



VETInnovate

Transformation of VET Centres to become
regional leaders of inclusive, sustainable
and digital skills ecosystems

PILLAR 3: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS



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Pillar 3: Leadership and Management Skills in Vocational Education and Training

This pillar is the third of the total of 8 Pillars to be included in the Self-Assessment Tool and focuses specifically on upgrading the strategic and operational capabilities of leaders and managers within VET centres. It recognises that even the most ambitious curriculum reforms, the most advanced equipment, and the most engaged teaching staff will fall short of their potential if leadership lacks the vision, skills, and systems to guide the institution forward.

This section provides VET centre leaders and management teams with a structured framework to assess their current capabilities, identify areas for growth, and take practical steps towards institutional transformation. It is designed to be used both as a standalone self-assessment tool and as part of the broader 8-Pillar guide, which covers complementary areas such as curriculum design, digital readiness, industry partnerships, and quality assurance.

1. Why Leadership & Management Are of Essence In VET

1.1 The Changing Role of VET Centres

VET centres have historically been viewed as institutions focused primarily on delivering practical, trade-specific skills. However, the scale of the sector tells a different story. In 2023, vocational programmes accounted for 49.1% of all pupils at upper secondary level across the EU (Eurostat, 2025) with 8.8 million initial VET students enrolled at this level in 2021 (CEDEFOP, 2024). These are not niche providers but mainstream institutions shaping the futures of millions of Europeans.

Modern VET centres are expected to adapt to the unimaginably rapid changes in the field of education, technology and innovation and go beyond their service as conventional training providers to a hub that promotes lifelong learning, regional development and social inclusion.



The urgency is clear as according to the 2024 State of the Digital Decade Report (European Commission, July 2024) only 55.6% of the EU's adult population currently possesses at least basic digital skills, against a target of 80% by 2030 and without further measures, projections suggest only 60% will reach that threshold by the end of the decade (European Commission, March 2025). Also, 4 out of 10 adults and working in Europe still lack basic digital skills (European Commission, May 2025). In the manufacturing sector alone, 77% of employers cite the lack of qualified candidates as the primary hiring obstacle, as the rapid pace of technological change has surpassed the ability of education and training systems to equip candidates with the skills needed for emerging roles (Cecimo, 2025). VET centres stand at the frontline of closing these gaps yet doing so demands leadership capable of transforming institutions at the same speed the world around them is changing.

1.2 Leadership vs. Management: A Complementary Relationship

While the terms "leadership" and "management" are often used interchangeably, their meanings are distinct. The Cambridge Dictionary defines leadership as "the quality or ability that makes a person a leader, or the position of being a leader," emphasising direction, vision and influence. Management, by contrast, is defined as "the control and organization of something, esp. a business and its employees" pointing to organisation, oversight and the efficient use of (human) resources. In practice, leadership is about deciding where the institution should go, while management is about ensuring it gets there.

A high-performing VET centre needs both: visionary leaders who inspire change, set strategic direction and align the institution with evolving EU and national priorities, and skilled managers who translate that vision into daily operational reality by allocating resources, maintaining quality and keeping complex stakeholder relationships on track.



2. Key Focus Areas for Leadership & Management

Effective leadership and management in VET can be understood through five interconnected focus areas. Each represents a critical dimension of institutional capability, and together they provide a comprehensive picture of an institution's readiness to innovate and adapt.

Area	Description	Why It Matters
Vision and Strategy	Setting long-term direction aligned with EU, national, and regional priorities.	Ensures institutional sustainability, coherence, and policy alignment.
Inclusive Governance	Involving staff, learners, industry representatives, and community stakeholders in decision-making processes.	Builds trust, enhances buy-in, and fosters a culture of co-creation.
Change Management	Adapting the institution to labour market shifts, digital transformation, and the green transition.	Keeps the centre relevant, responsive, and resilient in a rapidly evolving environment.
Staff Empowerment	Supporting continuous professional development, recognising achievements, and creating career pathways for educators.	Improves teaching quality, retention, and institutional innovation capacity.
Evidence-Based Management	Using data, key performance indicators (KPIs), and systematic evaluation to inform strategic planning.	Strengthens accountability, transparency, and measurable impact.

Table 1: Key Focus Areas for Leadership and Management in VET



2.2 Vision & Strategy

Vision refers to an institution's long-term sense of purpose, while strategy is the operational roadmap that turns that purpose into measurable action. [European policy](#) increasingly expects VET centres to align their institutional plans with continental priorities, from climate neutrality by 2050 to digital transformation targets for 2030. For VET centres, this means a strategic plan should not exist in isolation. It must explicitly reference EU frameworks such as the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Compass 2030 and the [EQAVET Quality Assurance Cycle](#) of Plan, Do, Check, Act. A strong strategic plan draws on four inputs: labour market intelligence, learner feedback, staff consultation and industry engagement. It is a living document, reviewed annually, not a shelf document produced for accreditation purposes.



2.2.1 What does a good strategic plan look like?

- It is aligned: explicitly linked to EU, national, and regional priorities such as the [European Green Deal](#), the [European Skills Agenda](#), and [Digital Compass 2030](#).
- It is participatory: developed with input from staff, learners, industry partners, and community representatives.
- It is evidence-informed: based on labour market data, learner outcome tracking, and employer satisfaction surveys.
- It is reviewed regularly: treated as a living document with annual reviews and the flexibility to adapt to significant external changes.

2.3 Inclusive Governance

Inclusive governance, sometimes referred to as participatory governance or shared decision-making, means that decisions about institutional direction are shaped by all stakeholders, not just senior management. For a VET centre, this means creating space at the table for four groups whose perspectives are essential: teaching and support staff, learners, industry partners and community organisations.

In practice, this translates into formal structures such as advisory boards with employer representation, student councils with a recognised voice in planning, regular staff forums and open feedback channels. The key distinction to understand is between consultation and co-creation. Consultation means gathering opinions before a decision is made. Co-creation means stakeholders are involved in shaping the decision itself from the outset, leading to stronger buy-in and more grounded outcomes.

2.3.1 How can a centre strengthen inclusive governance?

- Establish advisory boards: ensure that industry, community, and learner representatives have a formal and meaningful role in governance.
- Create feedback mechanisms: implement regular surveys, suggestion systems, and open forums to gather input from staff and learners.
- Promote transparency: publish minutes of governance meetings, share decision rationales, and report regularly on institutional performance.
- Leverage digital tools: use collaborative platforms and online consultation tools to broaden participation, particularly for stakeholders who face barriers to in-person engagement.



2.4 Change Management

Change management is the structured process of moving an institution from its current state to a desired future state while minimising disruption. For VET centres, change is no longer occasional or optional. It is constant, driven by the twin transition towards a digital and green economy. The skills your centre taught five years ago may already be partially obsolete, and the fields growing fastest, such as artificial intelligence, clean energy, robotics and data analysis, require not just new curricula but new ways of teaching, equipping and partnering.

Effective change management in a VET centre rests on five leadership functions: Effective change management rests on five leadership functions: communicating the why behind the change, engaging stakeholders before decisions are finalised, building cross-departmental coalitions, setting milestones with clear ownership, and monitoring progress honestly. A practical approach to this is the pilot approach.

2.4.1 What practical approaches work?

- Invest in training: equip leaders and managers with frameworks and tools for planning and implementing organisational change.
- Appoint change initiators: identify, encourage and support staff members who can advocate for and facilitate change at the departmental level.
- Start with pilot projects: test new approaches on a small scale before applying them institution-wide, and use lessons learned and feedback to refine the approach.
- Communicate: keep all stakeholders informed about the purpose, progress, and outcomes of change initiatives.



2.5 Staff Empowerment

The quality of a VET centre is only as strong as the quality of its people. Staff empowerment means giving educators and support staff the resources, time and trust to develop professionally, try new approaches and contribute to institutional improvement. The EU uses the term continuous professional development (CPD) to describe this ongoing investment. In VET, CPD should cover five domains: technical skill updates in vocational fields, pedagogical innovation, digital competence, leadership development and cross-sectoral collaboration.

European mobility opportunities such as job shadowing, professional courses and international placements through programmes like Erasmus+ are powerful CPD tools, yet many centres underuse them. Beyond formal training, empowerment means putting practical systems in place: individual development plans agreed annually with each staff member, mentoring for new teachers, peer observation, and protected time for experimentation.

Recognition matters too. When the only feedback staff receive is about what went wrong, innovation stalls. Centres that track CPD participation rates and involve staff in choosing their own development priorities consistently see stronger engagement, higher retention and more willingness to adopt new methods.

2.5.1 How can centres empower their staff?

- **Develop individual CPD plans:** work with each staff member to identify learning goals, agree on activities, and track progress.
- **Create recognition systems:** acknowledge and celebrate staff achievements through awards, public recognition, and career advancement opportunities.
- **Support mobility and networking:** encourage participation in Erasmus+ projects, professional associations, and cross-institutional collaborations.



2.6 Evidence-Based Management

In an era of increasing accountability, VET centres must be able to demonstrate their impact. Evidence-based management means using data systematically to inform decisions, monitor performance, and drive improvement. This includes collecting and analysing data on learner outcomes, employer satisfaction, staff development, financial performance, and operational efficiency.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) provide a structured way to track progress against strategic objectives. However, KPIs are only useful if they are carefully selected, regularly reviewed, and genuinely used to inform action. Leaders should guard against the temptation to measure too many things or to treat data collection as an end in itself. The goal is to create a culture of intelligent inquiry, where evidence is used to ask good questions, challenge assumptions, and identify opportunities for improvement.

2.6.1 What does this look like in practice?

- Define meaningful KPIs: select a manageable number of indicators that genuinely reflect strategic priorities and can be tracked consistently.
- Invest in data systems: implement digital tools for data collection, analysis, and visualisation that make evidence accessible and actionable.
- Create a culture of inquiry: encourage staff to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and use evidence to inform their practice.
- Report and act on findings: share monitoring and evaluation results widely, and ensure that findings are systematically used to inform planning and improvement.

To ensure coherence between the conceptual framework and the self-assessment tool, each focus area is directly linked to the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) presented in Section 3. This mapping helps users clearly understand how strategic dimensions translate into measurable elements.

Focus Area	Related KPIs	What is being assessed
Vision & Strategy	KPI 1	Alignment of institutional strategy with EU, national and regional priorities
Inclusive Governance	KPI 2, KPI 5	Stakeholder participation and transparency in decision-making processes
Change Management	KPI 3, KPI 10	Capacity to implement transformation initiatives and respond to disruptions
Staff Empowerment	KPI 4, KPI 6, KPI 7	Leadership development, CPD participation, and diversity in leadership
Evidence-Based Management	KPI 8, KPI 9	Use of partnerships, data, monitoring and evaluation for decision-making

This structure helps connect the assessment results to the institution's broader leadership and management priorities, ensuring a coherent and meaningful evaluation.



3. Self-Assessment Framework

How can VET centres' leaders know leadership and management work well within their institutions?

The answer is through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The following self-assessment framework is designed to help VET centre leaders evaluate their current leadership and management capabilities against ten key performance indicators. Each KPI is scored on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates minimal or no capacity and 5 indicates exemplary practice. The framework is intended to be used collaboratively, involving leadership teams, staff representatives, and where appropriate, external stakeholders, to ensure a balanced and honest assessment.

3.1 Scoring Scale

Score	Description
1 – Initial	Limited or no evidence of this capability. The area is at an early stage with no structured approach yet in place.
2 – Emerging	Initial steps have been taken, but practice is informal, inconsistent, or limited in scope.
3 – Developing	Structured approaches are in place, but implementation is uneven or not yet fully embedded.
4 – Advanced	The capability is well-developed, consistently applied, and producing measurable results.
5 – Transformational	The institution demonstrates best practice, serves as a model for others, and continuously innovates.

3.2 Assessment Criteria and KPIs

The KPIs presented below are structured according to the five key focus areas introduced in Section 2, ensuring full alignment between strategic priorities and measurable performance indicators.

#	KPI	Description	Guiding Questions
KPI 1	Strategic Plan Alignment	Existence of a long-term institutional strategy that is explicitly linked to EU, national, and regional policy priorities.	Is there a documented strategic plan? Does it reference the European Skills Agenda, Digital Compass 2030, or the Green Deal? When was it last updated?
KPI 2	Stakeholder Involvement	Degree and quality of participation by staff, learners, industry representatives, and community partners in governance and strategic decision-making.	Are there formal mechanisms (advisory boards, student councils, staff forums) for stakeholder participation? How often do they meet? Is their input demonstrably reflected in decisions?
KPI 3	Change Management Initiatives	Number, quality, and effectiveness of projects or initiatives that adapt the institution to the digital and green transitions.	Can you list recent change initiatives? Were they planned and managed systematically? What outcomes were achieved?
KPI 4	Leadership Development	Availability and uptake of training programmes for managers in areas such as leadership, strategic planning, innovation management, and EU policy literacy.	Have managers participated in leadership training in the past two years? Is there a budget allocated for management development?
KPI 5	Decision Transparency	Use of open, documented, and communicated processes in leadership decisions, including clear rationale and feedback loops.	Are major decisions documented and communicated to all staff? Is there a mechanism for staff to ask questions or provide feedback on leadership decisions?
KPI 6	Staff Empowerment	Proportion of educators and support staff actively engaged in continuous professional development and formally recognised for their achievements.	What percentage of staff participated in CPD activities this year? Are there recognition or reward systems in place? Do staff have individual development plans?
KPI 7	Diversity in Leadership	Representation of women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and young professionals in management and leadership positions.	What is the demographic composition of your leadership team? Are there policies or targets to improve diversity? Is diversity monitored and reported?
KPI 8	Partnership Building	Quality, breadth, and strategic value of collaborations with external organisations including employers, research institutions, other VET providers, and international partners.	How many active partnerships does the centre maintain? Are partnerships documented with clear objectives? Do they contribute to curriculum development or learner outcomes?



KPI 9	Monitoring and Evaluation	Existence and use of systematic processes for tracking institutional performance, learner outcomes, and the impact of strategic initiatives.	Is there a monitoring and evaluation framework in place? Are KPIs tracked regularly? Are findings used to inform planning and improvement?
KPI 10	Crisis Management Capacity	Ability of leadership to anticipate, prepare for, and respond effectively to unexpected disruptions, whether operational, financial, or societal.	Does the centre have a crisis management plan? Has it been tested? How effectively did leadership respond to recent disruptions (e.g., pandemic-related closures)?

Table 2: Assessment Criteria and KPIs for Leadership and Management

The ten KPIs above cover the full spectrum of leadership and management capabilities relevant to VET centres. For each indicator, assessors should consider the guiding questions, review available evidence, and assign a score.

4. Self-Assessment Scorecard

Use the scorecard below to record your assessment for each KPI. The total score provides an overall indication of leadership and management maturity. The scorecard is designed to be completed collaboratively by the leadership team, ideally with input from staff representatives and external stakeholders.

#	KPI	Score	Notes / Evidence
1	Strategic Plan Alignment	/5	
2	Stakeholder Involvement	/5	
3	Change Management Initiatives	/5	
4	Leadership Development	/5	
5	Decision Transparency	/5	
6	Staff Empowerment	/5	
7	Diversity in Leadership	/5	
8	Partnership Building	/5	
9	Monitoring and Evaluation	/5	
10	Crisis Management Capacity	/5	
TOTAL SCORE		/50	

Table 3: Self-Assessment Scorecard

4.1 Interpreting Your Score

Score Range	Maturity Level	Guidance
40–50	Transformational	Your centre demonstrates strong leadership and management practices. Focus on sustaining excellence, sharing best practices with peer institutions, and driving continuous innovation.
30–39	Advanced	Solid foundations are in place, but there are clear opportunities for improvement. Prioritise the lowest-scoring KPIs and develop targeted action plans.
20–29	Developing	Leadership and management capabilities are at an early stage. Consider investing in leadership training, establishing formal governance structures, and seeking external support or mentoring.
10–19	Emerging	Some leadership activity is under way but it remains ad hoc and largely reactive. Focus on formalising at least one



		governance mechanism, assigning clear responsibilities, and building a shared understanding of institutional direction.
Below 10	Initial	Immediate attention is needed. Start with the fundamentals: develop a strategic plan, establish basic governance mechanisms, and create a culture of open communication.

5. Transformation Pathways and Practical Recommendations

Self-assessment is only valuable if it leads to action. This section provides practical recommendations for VET centres at different stages of leadership and management maturity, structured around the five focus areas and informed by KPI-based self-assessment results. The recommendations are designed to be adaptable to different institutional contexts and support institutions in translating their scores into targeted improvement actions.

For centres at the Initial or Developing stage:

- **Start with fundamentals:** develop a clear strategic plan, even a short one, that identifies three to five institutional priorities for the next three years. Start with a one-page document that names three institutional priorities, assigns a responsible person to each and set a 12-month review period. Evidence from [CEDEFOP's 2023 survey](#) of VET providers shows that centres with even minimal formalised direction documents are significantly more likely to pursue quality assurance processes within two years.
- **Appoint an internal "change contact person:** Designate one staff member (senior position or not) whose role includes flagging changes in the external environment (new qualifications, labour market shifts, EU policy updates) to management. This costs nothing but creates an early-warning function that many Initial-level centres lack entirely.
- **Invest in leadership training:** ensure that at least one member of the management team participates in a leadership development programme each year. For the case of Cyprus, take advantage of the multiple [HRDA](#)-approved training centres that provide fast-paced training sessions on leadership, management and other relevant skills throughout the year.
- **Build a data baseline:** begin tracking a small number of meaningful KPIs (e.g., learner completion rates, employer satisfaction, CPD participation).



For centres at the Developing stage:

- **Pilot a structured industry advisory session (once per semester):** Rather than building a full advisory board immediately, begin with a structured two-hour session per semester with three to five employer contacts. Use a standard agenda: what skills gaps are you seeing? What would you like us to stop, start, or continue? [CEDEFOP's Vocational Excellence initiative \(2021–2024\)](#) found that VET centres with even low-frequency employer dialogue showed measurably better curriculum relevance scores in employer satisfaction surveys within 18 months.
- **Introduce individual CPD conversations (30 minutes per teacher per year):** The [OECD's 2025 VET review](#) found that centres where managers had brief but regular development conversations with individual teachers showed 22 percentage points higher CPD participation rates than those relying on collective training alone. This requires no budget; only scheduled time.
- **Track three KPIs manually before investing in a data system:** Before purchasing dashboards or reporting software, select three indicators the centre can track manually: learner completion rate, employer satisfaction (simple 1–5 survey after internships), and CPD hours per staff member. Tracking these for one year creates the evidence base that justifies further investment and builds the habit.

For centres at the Advanced stage:

- **Co-design the annual strategic review with staff and one external stakeholder:** Move from a management-only annual review to a structured participatory session. A half-day workshop with mixed staff levels and at least one employer representative produces plans with stronger buy-in and better identification of capability gaps.
- **Link CPD explicitly to strategic priorities:** Map each CPD activity to at least one institutional priority in the strategic plan. This prevents the common pattern where CPD spend is high but has no measurable impact on learner outcomes because activities are chosen individually without institutional direction.

Formalise at least one industry partnership into a written agreement: A simple MOU with one employer partner — specifying joint activities,



expected outcomes, and review frequency — transforms an informal relationship into institutional capital that survives personnel changes.

For centres at the Transformational stage:

- **Establish a leadership pipeline beyond CPD for current managers: Identify two or three teaching staff with leadership potential and offer them structured exposure to strategic processes:** attending planning meetings, leading a small improvement project, participating in an Erasmus+ KA2 partnership. European CoVEs consistently cite internal leadership pipelines as a critical factor in sustaining excellence beyond the tenure of founding leaders.
- **Contribute to the national or European policy conversation:** Participate in CEDEFOP's or European Training Foundation's (ETF) stakeholder consultations, host a national peer-learning visit, or contribute to a VET excellence case study for publication. Transformational centres generate value beyond their own walls and this visibility directly supports staff recruitment, employer attraction, and future funding positioning.
- **Develop a replication or transfer model for your strongest practice:** Document one process whether an employer co-design mechanism, a CPD model, or a data-driven review cycle in a modular format that another centre could adopt.

5.1 What Does All This Mean for the Future?

It means that VET centres do not succeed or fail based on equipment and curricula alone. They succeed when they are led by people with clear vision, managed by teams with strong systems, and supported by governance structures that bring all stakeholders into the conversation.

With 80% of VET graduates entering employment in 2024 (EURES, 2026) and 65.2% of recent VET graduates having experienced work-based learning, VET is already proving its value. But reaching the next level of performance, closing the digital skills gap, meeting the 82% employability target, and scaling learner mobility to 12%, requires VET centres to be led and managed with the same ambition and professionalism as the best organisations in any sector (EC, 2025).

Thanks to strong leadership and management, VET centres can ensure that learners receive training that is current, relevant, and connected to real employment opportunities. Staff are supported, motivated, and continuously developing. The institution is resilient, adaptive, and positioned as a key partner in its region's economic and social development.



6. Conclusion

Strong leadership sets the direction; effective management makes it happen. Without these two elements working in tandem, the competences, partnerships, digital infrastructure, and quality processes addressed across the remaining pillars of this framework will lack the institutional grounding needed to deliver lasting results.

Leadership and management are not abstract qualities reserved for large or well-resourced institutions. They are practical, learnable, and improvable at every stage of a VET centre's development starting from the first attempt of a written strategic plan to the most sophisticated systems of distributed governance and data-driven decision-making. What matters is not the starting point, but the commitment to move forward deliberately and with a clear sense of purpose.

VET centres that invest in this pillar are investing in their own capacity to make full use of the valuable content the Self-Assessment Tool has to offer. The work ahead institutional capacity, ecosystems and networks, mobility opportunities, and green competences becomes significantly more achievable when it is led with clarity, managed with consistency, and guided by a shared vision of what excellence in vocational education and training can look like.



Annexes

A. Action Planning Template

Use the template below to translate your self-assessment findings into a concrete action plan. For each priority area, identify specific actions, assign responsibilities, set timelines, and define success indicators. This template can be adapted to your institution's planning processes and should be reviewed regularly to track progress.



Action Planning

Priority Area	Specific Actions	Responsible Person/Team	Timeline	Success Indicator



B. Recommended EU Resources and Frameworks

- **European Skills Agenda (2020):** the EU's five-year plan for helping individuals and businesses develop and use skills relevant to the green and digital transitions.
- **Digital Compass 2030:** the EU's vision for Europe's digital transformation, including the target of 80% of adults having basic digital skills.
- **EQAVET Framework:** the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training reference framework, supporting the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle at system and provider level.
- **Erasmus+ Programme:** the EU's programme for education, training, youth, and sport, offering mobility and cooperation opportunities for VET staff and learners.
- **Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs):** a European initiative connecting VET providers with local innovation ecosystems for regional development and excellence.
- **European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA):** a multi-stakeholder platform aimed at strengthening the quality, supply, and image of apprenticeships across Europe.
- **CEDEFOP: Country Specific Reports:** An array of report thematics per EU nation on various topics including skills forecast, inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices, VET policy briefs, implementation of EU priorities in VET and others.



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