



On-site assessment to identify success factors for developing vocational education and training strategies at the regional level in Poland.

Final report

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Executive abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the main steps and actors in a successful strategy formulation, implementation and monitoring as well as systemic bottlenecks to define success factors for developing VET strategies at the regional level in Poland, with the focus on initial VET (iVET). Based on initial review of existing strategic efforts across all the regions in Poland and scoping interviews at the central level, three regions were selected for in-depth analysis: Dolnośląskie, Małopolskie, and Pomorskie. The fieldwork phase consisted of 20 semi-structured individual interviews (IDIs) conducted in each of the three selected regions. Interviewees included Regional Operational Programme Managing Authorities, representatives of local governments and central institutions at the regional level, iVET school directors and employers.

Alongside examining specific strategy-development processes and regional capacities in this respect, the study investigated how regions were able to overcome systemic challenges, such as the decentralisation of managerial and financial responsibilities for iVET sector to counties (*powiats*). While regional authorities have financial resources of Regional Operational Programmes (ROP) at their disposal, they have a limited mandate in relation to iVET. Thus, the major dilemma facing Polish regions as they decide on strategic development of iVET in their territory and as they programme ROPs is how to achieve strategic goals with limited managerial powers over a vast majority of vocational and technical schools, and with counties and cities with county rights having political and budgetary independence from regions.

The research revealed that the regional strategic approaches to iVET in the three regions which were investigated within the study display common characteristics. All three regional approaches studied entailed an objective to achieve a greater level of coordination of the iVET providers and their educational offer. Although with varying degrees of success, in all three region efforts to rationalise the iVET schools' network to minimise competition between them and foster specialisation of schools were part of this approach. Secondly, the actions planned for the strategy implementation are based on considerations of complementarity, both in terms of measures and the target groups. Thus, investment in infrastructure ('hard' investment projects) and investment in people ('soft' skills and competencies projects) are integrated in all three regions, either as two separate groups of competition- and non-competition based projects as in Dolnośląskie and Małopolskie, or in the form of integrated projects as in Pomorskie. Thirdly, all three strategic approaches adopt a holistic perspective of iVET, integrating not only infrastructure and equipment acquisition and various forms of learning, but also interventions focusing on iVET career advisory and promotion (in all three regions) or monitoring of graduates' pathways (in Małopolskie and Pomorskie).

This report demonstrates that, while substantially limited by the VET governance framework in the country, regions can, in fact, develop and effectively implement broadly understood strategic regional approaches. The research further identifies several groups of factors which enable the conception and putting in place of regional strategic approaches to iVET. These can broadly be grouped as 'human factors' relating to leadership, commitment and expertise brought in through engagement of individuals and 'mechanism and instruments' put in place for better planning and implementation. While least tangible, the importance of leadership, commitment and expertise both within teams and individuals stands out as one of the key decisive factors in understanding why certain regions manage to approach VET on the regional level and strategically. The key factor is the direct engagement and responsibility for the process of the regional authorities (Marshall Office). Similarly, since the implementation of the strategic approach to initial VET across the region depends on the willingness and cooperation of the local governments, leadership on the level of county heads and their ownership of the processes is a vital success factor. Explicit formulation of iVET-related goals and measures in regional strategic programmes facilitates long-term commitment of the stakeholders, and allows interventions to be planned in a comprehensive manner. Regions successful in adopting strategic approaches to iVET also employ differentiated mechanisms for identifying iVET needs in the region, using a range of information sources and tools to ensure evidence-based planning and decision-making. These include studies,

diagnoses and predictions developed in the programming phase of respectful regional development strategies, and research studies and diagnosis financed in the framework of ROP. The authorities of all three regions analysed in the present report base their strategies on thorough diagnoses of initial VET sector on their territory and on the region's labour market and the demography more broadly.

The report presents concrete steps and action undertaken by the three selected regions leading to their significant success in strategic management of iVET. Based on the lessons learnt and factors identified across the three regions, a set of recommendation to the Polish regions but also to the European Commission was developed.

1.0 Glossary

Polish original	English translation
Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna	Central Examination Board
Centrum Kształcenia Zawodowego	Vocational Education Centre
Centrum Kompetencji Zawodowych	Vocational Competence Centres
Gmina	Commune
Instytucja Zarządzająca	Managing Authority (MA)
Izba Rzemieśnicza	Chamber of Crafts
Klasyfikacja zawodów szkolnictwa branżowego	Classification of Occupations for Vocational Education
Konwent Powiatów	Counties Convention
Kurator	Head of the Regional Education Authority
Kuratorium	Regional Education Authority
Liceum ogólnokształcące	General secondary school or lyceum
Matura	Final secondary school exam
Miasta na prawach powiatu	Cities with county rights
Ośrodki doskonalenia nauczycieli	Centres for in-service teacher training
Podstawy programowe kształcenia w zawodach	Core curricula for vocational programmes
Powiat	County
Program Operacyjny Kapitał Ludzki	Human Capital Operational Programme
Rada Powiatu	County Council
Samorząd	Local government
Samorząd województwa	Regional government
Starostwo	Office of the Head of the County Board
Szkoła branżowa I stopnia	Stage I sectoral vocational school
Technikum	Technical secondary school
Urząd Marszałkowski	Marshal's Office (MO)
Urząd Pracy	Public Employment Service
Wojewódzka rada rynku pracy	Regional Labour Market Council
Województwo	Region or Voivodeship
Zarząd Powiatu	County Board
Zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa	Basic vocational school

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Research rationale and scope

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a priority for ESF-funded intervention in Poland. Most of ESF investment in VET is channelled through Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs). At the same time, differences among regional ROP Managing Authorities are substantial in terms of their capacity to programme this support strategically. Some regions have already managed to achieve this and have witnessed progress toward a systemic change, while in others a lot still remains to be done. The European Commission recognises the value of the proper formulation of regional VET strategies for the judicious use of ESF resources. In this context, as part of a Framework Service Contract to provide Expertise and Support for European Cooperation in Education, Training, Youth and Support (EAC/07/2015), it commissioned the study on “On-site assessment to identify success factors for developing vocational education and training strategies at the regional level in Poland”. The study was implemented between November 2019 and April 2020 by the Consortium of Ecorys Polska Sp. z o.o. (Leader) and EIESP.

The overall purpose of the study was to identify the main steps and actors in a successful strategy formulation, implementation and monitoring as well as systemic bottlenecks to define success factors for developing VET strategies at the regional level in Poland, with the focus on initial VET (iVET). While the content of strategies was not entirely outside the project scope, the study was focused on the identification of *processes*. Notably, out of the three listed processes, strategy formulation was to be given priority. The task at hand required an initial review of existing strategic efforts and the identification of three regions successful in establishing regional iVET strategies for in-depth investigation. Importantly, the study did *not* serve to evaluate the selected strategic approaches as to relevance, effectiveness, etc. The studied regions were chosen in order to provide opportunities for drawing lessons in relation to factors facilitating strategy development.

To this end, three regions were selected for in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned processes: Dolnośląskie, Małopolskie, and Pomorskie.

Alongside examining specific strategy-development processes and regional capacities in this respect, the study investigated how regions were able to overcome systemic challenges, such as the decentralisation of managerial and financial responsibilities for iVET sector to counties (*powiats*). While regional authorities have financial resources of ROPs at their disposal, they have a limited mandate in relation to iVET. Thus, the major dilemma facing Polish regions as they decide on strategic development of iVET in their territory and as they programme ROPs is how to achieve strategic goals with limited managerial powers over a vast majority of vocational and technical schools, and with counties and cities with county rights having political and budgetary independence from regions.

The current report summarises the main findings from the conducted research. It consists of six parts, each serving the purpose for understanding the processes which evolved in the selected regions within the context of their own dynamics as well as the overall context. As such, we start from presenting the general historical trends which resulted in shared challenges in vocational education across Poland. This is followed by an **overview of the National framework and financial regulations for iVET** to map out key stakeholders in the area of iVET and their roles, as well as policy restrictions and opportunities largely framing the scope of intervention of regional governments. Next, we present an **overview of strategic developments and planning in other regions in Poland** to give context as to what was identified in Dolnośląskie, Małopolskie and Pomorskie. This takes us to presentation of three, concise reports presenting the content and process of development and implementation of strategic approaches in the selected regions. These reports serve as basis for understanding the **success factors identified and**

presented in chapter six. Lastly, we provide a short conclusion in form of **lessons learnt, closing with recommendations** for other regions to consider a strategic approach to iVET as part of the 2021-2027 programming period.

The authors hope that the study will serve the Polish regional authorities in facilitating the development of regional iVET policy and programming of prospective ROPs. The report is intended to disseminate promising approaches and solutions for strategy development, inspire cross-regional learning and provide methodological guidelines. It will also serve the internal purposes of the European Commission by supporting discussions with the Polish regions concerning different options for formulating strategies of VET development and with the Polish Government in the context of programming the use of ESF+ fund.

2.2 Object of the study

2.2.1 iVET over years

In the last thirty years, the education system in Poland has had to adapt to significant demographic changes. The number of students in post-primary schools¹ grew from about 1 million in 1990 to over 1.2 million in 2000, and since then declined rapidly to about 0.55 million presently². In parallel, the shares of different sub-sectors (tracks) have also changed (see Figure 1).

Despite a drastic drop in numbers, **the share of students in lyceums and technical schools has been on the rise, while basic vocational schools suffered from a dramatic decrease in levels of student interest.** Over the past two decades, the attractiveness of iVET has been declining, with an increasing share of primary school graduates (and then lower-secondary schools) choosing general academic secondary schools instead. This reflected the rise of educational aspirations in society and a national trend to pursue higher education, which at the beginning of the 1990's was a guarantee of well-paid job and social advancement³. The trend was consistent with the policies advocated by the Ministry of National Education which considered secondary education the best way for Polish youth⁴. As such, in the 1990s, complexes of secondary schools had to abandon proposed new vocational and technical classes each year due to an insufficient number of candidates and instead open new general academic classes, which were not initially foreseen as necessary⁵. After a relative stabilization of students' educational choices between 2007 and 2010, basic vocational schools again started slowly losing their share of the student body, this time to their technical counterparts. This long-term trend is illustrated in the following figure, displaying the relative share of the number of first grade students in three sub-sectors of education.

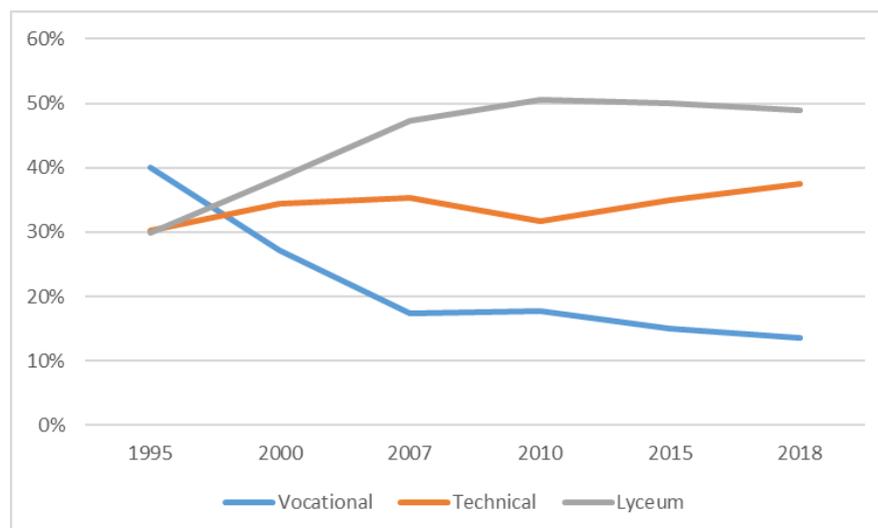
¹ Post-primary education in Poland is divided into three subsectors (tracks), general academic (lyceum), basic vocational (branch school) and technical (professional) schools. Basic vocational schools are not considered secondary, since they do not give access to higher education. (Technical schools are vocational and give access to HE).

² GUS (2020), Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2018/19, Warszawa.

³ Graduates of basic vocational schools could not enter higher education institutions.

⁴ For example, white paper on the reform, published by the Ministry in 1998, stated that basic vocational schools are designed for students who "are not able to complete full secondary school". Quoted after Szłosek (2012), Kształcenie zawodowe w Polsce na początku XXI wieku.

⁵ Recall that majority of vocational schools in Poland operate in complexes of schools, which are administrative units comprising several different VET schools with related vocational profiles, but also often a general academic school. See J. Herczyński, A. Sobotka (2015) Zmiany w sieci szkół ponadgimnazjalnych w latach 2007 -2013, IBE, Warszawa. Available at <http://produkty.ibe.edu.pl/docs/raporty/ibe-ee-raport-zmiany-w-sieci-szkol-ponadgimnazjalnych.pdf>

Figure 1. Relative share of the number of first grade students in three sub-sectors of education

Source: GUS(2011), GUS (2020)⁶.

These trends and policy approaches have left iVET largely with underinvestment and with a declining reputation as an educational pathway. Many schools were closed down, others had their offer significantly reduced, while the infrastructure and equipment of both technical and basic vocational schools deteriorated, in part because keeping school equipment in line with rapid development of new technologies in the workplace became more and more expensive. A plethora of factors made iVET an unattractive choice for graduates of primary education, and at the same time also an ineffective means of supplying a skilled workforce for employers. This is evidenced, for example, in the higher unemployment rates of graduates of vocational schools compared to general academic schools (among graduates who did not continue their education), see for example the recent report by Bulkowski and others (2019)⁷.

Since about 2010, Polish authorities became aware of the problem of the shortages in skilled technical labour and undertook corrective actions. This was partly due to the opening of EU labour markets to the Polish workforce which resulted in a massive emigration of skilled labourers, and negatively effect on the national economy. One of the initiatives at the national level was a national project “Vocation school is a positive choice” (Szkoła zawodowa szkołą pozytywnego wyboru), implemented between 2010 and 2013 and financed from Operational Program Human Capital (POKL). The 2014/15 school year was declared “Year of VET schools” (Rok szkoły zawodowców) by the Ministry. Similar initiatives were undertaken at regional level, financed from ROP. The primary goals of these projects were to motivate and support VET schools to improve their quality, strengthen their cooperation with employers, the alignment of a vocational offer with the needs of the labour market, and the promotion of VET among the student population. As the graph above shows, despite considerable resources allocated to these efforts, the reversal of long-term trends has proved to be very difficult, while it could be argued that coordinated policy actions might have contributed to stabilisation of the overall trends.

2.2.2 Main iVET challenges

While its importance for the Polish economy has been re-affirmed at various levels of governance, iVET still suffers multiple challenges. The supply of ESF funds through ROPs managed by regional authorities

⁶ Source: GUS (2020), Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2018/19, Warszawa, GUS (2011) Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2010/2011. The data includes only graduates of primary schools (without schools for adults).

⁷ K. Bulkowski, P. Grygiel, G. Humenny, G., M. Kłobuszewska, M. Sitek, J. Stasiowski, T. Żółtak (2019). Absolwenci szkół zawodowych z roku szkolnego 2016/2017. Raport z pierwszej rundy monitoringu losów edukacyjno-zawodowych absolwentów szkół zawodowych

creates an opportunity for tackling some of those precisely at regional levels, as EU financing supplements scarce national resources.

One of the challenges lies in tackling the perception of iVET as an unattractive educational pathway which is perceived to lead to limited career opportunities or unemployment translating into low enrolment and creating a further downward spiral. Even as iVET has modernised, this image has not been corrected by a system of career guidance and counselling at lower education levels, as such systems have largely been missing in Poland (Podwojic 2015). It is important to highlight, however, that the significant trend of declining enrolment in iVET schools is not uniform across every Polish region. Figure 2 presents the share of students in three sub-sectors for Poland as a whole and for Dolnośląskie, Małopolskie, and Pomorskie regions, i.e. the three regions reviewed in this report, in 2018⁸.

Figure 2. The share of students by education sector

	Vocational	Lyceum	Technical
Poland	5,6%	54,5%	39,8%
Dolnośląskie	11,5%	48,6%	40,0%
Małopolskie	13,4%	43,3%	43,4%
Pomorskie	14,1%	47,6%	38,3%

In all three regions the share of students in initial VET (basic vocational schools and technical schools)⁹ remained at more than twice the national average, while the share in general academic schools is lower than the national average. The high share of students attending VET schools in analysed regions may suggest that the regions' efforts were, indeed, strategic in nature and are worth transferring to other contexts, or perhaps that these regions, with their higher share of population working in the industry, were under stronger pressure to modernize their VET schools, compared to some other regions (especially located in the East of the country), where a higher share of population works in agriculture.

The poor image of VET results, among others, from the low quality of its educational offer and consequently its effectiveness, which is a by-product of a number of accumulated problems. The quality of education is significantly limited by old infrastructure and equipment, outdated teaching methods, as well as the insufficient qualifications and competences of VET teachers. This means for example that students do not learn by using machines that they will actually operate in their future workplace, and that classes have limited practical components. For this reason, there has been a strong emphasis on improving the equipment and infrastructure base of VET, the provision of practical training through apprenticeships with companies, as well as strengthening teachers' qualifications and competences in the implementation of ROPs, regional development strategies (RDS) and other existing strategic documents which refer to VET.

Polish iVET has been lagging behind in terms of tailoring its offer to the needs of the labour market. Fast-paced developments in the world produce dynamic changes in the economy and demand for labour, which puts a strain on any education system, including iVET. Close ties between iVET schools and businesses can be seen as a way to tackle this challenge. However, in Poland, cooperation between iVET schools and employers has so far been insufficient. Among the obstacles, iVET schools indicate in particular, general difficulties in identifying companies willing to engage in student training. These difficulties can be further exacerbated in regions where business is less developed. At the same time, employers lack information on cooperation opportunities or, in the case of internships to be organised as part of EU-funded projects, are cautious of the formalities related to project implementation. A lack of easily available instruments linking information on iVET demand and supply further contributes to a mismatch. Additionally,

⁸ GUS (2020), Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2018/19, Warszawa.

⁹ While this table offers data disaggregated by basic schools and technical schools, in the course of this study both (combined) are considered 'initial VET'.

iVET supply has also been limited by systemic capacities, including the availability of specific competences among teachers. A limited focus on developing students' transversal skills and key competences in VET has also meant that graduates enter the dynamically shifting labour market less prepared for its requirements. One indicator of the insufficiency of general competencies of graduates of iVET school is provided by results of international assessment PISA. The latest available data refers to PISA 2012¹⁰. This shows dramatic differences between students in different types of schools. For example, in mathematics, students of general academic schools scored on average 571 points, students of technical schools – 506 points, while students of basic vocational schools – only 417 points. At the same time, 15-years old's, who are generally one year younger than I grade students of secondary schools, scored on average 518 points in mathematics¹¹. This underlines to what extent the transversal skills of students – and hence also the graduates – of iVET schools, especially of basic vocational schools, are weaker than those of general academic schools.

The European Commission in subsequent *Country Specific Recommendations* (European Semester) and the *Education and Training Monitor* has underlined importance of the development of skills relevant to labour market needs in Poland. The role of initial vocational education and training was highlighted as **crucial in the development of both transversal key competences, professional knowledge, and practical skills**. To fulfil those tasks, it has been recommended that vocational schools should **strengthen the cooperation with employers, renew and update the curricula and improve professional competences of teachers**.

In 2019 both the *Country Specific Recommendations* and the *Education and Training Monitor* noted the progress of VET reforms and welcomed the amendment of the Law on School Education. The 2019 Country Report outlined that “the reform to be implemented from the 2019/2020 school year introduces measures to strengthen links with the labour market through changes in curricula, the financing system, practical training and increased involvement by employers. The financing formula is to take into account the extent to which schools' offer matches the demand for specific occupations.”¹² However, the Commission observed that vocational schools faced difficulties in equipping pupils with general basic skills.

2.3 Methodology and limitations of research

2.3.1 Methodology

The research consisted of two phases: (1) the scoping phase which consisted of key informant interviews (KIIs) carried at the central level and desk research for all the regions in Poland; and (2) the fieldwork phase which consisted of on-site visits and interviews in three selected regions where strategic approaches were identified.

The purpose of the **scoping phase** was to gain a better understanding of the overall dynamics of VET developments across Poland and identify which regions are considered exemplary in terms of strategic approaches. The phase included five KIIs carried out with representatives of the Ministry of Investment and Economic Development (currently the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy); Centre for Education Development; Educational Research Institute; the former long-term director at the Vocational Education Department of the Ministry of National Education; the former long-term director of the European Social

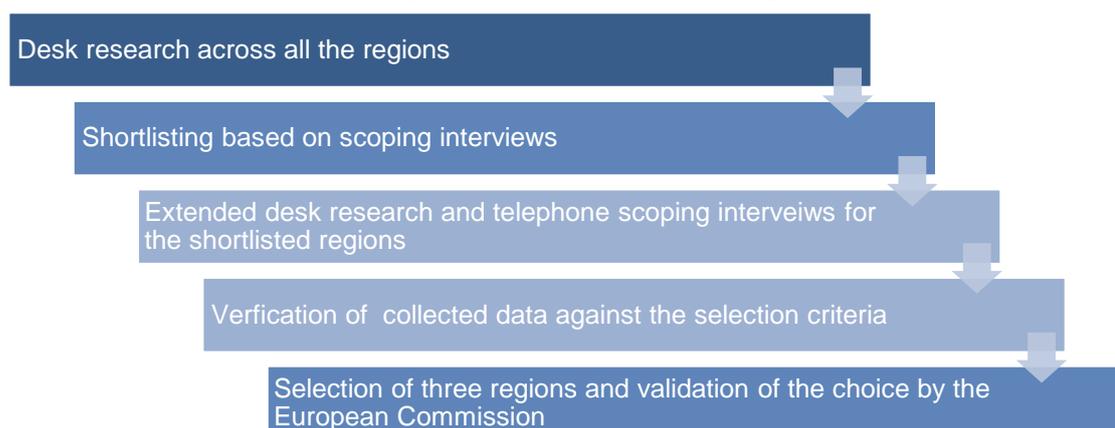
¹⁰ Between 2003 and 2018, as a result of education reform of 2000, Polish 15-years old participating in PISA were enrolled almost exclusively in lower secondary school (gymnasium), with the same curriculum for the whole cohort of students. In 2018 this reform was reversed, so PISA 2021, exactly as PISA 2000, will be conducted in three different types of schools (general academic, basic vocational, technical), which will allow to compare the competencies of their students. However, between 2003 and 2012, under so called “national option”, Poland was also testing students of first grade of post-gymnasium schools. PISA data reported here refer to this national option. National option was discontinued after 2012.

¹¹ Federowicz, M. i in. (2013). *OECD PISA 2012. Wyniki badania 2012 w Polsce*. Warszawa: Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej

¹² Country Report Poland 2019, SWD(2019) 1020 final

Fund Department at the Ministry of Investment and Economic Development. The interviews allowed for choosing a short-list of regions whose approaches to iVET could be studied in more depth. The insights gained through these initial consultations with stakeholders combined with desk research carried out across all regions in Poland, as well as extended desk research for the pre-selected regions and the overall expertise of the research team resulted in the selection of three regions with the highest potential in terms of the identification of success factors in the area of strategic approaches to iVET. The final selection took place against the backdrop of pre-defined guiding questions¹³, but also taking into account the broader socio-economic characteristics of the regions and their historical development. The choice was further validated by the European Commission.

Figure 3. Stages for selection of the three regions



The **fieldwork phase** consisted of 20 semi-structured individual interviews (IDIs) conducted in each of the three selected regions. IDIs lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours. They were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purpose of analysis. In each region, representatives of four stakeholder groups were consulted. An interview topic-guide was developed for each of those groups. In the course of fieldwork, the scenarios were tailored to the context of each of the regions based on in-depth analysis of the available regional documents. In total, 60 in-depth interviews were conducted across the three regions representing the following stakeholders:

Figure 4. Stakeholders consulted in the course of the fieldwork

Stakeholder group	Types of entities represented
ROP Managing Authorities	Relevant departments in the Marshall's Office of a given region and institutions acting as the Intermediate Body in the implementation of the ROPs

¹³ Including, but not limited to: Does the region have a comprehensive strategic document in the field of VET? Is the document accompanied by operational plans and budget? How many different target areas and priorities for the region's VET development does the document encompass? What are the different institutions (public and private) actively involved and cooperating in the field of information-sharing and strategic development of VET? Are there formalised mechanisms of cooperation involving most of VET schools and at least some representatives of the labour market? How are different roles of different stakeholders reflected in cooperation mechanisms (school administration, employers and employer organisations, local authorities, local labour market institutions, training centers, higher education institutions, industrial clusters, research institutions)? Is VET in the region aligned with the needs of the local labour market? Is the diagnosis of demand and supply skills' and competences carried out periodically in the region? Is there a mechanism for graduate tracking? Is there a clear link between these instruments and VET planning? Is this considered a priority in the strategic documents? Are innovative approaches and excellence in teaching consciously developed and promoted?

Representatives of local governments and central institutions at the regional level	Education Departments in the Marshall's Office of a given region; Regional Education Authority (<i>kuratorium oświaty</i>); Regional Labour Office; county governments
School directors	Directors of iVET schools in the region
Employers	Individual employers, employers' organisations Special Economic Zones, employers associations, chambers of crafts

2.3.2 Limitations to the fieldwork implementation

A number of limitations have affected the implementation of the study. However, due to mitigation measures, including necessary adjustments in the research process based on the situation on the ground, their impact was minimised. The constraints faced included, in particular, the limited availability of stakeholders for interviews due to the winter school break taking place at the time of the fieldwork. The duration of fieldwork was extended to accommodate this. In one of the regions, the team also experienced difficulties in reaching stakeholders who were involved in the planning and earlier stages of implemented strategic interventions due to their transfer to other workplaces and poor institutional knowledge. Efforts were made to contact such key informants regardless of their current affiliation. Employers and employer organisations proved to be the most difficult group in terms of access and availability for interviews with some employers cancelling or re-scheduling at the very last moment. A possible bias of consulted stakeholders in favour of strategic processes advanced by the regional governments should be considered. This was largely due to the sampling approach used for selection of representatives of schools and employers, relying on recommendations made by the regional governments. The team was aware of such a possibility and this circumstance was either balanced out by interviews with other stakeholders in the field or taken into account during the analysis phase. Finally, a considerable limitation to the study was the limited time available for conducting second round of the interviews in the regions, following analysis of the data previously gathered. Since this research was mainly comprised of primary research with limited secondary resources available, such follow up interviews would be highly beneficial for further clarification and exploration of the identified issues.

3.0 The national framework and financial arrangements for iVET

A strategic approach to development of iVET at the regional level requires cooperation with many independent authorities, each of which has its own policy priorities and budget constraints. On the map of institutions with the potential to strategically shape development of iVET across Poland, regional governments occupy a difficult position. On the one hand, **regional governments are tasked with formulating and implementing broad regional development strategies**, which should include economic and social development and activities to improve education attainment of the population¹⁴, on the other hand, they **do not have managerial or financial responsibility for iVET schools in the region most of which are run by counties** (apart from very few institutions of regional importance managed directly by the regional governments).

3.1 Different tiers of educational management

Since the decentralization of education in 1999, secondary and basic vocational schools¹⁵ became the responsibility of counties¹⁶. Some large cities became communes with county rights; in the education sector this means that they manage and finance not only pre-primary and primary education but also secondary schools located in their territory¹⁷. **Counties and cities with county rights are responsible, as founders of secondary schools, to determine their network, which means opening and closing schools, merging them and changing school location.** The same applies to regions as school founders. Since 2016, these decisions have required the approval of the Regional Education Authority (Kurator), which sometimes leads to bitter conflicts. School founders also decide on the vocational profiles of schools, but they need to first obtain the opinion from Regional Labour Market Council. Until 2020 such opinions were issued by the County Labour Market Councils and shifting this role to the regional level was subject to criticism, as the regional council is a voluntary body, with limited capacity to effectively respond to opinion requests from schools from the entire region¹⁸.

Regions are entrusted with management and financing of colleges for social workers, centres for in-service teacher training (ośrodki doskonalenia nauczycieli), pedagogical libraries and very few selected secondary schools of regional importance. The education tasks of regional governments concerning iVET are defined in a Law on School Education¹⁹, (article 8, point 22). These include establishing and financing iVET schools of regional and transregional importance, whose network should be defined in the regional strategy of development, adopted individually by every region according to the Law on regional Self-Government²⁰.

¹⁴ Ustawa z dnia 5 czerwca 1998 r. o samorządzie województwa, Dz. U. 1998 nr. 91 poz. 576, art. 11.

¹⁵ Basic vocational schools (zasadnicze szkoły zawodowe) offered 3-year programmes leading only to 'qualified worker' qualifications. In 2017 those schools were re-named as 'stage I sectoral vocational schools (szkoły branżowe I stopnia).

¹⁶ The law establishes, which schools are the responsibility for which tier of local government. However, a different tier may establish or take over a school assigned by law to another tier, on the basis of a contract. This explain, for example, why there are some vocational schools managed by communes which are not cities with county rights.

¹⁷ There are now 66 such cities.

¹⁸ See for instance opinion of the Dolnośląski County Council on this issue, available at <https://www.zpp.pl/storage/files/2019-11/1eb53f3863332b8c7877ae4a07b9f82a5845.pdf>

¹⁹ Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe, Dz. U. 2017 poz. 59.

²⁰ Ustawa z dnia 5 czerwca 1998 r. o samorządzie województwa, Dz. U. 1998 nr. 91 poz. 576 (tekst jednolity Dz. U. 2017 poz. 2096). Clearly, if a regional development strategy was before the Education Law was passed, it does not include the list of these schools.

Figure 5. Distribution of iVET schools according to managing authorities

Founding body	Basic vocational schools		Technical secondary schools	
	Schools	Students	Schools	Students
Commune	5,2%	2,8%	2,4%	1,1%
County	55,6%	61,7%	57,0%	54,2%
City with county rights	24,5%	26,3%	28,1%	39,6%
Region	0,1%	0,0%	0,5%	0,2%
Minister	2,3%	0,7%	2,9%	2,0%
Other	12,4%	8,5%	9,2%	2,8%

Source: Herczyński, Sobotka (2015)²¹.

The overall number of schools managed by regions is very small compared to the number of vocational schools managed by counties and cities with county rights (Figure 5). While the regions may adapt sectoral strategies, either directly focused on VET, or comprising activities for development of VET institutions, their implementation is a challenge, because counties and cities with county rights are completely independent of the regions based on the principle of subsidiarity. This is indeed one of key characteristics of the Polish model of regional decentralization, there is no hierarchical dependency between tiers of local governments. This means that **regional governments cannot intervene in the decisions of founders of iVET schools, such as regarding opening and closures, the determination of profiles, or setting budgets.**

3.2 The organisation of initial VET school system

Vocational schools in Poland are part of the upper secondary (ISCED 3) education. After completion of primary school (until 2019 lower secondary school²²) students can continue their education in 4-year general secondary schools (liceum ogólnokształcące), 5-year technical secondary school (technikum) or 3-year stage I sectoral vocational schools (szkoła branżowa I stopnia) - the last two constituting initial VET education. Primary school graduates most often choose general secondary programmes; technical secondary schools are slightly less popular, while sectoral vocational schools (basic vocational schools before 2017) are considered as the worst option and often a negative choice. As such, in the school year 2018/2019 only 15% of pupils chose I stage sectoral schools compared to 40% pupils choosing general secondary schools²³.

Curricula, qualifications and examinations

Core curricula, qualifications and examinations in the area of iVET in Poland are designed and managed centrally, and as such they mostly pertain to the responsibilities and control of the Ministry of National Education, with no room for intervention at the regional level. The curricula and teaching programmes in vocational school include two components: general education and vocational training. The core education curriculum is defined by the **Ministry of National Education**. The core curriculum for general education plays a pivotal role in the school education system management. It determines the overall goals of the system, objectives for schools and expected individual students learning outcomes. It is a basis for the examination requirements and standards for school evaluation. The Ministry

²¹ J. Herczyński, A. Sobotka (2015) Zmiany w sieci szkół ponadgimnazjalnych w latach 2007 -2013, IBE, Warszawa. Available at <http://produkty.ibe.edu.pl/docs/raporty/ibe-ee-raport-zmiany-w-sieci-szkol-ponadgimnazjalnych.pdf>

²² The new structure which encompasses also 8-year primary school (in place of 6-year primary school and 3 year lower secondary school) is the effect of 2017 school education reform. Changes are being introduced gradually starting in 2017 (in 2019 at secondary level) to be completed in 2023/24.

²³ GUS "Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2018/19", Warszawa, Gdański 2019 <http://stat.gov.pl/obszary tematyczne/edukacja/>

also decides on the Classification of Occupations for Vocational Education²⁴ and defines core curricula for vocational programmes (podstawy programowe kształcenia w zawodach). Vocational examinations are designed to assess student's knowledge and skills (learning outcomes) required for a given qualification, as defined in the core curriculum for vocational education or training for specific occupations. Standards and guidelines for vocational exams are set by the **Central Examination Board** (Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna).

From the beginning of the school year 2019/20²⁵ instead of the non-obligatory exam that confirmed qualifications (requirements) for a given occupation, a new vocational exam covers only single qualification and will lead to a vocational qualification certificate. To be awarded a vocational diploma it is required to obtain vocational qualification certificates for all qualifications identified within a given occupation. Due to the amended law vocational exams became mandatory – all vocational school students are required to take the exam as a precondition for completing a given level of education (certificate) and to obtain vocational diploma. A school final certificate does not confirm qualifications anymore. Graduates of technical vocational schools besides vocational exams can undertake final secondary school exam (matura) which serves as the entrance exam to tertiary education institutions (universities).

Schools have relatively broad autonomy to decide on applied teaching programmes (syllabuses) and used textbooks (within the framework of the core curriculum and other ministerial regulations).

Quality assurance, supervision

The local governments' (communes and counties) power and responsibilities over school founding (running) bodies are limited to financial and administrative aspects; they are not accountable for the quality of educational services provided by schools. It is the **Regional Education Authorities** (kuratoria oświaty), led by the Head of the Regional Education Authorities (*kurator oświaty*) that exercise pedagogical supervision over schools and education institutions. While the Head is appointed and dismissed by the Minister of National Education, kuratorium is part of the regional representation of governmental administration structure and formally is not subordinated to the Minister of National Education but to Voivode (wojewoda). Besides the evaluation of school performance *Kurator* is obligated to contribute to the implementation of the national education policy and to cooperate with local and regional governments in the development of education policies consistent with national policy. *Kurator* gives binding opinions on networks of public schools and on organisational sheets of public schools (documents, submitted by school heads, containing information on the number of classes, their size, the number of teachers, extra-curricular activities planned for the following school year).

3.3 Financial arrangements for iVET

The Polish iVET sector is a part of the overall school education system, governed by the same legislation. Accordingly, the financing of iVET is an integral part of overall system of financing of education. School education is financed in two steps: money from the state budget is transferred to the local governments which then distribute it among the schools in their care.

School founders receive a non-categorical grant (which means it can be spent for any task under the responsibility of the local government, e.g. maintaining local roads, sewage, etc.) from the national government budget, called educational part of general subvention (or more succinctly education subvention). It is allocated to managing authorities according to a formula, based primarily on the number

²⁴ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 15 lutego 2019 r. w sprawie ogólnych celów i zadań kształcenia w zawodach szkolnictwa branżowego oraz klasyfikacji zawodów szkolnictwa branżowego, Dz.U. 2019 poz. 316

²⁵ Changes introduced by the Amendment to the Law on School Education in November 2018. Ustawa z dnia 22 listopada 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy - Prawo oświatowe, ustawy o systemie oświaty oraz niektórych innych ustaw, Dz.U. 2018 poz. 2245

of students²⁶. The formula includes several weights (co-efficients) for different groups of students, to reflect different per student costs of providing education (for example, special needs students, students of rural schools or of schools for minorities are granted with higher weights). Funds for iVET are included in the subvention with their specific coefficients increasing standard amount per student by 23% to 40% depending on programme specialisation²⁷.

Since 2019, the Ministry of National Education issues a prognosis of the labour market needs at the national and regional levels in a decree²⁸. The decree lists professions which will be in demand at the national level, as well as professions which will be in strong or medium demand in each region. According to that decree, the prognosis will be used as justification for the differentiated weights (on the top of the weights used in the algorithm) for groups of professions, to motivate counties to provide training for needed professions.

Education subvention is a general revenue of local governments, it may be used for any subsector of education and for other purposes as well according to decisions of communal, county, and local and regional councils. Nevertheless, as we discuss below, education expenditures of local governments far exceed the received education subvention.

School founders finance their schools, adopting their financial plans²⁹. The education subvention is just one revenue for local governments, who can and most often do use funds from other revenues to finance education, including iVET. While it is difficult to assess exactly how much local governments add of their own resources to finance professional and vocational schools, it is well understood that overall they spend far more on education than they receive in education subvention. In a joint report³⁰ of Association of Polish Cities and other local government associations it is estimated that 2018 education expenditures exceeded received education subvention by 54% ("the financing gap"). This gap is however unequally distributed between types of local governments. It is rather low for counties (12%) and very high for different types of communes (from 48% in rural municipalities to 76% in cities). In cities with county rights the gap is 64%. This may indicate that the gap is mostly generated in primary education run by communes. The financing gap means that of all education expenditures of Polish local governments, 65% is covered from education subvention and 35% is covered from other revenues.

²⁶ Rozporządzenie MEN z dnia 12 grudnia 2019 r. w sprawie sposobu podziału części oświatowej subwencji ogólnej dla jednostek samorządu terytorialnego w roku 2020, Dz. U. 2019 poz. 2446.

²⁷ Differentiated weights for groups of professions were introduced in 2018 and not changed since then. Until 2017, all professions with minor exceptions were assigned the same weight.

²⁸ Obwieszczenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 22 marca 2019 r. w sprawie prognozy zapotrzebowania na pracowników w zawodach szkolnictwa branżowego na krajowym i wojewódzkim rynku pracy, 2019, poz. 276.

²⁹ Educational institutions do not have budgetary autonomy in Poland.

³⁰ Związek Miast Polskich et al. (2019) Raport o finansowaniu oświaty w Polsce 2014-2018. Available at <http://www.miaasta.pl/aktualnosci/raport-o-finansowaniu-oswiaty-w-polsce-w-latach-2004-2018>

4.0 Overview of iVET strategic planning across the regions in Poland

Over recent years, Polish regions have recognised the value of VET. However, their approaches to iVET have remained at varying degrees of development. The chapter attempts to map efforts of a more strategic nature in relation to iVET among Polish regions in order to provide a background for the in-depth examination of the three selected case studies. The presentation will first analyse how VET is incorporated in general strategic documents at the regional level. It will then outline relevant sectoral programmes which include VET. Finally, it will focus in on the most iVET-specific strategic efforts, be that development of documents devoted solely to iVET or interventions implemented in practice.

All current regional development strategies (RDS) refer – in more or less detail – to VET, diagnosing roughly the same challenges and providing similar solutions. iVET is considered under strategic objectives related to human capital and the competitiveness of the economy. At various levels of planning (as strategic or operational objectives, directions for intervention, strategic initiatives, activities etc.), the documents foresee, in particular: increasing iVET quality, e.g. through improving education processes, infrastructural and equipment base, as well as qualifications and competences of teachers; tailoring iVET to the needs of the labour market, e.g. through cooperation with employers (educational profiles on demand, business patronage), professional counselling and integrating iVET with regional smart specialisations; and improving the image of vocational education, etc. **While the majority of provisions are general, some regions outline more concrete interventions, e.g. related to specific sub-regions or local key industries.** The Łódzkie Regional Development Strategy for 2020, for example, takes note of locations (e.g. Ceramics and Construction Basin Opoczno-Tomaszów Mazowiecki; Mining and Energy Basin Bełchatów-Szczerców-Złoczew) where there is a particular need to build strong vocational education hubs at secondary and higher level to support the development of key industrial sectors.

Apart from RDS, some regions have lower-level programmes related to specific sectors, such as education or innovation, which include VET. These serve to give effect to RDS and are coherent with their diagnoses, objectives and foreseen activities. Notably, the Programme for Education Development in the Podkarpackie region until 2020³¹ devotes ample space to VET, not only by providing its nuanced analysis, but also by presenting a comprehensive grid of strategic directions for VET interventions, specific objectives and tasks. The grid closely reflects the region's identified weakness in relation to VET. The strategic direction foreseen included: tailoring VET to labour market needs; ensuring a high quality of VET; coordinated network of vocational education (to be pursued through specific objectives of supporting cooperation within the network and supporting a planned development of VET schools within the network); supporting conscious choices in relation to education and employment. The Kujawsko-Pomorski Programme for Education Development³² also contains objectives related to VET, including e.g. strengthening its capacity vis-à-vis the region's smart specialisations. The Updated Strategy for Employment and Development of Human Capital in the Warmińsko-Mazurkie region until 2025³³ includes VET under Priority II "Improving the quality of education" and underscores the importance of improving teacher qualifications and competences, the infrastructure and equipment base of VET schools, as well as the harmonisation between the labour market and the VET system.

³¹ Podkarpackie region, Programme for Education Development in the Podkarpackie region until 2020 (*Program rozwoju edukacji w województwie podkarpackim do roku 2020*), available at: <https://bit.ly/3cJrGUr> (access: 8.03.2020)

³² Kujawsko-Pomorskie region (2014), Kujawsko-Pomorski Program Rozwoju Edukacji, available at: <https://bit.ly/3aJUcUf> (access 8.03.2020).

³³ Warmińsko-Mazurskie region, Updates Strategy for Employment and Development of Human Capital in the Warmińsko-Mazurkie region until 2025 (*Zaktualizowana Strategia Zatrudnienia i Rozwoju Zasobów Ludzkich w Województwie Warmińsko-Mazurskim do 2025 roku*), available at: <https://bit.ly/39OFnzm> (access: 8.03.2020).

In a number of regions, official documents specifically devoted to VET were developed by regional authorities. The **Śląskie region** prepared the “Programme for developing vocational education in the Śląskie region for the years 2014-2020”³⁴ within a systemic project; “I have a profession – I have a job in the region” (*Mam zawód – mam pracę w regionie*) financed from the Human Capital Operational Programme 2007-2013 (*Program Operacyjny Kapitał Ludzki, HC OP 2007-2013*). The programme specifies three strategic objectives: smooth and quick adjustment of the VET offer to the needs of the labour market and the economy; modernisation and improving the quality of VET process; promotion of VET. The operational objectives include, among others, increasing cooperation with employers; building students’ awareness of their careers; improving access for students with SEN; strengthening the infrastructural base of VET schools; improving the qualifications of teachers; increasing the practical dimension of VET, etc. The main funding for the programme was foreseen in the Śląskie Regional Operational Programme for the years 2014-2020, Priority 12 Education infrastructure (Activity 12.2. Infrastructure of vocational education) and Priority 11 Strengthening the educational potential (Activity 11.2. “Adjusting the VET offer to the needs of the local labour market”).

In 2016, the **Lubelskie region** prepared the “Diagnosis and plan of development of vocational education in the Lubelskie region until 2025”³⁵. The document identifies strategic regional VET challenges and proposes solutions. Four strategic objectives are outlined: the development of network cooperation between schools and improvement of their digitalization; tailoring the VET offer to labour market needs; improving the quality of VET; and the promotion of VET as an effective pathway to entering the labour market. These are further divided into operational objectives. In particular, the authors propose a strategic focus on schools with the highest developmental potential to create supra-local vocational education centres supported by schools with smaller potential. Such centres should be integrated with the regions’ smart specialisations and other sectors of key importance for the regional economy. The Lubelskie Regional Operational Programme for the years 2014-2020 (Activities 12.4 and 13.6) was identified as the main source of funding with additional resources mobilised through the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development for the years 2014-2020 and local government budgets.

The **Lubuskie region** prepared the “Plan for developing vocational education in the Lubuskie region with the use of funds from the Regional Operational Programme – Lubuskie 2020”³⁶. The document underscores the strategic importance of VET for developing the regional economy. It highlights, among others, the need for enhancing the quality of VET, including through improving the infrastructural and equipment base, cooperation with employers and integration of VET with regional smart specialisations. The Lubuskie strategic focus on VET will also be continued beyond 2020, as the Lubuskie Regional Development Strategy 2030 foresees preparation of the sectoral “Programme for developing vocational education in the Lubuskie region”³⁷.

Some regions focused on implementing strategic projects in the area of VET, rather than on developing documents. The strategic character of those interventions lies, among others, in the close tailoring of activities to regional VET challenges, both in terms of geographical coverage and stakeholder involvement. In the **Opolskie region**, note should be taken in particular of the project “Closer to the Labour Market 2” (*Opolskie szkolnictwo zawodowe bliżej rynku pracy 2*). As the title suggests, its major aim was to bring VET closer to employers to respond to the needs of the labour market. Indeed, the

³⁴ Śląskie region (2015), Programme for developing vocational education in the Śląskie region for the years 2014-2020 (*Program Rozwoju Szkolnictwa Zawodowego Województwa Śląskiego na lata 2014-2020*), available at: www.slaskie.pl/content/program-rozwoju-szkolnictwa-zawodowego (access: 8.03.2020).

³⁵ Lubuskie region (2016), Diagnosis and plan of development of vocational education in the Lubelskie region until 2025 (*Diagnoza i plan rozwoju szkolnictwa zawodowego w województwie lubelskim do roku 2025*), available at: <https://bit.ly/2TOAzMY> (access: 8.03.2020)

³⁶ Lubuskie Region (2016), Plan for developing vocational education in the Lubuskie region with the use of funds from the Regional Operational Programme – Lubuskie 2020 (*Plan rozwoju szkolnictwa zawodowego w województwie lubuskim z wykorzystaniem środków Regionalnego Programu Operacyjnego – Lubuskie 2020*), available at: <https://bit.ly/2vJ3HUV> (access: 8.03.2020)

³⁷ Lubuskie region (2019), Lubuskie Regional Development Strategy 2030 (*Strategia Rowoju Województwa Lubuskiego 2030*), available at: <http://lubuskie.pl/uploads/pliki/strategia/projekt%20SRWL%202030.pdf> (access: 9.03.2020)

project is considered to have meaningfully brought together VET schools, students and businesses and was honoured with the VET Excellence Awards 2018 in the category “European Funding for Excellence – European Social Fund project”³⁸. The intervention was implemented between 2016-2018 by regional authorities represented by the Regional Group of Education Support Facilities (*Regionalny Zespół Placówek Wsparcia Edukacji*) in partnership with the Opolskie Centre for Economic Development (*Opolskie Centrum Rozwoju Gospodarki*), Opolskie University of Technology and the city of Opole. The project also involved dozens of schools from the region. Its components included courses for students both in VET schools and extramural, e.g. at the Opolskie University of Technology and in companies, as well as activities aimed at increasing the competences and qualifications of teachers. Additionally, 51 creative student teams were set up, with over 200 students engaging in specific projects in companies, and a number of new courses with employer patronage were introduced. New equipment was also provided in an effort to modernise schools and their workshops.

In 2018, the **Mazowieckie region** initiated a comprehensive project “Integrated development of vocational education” (*Zintegrowany rozwój szkolnictwa zawodowego*) implemented by the Marshal's Office of the Mazowieckie region in partnership with the Mazowsze Development Agency (*Agencja Rozwoju Mazowsza S.A.*)³⁹. The project will engage 159 schools and education entities, i.e. close to a half of all such establishments in the region⁴⁰, from 31 counties⁴¹. Relevant agreements have or will be signed with local authorities which manage schools. The components will include internships at companies, specialised courses and professional counselling. Each school will develop its pedagogical innovation programme to improve the quality of provided education and, among others, introduce new classes. The project will offer opportunities to improve the schools' equipment base and also foresees organisation of 36 VET fairs with participation of students and approx. 300 enterprises from the region. The intervention will be implemented over a period of five years between 2018-2023. Its overall funding will amount to approx. 120 mln PLN, including close to 108 mln PLN in EU funds from the Mazowieckie Regional Operational Programme of the region 2014-2020. The project is in line with the Mazowieckie Regional Development Strategy until 2030 which sees the creation of an effective VET system as a foundation for development of a modern and innovative regional economy.

The **Wielkopolskie region** also represents a focused approach to VET rooted in a long-standing partnership between the Poznań University of Technology (PUT) and regional authorities, resulting in both strategic/programmatic documents and related region-wide interventions which address pressing VET challenges. It is worth noting the bottom-up character and emphasis on technology diffusion in the approach, which originated in an initiative of the Technical Knowledge Accelerator (*Akcelerator Wiedzy Technicznej*, AWT) developed by PUT in 2006 and later supported by many institutions from the region⁴². In 2008, as response to endorsements, PUT developed the “Programme of acceleration of technical, mathematical and natural science knowledge”⁴³. The same year, the Wielkopolskie region officially joined the programme⁴⁴ and the “Conceptual framework for the organisation of education of qualified professionals

³⁸ Information available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/vocational-skills-week/week-2018_en (access: 8.03.2020)

³⁹ Information available at:

www.mazovia.pl/aktualnosci/art.6396,rekordowe-wsparcie-dla-szkol-zawodowych.html;

wupwarszawa.praca.gov.pl/documents/47726/0/P2/b07d2e2b-a8a3-4d73-bf26-b1648f915f8e (access: 8.03.2020)

⁴⁰ The initial project description foresees 130 entities, but official sources published later indicate higher numbers.

⁴¹ Information available at: <https://mapadotacji.gov.pl/projekty/776123/> (access: 8.03.2020)

⁴² Information available at: www.awt.org.pl/o-awt/uniwersalny-opis-koncepcji/?lang=en (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴³ Szafrński, M., Grupka, K., Goliński, M. (2008), Programme of acceleration of technical, mathematical and natural science knowledge in Poland (*Program akceleracji wiedzy technicznej i matematyczno-przyrodniczej w Polsce*), available at: www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/394328/edition/305723/content (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁴ Resolution No. 1350/08 of the Board of the Wielkopolskie Region of 29 May 2008 on the Wielkopolskie Region's accession to the programme „Technical Knowledge Accelerator” and accompanying activities as part of the conceptual framework for organisation of vocational education (*Uchwała Nr 1350/08 Zarządu Województwa Wielkopolskiego z dnia 29 maja 2008 r. w sprawie przystąpienia Województwa Wielkopolskiego do programu „Akcelerator Wiedzy Technicznej” i działań towarzyszących w ramach koncepcji organizacyjnej kształcenia zawodowego*), available at: <https://bip.umwww.pl/artykuly/62105/pliki/uchwala1350-08.pdf> (access: 8.03.2020).

and continuous education”⁴⁵ in the region was developed. The programme and concept were given effect in subsequent joint projects. Between 2010-2012, PUT with the Wielkopolskie regional government and the Central Ostrobothnia University of Applied Sciences Unit Ylivieska (Finland) as partners implemented the project “Wielkopolska Monitoring and Forecasting System for Vocational Education”⁴⁶. It was financed from the ESF under Priority 9 of the HC OP 2007-2013 and aimed at linking information on regional labour market needs with that on VET supply, bridging the existing knowledge gap. As a result, an information system was developed for VET students, employers, schools and managing institutions, as well as labour market analysts⁴⁷. These achievements were continued in a subsequent intervention “Time for professionals – vocational education in Wielkopolskie” (*Czas zawodowców – wielkopolskie kształcenie zawodowe*). The intervention, led by the Wielkopolskie regional government with PUT as a partner, was implemented between 2012-2015 as a systemic project financed under Priority 9 of the HC OP (Activity 9.2)⁴⁸. It was awarded the title of the “Best Investment in People” (*Najlepsza inwestycja w człowieka*) by the Minister of Infrastructure and Development in the competition “2014 ESF Best Practices” (*Dobre praktyki ESF 2014*)⁴⁹. It is continued through the project “Time for professional BIS – vocational education in Wielkopolskie” implemented by the Department of Education and Science of the Marshal’s Office together with PUT as Sub-activity 8.3.3. within the Wielkopolskie Regional Operational Programme for the years 2014-2020 in a non-competition mode. The project engages local governments, employers and 86 VET schools from the region⁵⁰. Its components include paid internships for students; professional counselling; courses and training for teachers⁵¹; innovative lab classes⁵²; an e-learning platform; and a communication platform between employers, vocational education system institutions and students. The project also established the Wielkopolska Education and Economic Network (*Wielkopolska Sieć Edukacyjno-Gospodarcza*).

The review shows that all regions recognise the importance of VET in developing human capital and a competitive economy. They also diagnose similar weaknesses and challenges to be tackled in regional VET systems. These include, among others, the low quality of VET, including education process and infrastructural and equipment base; a mismatch between the demand of the labour market and the labour force supply from the VET system; and a poor image and reputation of VET among its possible clients, resulting in the lack of interest in this type of education. The proposed core solutions are also similar, although as visible above in some regions they are organised in a more comprehensive and coordinated manner based on strategic documents and/or important, systemic projects. The review provides evidence for a crucial role of EU-funds in stimulating development of strategic efforts in relation to VET, as the financing for the latter comes primarily from regional operational programmes which distribute ESF and ERDF resources. The importance of leadership among the regional authorities in organising and implementing those efforts is also visible; however other stakeholders can also initiate strategic interventions. The analysis of specific interventions also makes a case for building region-wide coalitions around VET interventions.

⁴⁵ Wielkopolskie Region (2008), Conceptual framework for organisation of education of qualified professionals and continuous education (*Koncepcja organizacyjna kształcenia kadr kwalifikowanych i kształcenia ustawicznego w Wielkopolsce. Na poziomie zasadniczej szkoły zawodowej, technikum, szkoły policealnej, kolegium, dokształcanie, doskonalenie i doradztwo*), available at: www.umwww.pl/attachments/article/23364/koncepcja-organizacyjna-ksztalcenia-kadr.pdf (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁶ Information available at: www.awt.org.pl/projekty/wsmip/ (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁷ Szafranski, M. (ed.) (2011), Wielkopolska Monitoring and Forecasting System for Vocational Education (*Wielkopolski system monitorowania i prognozowania w zakresie kształcenia zawodowego*), available at: <https://bit.ly/2xpmzbu> (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁸ Information available at: <https://bit.ly/3cKa22V> (access: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁹ Information available at: <https://zawodowcy.org/o-projekcie-2/> (access: 8.03.2020). For more information on its successes, see e.g. Szafranski, M. (2015), “Acceleration of Educating as an External Factor Supporting Preventive and Improving Actions in Businesses”, *Procedia Manufacturing* Vol. 3 (2015), pp. 4948-4955, available at: shorturl.at/losl6 (access: 8.03.2020).

⁵⁰ The project was approved in January 2016 and will last until 2022. The overall budget amounts to 63,500,000 PLN of which 6,350,000 PLN comes from local government budgets, while the remaining part constitutes EU support. <https://zawodowcy.org/o-projekcie-2/> (access: 8.03.2020).

⁵¹ In addition to qualification courses and post-graduate diplomas, as part of the project, the PUT offers internships with employers and courses, e.g. on drone operation, alarm systems, 3D prototyping and modelling, entrepreneurship etc.

⁵² The component evolved from an idea of mobile labs, see Szafranski, M. (2014), “Laboratoria praktyk jako narzędzie wspomagające akcelerację dyfuzji wiedzy technicznej w przedsiębiorstwach” [in:] Werner, I., Więcek-Janka, E. (ed.) (2014), *Pomiędzy zarządzaniem procesami edukacyjnymi a rynkiem pracy*, p. 81, available at: <http://piz.san.edu.pl/docs/e-XV-8-2.pdf> (access: 8.03.2020).

5.0 Review of approaches to strategic development of VET in selected regions

5.1 Introduction

The three regions selected for this study (Pomorskie, Dolnośląskie and Małopolskie) are quite different in the specific approach they adopted and in the degree of success they had. Dolnośląskie achieved strategic success in its bottom-up approach to rationalising and equipping the iVET schools network in the previous programming period (2007-2013), so in the current programming period they built on the existing set-up while largely continuing interventions in the 'soft' areas identified and initiated in the past. Małopolskie followed Dolnośląskie's example of clustering schools and investing in the selected industries based on a territorial dimension, yet strongly emphasising the need for collaboration with employers. They developed a comprehensive strategy for iVET, based on the concept of sub-regional competence centres, focusing on smart specialization, albeit the final number of schools supported largely exceeded the more concentrated network of Dolnośląskie. Both regions developed complementary 'soft' systemic projects to facilitate a wide range of elements deemed crucial for advancement of iVET. Pomorskie chose a different approach. After adopting their strategic documents, they organised (through competition-based projects to all founders of iVET schools) an almost 2-year process of defining county-level concepts for the development of iVET, in close cooperation with different stakeholders and with the regional education department. Once prepared by counties, these concepts were formally adopted by the regional authorities and served as the basis for competition-based projects. In this section we provide an overview of individual approaches developed by each region.

5.2 Pomorskie

Regional socio-economic and policy context

Pomorskie is a middle-sized regional economy, occupying the fifth position in the Polish regions' ranking of GDP per person as of 2018.⁵³ The region's population is highly economically active, as demonstrated by robust entrepreneurship (with 61 enterprises per 1,000 people in 2018, the region was the second highest in Poland⁵⁴), low unemployment (in the third quarter of 2019, unemployment was the fourth lowest in the country at 4.4%⁵⁵), and a strong presence of economic clusters and organisations supporting businesses.⁵⁶ Influenced by its location by the Baltic Sea, Pomorskie's traditional industries include the petrochemical, shipbuilding, electromechanical, construction, and food and tourism sectors. Increasingly, however, the region's policy has been to boost investments in higher value-added services not subject to seasonal fluctuations in demand. In 2014-2015, following research and consultative processes, four Smart Specialisations (off-shore, port and logistics; ICT; eco-effective; and medical sectors) and 15 key industries

⁵³ Central Statistical Office (2019) Preliminary estimates of GDP per regions in 2019. Available from: https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5482/8/2/1/wstepne_szacunki_produkty_krajowego_brutto_w_przekroju_regionow_w_2018.pdf

⁵⁴ Central Statistical Office (2019) Activity of non-financial enterprises in 2018. Available from: https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5502/2/15/1/dzialalnosc_przedsiębiorstw_niefinansowych_w_2018.pdf

⁵⁵ Central Statistical Office (2019) Registered Unemployment. I-III quarters of 2019. Available from: https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5473/3/38/1/bezrobocie_rejestrowane_1-3_kwartal_2019.pdf

⁵⁶ Marshal Office of the Pomorskie region (2020) Economic Profile. Available from: <https://pomorskie.eu/profil-gospodarczy>

(*branże kluczowe*)⁵⁷ were identified as priority areas with the largest potential to bring economic development. Unlike most regions in Poland, Pomorskie has a population growth and positive net migration. Despite this, the region continues to face shortages of qualified labour force, largely as a result of the low appeal to potential entrants and long-term under-investment in VET which is observable across the country.

The need for improving the quality of iVET was recognised by Pomorskie's regional authorities as one of the key areas of intervention already planned as part of the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013. In that period, the implementation **of first region-wide measures for the improvement of iVET took the form of a series of “soft” ESF-funded activities, and the key intervention in the 2007-2013 programming period was the systemic project titled “Pomorskie - dobry kurs na edukację. Szkolnictwo zawodowe w regionie a wyzwania rynku pracy”**. The project exclusively addressed the ‘soft’ needs identified in the region and included development of standards for apprenticeships and practical vocational training, the delivery of vocational language courses, the development of required educational materials and the organisation of courses enabling students to acquire additional competences and vocational qualifications. Experiences gained during the previous programming period were relevant for the preparation of a more strategic iVET policy approach and measures to be realised from 2014 onwards.

Development, objectives and scope of the strategic approach

One of the key aspects of Pomorskie's strategic approach in the area of iVET is the fact that it has been developed within several levels of regional documents: first in the region's overall development strategy, then in one of its strategic programs, and finally in a comprehensive strategic initiative dedicated entirely to the development of iVET. Its origins can be found in Pomorskie's Regional Development Strategy 2020 (*Strategia Rozwoju Województwa Pomorskiego 2020*), adopted in 2012, which outlines the vision, goals, and the main areas of intervention for the region's socio-economic development.

On importance of strategy:

“First we think about the idea, and then about the financing source. And perhaps this idea will turn out to be in line with EU funds. But it is the ideas which are the most important.” KII 1, Pomorskie

Improving the educational offer in Pomorskie, including iVET in particular, is one of the main commitments of the strategy, treated as necessary effort to support a modern economy and an active population of the region. Specific goals, priorities and measures to be taken in the field of education and training are laid out in the Regional Strategic Programme “Active Pomeranians” (*Regionalny Program Strategiczny “Aktywni Pomorzanie” 2020*)⁵⁸, one of six regional strategic programmes operationalising

Pomorskie's Regional Development Strategy 2020. The document introduces three strategic initiatives (*przedsięwzięcia strategiczne*) for the realisation of its goals, one of which⁵⁹ is entitled **“Shaping a network of upper secondary vocational schools aligned with the needs of the sub-regional and regional labour markets”** (*“Kształtowanie sieci ponadgimnazjalnych szkół zawodowych, uwzględniającej potrzeby subregionalnych i regionalnego rynków pracy”*, hereafter: the strategic initiative).⁶⁰

⁵⁷ The 15 key industries of Pomorze are: ICT and electronics; the marine sector; environment; energy and eco-energy; the health and the *medical* sector; transport, logistics and automotive; construction; the creative sector; light chemical sector; petrochemistry; biotechnology; tourism, sport and recreation; financial and business services; food processing; furniture.

⁵⁸ Available at

https://strategia.pomorskie.eu/documents/240306/1837946/Za%C5%82%C4%85cznik+nr+1+do+uchwa%C5%82y+nr+376_332_18++RPS+AP.pdf/71e5044b-295d-4a79-870a-004cd8205d39

⁵⁹ The other two strategic initiatives introduced in the Regional Strategic Programme “Active Pomeranians” are aimed at general education and include “Comprehensive support for schools and educational entities” (“Kompleksowe wsparcie szkół i placówek”) and “The gifted of Pomerania” (“Zdolni z Pomorza”)

⁶⁰ Marshall Office of Pomorskie Region (2018) Regional Strategic Programme “Active Pomeranians”. Available from: https://strategia.pomorskie.eu/documents/240306/1837946/Za%C5%82%C4%85cznik+nr+1+do+uchwa%C5%82y+nr+376_332_18++RPS+AP.pdf/71e5044b-295d-4a79-870a-004cd8205d39

The strategic initiative aims at improving the quality of iVET provision in the region through the development of iVET providers' network which will better respond to the local and regional needs. Its specific objectives are to:

- a.) enhance the collaboration of iVET schools with employers and higher education institutions and render it more systematic;
- b.) improve the chances of iVET schools' graduates to successfully enter the labour market;
- c.) adjust the competences of iVET schools' teachers to the requirements of the rapidly changing labour market;
- d.) boost the attractiveness of iVET offer for primary school pupils;
- e.) broaden the opportunities for continuing education corresponding to the needs of the labour market.⁶¹

The main premise of the initiative is the rationalisation and enhancement of the iVET offer in the region through the provision of technical and financial support to selected VET providers and for specific vocational courses in a coordinated and harmonised manner.

The scope of the strategic initiative covers all founding organs of iVET schools, that is all counties and cities with county rights, and includes, among others, aligning the iVET offer with the key strategic industries defined; providing additional opportunities for the acquisition of competences for both students and teachers; acquiring and modernising the infrastructure and teaching equipment in iVET schools; developing career guidance mechanisms in primary schools; and establishing mechanisms for the inclusion of employers and higher education institutions into iVET provision.

The Marshal Office of the Pomorskie region (MO) played the leading role in the development of the key strategic documents, which were nevertheless widely consulted on with the public and key stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental actors.

The MO managed and coordinated most of the activities involved in the development of the Regional Development Strategy 2020, the Regional Strategic Programme (RSP) "Active Pomeranians", and the strategic initiative. Specifically, the Department for Regional and Spatial Development and the Department of Economic Development were primarily responsible for the development of the Regional Development Strategy 2020, while the RSP "Active Pomeranians" was created under the leadership of the Department of Education and Sports. The documents are developed internally within the MA on the basis of internal studies, of knowledge gained through experience of previous programming period, and through regular discussions with iVET entities in the region. MA also procured external analyses and assessments. Further, the documents were consulted on with the public and key stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental actors, through many workshops and online consultations (exceeding the minimum requirements for such consultations). As such, designated working groups composed of local authorities managing schools, employers' representatives, teachers and

On promoting rational planning in VET:

„Within the [strategic] initiative, we really wanted to mobilise VET schools' managing authorities to look into VET schools' graduate pathways and study their career and further education progress, in order to stimulate them to reflect on whether the VET courses in their schools are actually needed and enable the graduates to access employment easily and rapidly. Such a reflection teaches the VET schools' managing authorities to develop evidence-based educational policy and to make more optimal choices with respect to the educational offer which the given counties are planning to launch.” KII 1 Pomorskie

⁶¹ Strategic Initiative Information Sheet

academic experts were included in the formulation of the RSP “Active Pomeranians” and the strategic initiative. Implementation of the strategic approach.

The Pomorskie Voivodeship Regional Operational Programme (ROP) for 2014-2020 constitutes the main vessel for the implementation of the strategic initiative. Other pillars include strategic use of the regional in-service teacher training centre (*Centrum Edukacji Nauczycieli*).

The implementation consisted of two phases. In the first phase, a competition for counties to formulate concepts of development of iVET at the county level was announced in June 2014, after several months of meetings with counties. In these concepts, the local authorities had to lay out how their project prioritises the most important schools and courses from a strategic point of view and how it is aligned with the regional strategy, with the local and regional labour market needs (and the 15 key industries in particular) and iVET policies. In addition, the concepts were required to include a description of concrete arrangements for the collaboration with employers and higher institutions. Importantly, developing these concepts was made a pre-condition for the counties’ participation in the subsequent call for proposals for EU funding for iVET, effectively incentivising all counties in the region to participate. The counties were also informed at the beginning of the process that ESF and ERDF funding would be tied, therefore those who wanted to apply for financing from either of the two sources would need to prepare such concepts.

The concepts developed by the counties were subsequently presented in front of a designated commission composed of the key MA representatives and a spectrum of other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (such as representatives of employers and employers’ associations, the Regional Educational Authority the Regional Labour Market Council, Regional Public Employment Services, Regional Development Agency and the Regional Special Economic Zone). For the purposes of transparency, the MA also involved representatives of the Counties Convention (*konwent powiatów*) in the commission’s work as an observer.

On importance of good preparations:

„It was much easier for the VET schools’ managing authorities to prepare the formally required application, because [by that time] they already analysed in detail what they want to do, for how much, and based on what resources. This makes sense from the regional perspective, when these plans are complementary across the counties.” KII 2, Pomorskie

In these meetings, the concepts were assessed and evaluated against several criteria announced at the start of the intervention, and on that basis, the projects were refined. Most concepts were revised in the process as the initial proposals often involved a broad range of schools and courses rather than being limited to those which were the most strategic from the perspective of the regional and local economies, and the labour markets. In addition, the MO aimed for all the concepts to be complementary with each other, resulting in the need for some counties to negotiate with each other to avoid proposing overlapping interventions (e.g. financing for two schools or courses of the same speciality in the close vicinity with each other). All concepts

had to be based on evidence, including data and testimonies from iVET school directors and private sector representatives who were also required to accompany the counties in the meetings with the commission and were generally expected to play an active role in the development of the projects.

The entire process lasted 18 months, and culminated in the formation of a comprehensive group of integrated projects, covering all counties in the region, accepted by the Board of Pomorskie Voivodeship, creating a network of supported iVET schools together providing a coherent and strategic iVET offer in the region.

In March 2016, after almost two years of intensive negotiations, final versions of county concepts were approved, and then adopted to define the exact scope of the strategic initiative as a decree of MO. Thus, by somewhat altering the scope of the projects developed by the counties, the general goals of the regional strategy could be translated into a set of detailed concepts of iVET development covering all counties in

the region. The county concepts served as basis for integrated projects, a parallel non-competition-based project for so called “motivational programmes” was developed by MO.

In the second phase, a second competition was announced by MO, this time in scope of the ROP. It was launched in May 2016, for counties to present their integrated projects. In order to be awarded funds, counties had to present integrated projects, covering both soft measures (EFS) and hard measures (ERDF), in accordance with the concepts already approved by the MO. All counties and cities with county rights submitted their proposals and all proposals were awarded financing. The level of financing awarded to each beneficiary was based on the needs as expressed and supported with evidence in their concepts. While there was no upper limit on the financing received, the MO also strived to allocate funds fairly and to avoid large disparities between counties. In addition, an integrated project for iVET schools managed directly by the region (medical schools) and two integrated projects submitted by craft organisations were financed.

An essential part of Pomorskie’s approach was the creation of a regional network of school career counsellors to improve the availability of information and increase the appeal of the iVET offer in the region among its adolescents and youth. For this purpose, a regional coordinator was nominated in the regional centre for in-service teacher training, to create and coordinate a platform for the exchange of practices and mutual support for county level career counsellors⁶². In fact, the appointment of counsellors at the county level was one of the conditions for favourable assessment of counties’ integrated projects submitted for support in the framework of the ROP.

ESF and ERDF financing channelled through the ROP into the strategic initiative amount to almost 277 million PLN out of the total 326 million PLN, or almost 85% of resources spent for its realisation. An additional 41 million PLN or 11.2% came from the local authorities’ resources as co-financing of projects, 4.8 million PLN or 1.5% from the central budget and 3.2 million PLN or 1% from the regional authorities’ budget.⁶³ With these resources, the strategic initiative is financed in two main ways:

- a) Integrated projects (*projekty zintegrowane*) combining ESF funding for “soft” activities such as teacher training and ERDF funding for “hard” measures such as acquisition of new equipment awarded via the competition mode; and
- b) “Motivational programmes” (*programy motywacyjne*) project managed by the Department of Education and Sports at the MO awarded in a non-competition mode.

The integrated projects constitute the major part of the intervention and the key instrument for ensuring rationalisation of the school network in the region. The rationale behind them has been that combining ESF and ERDF funding sources brings the most significant effects, enabling the supported schools to holistically transform their educational offer. In order to enable a region-wide, coordinated intervention the integrated projects are executed by counties rather than directly by individual iVET schools.

On negotiating regional approach:

„The assumption was that we create a network [of VET schools], but that the scope of the support is agreed on earlier. [...] The support was channelled and agreed on based on the suggestions of schools and country authorities. For instance, they believed that so and so schools for so and so vocations should be supported. Subsequently, we verified this by looking at the regional scale, whether there would be no overlaps. [...] So we worked with the county authorities, if we believed that the scope was too broad, or if funding to particular vocations, schools should not be allocated – we looked at it in a holistic way.” KII 3, Pomorskie

⁶² As well as for the five medical VET schools managed directly by the Marshal Office.

⁶³ Strategic Initiative Information Sheet

As such, the **intervention was designed in a way that a county applying for support through ERDF was obliged to simultaneously request support through ESF, and success in securing financing from one fund was prerequisite for obtaining funds from the other.** While all counties and towns and cities with county rights were invited to participate in the initiative, their eligibility was conditional on adherence to detailed concepts for the development of iVET in their territory developed during the first phase of the implementation.

Pomorskie's two-phase approach to elaborating and negotiating the implementation of the RPO financial support through competition mode stands out as unique in its comprehensiveness and effectiveness in ensuring adherence to the overall region's strategic vision of iVET. Due to the intense preparations during the first phase, all counties in the region (as well as the two craft organisations) prepared coherent concepts. In the second phase, integrated projects based on these concepts were awarded funding in the competition procedure in accordance with the ESF and ERDF requirements. Interestingly, the commission which negotiated the concepts during the first phase continues to be involved in the monitoring of the projects during the second phase, after the award of the financing.

On leadership:

„It is people who constitute the potential of our department. People, who are employed in the department and create the policy based on their rich experience, and not those responsible for the implementation of the projects directly. We are not a typical department of education – our role is not limited to managing VET schools. In turn, in addition to that, we develop and implement a regional, educational policy. On the other hand, we also have a very open-minded board who support our efforts to inspire and coordinate education, collect certain data, and speak about [the region's] potential as well as barriers.” KII 2 Pomorskie

The schools not selected for financing in the framework of the integrated projects were nevertheless benefiting from support in the form of 'motivational programmes', managed in a non-competition mode. The main aim of the "motivational programmes" was to allow access to various forms of professional training for students to undertake internships and apprenticeships with employers, vocational courses, benefit from study visits to employers, laboratory classes at universities. It also encompassed activities targeting all the students in the region and (including those who were covered by integrated projects) to participate in competitions on professional knowledge, in educational and vocational camps, benefit from scholarship support. The last component consisted of activities vocational education teachers and practical vocational training instructors.

The entire implementation process has evolved under the strong leadership of the Marshalls Office as the Regional Strategic Programme has been managed by a team composed of representatives of the majority of departments, headed by the Director of the Department of Education and Sports.

Consequently, **the strategic initiative is implemented under the leadership of the Marshall Office with the active engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, including many employers and employers' organisations.** As per the strategic approach, counties are the primary entities responsible for the implementation of ESF- and ERDF-funded iVET projects but schools and the private sector representatives also play an important role in the process.

5.3 Dolnośląskie

Regional socio-economic and policy context

Dolny Śląsk ranks amongst Poland's most developed and richest regions⁶⁴. Bordering both Germany and Czechia, it has long been involved in partnerships and collaboration with these neighbours, not least in the area of education. Being one of the voivodships located closest to the Western border, as well as boasting well developed industrial and logistical infrastructure⁶⁵ contributed to **substantial investment of foreign enterprises in the area**⁶⁶. All these factors, especially a high demand for skilled labour force signalled by foreign and local enterprises, have led to Dolny Śląsk to recognize the need for investment in iVET early on.

On changing economy:

„Employers were used to accessing trained workers without their inputs, investments [...] and that suddenly changed. So they came to the conclusion that they need to become engaged in VET, because otherwise they won't have the workers to do the job.” KII 4, Dolnośląskie

Poland's seventh largest administrative area, and the third most populated, the region is divided into 26 counties and four cities with county rights (including region's capital - Wrocław). While Wrocław stands as the largest and richest city of the region, the area is polycentric and other urban centres (Walbrzych, Jelenia Góra and Legnica) are well-developed both economically and infrastructurally. In fact, the region's three Special Economic Zones⁶⁷ are based in Walbrzych⁶⁸, Legnica and Kamienna Góra. Dolny Śląsk's positioning and potential is reflected in the region's Development Strategy and RIS 3 (Regional Innovation Strategy), where **chemical and pharmaceutical**

industries, high quality food, natural resources and secondary raw materials, production of machines and equipment, information and communication technologies, transport are identified as key strategic areas⁶⁹. In recent years the region absorbed significant numbers of Ukrainian workers, who partially filled a large labour force gap created by the local population's wide-spread migration to Western Europe. Although the region is one of Poland's economic champions⁷⁰, in 2018 over one hundred local governments (gminas) of the southern and south-western sub-region of Dolny Śląsk adopted 'Development Strategy Sudety 2030'⁷¹ aimed at advancing the economy and living conditions in this part of the country, with the plan to catch up with the northern regions. This shows that the region's level of development is not uniform.

Interviews conducted for this study revealed that the region's current most pressing challenges in the area of iVET largely reflect those faced by the whole country: growing shortages of iVET teachers, school curricula and examination models not compatible with the needs of employers, poor reputation of iVET education. At the same time, the most dire material and infrastructure needs of many of the schools have been addressed during the past programming period, which in case of Dolnośląskie was the key period of strategic intervention (described in more detail in the following sections of this report).

⁶⁴ Statistics Poland (2018) Regions of Poland. Available at <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/inne-opracowania/miasta-województwa/regiy-polski-2018,6,12.html> (accessed 10.03.2020)

⁶⁵ Historically, Dolny Slask (or earlier Lower Silesia) was a region pertaining to Germany, which benefited the area with investments in roads and railways. Both are substantially better developed than their counterparts in the eastern parts of Poland.

⁶⁶ UMWD, <http://www.umwd.dolnyslask.pl/gospodarka/inwestycjezagraniczne/atrakcyjnoinwestycjinaregion/najwieksi-inwestorzy/>

⁶⁷ A special economic zone (SEZ) is an area in which the business and trade laws are different from the rest of the country. SEZs are located within a country's national borders, and their aims include increased trade balance, employment, increased investment, job creation and effective administration

⁶⁸ Walbrzyska Strefa Ekonomiczna 'Invest-Park' ranked as 4th in Europe, and 22 in the world in Financial Times listing. See <https://invest-park.com.pl/en/investment-lands-with-tax-exemptions/>

⁶⁹ Marshall Office of the Dolnoslaskie Region (2015) Ramy Strategiczne na rzecz inteligentnych specjalizacji Dolnego Slaska.

⁷⁰ Statistics Poland (2018) Regions of Poland. Available at <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/inne-opracowania/miasta-województwa/regiony-polski-2018,6,12.html> (accessed 10.03.2020)

⁷¹ <https://www.um.walbrzych.pl/pl/news/strategia-sudety-2030-zatwierdzona>

This combined with the increasing trend of companies directly collaborating with schools (financing modernization of material base, establishing patronage classes and providing opportunities for internships), different initiatives managed by the educational clusters of the Special Economic Zones and capacities of counties and school headmasters to actively seek support through projects, indicate that iVET in the region is continuously developing.

Objectives, scope and key components of the strategic approach

On the bottom-up approach:

“The challenges of the VET system were first truly observed in 2006, not long after [Poland’s] entry into the EU, and right before the new programming period of 2007-2013. The heads of county authorities, persuaded by the heads of their educational departments, decided that they wanted to improve VET. [...] They agreed, that a number of greatly equipped Vocational Training Centres will be formed. But, there are almost 30 counties – which should benefit? [...] They agreed that these centres will be [set-up] in selected countries only, since there is no money to grant to everyone, and not everyone needs this. So extensive analyses were performed in a way, where VET teachers spent their entire 2 months of the holiday period to analyse what they have, what they miss, what they need, how much would everything cost, and who would price it.”
KII 5, Dolnośląskie

The regional approach to iVET in Dolny Śląsk is not described in any strategic or operational document, other than the priorities and actions in this area defined in the successive regional development strategies⁷². The Regional Development Strategy 2020 adopted in 2005 acknowledged an outdated education infrastructure, low flexibility of iVET and a lack of compatibility between courses offered and labour market demands. Activities planned in that strategy included cooperation between schools and employers in the area of initial VET as well as improvement of the career counselling at primary school level. In the updated version of the Strategy⁷³ (adopted in 2013), expansion and modernisation of the regional iVET has become a stand-alone priority, activities planned include elaboration of a model of collaboration between iVET schools and employers. There are no strategic regional programmes developed encompassing VET, nor a single document outlining the region’s strategic approach. **In the case of Dolny Śląsk, a strategic approach to iVET can be seen through the coordinated practice and systemic projects managed by the Education Department of the Marshall Office the in the previous programming period.**

The strategic approach to iVET in Dolny Śląsk developed in the mid-2000s was built on the premise that given the large scale of under-investment and

outdated infrastructure in vocational schools, it was impossible to meaningfully improve them all and as such, priority industries and localities had to be selected. Implementation of this approach has involved two parallel systemic projects:

- A ‘hard’ investment project- “Modernisation of VET Centres in Dolny Śląsk” (“Modernizacja centrów kształcenia zawodowego na Dolnym Śląsku”);
- A ‘soft’ skills project- “Modernisation of VET Education in Dolny Śląsk II” (“Modernizacja kształcenia zawodowego na Dolnym Śląsku II”).

“Modernisation of VET Centres in Dolny Śląsk” was implemented between 2009 and 2013 in the framework of Priority 7 of the Regional Operational Programme, Expansion and modernization of educational infrastructure in Dolny Śląsk. With the total value of over PLN 67 million, the project is set to modernize

⁷² Research for *this study revealed* that the idea of creating an overarching education strategy document at the regional level was in fact explored and discussed at the Marshal Office in the past years. It was however judged that a very general nature of such documents would lead to their limited usefulness, and as a result the idea was abandoned.

⁷³ http://www.umwd.dolnyslask.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Rozwoj_regionalny/SRWD/SRWD_2020-final.pdf

iVET by establishing a network of vocational education centres (branżowe centra kształcenia) in seven key industries: mechanics, automotive, electro-energetic, mechatronic-electronic, IT, construction and tourism. The centres were to be based in already existing schools, assessed as having sufficient infrastructure potential to house and feed students coming from other counties, located in nine counties. The industries were selected from the perspective of their relevance to the regional economy but also based on the fact that adequate, modern equipment necessary for effective education in these schools (given the nature of machines needed) was very expensive. The modernization of infrastructure in iVET schools for the majority of these industries was beyond the budgetary capacities of the counties, so external support was crucial. In this strategic approach, the highly modernized centres, equipped with the newest machines would provide resources for education adequate to the needs of the labour market. The centres were designed to be used by students from different schools in the area, based on cooperation between the institutions and shared use of the facilities. It was judged that comprehensive, expensive modernization of several schools in key industries and enabling the facility usage by students from other schools was better than limited investment in all of the schools. Clearly, this approach required prior review and identification of strategic priorities for the region.

The establishment of the modern equipped centres was accompanied by 'soft' interventions, one of them being the 'Modernisation of VET Education in Dolny Śląsk' where emphasis was placed on increasing the appeal and quality of vocational education in the region. **The investment project discussed above was complemented by a large, 'soft' systemic project "Modernisation of VET Education in Dolny Śląsk II", so that the modern facilities developed through the 'hard' intervention were used effectively for development of relevant skills and competencies.** The project activities targeted all the counties in the region through the implementation of development programmes in 250 schools, pertaining to 14 industries. With the value of almost PLN 114 million, the project largely reflected the aims of the first project 'Modernisation of VET Education in Dolny Śląsk' by scaling up the activities to cover the whole region. It encompassed development of core competences demanded by the employers, increase in professional competences, increasing students' knowledge of the labour market and their abilities to plan educational-professional careers. The project also set out to include employers in the education process at all the 250 schools. A wide range of activities was planned in the scope of this intervention, from additional classes for mastering transversal competences and psycho-pedagogical support, through to career counselling and visitations to well-equipped educational centres, to mini-research projects carried out by the students and competitions for best students in a given profession. The project included internships as well as vocational fairs and presentations.

On importance of industry leadership:

"We thought that we will continue the systemic projects and fund and update the centres' equipment. When that does not happen, the employers can step in. This is happening today. Faced with the shortage of these funds, the patronage classes started operating. Here, our role was automatically taken over by the [special] economic zones. The Convention [of Counties], all that was common, is [now] fragmented. Because the zones' interests are limited to their member employers. In strategic decision-making, politics and widespread consensus plays an important role. If the industry is now a unifying factor, let us focus on the areas which the employers understand the best. Let the schools and funds focus around these zones – it's an idea, which emerged in this programming period." KII 3, Dolnośląskie

Importantly, the project also served as an instrument for accommodating physical infrastructure and equipment needs at schools not benefiting directly from the investment project. **While to a smaller extent in comparison to the large scale investments in the other systemic project, here schools also benefited from the modernisation and update of their material basis. This was significant approach to balance out and compensate to the counties not selected for establishment of vocational education centres.** As such, the combined systemic projects largely improved and re-shaped the

vocational education map of the region, creating focal points in form of the very well-equipped vocational education centres, linked with other schools through sharing facilities.

The Department still leads several multi-stakeholder projects, partnering with higher education institutions and numerous counties. “Vocational Dolny Śląsk” (*Zawodowy Dolny Śląsk*) was a project targeting specifically professions important to the region from the perspective of RIS as well as deficit professions and has a strong component of collaboration with higher learning institutions. “Time for Professionals” (*Czas na zawodowców*), another project emphasising strong collaboration with technical universities, involves ten counties. The only-non competition project in the area of iVET within this programming period – providing stipends for students performing well in professional courses - is to be launched shortly⁷⁴.

These projects however are limited in financial scope - “Vocational Dolny Śląsk”, implemented during 2017 and 2018, while involving eighteen counties and 44 schools, had value of PLN 4 million only (compared to almost PLN 114 million in the previous programming period. The remaining funds designated for development of VET through the Regional Operational Programme have been distributed through a number of smaller competitions, with multiple beneficiaries, from schools, through to counties to civil society organisations. These competitions enjoyed a high level of response and level of funds absorption, which indicates that stakeholders in the region have the capacity to design and manage well their own targeted interventions.

Development and implementation of the strategic approach

We first discuss development and implementation of the strategic approach in 2007-13 programming period before moving on to the current one. **The prospect of accessing significant financial support which came with programming for the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013 served as a motivation, largely shaping cooperation and negotiations amongst the counties in the area of VET.** While the money was channelled top-down by the Managing Authority, and the systemic projects were developed and managed by the Education Department of the Marshal Office, **the effort invested in developing a coherent, strategic approach to this money distribution in the case of Dolnośląskie was bottom-up in character.** First consultation and coordination efforts evolved at the level of several departments of education in the counties, subsequently involving in the process more local governments. This created a strong sense of ownership over the entire process amongst the counties - a factor which was very useful in the further negotiation on the shape and distribution of resources from the systemic projects. The interviews for this research revealed that in the mid-2000’s heads of several county education departments, pressured by ongoing requests for support from vocational schools lacking sufficient investment launched a discussion on how these needs could be addressed at a regional level. Lobbying heads of counties, who in turn placed the topic of iVET development on the agenda of Dolnośląskie Counties Convent led to the issue gaining significant momentum in 2006 and 2007. The Convent entered an active discussion with the Department of Education of the Marshall Office and through a cooperative effort two large systemic projects were developed and implemented within the Regional Operational Programme. A working group for iVET was established at the level of the Convent, bringing together representatives of four counties most active in developing intervention. While the Education Department had the final say regarding the design of both projects and managed the preparation and implementation processes, the County Convent was a platform used for effective negotiations with and between different counties. This active role of the Convent was important because the selection and establishment of the planned vocational education centres in just nine counties required extensive consensus achieved through bargaining among almost 30 local governments of the region (with somehow limited role for the region in this bargaining process). Out of the nine counties

⁷⁴ The project largely corresponds with the region’s overall goal of financially supporting gifted students across different educational areas. See <http://www.umwd.dolnyslask.pl/edukacja-i-nauka/programy-edukacyjne-wynikajace-ze-strategii-rozwoju-wojewodztwa-dolnoslaskiego/>

selected for support, four were those represented by the education departments most engaged in the processes from the start.

Another important forum for discussions on the way forward for the regional vocational education came in the form of a Consultative Council on VET, launched in 2006 by the Dolnośląskie Regional Educational Authority (*kuratorium oświaty*), regional representative of the national government. While the Regional Educational Authority is not tasked with management of regional policies (it reports directly to the Ministry of Education), the Council involved representatives of the Marshall Office, counties, labour market institutions and employer organisations, and served as an important platform for discussing different challenges in iVET shared regionally. A final selection of the counties, schools and industries to benefit from the projects, as well as planning and budgeting of the investment elements of the intervention, was built largely on an extensive needs diagnosis and stock-taking exercise carried out voluntarily by iVET teachers across the spectrum of schools. The interviews for this study revealed that this joint, voluntary effort of teachers and headmasters was in fact a rare historical moment of bottom-up mobilization prompted both by dramatic conditions for teaching in the schools and by the possibilities for change seen in form of ROP funding. Teachers and headmasters spent their free time analysing equipment, materials and infrastructure available at their schools, diagnosing capacities and needs and developing purchase projections⁷⁵. The process included consultations with the employers so as to best reflect their needs and to make sure that the expensive, modern machines purchased were actually those most needed and effective from the perspective of learning outcomes.

While the implementation of the two systemic projects was planned as successive, so that the 'soft' project would build on the fully modernized vocational education centres, in practice they were implemented almost in parallel. This was largely due to delays in the procurement of the equipment managed by the Marshall Office. Project activities were implemented by Dolnośląskie Teacher Training Centre (Centrum Informacji Zawodowej i Doskonalenia Nauczycieli) based in Wałbrzych, in collaboration with an extensive network of project officers located at all the counties.

On limitations of systemic approach:

„Within the 'Modernisation' [of VET schools] framework, one school wanted an antique car [...], another wanted a machine tool, and yet another wanted something else. [...] And it transpired that meeting such fragmented demands and need within such a large project, administered by one entity and where public procurement procedures apply, is impossible. Some things had to be made uniform, but then individual needs fall through the cracks. In the current programming period, several regional initiatives remain, but fortunately, there is also a pool of resources which enables schools to apply individually.” KII 5, Dolnośląskie

The entire project team built in the process of project preparation and implementation at the Education Department, Teacher Training Centre and in the counties amounted to approximately 40 people. Completed in 2015, the projects were considered a success and learning opportunity for other regions in Poland to follow.

Based on the success of the two projects, the Education Department at the Marshal Office initially wanted to continue the same coordinated, systemic approach at a large scale in the current programming period but this was not allowed. Interviews carried out for this study showed that on the one hand there was a sense of disappointment with this situation, while on the other hand, informants expressed a sentiment that many individual counties as well as other stakeholders might in fact prefer a solution where they have more room for representing individual local needs and strategies. Other, more critical voices indicated that lack of large, coordinated interventions has to do with limited capacity and leadership at the level of the Managing Authority and the Education Department. At the same time,

there is a general consensus that empowerment of schools and counties in the previous processes

⁷⁵ Internal project documentation and presentations identified during fieldwork. On stock with the authors.

combined with growth of vibrant economy in the region has created conditions where centralized leadership at the regional level is less necessary as other smaller mechanisms for coordination evolved over time, specifically Special Economic Zones.

5.4 Małopolskie

Regional socio-economic context

Małopolska ranks both amongst the country's smaller regions, and the most populated ones⁷⁶. Despite its relatively small size (12th in the country), the region is divided into 22 counties and three cities with county rights. Demographic trends observed in the region are the ageing of the society, leading to a falling share of people of working age. In this context there is a high demand from the economy to effectively include graduates of industry/vocational schools into the labour market. This requires that students have the opportunity to acquire qualifications and competences useful and relevant to needs of employers and the labour market already during their schooling. Despite the growing importance of developing sectors, such as the high-tech and motor industries, the region maintains such traditional sectors as metallurgy, heavy chemicals, mining, metal, tobacco and food industries, which constitute its economic base⁷⁷. The capital of the voivodeship is Kraków – an important cultural, economic, and scientific, academic and educational centre in Poland. Małopolskie is prominent among other regions due to large number of VET schools (ranking fourth in the country) but also higher education institutions. The overall potential arising from high number of educational institutions was recognised by the regional government and addressed through 'Małopolska Chmura Edukacyjna' - a project supported through the Regional Operational Programme, aimed at increasing the transfer of new knowledge from the universities to schools using communication technologies⁷⁸.

Małopolska's strategic approach to iVET builds on the region's experience accumulated in over a decade. The region had already started to tackle challenges in the area of iVET in the 2007-2009 period, when it assumed a needs-based approach to supporting schools and their management bodies (especially counties) through competition-based project selection. As, insufficient interest was observed, with a relatively low number of entities applying for support (indicating deficits with the ability to prepare and manage EU-funded projects), a systemic project was developed. *The Modernisation of vocational education I* (Modernizacja Kształcenia Zawodowego I), implemented between 2009 and 2015 constituted the first systemic approach to developing iVET in the region, with main actions aimed at improving iVET infrastructure, the educational offer for students, promoting the appeal of iVET across the region. At the same time an important effect in the form of developing the organisational potential of institutions (especially schools and counties) in managing EU-funded projects was achieved.

Objectives, scope and key components of the strategic approach

The key document regarding iVET in Małopolska is the strategic programme "Intellectual Capital and Labour Market" (*Kapitał intelektualny i rynek pracy*)⁷⁹, adopted in 2015. It is one of ten strategic programmes designed as documents implementing the Małopolska Regional Development Strategy 2020 (*Strategia Rozwoju Województwa Małopolskiego na lata 2011-2020 "Małopolska 2020. Nieograniczone możliwości"*), which was adopted in 2011. The programme presents a coherent approach to supporting the development of intellectual capital and vocational activity of the region's inhabitants with "Improvement of quality and effectiveness of vocational education" being one of the programme's five priorities.

The overall objective of this priority is defined as establishing "lasting mechanisms to ensure the training of qualified personnel for the region's economy", indicating that the regional government perceives iVET as an instrument of regional development in the context of the region's labour market. The document introduces the following two strategic projects as means of achieving this objective:

⁷⁶ Ibidem

⁷⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regional-innovation-monitor/base-profile/malopolskie>; accessed 03.03.2020r.

⁷⁸ <http://e-chmura.malopolska.pl/index.php/o-projekcie/1-o-projekcie>

⁷⁹ Available at http://www.umwm.pl/userfiles/uploads/KliRP%20uchwala%201741_15.pdf

- a.) Vocational Competence Centres (Centrum Kompetencji Zawodowych, further referred to as VCCs) – as a network of institutions providing vocational education based on partnerships of existing schools and units.
- b.) Modernisation of vocational education II (*Modernizacja Kształcenia Zawodowego II*) – as a project supporting the VCCs network and coordinating the VET-related activity in the region.

In addition, the second of these projects includes the creation of two VCC's based on iVET schools founded by the region.

Both interventions were designed within the scope of financing for the Regional Operational Programme and are built on the strong levels of complementarity. While the VCC's were envisioned as a competition based project

addressed to counties of the region, the second intervention was planned a complementing the first, through broad coordination and support delivered through a non-competition mode.

The introduction of the VCCs to the Małopolska's iVET landscape was in its assumption an **attempt at rationalization of the school network on the basis of sub-regional needs and distribution of newly established entities across three sub regions.**

The "Intellectual Capital and Labour Market" initially envisioned creation of 25 VCC's across the voivodeship, a number which has increased in the process of further consultations and finetuning of the approach, to reach 49 centres in the end.

On difficulties in negotiating territorial approach:

"(...) our guiding principle was to avoid overlapping of further investments in the region where Vocational [Training] Centres of identical specialisations emerge in all counties. Instead, we wanted the specialisations of the centres to differ, based on their location. It was challenging to develop such a system where some counties need to discontinue some courses, because they are provided in one centre in Małopolska elsewhere. Thus, the specialisations do overlap partly, but we managed to coordinate this to some extent, to avoid excessive duplication." KII 2 Małopolskie

On comprehensive strategy development:

"We worked on developing the strategy for about a year and a half. The next step were the strategic programmes. In parallel, we were writing the ROP. And during this process of creating the ROP already, there were discussions with the VET schools' managing authorities. Overall, the process took several years to make region-level agreements. Not impose, but come to an agreement about what we want to do with those who are subsequently going to implement it." KII 1, Małopolskie

Another aspect of Małopolskie's strategic approach was a strong level of standardisation of the planned VCC's, described in detail in the region's flagship document "Model for Support of Vocational Education in Małopolska 2014-2020" (*Model wsparcia kształcenia zawodowego w Małopolsce w latach 2014-2020*) adopted in 2016. In its view, **the VCC's are partnership projects implemented by existing iVET and continuing education schools or units and their managing entities.** They are network-based as a VCC consists of several schools/units and project-based (with one entity being a leader or coordinator, and others – partners). In terms of the educational offer, the concept of a VCC stresses the **need for specialisation in one specific vocational sector**, with another area complementing the offer. Here again, the territorial aspect has been emphasised as **specialisations should be selected with reference to the specific character, needs and potential of a sub-regional area, on the basis of a local and sub-regional socio-economical diagnosis.** The document also specifies factors which should be considered in the selection of the school or unit which will

form the basis of a VCC as having significant on sub-regional scale potential in terms of the teaching

infrastructure; the number of pupils; exam results; transport and logistical conditions; proximity of exam centres/institutions; and existing and potential links with employers.

Cooperation with employers is the third important element of the VCC concept. Developing learners' practical competences, and providing means for gaining vocational experience through work-based learning are priority tasks of VCCs. At VCCs, learners are offered vocational counselling and practical training and apprenticeship opportunities, with funding for both the learner (in the form of a scholarship) and the employer (funding for organising the practice) ensured. The intervention requires each VCC to cooperate with employers by forming an advisory-monitoring body – a Programme Council – which includes, among other stakeholders, representatives of schools/units and industry/employers. Together with supporting learners, VCC's also offer assistance for the development of teachers' competences. Importantly, support is available not only for learners and teachers of the schools/units which form a specific VCC, but also learners and teachers from other schools/units in Małopolska. VCCs are also intended to provide education opportunities for adult learners, however outside of the ROP VET funding.

The second measure outlined in the “Intellectual Capital and Labour Market” programme, *the Modernisation of vocational education II*, aimed at **supporting the creation and development of VCCs and coordinating iVET-related activity in the region**. As mentioned above, the intervention has two components. Firstly, it creates two VCCs based on VET schools managed directly by the Marshal Office. Further, it provides support to county-run VCCs through a number of activities (mainly coordinating and networking), promoting VET as positive, informed choice (through annual regional presentation of different professions - ‘Vocational Festival’ and career counselling at the level of primary schools), enhancing cooperation with technical schools and the usage of ‘Małopolska Chmura Edukacyjna’ as to promote region's smart specializations, internationalisation of iVET. This shows a planned, comprehensive, multi-layered approach.

The Department of Education at the Marshal Office acted as a leading body in the development of the strategic approach, mainly through preparing the “Intellectual Capital and Labour Market” (*Kapitał intelektualny i rynek pracy*) programme specifically.

The programme was prepared in consultation with various stakeholders and the process was largely facilitated by previously existing modes of cooperation established in the form of the Małopolskie Partnership for Continuing Education (*Małopolskie partnerstwo na rzecz Kształcenia Ustawicznego*), which involved stakeholders from different groups – central institutions (e.g. the Regional Educational Authority), regional authorities and departments of the Marshal's Office, counties, regional and county Public Employment Services, schools and education institutions, private training companies. The Regional Public Employment Services played an especially important role in the early stages of the strategy formulation process, acting as one of its initiators, and providing institutional and organisational capacity as the leader of a number of projects already during the 2007-2013 period.

On the role of Education Department:

„When we began the preparation of the ROP, we acknowledged that we are entering the competition sphere, but that we need to do it through the creation of an umbrella project entitled ‘Modernisation of vocational education II’ in our department, which will try to ensure uniformity of the intervention and criteria at the regional level and to be a partner, entity responsible for the model of the support, despite the fact that it is set-up in such a way that everyone can apply for projects and participate in it.” KII 1, Małopolskie

Implementation of the strategy

The Regional Operational Programme is the key source of funding for implementation of the strategy. Since the first drafts of the strategic documents were developed prior to the ROP 2014-2020 programming, they were further fine-tuned as the specifics and guidelines for the 2014-2020 programming period emerged. In turn, the ROP closely reflects the priorities and measures described in the strategic documents. Priority 2

of the “Intellectual Capital and Labour Market” programme, which covers the area of VET, was included as a measure 10.2 of Priority Axis 10 within the ROP. As a means of encouraging adherence to the strategic design, consistency with the “Model of support (...)” was rewarded with bonus points within the competition-based project selection procedure, aimed at VCC creation.

As a leader of the Modernisation of vocational education II project, the Department of Education at the Marshal Office is a key stakeholder in implementing the strategy. As the strategy is implemented primarily through ROP funding, the ROP Management Authority and Intermediate Bodies also play an important role. Stakeholders from other sectors and institutions are included in strategic planning and adjustment, as well as in monitoring the implementation of strategy, through Regional Sectoral Councils and VCC Programme Councils established specifically for the strategy implementation.

On complementarity of interventions:

„When we began the preparation of the ROP, we acknowledged that we are entering the competition sphere, but that we need to do it through the creation of an umbrella project entitled ‘Modernisation of vocational education II’ in our department, which will try to ensure uniformity of the intervention and criteria at the regional level and to be a partner, entity responsible for the model of the support, despite the fact that it is set-up in such a way that everyone can apply for projects and participate in it.” KII 2, Małopolskie

During the first call for VCC contest projects, in 2016, the Department of Education of the Marshal’s Office (which is the leader of “Modernisation of Vocational Education II”) conducted a series of workshops aimed at supporting school managing institutions in project preparation. The functioning of VCCs, along with coordination activities undertaken within the “Modernisation of Vocational Education II” project, provides platforms for stakeholder involvement and strategic/operational adjustments. As of 2020, 47 VCC projects were created with support under the competition-based measure, and 2 VCCs under the non-competition “Modernisation of Vocational Education II” project. Other activities envisaged in the non-competition project are also being implemented.

Modernisation led by the Department of Education in the Małopolska Marshal Office, involves over 300 partners from municipalities (*gminy*), entities managing vocational schools

(including counties), as well as public and private higher education institutions.

Thus the second measure consists of a range of activities, which together constitutes a systemic and coherent approach to supporting iVET development in the region by providing organisational and thematic support to relevant institutions, creating regional-level cooperation among stakeholders (including employers) and carrying out actions aimed at improving the appeal of iVET as an educational choice for graduates of primary schools.

5.5 Conclusions

The regional strategic approaches to iVET in the three regions which were investigated within the study display common characteristics.

In the programming period 2007-2013, despite important differences, the three regions studied had used analogous general approaches to using ROP funds. This was done through large scale systemic (non-competition) projects. In Małopolskie, they started with competition-based projects and, after realising that the results were not sufficient, introduced a systemic project, “Modernisation of Vocational Education” (see section 5.4). In Dolnośląskie, prior to the adoption of two systemic projects (‘Modernisation of Vocational Education Centres’ and ‘Modernisation of Vocational Education’), the authorities conducted in-depth negotiations with all counties (see section 5.3). In both of those regions systemic projects combined soft and hard interventions (investments in VET schools’ infrastructure). In Pomorskie, a large-scale systemic project, “Pomorskie - dobry kurs na edukację. Szkolnictwo zawodowe w regionie a wyzwania rynku pracy”,

focused only on soft interventions (see section 5.2). In all three cases, these large systemic projects covered the whole regional VET systems (even if not all VET schools) and their achievements are generally recognised as impressive. In this respect, Dolny Śląsk stood out as having seized the opportunity to strategically use available resources, to promote selected industries and achieve consensus amongst the counties for the selection of a few to be supported through large-scale investment.

The start of the programming period 2014-2020 brought an important change in the regulations of how ROPs may be designed. Namely, the non-competitive projects are allowed only if they are of strategic importance to the region and indicated in strategic documents adopted by the region⁸⁰. Moreover, if these systemic projects are funded from ESF, they must also be of a specific type, namely implementation projects (projekty wdrożeniowe), providing services to final beneficiaries⁸¹. This change meant that the continuation of systemic projects, as conceived in the previous programming period, was not possible and the approval of non-competition mode projects was subject to agreements.

All three regional approaches studied entailed an objective to achieve a greater level of coordination of the iVET providers and their educational offer. Although with varying degrees of success, in all three region efforts to rationalise the iVET schools' network to minimise competition between them and foster specialisation of schools were part of this approach. Secondly, the actions planned for the strategy implementation are based on considerations of complementarity, both in terms of measures and the target groups. Thus, "soft" and "hard" measures are integrated in all three regions, either as two separate groups of competition- and non-competition based projects as in Dolnośląskie and Małopolskie, or in the form of integrated projects as in Pomorskie. Thirdly, all three strategic approaches adopt a holistic perspective of iVET, integrating not only infrastructure and equipment acquisition and various forms of learning but also interventions focusing on iVET career advisory and promotion (in all three regions) or monitoring of graduates' pathways (in Małopolskie and Pomorskie).

On securing resources through non-competition mode:

„Our Department of Education is active, but in addition to that, it needs to be able to implement its plans, that is it needs to be at the disposal of the resources with which to hire staff. Thus, alongside good will and determination, earmarking funds from the overall pool of resources in the non-competition project to hire people and pay them as much as the other staff in the Marshall's Office is another success factor which enables real action.” KII 1
Małopolska

The research conducted in the three regions revealed that the regional governments in general perceive the systemic projects allowed under the previous financial programming period as more effective in the development and implementation of coherent regional strategies. While such projects have their operational limitations (see section describing Dolnośląskie experiences) and risk not adequately addressing the individual needs of schools, they are also a strong instrument in ensuring collaboration of counties. Dolnośląskie's trajectory showed that the lack of a systemic project resulted in less commitment on the side of counties to joint initiatives. At the same time, a possibility to organise non-competition interventions in the current perspective was used by both Małopolskie and Pomorskie

On learning from other regions:

„Everything started with observing Dolnośląskie's solutions. It was Dolny Śląsk which first started to integrate the key entities responsible for VET, that is counties, around specific industries, actions, and in collaboration with the economic environment. We developed their approach and made a step further towards a multi-annual, large systemic project.” KII 1, Małopolskie

⁸⁰ See Minister Inwestycji i Rozwoju (2015), *Wytuczne w zakresie trybów wyboru projektów na lata 2014-2020*, section 8.1, p. 1) and 4) . Available at www.pois.gov.pl/media/1995/Wytuczne_w_zakresie_trybow_wyboru_projektow_2014_2020.pdf

⁸¹ See Minister Inwestycji i Rozwoju (2015), *Wytuczne w zakresie trybów wyboru projektów na lata 2014-2020*, section 8.1, p. 7) c (ii).

as a tool to strengthen the role and capacities of the Marshal's Office's Education Department and to continue their role as leaders. This was also important due to the financing available.

Still, while not free from its limitations, the competition mode also offers an opportunity to strategically shape development of VET in regions. It is possible to design competitions so as to transform them into instruments for implementing regional VET strategies. In such competitions not all submissions would be accepted and awarded financing. This requires tailoring the criteria and conditions for proposals in a way which would reward only, or mainly, those interventions which are well-aligned with the regional priorities in VET. For example, if the regional strategy is to focus VET on specific sectors of the economy, the competitions could favour projects which support development of skills for those sectors. Another example may be competitions specifically aimed at fostering the supply of motivated teachers for VET schools. However, the region's adoption of a clearly articulated VET strategy is a pre-condition for designing competitions in such a way.

Against the different approaches and levels of success achieved, a set of common characteristics and success factors in strategically developing iVET was identified in all the three regions, albeit displayed to varying degrees. These factors are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

6.0 Success factors in the formulation and implementation of iVET strategies in selected regions

The research carried out for this study identified several groups of factors which enable the conception and putting in place of regional strategic approaches to iVET. These can broadly be grouped as **'human factors'** relating to leadership, commitment and expertise brought in through engagement of individuals and **'mechanism and instruments'** put in place for better planning and implementation.

6.1 Importance of human factors

While least tangible, the importance of leadership, commitment and expertise both within teams and individuals stands out as one of the key decisive factors in understanding why certain regions manage to approach VET on the regional level and strategically. The key factor is the direct engagement and responsibility for the process of the regional authorities (Marshall Office).

Culture of meritocracy and institutional memory of the Marshall Office's staff is a powerful factor for the successful development and implementation of regional iVET strategies. Fieldwork carried out in Pomorskie in particular showed that the strategic approach in the region was designed by the highly competent and experienced staff of the involved departments. The members of the Department for Education and Sports at the MO are long-time education practitioners with a strong track record of working in the field of education and training. The strength of the current human resources are a manifestation of a broader culture of meritocracy in the civil service in Pomorskie. Meritocracy also facilitates institutional memory which played a significant role in enabling strategic reflection and planning in the relevant departments of the MA. Indeed, there has been a limited turnover of staff in the departments engaged in the formulation and implementation of the strategic approach to iVET in the region. For instance, with slight changes, the team working on the strategy has been composed of the same people who rolled out iVET activities within the 2007-2013 programming period. By contrast, **one of the key challenges to maintaining strategic approach identified in Dolnośląskie has been poor long-term institutional memory at the level of Marshall's Office.** The institution has been subject to significant staff rotation in part resulting from political bargaining, as a result of which staff involved in development and the implementation of the initial strategic approach has been largely replaced with new employees. As such human capital, knowledge and expertise accumulated through implementation of the system projects has been to a good extent dispersed. This happened first at the end of the first financial programming period when a lack of approval for system project approach led to significant decrease in staff involved in the strategic development of iVET. Secondly, staff rotation continued due to political changes and appointments, which have heavily impacted employment at the Marshall's office.

On collaboration within MO:

„Good collaboration between the departments [of the Marshall's Office] is key. Not everyone pulling in their own direction. We work with the Departments of Economic Development or Regional and Spatial Development daily. We also implement these processes [of developing and implementing VET policy] with them.

If we need something from them – we obtain the knowledge. On the other hand, we also share our knowledge in specific areas with them. And there is no feeling that everybody acts only for themselves.”

KII 1, Pomorskie

Experiences of Małopolskie also speak to this argument: the continuity of managerial leadership at the Education Department largely facilitates long-term planning and the coherence of development vision, while closure of the Regional Labour Market Observatories at the Employment Office significantly impaired the region's research and diagnosis capacities as experienced staff was absorbed by different departments and institutions. At the same time, fieldwork in Dolnośląskie and Małopolskie revealed that certain levels of staff rotation are considered desirable as new people bring in new perspectives and expertise, sometimes challenging 'the old way' of doing things. Such new perspectives for understanding challenges of iVET in the European context and building on the experiences and approaches promoted in the Western European countries were signalled during the interviews with the relatively new staff of the Marshall Office of Dolnośląskie. This has potential for actively re-shaping the priorities established for iVET historically, and especially in the past programming period. Although, as the interviews revealed, changing the long established paths of practice might prove challenging.

On leadership:

"There needs to be a regional leader, person, or even institution. Why were some regions better than others? It depends on the Marshall's Office, on the board of the Marshall's Office – whether they had a vision or not. The Department of Education of the Marshall's Office should be an engine and promote certain issues, as it was back then [during the previous programming period]. Because of that, we gathered around us everyone."

KII 3, Dolnośląskie

The study underscored the **vital role of the political leadership in the development and implementation of regional iVET strategies**. One of the main factors for the relevance and effectiveness of iVET governance in Małopolskie and Pomorskie has been the assumption of a leadership role on the part of the respective Marshall Offices in developing their strategies. In Pomorskie, the Marshall Office carried out the majority of the works involved in the development of the Regional Development Strategy 2020, the Regional Strategic Programme (RSP) "Active Pomeranians" document and the strategic initiative. Specifically, the Departments for Regional and Spatial Development and the Department of Economic Development were primarily responsible for the development of the Regional Development Strategy 2020, while the RSP "Active Pomeranians" was created under the

leadership of the Department of Education and Sports. In Małopolskie, the preparation of the current strategy has also been a result of a top-down process, related to the region's decision to prepare 10 strategic programmes as documents accompanying the Regional Development Strategy for the years 2011-2020. In the strategic design process, the Marshall Office's Department of Regional Policy acted as the coordinator of the development of sectoral strategic programmes as documents detailing strategies in different thematic areas, and the Department of Education acted as a leading body in preparing one of them – the "Intellectual Capital and Labour Market" (Kapitał intelektualny i rynek pracy) programme – which includes the area of iVET.

In addition to leadership by specific departments, active and stable top leadership, i.e. the Marshall can also play a facilitating role. The Marshall of Pomorskie has been described as supportive to new and innovative ideas, including in the field of iVET. Moreover, he actively supports the implementation of the strategic approach to iVET by representing the Marshall Office in the wider socio-economic environment. The Marshall participates in various fora and plays an inspirational role among the relevant stakeholders and the public. Importantly, the Marshall has been only rarely replaced in Pomorskie, allowing for a continuity in decision-making and oversight.

The importance of leadership for the continuation of a iVET strategy has been further highlighted by the challenges faced in Dolnośląskie. The lack of clear leadership on the side of the Managing Authority during the current programming period, stands out as one of the reasons for the discontinuation of the strategic advancement of iVET in the region. Similarly, a specific constellation of members and leaders of the Counties Convents during the past financial programming period was considered fundamental in shaping the dialogue both internally amongst the counties and with the Marshall Office. The research revealed that

lack of this special attention and commitment to the issues of iVET at the level of Counties Council currently also contributes to weaker regional dimension of iVET development.

Explicit formulation of iVET-related goals and measures in regional strategic programmes facilitates long-term commitment, and allows interventions to be planned in a comprehensive manner. Moreover, the explicit inclusion of iVET goals in a strategic document indicates willingness to assume the leadership role and provides guidance and direction to all iVET stakeholders in the region. While all the three regions account for iVET in their regional strategies, in Pomorskie and Małopolskie - the two regions which continue their strategic approach- iVET is an explicit objective of a strategic programme dedicated to education, human capital and the labour market. These are the “Intellectual Capital and Labour Market” (Kapitał intelektualny i rynek pracy) programme in Małopolskie and RSP “Active Pomeranians” in Pomorskie. The lack of a programmatic document focusing on education and training and sole focus on iVET in the Regional Development Strategy in Dolnośląskie is a possible factor for the discontinuation of the strategic approach.

Lastly, since the implementation of the strategic approach to initial VET across the region depends on the willingness and cooperation of the local governments, leadership on the level of county heads and their ownership of the processes is a vital success factor. While strong, and clear management on the side of the regional government is essential, any approaches will fail unless multiple local governments recognise the value of a consolidated approach and are willing to sometimes sacrifice their local interests in the short term for the shared regional good in the long term.

This shared sense of ownership is difficult to attain as each region consists of numerous counties, each governed by its own priorities and agendas. The example of Dolnośląskie from the past financial programming period showed how an active approach to iVET on the side of the counties, and their bottom-up facilitation of the processes is desirable and, in fact ideal for consensus building around the regionally shared priorities. Similarly, respondents in Małopolskie specifically emphasised the importance of leadership exercised by the counties towards the iVET schools they manage. This section of the process was deemed essential for effective implementation of any meaningful change in the region.

On the importance of consensus:

„Unifying for the objective, that is the Convention [of Counties], is very important. But that depends on the elections and individual county heads. These are people in the end, and if these heads do not hail from the education sector, they often do not feel it. [...] Achieving the consensus was difficult, but everyone realised the need for these resources. It seems that for the first time, such an agreement between all counties was achieved to implement the systemic project. In the second programming period, when there is no systemic projects, not everyone became engaged.” KII 3 Dolnośląskie

6.2 Effective use of available mechanisms and instruments

Robust data collection mechanisms

Regions successful in adopting strategic approaches to iVET employ differentiated mechanisms for identifying iVET needs in the region, using a range of information sources and tools to ensure evidence-based planning and decision-making. These include studies, diagnoses and predictions developed in the programming phase of respectful regional development strategies, and research studies and diagnosis financed in the framework of Regional Operational Programmes⁸². The authorities of all three

⁸² In practice it turned out that studies and analyses developed in the previous financial programming period were especially useful.

regions analysed in the present report base their strategies on thorough diagnoses of initial VET sector on their territory and on the region's labour market and the demography more broadly.

In Pomorskie, the regional iVET strategy formulation was strongly based on the labour market needs and demographic situation as diagnosed by the Regional Development Strategy 2020 and other research, e.g. a research paper produced within the framework of the 2007-13 programming period ("Socio-economic potential of Pomeranian counties in the context of development of key sectors of the region").

On the need for strong diagnosis:

„We presented a series of indicators showing that particular industries are key for us, such as number of workers employed in these industries, GDP share of these industries, etc. We also showed how this changed over time, including taking into account certain traditional, historically present industries in our county. It was also possible to speak with the evaluation committee's members, including the representatives of the Marshall's Office but also employers' associations, who know the realities of our regional economy very well. These conversations were truly content-focused and substantive.” KII 3, Pomorskie

In Małopolskie, a broader range of data on iVET is gathered by the Małopolskie Regional Development Observatory (*Małopolskie Obserwatorium Rozwoju Regionalnego*), as a continuation of research undertaken by the now non-existent Regional Labour Market and Education Observatory (*Regionalne Obserwatorium Rynku Pracy i Edukacji*). One of the flagship publications, monitoring of the careers of graduates (*Badanie losów absolwentów*) has been published regularly, every three years, providing valuable information on the effects of teaching of iVET schools. In Dolnośląskie, during the previous programming period, when core of the strategic approach built on the need for modernisation and for improvement of the iVET infrastructure, planning was developed largely on the basis of an extensive diagnosis and stock taking exercise carried out voluntarily by VET school directors, and teachers. Similarly, research in Dolnośląskie revealed the value of knowledge gained through direct management of iVET schools run by the Marshal Office. While in all three regions

only a handful of schools fall under the direct jurisdiction of the regional government, maintaining intensive, direct contact with them was considered an important source for understanding initial VET schools' day-to-day challenges and their evolving needs. The research also revealed that while some information is available periodically (including Vocational Barometer published annually on county, region and national levels, statistical data produced by employment offices, annual examination results), the regions need long-term diagnosis given the dynamics of labour market and inability of the educational system to respond quickly enough.

Learning from and acting on previous experiences in iVET and other areas of intervention has been a valuable source of evidence for planning of interventions in the three investigated regions. In Małopolskie, a reflection on the part of Marshall Office that competition-based projects are not very effective prompted the development and implement a systemic, non-competition project, the Modernisation of vocational education I (*Modernizacja Kształcenia Zawodowego I*), beginning from 2009 and continuing until 2015. It allowed weaker counties gain management and implementation experience important for the next editions of competition-based projects. Dolnośląskie clearly benefits from well-implemented broad and comprehensive system projects of the previous programming period which have to an extent transformed the regional iVET landscape. While the system approach has had its limitations, it has allowed to effectively coherent and extensive intervention with clear demarcation of aims and priorities. It seems that this approach allowed the region to smoothly continue development in the area of iVET through competition mode and broad-partnership projects during the current financial programming period, largely following the path established in the earlier period and adding new elements. In Pomorskie, the initiation of a strategic approach to iVET was largely an effect of the utilisation and reflection on the past experiences gained through the implementation of measures in iVET, but also other areas (especially revitalisation) within the framework of the 2007-2013 financial programming period. There was a reflection on the part of the Marshall Office representatives that many of the activities supported with ESF and ERDF resources are not

sustainable, prompting them to seek solutions to this in the 2014-2020 perspective. In the 2007-2013 programming period, the approach of working the projects out together with the counties was somewhat tested in revitalisation efforts, although at a much smaller scale than the later implemented work on iVET.

Ensuring a broad spectrum of inputs

In all three regions, broad social consultations designed and implemented during the programming phase for the 2014-2020 financial programming period exceeded formal requirements in this respect. In

On extensive consultations:

„It was continuous dialogue and explaining why we want to coordinate [VET in the region] and differentiate the specialisations. It was a long process, given that all VET schools' managing authorities based their thinking of the historically existing school branches. All these [branches] have particular logistical and infrastructural bases, and staff who are eager for the specific subjects to be continued. Such a system inertia is always present. It required a lot of time to explain the plan. While it was eventually partly accepted, there was a need to modify the initial ideas so that they are applicable and approved at the local level – a compromise of sorts.”

KII 1 Małopolskie

Pomorskie, a spectrum of relevant stakeholders including the employers and employers' organisations, school directors and teachers (also as part of teachers in-service training centre), the Regional Educational Authority, the regional labour market council, regional Public Employment Services, regional development agency and the Regional Special Economic Zone were engaged in the formulation and implementation of the strategy. With regard to formulation, as described in section 7.3, designated working groups composed of local authorities managing schools, employers' representatives, teachers and academic experts were formed for the formulation of the RSP “Active Pomeranians” and the strategic initiative.

The working groups met regularly at workshops organised by the MO In Małopolskie, the “Intellectual Capital and Labour Market” (*Kapitał intelektualny i rynek pracy*) programme was prepared in consultation with various stakeholders and the process was largely facilitated by the Małopolskie Partnership for Continuing Education (*Małopolskie partnerstwo na rzecz Kształcenia Ustawicznego*). As aforementioned, the platform involved stakeholders from different groups – central institutions (e.g.

Regional Educational Authority), regional authorities and departments of the Marshal's Office, counties, regional and county Public Employment Services, schools and education institutions, private training companies.

Employing specific measures for the development and implementation of iVET strategy

Formulating systemic, competition and non-competition interventions in the framework of Regional Operational programmes in ways that facilitate the implementation of the regional vision for iVET development.

Regions, short of authority over counties, need to find approaches to ensure that resources from the ESF and ERDF can be used as effective tool to ensure implementation of a regional strategy for i VET. The research revealed that the standardised guidelines, requirements and conditions stipulated in the programming of the ROP (both from the side of the European Commission and from the national government) largely shape and limit regions' perceived autonomy and ability to accommodate needs diagnosed on the ground. At the same time, analysed approaches in the three regions showed that creative approached to programming can in fact make use of ROP as powerful tool in securing cooperation of counties and coordinated efforts. The use of systemic project by the Dolnośląskie in the previous programming period was the most straightforward way to implement a regionally managed strategy for rationalisation and modernisation of selected iVET schools, although it still requires consensus with the counties. Since this ability was much reduced in the current programming period, regions had to develop specific measures to implement their strategic visions. Dolnośląskie continued its iVET development through large partnership-based project, ‘Zawodowy Dolny Śląsk’, where an emphasis was placed on a deficit and RIS-relevant iVET schools, and majority of the counties were supported. Pomorskie

approached the competition mode of the ROP in an extensively consultative manner, where counties were strongly assisted in development of concepts both meeting their local priorities and fitting into a regionally-sound iVET map.

Małopolskie ensured strong relationship between its both activities (competition-based establishment of VCCs and smaller systemic support of VCCs development and coordination), by linking soft and hard interventions in VCC's with region-wide coordination and cooperation with these institutions.

Figure 6. Good practice in Pomorskie

Good practice:
Using competition-based projects to shape regional network of schools in Pomorskie

In order to ensure the alignment of county level VET interventions with the regional iVET strategy, and in this way also with needs of the regional and labour markets, the Marshall Office of Pomorskie organised competition for county concepts, preceding competition organised in the framework of the ROP. The MO provided the potential beneficiaries (only school founders) with a detailed description of the key areas to be described in the applications and the selection criteria against which the concepts were assessed. The four required areas of the concepts included: 1) Development of VET (outlining the vision, key objectives and relevance of the project in relation to iVET policies and to regional iVET strategy), 2) Potential of iVET and continuing education in selected key industries, 3) Collaboration with the employers and other stakeholders within the framework of the key industries, and 4) Scope and costs of the planned intervention. The concepts were then presented by the local authorities in front of the MA and a multi-stakeholder commission. What followed was an intensive negotiation and planning process, evolving over one year and a half. During these talks, the commission, assessed proposals brought forward by the all the counties, and intervened when initiatives did not fit into the overall evolving map of rationalised schools. While some counties' initial concepts were not modified greatly, some concepts have undergone significant changes as a result of the discussions. The long, comprehensive planning processes resulted in a set of projects formally accepted for funding and de facto representing the new map of prioritised iVET schools in the region, in agreement with the regional iVET strategy.

Supporting the capacity of strategic partners, specifically counties managing iVET schools, in preparation and implementation of projects. Both Małopolskie and Pomorskie integrated this objective into their actions. In Małopolskie, in 2016 during the first call for contest projects, the Department of Education of the Marshal's Office (which is the leader of "Modernisation of Vocational Education II") conducted a series of workshops aimed at supporting school managing institutions in project preparation. In the latter region, the desire to improve the capacity of county authorities was one of the reasons for which the Marshall Office decided to award competition-based projects to counties rather than individual schools. At the same time, the research revealed that school headmasters are important stakeholders in terms of supporting and capacity building the management of their institutions but also project cycle management. Lack of possibilities in the current programming period of financing activities targeting school heads in ROP was identified as limiting, since competent school management is crucial for their effective functioning. In Dolnośląskie such capacity building trainings on management will be financed from other sources.

Adopting mechanisms for integrating employers and employers' organisations in particular into the iVET strategic approach development and implementation processes. In Pomorskie, employers and employers' organisations were members of the working group which first conceptualised the strategic initiative, and the commission which reviewed, assessed and monitored all individual projects. It was apparent across the localities visited during this research that the employers and employers' organisations provided important inputs into the concepts formulation.

Moreover, the potential beneficiaries were required to provide a detailed plan of how they will collaborate with the private sector for the implementation of their project. Collaboration with employers and other relevant organisations was one of the key four required parts of the concept in which current collaboration and future plans were two assessment criteria. Moreover, the potential beneficiaries were asked to be accompanied by employers and schools directors to the meetings during which they presented their projects. Importantly, the process encouraged the counties and employers to seek deeper collaboration where the latter are also engaged in the preparation of curricula.

On involving employers:

„Employers respect their time and become engaged when they see the sense in the actions. They do have a real influence and based on that, they either engage more intensely in the dialogue and collaboration, or take part only to the extent to which they have to.” KII2, Małopolska

In Małopolskie, the model of VCC requires the active involvement and partnership with employers and employee organisations as mandatory element in order to receive financing. Moreover, advisory and monitoring bodies established at the regional and local levels involve employers. It is important to consider these boards as not only providing opinion on strategic decisions or adjustments, and serving as a platform for stakeholder cooperation, but also providing qualitative data on changes relevant to specific industry sectors or a local VCC environment (e.g. market needs in terms of competences/qualifications, or deficit of workforce, etc.). This information is used by VCCs on an operational basis, for example in initiating contact or developing relations with companies at which apprenticeships are held (in order to address market demand for learners' competences and potential workforce volume). It also informs schools' and counties' education strategies, especially on the subject of opening patronage classes (*klasy patronackie*) or new vocations.

Good practice: Regional Sectoral Councils as advisory and monitoring body in Małopolskie

Seven Regional Sectoral Councils (*Regionalna Rada Branżowa*) function at the regional level within specific industry sector areas, with members representing stakeholders from institutions (Marshal's Office departments, ROP implementing bodies, Regional Public Employment Services, Regional Educational Authority and the Regional Examination Commissions), employers and employer's associations, schools, and counties as school managing bodies. The Councils were established in the framework of the 'Modernisation of VET Education in Małopolska II' project to provide expertise, advise and support development of VET in the region. They are tasked also with enhancing cooperation initiatives linking development of school network with the employers' needs, overseeing high standards of education, including that offered at VCCs and recommendation of new courses and profiles.

Continuous dialogue with relevant stakeholders and the existence of feedback and advisory mechanisms.

The fieldwork carried out in all three regions highlighted the importance of continuous efforts to build and maintain relationships between the various actors in the implementation of iVET strategies. The majority of the stakeholders interviewed in the scope of this research emphasised the importance of direct communication for building trust and allowing for rapid adaptation to the arising challenges. In the course of the implementation period of the strategic initiative in Pomorskie, for instance, career advisors who were appointed at the county level had to be re-located due to the introduction of the central level reform, necessitating rapid action.⁸³ Some beneficiaries also reported having faced a need to shift the resources from one course to another due to the changing economic context – something which was enabled relatively rapidly due to close collaboration with

⁸³ The reform eliminating lower-secondary schools resulted in the need to re-locate the career advisors who mainly provided career advice to 14 year olds from lower secondary schools to the primary schools

the Marshall Office. The mechanisms adopted for the monitoring of the strategic initiative in Pomorskie go beyond audits and quantitative indicators' achievement checks and include **measures to facilitate the continuous evaluation of the projects and strategic reflection moments**. In Małopolskie, reports on progress of activities undertaken within the Modernisation of vocational education II are published regularly. In Pomorskie, key representatives of the Marshall Office, together with the majority of the members of the commission which was formed for assessing the projects to be financed from ROP carry out regular study visits to ensure that all projects are implemented according to their assumptions. The idea of these visits is to provide the opportunity for a conversation and a strategic reflection around the individual projects with the aim of constantly correcting the course and learning for the future. The counties' representatives interviewed for this study uniformly highlighted the value of these study visits during which their projects are viewed from diverse perspective and constructive feedback is given.

Spaces for regular dialogue with the relevant stakeholders, which all the three regions investigated for this study actively foster.

While this point goes beyond the narrowly understood strategy formulation process, the overall dialogue and experience sharing platforms on the topics of iVET available and utilised in the regions appear important. Platforms for dialogue are important as they help build the ownership of the strategic approach but also allow for in-depth, ongoing discussions on the region's needs and developments in the area of iVET. Realising this, all the three regions investigated for this study make dedicated efforts to create, support or participate in the functioning of such spaces. In Dolnośląskie, the development of the two systemic projects of the previous financial programming period was accompanied by the creation of a Consultative Group on VET⁸⁴. While it has been created and is operating under the auspices of the Regional Education Authority, rather than the Marshal Office, directors of the Education Department of the Marshal Office have actively participated in this knowledge-sharing platform, together with representatives of education departments at counties, employers' associations, school headmasters employment office representatives. In Pomorskie, the MA regularly meets and discusses education and training issues with these stakeholders in various forms, such as the council of county-level heads of education (*rada naczelników*) – an advisory body initiated by the Marshall's Office's Department for Education and Sport or the Pomorskie's Education Council (*Pomorska Rada Oświatowa*). In Małopolska the 2007-2013 programming period was used for the formation and maintenance of a platform for collaboration in education and training specifically. A networking platform was initiated in the form of the Małopolskie Partnership for Continuing Education (*Małopolskie partnerstwo na rzecz Kształcenia Ustawicznego*).

Good practice:

Małopolskie Partnership for Continuing Education

A networking platform was initiated in the form of the Małopolskie Partnership for Continuing Education (*Małopolskie partnerstwo na rzecz Kształcenia Ustawicznego*). The Partnership involved stakeholders from different groups – central institutions (Regional Educational Authority), regional authorities and departments of the Marshal's Office, counties, regional and county Labour Offices, schools and education institutions, private training companies. Thematic teams were formed within the partnership, one of which was dedicated to VET-related issues. The Partnership provided grounds for cooperation and networking, which translated into collaborative work on the vision of VET in the region, and, eventually, stakeholder engagement in preparing strategic documents for the 2014-2020 programming period.

In addition, the authorities of the three regions stimulate civic engagement more broadly by organising or co-organising multiple conferences, thematic groups meetings and forums dedicated to specific issues related to regional development (including iVET) throughout the year. Such conferences and seminars are judged as an important platform for learning about the needs on the ground but also for facilitating contacts between various stakeholders, in particular between employers and schools.

⁸⁴ Rada Konsultacyjna do Spraw Kształcenia Zawodowego przy Dolnośląskim Kuratorze Oświaty

On partnering with relevant stakeholders:

„When the first internships started, employers were apprehensive of receiving co-financing. [...] Small enterprises, especially in crafts, don't have extensively developed accounting systems, while the projects require that the documentation is kept for 5 years. We were organising meetings to explain and convince them, that there is nothing [to be afraid of], and the awareness changed. We organised meetings with chambers of crafts, which bring together the smaller [enterprises]. Reaching out via the chambers of crafts rather than just going to individual schools increased our credibility. Stemming from our over 100 years' experience, this approach was successful. Year by year, the [willingness of employers to organise internships] improved, and today, the employers are rather enthusiastic [to collaborate]. KII 3, Dolnośląskie

Partnering with strategic stakeholders in the region.

Active engagement and commitment of counties and employers is the crucial condition for effective development of iVET in the regions. As such, reaching out to stakeholders representing their shared interests can be an effective approach in securing their inputs and cooperation. The example of Dolnośląskie's experience from the 2007-2013 programming perspective showed that the Counties Convention can play an important role as a platform mediating between counties and the regional government. Creation of Modernisation and Modernisation II system projects was a bottom-up initiative, and the fact that at the time, the Counties Convention paid so much importance to the issue of iVET at the time proved crucial for reaching agreement on strategic areas for investment. Also in Dolnośląskie collaboration between the Marshal Office and the Regional Crafts Chamber proved instrumental in overcoming small businesses reluctance towards internship component of the systemic projects. When the MA noticed that small and micro enterprises fear reporting commitments related to receiving interns through the RPO funded activities and fail to notice the benefits, it reached out to the Crafts Chamber to use the trust and connections this organisation enjoys amongst the craftsmen in the region, and to use it as a platform for information sharing and clarifying doubts.

In Pomorskie, the active engagement of employers' organisations in education and training governance and their awareness of the advantages of such engagement for the labour market were underscored by many respondents consulted as a success factor. The study showed that a number of employers' organisations regularly participate in the workshops and other forms of social dialogue during which initiatives are developed and consulted. These organisations also take part in the assessment and monitoring of projects, seeing their voluntary engagement in such activities as an opportunity to influence the learning outcomes of iVET graduates and thus contribute to the creation of a qualified labour force.

As shown by Pomorskie's experience, **cross-departmental collaboration within the Marshall Office combined with a clear demarcation of the various departments' roles can be a decisive factor enabling successful development and implementation of regional iVET strategies.** However, such collaboration has to be carefully planned and then implemented in practice. The data

collection undertaken in Pomorskie revealed that all four departments engaged in the formulation and implementation of the regional iVET strategic approach work closely and continuously with each other. In the same time, their roles and responsibilities are clearly demarcated. Thus, the Department for Regional and Spatial Development is responsible for the development of the overall regional strategy and the ROP;

On collaboration between departments:

„This arrangement as regards VET worked because we had a responsible partner – the Department of Education – which wanted to take this undertaking on, despite its multiple other commitments. If our department responsible for the preparation of the strategy and the ROP had to do it, we wouldn't have sufficient knowledge and networks in this specific field to do it so carefully and invest so much time in discussions with VET schools' managing authorities. We worked with everyone [across the Marshall's Office] for a longer time now, including on issues related to [EU] funds, so we knew if you could execute a large, conceptual strategy together.” KII 2, Małopolskie

the Department for Education and Sports is responsible for leading the development and content-side implementation of the education and training interventions, including the selection of the projects to be financed within ROP; the Department for ESF is tasked with operational implementation of ESF-funded activities within ROP and the Department for Regional Programmes for the ERDF-funded activities. The respondents interviewed were highly satisfied with the current arrangements and expressed a sense of “working together towards a common goal”. The geographical proximity of the departments facilitates their rapid communication. Some structural arrangements in the 2007-2013 programming period encouraged the rise of such a close cross-departmental collaboration.

Specifically, the introduction of the six interrelated thematic Regional Strategic Programmes (RSPs) required the departments to work with each other closely to enable them to implement the Regional Development Strategy 2020. Once again, experience from Dolnośląskie where such cross-departmental collaboration is currently not advanced underscores its importance. Dolnośląskie’s Marshall’s Office seems to be currently characterised by weaker internal communication and collaboration between the three departments involved in iVET development through ROP (Education Department, Regional Development Department (tasked with programming) and European Funds Department (tasked with implementation and monitoring) than during the previous financial programming period.

7.0 Lessons learned for the next budget perspective

7.1 Introduction

This study demonstrates that, while substantially limited by the VET governance framework in the country, regions can, in fact, develop and effectively implement strategic regional approaches.

Overall, while the three regions embarked on different paths, they share a number of common characteristics in their approaches and these could be further explored by other regions in Poland. Even if certain solutions result from region-specific circumstances (type of economy dominant, socio-political traditions, presence of foreign investment) and not always can be replicated elsewhere, this study highlights that certain approaches to shaping and implementing strategies are effective across different contexts.

The research, however, also showed that while tactical programming and the use of European funds are essential for bringing regional iVET visions to life, such actions must be accompanied or, better still, preceded by the elaboration of a shared strategic vision. It is only when the two elements are combined that it is possible to talk about successful strategy development and implementation. The factors discussed in the previous chapter and the three regional trajectories described earlier in the report also indicate that there are two side to the “success coin” – the human factor, including especially the leadership and focus on meritocracy in managing strategy development and implementation, and the effective use of available resources and mechanisms. While several of these cannot be translated into recommendations (such as personal character traits and commitment of key stakeholders), the research showed that there are concrete steps that can be taken to facilitate strategic regional development of iVET. Below, we present key recommendations in this regard.

7.2 Recommendations to the Polish Regions

1. Incorporate VET strategy high on the agenda of regional development.

The explicit formulation of iVET-related goals and measures in regional development strategies or in specific strategic documents adopted by the regions facilitates long-term commitment, and allows for the planning and implementation of regional operational programmes in the iVET sector in a comprehensive manner. Desk research across the regions in Poland showed that several, but not all of them developed explicit strategy documents for iVET. Even though the example of Dolnośląskie from the previous programming period shows that strategic transformation of iVET is possible without an overarching strategic document, it seems that this is an exception.

On strategy preceding ROP:

„We seriously considered developing a Regional Strategic Programme dedicated to education solely. But we abandoned that idea, to show our region’s citizens, that education is always a means for something else. The ultimate goal is for our graduates to meaningfully participate in the society and manage to successfully enter the labour market.” KII 2 Pomorskie

Similarly, there may be examples of regions which adopted strategic documents without being able to implement a coherent strategic approach in the practice of ROP. Interestingly, both Pomorskie and Małopolskie achieved this in part using specifically developed terminology, namely integrated projects in Pomorskie, and vocational competency centres in Małopolskie. Tailored terminology helps to create common language and strengthens the identification of the participants with the process. The regions invested their time and human resources into the development of coherent strategic approach towards

development of VET irrespective and prior to designing ROP, and formulated them in appropriate strategic documents. The effort put into proposing, discussing, and finally achieving some measure of consensus regarding strategic directions of transformation of VET facilitated programming of the Regional Operational Programs. Lastly, inscribing an iVET strategy within high-level regional documents clearly indicates leadership and responsibility claimed by the Marshal Office in the process of strategically managing processes.

It is recommended that:

- Regions establish clear strategic objectives in the area of iVET prior to ROP programming. The ESF and ERDF ought to be considered as one source of financing in the scope of ROP and instruments for realisation of previously established strategy.
- Regions incorporate strategic iVET objectives, identified in regional development strategies, into strategic regional programmes, preferably accompanied by work plans that can be operationalised. Programmes where iVET is placed in a broader context of labour market and regional development offer framework for more effective development.
- Regional strategies are organised around 'shared language', expressing a common vision and approach. This allows all stakeholders of VET to agree on a common language and shared values.
- Regions which have not yet addressed the issue of rationalising the school network, place this task high on their regional VET agenda and consider this as one of pre-conditions for effective development. It is recommended that these regions review the territorial distribution of VET schools and of their vocational profiles with territorial distribution of the needs of labour market, with demographic trends, as well as with barriers to access to schools (network of roads, available public transport). The results of such reviews should be made public, and should be used in all strategic processes for VET undertaken by regional authorities.
- The regions where the school network was to a great extent successfully rationalised, ensure continuous support and monitoring of progress, enhancement of the appeal of VET or strengthening school counselling and the continuation of the region-wide interventions on the basis of selected topics and areas for intervention.

2. Ensure evidence-based policy making through the development and effective use of different data sources

For the iVET strategy to be at the same time far-reaching and realistic, it must be evidence-based. From broad iVET needs diagnosis, through analysis of the region's and counties' key potentials to carefully re-examining past experiences, the regions should actively and purposefully use a broad array of information resources in their planning process. Given the dynamics of the labour market and iVET education, it is essential for data gathering and analysis to be periodic, allowing for adjustments of the course and evidence-based policy making. Similarly, involving different stakeholders in the planning process results in richness of the final approach, for example close cooperation with higher education institutions results in technology and innovation aspects of VET being strongly represented.

It is recommended that:

- In the process of strategy development and ROP programming, regions gather and analyse relevant data from multiple sources as to cross-check and verify available information. While some data may be readily available, others will require new research, designed and implemented specifically for the purpose of strategising.
- Regions both use information available from the central level (e.g. currently designed alumni tracking studies, listing of deficit professions, statistical data offered by the Ministry of Education) and develop and effectively use their own research and analysis mechanisms or institutions. These

could include periodic graduate tracking studies (as in Małopolskie) or one-off detailed stock-taking (as in Dolnośląskie).

- Diagnosis and evidence gathering covers multiple areas of data, this includes but is not limited to the condition of iVET schools in the region, economic and demographic trends as well as available infrastructure. Data gathered and subsequent analysis ought to incorporate historical development and changes occurring over time. This should be analysed both on the local (counties) and regional level, ensuring multiple territorial dimensions.
- Regions design and consequently implement robust monitoring procedures throughout implementation of the strategy. This should include both the measurement of progress through clearly established benchmarks and indicators as well as presence 'on the ground' and frequent visits to the places of interventions' implementation.

3. Resolute but flexible programming of Regional Operational Programme in VET sector.

The research reported in the present paper showed that when used tactically, ROPs and the funds available through them can be a powerful tool in the hands of the regional governments for implementation of regional VET strategies, if two conditions are met. The first is that the programming follows clear and well-designed directions, and the second is that it allows for flexibility during the implementation process. The programming of ROP follows clear directions if it is organised around specific concepts, preferably taken from the regional VET strategy. This may be focus on a few large, concentrated interventions (be that in form of non-competition or competition mode), designed to avoid scattered initiatives, and offering more leverage to achieve strategic goals, as was done in Pomorskie region. This may be also introducing a new form of partnership and channelling different types of interventions through those partnerships, as was done in Małopolskie region. Similarly, matching investments in people and in infrastructure is a good way to coherently responding to different VET needs, as showed also in other regions in Poland. The three regions also share a common pattern of using a smaller systemic project to ensure coordination and support to larger, competition-based projects, with a focus on soft skills and on promotion of VET.

It is recommended that:

- Regions plan the Regional Operational Programme interventions in the area of VET with the same forward-looking approach as they do when designing their regional VET strategy. The new concepts and associated terminology from the strategy may be used as building block for programming.
- The programmed interventions should account for the time and funding necessary for possible future adjustments. This may be achieved, for example, through well-designed monitoring procedures, and the sequencing of interventions where the successful evaluation of one part of the intervention is a pre-condition for the next phase.
- Creating a mode of complementarity between interventions, where they are all organised around core, well defined objective rather than plethora of disconnected actions. Complementarity between investment in infrastructure ('hard' investment projects) and investment in people ('soft' skills and competencies projects) is key. In the challenging task of rationalising the existing school network, focusing funds from one intervention on specific, strategically identified schools while compensating the remaining ones through other, broader actions helps maintain consensus and ownership among the less favoured counties and schools.
- Non-competition mode interventions are developed which allow Education Departments of Marshall Offices to ensure adequate internal resources and position them in coordinating role over the developments.

4. Ensure the active participation and commitment of relevant stakeholders, in particular school founders and employers.

A participatory process in the development of iVET strategy is key for its successful implementation. This process should include all relevant stakeholders in iVET, among them counties and cities with county rights, as well as other founders of VET schools, employers' organisations, and labour market institutions. While in the three regions researched, this has taken different shapes, all the case studies pointed towards extensive consultative and collaborative processes, aimed at increasing participation and ownership of the final strategic vision amongst the stakeholders, and in particular the local governments.

Participatory processes are more likely to result in feasible, realistic goals. Dolnośląskie during the previous programming period showcased strong involvement of the regional Convent of Counties, Pomorskie created an entire pre-ROP competition for development of county-level concepts for VET built on extensive consultations and negotiations, Małopolskie actively used the already existing multi-stakeholder platform for continuous education. All these were further accompanied by extensive consultations, workshops and discussions in all the three regions. At the same time, voices from regions indicate that lack of effective communication with Regional Education Authorities (representatives of the central government) can lead to a lack of synergy between central and regional activities, and the use of available resources. Among the key stakeholders of VET are employers and employer organisations. The research however also indicated that there is room for even more systematic and effecting engagement and consideration for bigger roles that could be played by Special Economic Zones or employers organisations.

On participatory process:

„When we speak about the strategic directions of our education, and what the EU funds will support, these are based on goals which we formulated in a consensus, and which guide our actions. The process of the Regional Strategic Programme development itself really helped to build these structures, which later enabled the rational allocation of the EU funds.”

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It is recommended that:

- Regions ensure and effectively use broad forms of consultation involving multiple stakeholders. This participatory process should be clearly formulated in the strategic documents, so that all potentially interested stakeholders know upfront where and in what manner they may contribute. This can take form of continuous mechanisms (such as existing thematic councils, working and consultative groups) or periodic events. Consultations should be ensured at the level of developing strategic documents, programming of ROPs as well as implementation and evaluation.
- Convent of Counties is actively involved as important discussion platform for development of VET strategy and consensus building arena. Experience of Dolnośląskie shows that creation of a working group at the level of Convent specific for VET facilitates active engagement.
- Regions develop models of working alongside the local governments in the process of diagnosing and elaborating county concepts. While the exact mode of communication and collaboration should be determined individually by each region, Pomorskie's approach of hands-on support and assistance in the process of local planning resulted in both the increased capacity of local stakeholders and synergy with the regional needs and vision.
- Regions should pay a special focus to ensuring the effective and meaningful involvement of employers and businesses. This can be achieved by close collaboration with employers' organisations (Crafts Unions, trade unions, regional and sectoral employers organisations, Special Economic Zones) in the consultative process and mechanisms but also by designing desired VET interventions in way that active dialogue with employers becomes mandatory (as in development of county level concepts in Pomorskie where local governments together with local business

defended their shared visions or in Małopolskie where active participation of employers in the work of the Vocational Competence Centres is mandatory).

- Regions fully engage and consult Special Economic Zones (SEZ) where educational clusters were established. The SEZ are involved both in strategy development, implementation and evaluation.
- Regions should engage and consult Regional Education Authorities (kuratoria oświaty) in the process of strategising. The example of Dolnośląskie shows that the institution, albeit not part of the regional government and not responsible for regional strategy or ROP, can play a key role in facilitating broad discussion amongst various stakeholders and shaping the regional vision.
- Regions should facilitate networking and cooperation of relevant stakeholders, where possible introducing posts of regional coordinators. The example of Pomorskie's creation of a regional network of school career counsellors is worth exploring.

5. Strengthening and safeguarding the human potential and collaborative processes within the Marshall Office's and institutions managed by the regional government.

The effective leadership and management of the strategic processes in the area of VET at the regional level requires initiative and efficiency of regional administration. Regional authorities supported by experienced and knowledgeable staff can design and propose new strategies much more easily, because the early drafts will receive critical scrutiny and will be improved before they are made public. Therefore human potential in the Marshall Office should be strengthened, and perhaps of equal importance, should be safeguarded from one financial programming period to the next one. At the same time, the staff should be well managed in their work. Their success is strongly enhanced by good, clearly defined collaboration of the relevant departments of the Marshall Office, and as applicable, other Managing Authorities. Intensive communication, exchange of information, discussing possible ways forward are key for coordinated effort. With insufficient or poorly designed internal procedures, even relatively simple tasks may lead to confusion. In particular, the Marshall can play a vital role in providing overall guidance and leadership to the processes, ensuring that adequate attention and importance is paid to the issue of strategic approach to initial VET.

It is recommended that:

- Regional authorities regularly analyse their human resource situation, review the reasons for losing some of their key experts (if this is the case) and work on attracting new talent.
- Regional authorities plan good collaboration between relevant departments, and design lines of communication, to facilitate cross-departmental collaboration at the level of Marshall Office. Physical proximity between key departments and regular, scheduled exchange of information between actors has proved effective.
- Regional authorities allocate sufficient resources (human and financial) for the tasks of regional development and leadership in the area of VET at the Education Departments, especially that these units are tasked with multiple assignments beyond iVET. Continuity of financial support is ensured between implementation periods of key ROP projects as not to lose talent.
- The Marshall emphasises and clearly communicates Marshall's Office Educational Departments' responsibility for creating and co-managing regional strategic development. Education Department is encouraged to take the leading role and not consider itself one amongst many school founders.
- Other institutions managed by the regional government are actively used in the process of designing and implementing strategic approaches.

7.3 Recommendations to the European Commission

Since Regional Operational Programmes remain the key vessel for operationalising and financing the strategic development of VET in the regions, a number of recommendations are identified as to how the European Commission might foster and facilitate strategic employment of the ESF resources.

It is recommended that the European Commission⁸⁵:

- Considers the management of VET schools as an important area for development with headteachers and considers a specific target group for activities. The effective management of VET schools involves a number of specific tasks not evident in management of other educational institutions (e.g. collaboration with employers, improvement of VET reputation, involvement of practical trainers, or adjusting school offer to changing demand for different vocational skills) and this requires adequate managerial skills. It is recommended that headteachers are recognised as a target group in their own right and with activities tailored to their needs.
- Advocates a more flexible approach to the Ministerial Recommendations in the area of iVET development. While it needs to be acknowledged that clear and comprehensive Recommendations play a facilitating role in the planning carried out by less experienced regions (or those lacking clear regional strategy for iVET), in case of more advanced regions, the Recommendations might prove limiting. Even if this pertains to the sphere of national governance, the European Commission can advocate for a more flexible approach on the side of the Polish government.
- Advocates for the Polish government to facilitate knowledge and the sharing of experience amongst the regions. Fieldwork for this study showed that regions have limited knowledge of experiences of other governments across the country and as such the opportunity for learning from other experiences is limited. At the same time, the study proved that there is in a great deal of learning potential in the analysis and discussion of approaches undertaken by different stakeholders, and that some Polish regions have in fact learned from the experience of others. Supporting mechanisms and platforms for knowledge sharing would enhance further improvement of strategic VET development across the country.
- Facilitates learning from the experiences and solutions of other regions in the European Union. While the specificity of the Polish context always needs to be considered, this study revealed that the regions look towards other countries in the EU and beyond for inspiration and guidance. A systematic review of best and most applicable experiences of regions outside Poland, taking into account the challenges and limitations facing Polish regions, would be beneficial for further shaping of regional policies and approaches.
- Advocates for the Polish government to explore incentives for the better involvement of employers and businesses. This could take form of tax incentives and other stimulus for the effective participation in iVET at the local and regional levels. Another possible direction would be to enable Special Economic Zones to participate in VET ROP interventions, for example through private-public partnerships.
- Re-considers systemic projects as possible instrument within the Regional Operational Programmes. While the rationale for abandoning systemic projects at the regional level is clear, research in the three regions revealed that systemic projects provide a good level of leverage for the strategic development of VET, especially in its initial phases. Even if such an instrument has its limitations, it is effective in addressing one of the key challenges faced in iVET in Poland currently – a lack of well-defined network of schools. The example of Pomorskie and Małopolskie

⁸⁵ These recommendations were tailored based on the authors' understanding of the role and scope of influence of GeoDesk Poland within DG Employment. As such a number of postulates voiced by the regions in the scope of the study were not presented here since they have no relevance to the specific role of GeoDesk.

shows that competition-mode interventions can be to a certain extent designed to support network rationalisation, but are not best-suited for region-wide planning and implementation processes.

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