



VETInnovate

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

PILLAR 1: DIGITAL ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUALS IN VET



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Executive Summary

Digital inclusion is no longer a supplementary concern for Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions — it is a fundamental requirement. As Europe's labour market transforms under the influence of Industry 4.0, the green transition, and the growing digital economy, VET centres must ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions, can access and benefit from high-quality training that prepares them for meaningful employment.

The Digital Assistive Technologies framework presented in this pillar offers VET centres a practical and structured instrument for evaluating their readiness to support inclusive learning through technology. By examining institutional performance across five key dimensions — accessibility by design, assistive devices and adaptive tools, inclusive learning environments, safe work-based learning, and learner empowerment — VET institutions can identify both their strengths and the areas that require further development.

The complementary 10-KPI assessment model provides a measurable and systematic approach to tracking progress over time. Taken together, these tools move inclusion from a reactive, project-based response to a proactive, embedded institutional value. They enable VET centres to ensure that no learner is left behind, that every individual has access to the tools they need, and that educational excellence is built on the foundation of genuine equity and accessibility.

Through this framework, VET centres across Europe can transform inclusion from an add-on feature into a core institutional value embedded in every programme, every classroom, and every partnership with industry.



1. Introduction

Vocational Education and Training systems across Europe serve an increasingly diverse learner population. Among this population, individuals with physical disabilities, sensory impairments, cognitive differences, and neurodivergent conditions — including dyslexia, autism spectrum conditions, ADHD, and dyscalculia — represent a significant and often underserved group. These learners face unique barriers not only in accessing educational content but also in demonstrating their skills and transitioning into the labour market.

Despite legislative frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Disability Strategy 2021–2030, many VET institutions still struggle to systematically implement inclusive practices. Challenges include limited awareness of available assistive technologies, insufficient teacher training, inadequate digital infrastructure, and a lack of coherent strategies for accessibility and neurodiversity inclusion.

The VETInnovate project addresses this gap by developing a structured self-assessment framework that adapts the well-established HEInnovate model to the specific context of VET. Within this broader framework, Pillar 1 focuses specifically on digital assistive technologies — the tools, approaches, and institutional conditions that enable learners with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals to access, participate in, and succeed within VET programmes.

This pillar is built on a clear premise: inclusion is not a matter of charitable provision but a matter of quality education. When VET centres invest in digital accessibility and assistive technology, they do not merely support vulnerable learners — they strengthen the overall quality and adaptability of their educational offer, benefiting all students and positioning themselves as leaders in inclusive, future-ready skills development.



1.1 Background

The VETInnovate self-assessment framework has been developed in response to the growing demand from European VET institutions for practical instruments that support institutional transformation. Pillar 1 draws on the Self-Assessment Tool, which identifies digital assistive technologies as a cornerstone of inclusion within vocational education. It builds further on EU priorities including the Digital Compass 2030, the European Skills Agenda, and the Accessibility Act, situating digital inclusion firmly within the broader context of Europe's twin digital and green transition.

1.2 Objectives

This booklet addresses the following key objectives:

- To provide VET centres with a clear framework for understanding and implementing digital assistive technologies.
- To present five strategic dimensions of inclusive technology that guide institutional reflection and action planning.
- To introduce a 10-KPI assessment methodology that allows VET institutions to measure and monitor their performance in inclusion and accessibility.
- To support practical implementation through step-by-step guidance and evidence-based recommendations.
- To help VET centres embed inclusion as a core institutional value rather than a supplementary feature.

2. The Strategic Framework: Five Dimensions of Inclusive Technology

For VET institutions to truly champion inclusion, digital assistive technologies must be embedded across all operational and pedagogical dimensions of institutional life. Inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or the provision of a single tool; it requires a comprehensive and interconnected approach that integrates design principles, specialised equipment, pedagogical innovation, workplace partnerships, and learner empowerment strategies.

Within the VETInnovate framework, the integration of digital assistive technologies for learners with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals is structured around five key dimensions. Each dimension addresses a distinct but complementary aspect of institutional performance, and together they provide a holistic picture of how well a VET centre supports inclusive learning through technology.

Dimension	Core Description	Practical VET Example
Accessibility by Design	Universal design built into all platforms and content	Screen reader-compatible LMS, captioned video content
Assistive Devices & Tools	Specialised hardware and software for diverse learner needs	Speech-to-text, AR guidance, adaptive keyboards
Inclusive Learning Environments	Virtual and physical spaces adapted for all abilities	VR simulators with accessibility modes, quiet study zones
Safe Work-Based Learning	Inclusive employer partnerships and safety protocols	Digital monitoring, risk-adjusted workplace placements



Learner Empowerment	Building autonomy and confidence through personalised tools	Individual digital learning plans, self-paced e-learning
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2.1. Dimension 1: Accessibility by Design

The first dimension, Accessibility by Design, refers to the principle that digital platforms, e-learning content, and assessment tools should be conceived and built from the outset to accommodate all learners, rather than retrofitted with accessibility features as an afterthought. This approach, known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), provides multiple means of representation, engagement, and action to ensure that learners with diverse needs can access the same educational experiences as their peers.

In practice, accessibility by design requires VET institutions to ensure that their learning management systems (LMS) and digital portals comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 or higher). This includes features such as keyboard navigation, scalable text, colour contrast adjustments, and compatibility with screen readers. E-learning modules should be designed with audio descriptions, subtitles, and text alternatives for all non-text content, while assessments should offer alternative formats that do not disadvantage learners with specific learning difficulties.

High-performing VET centres treat accessibility as a quality indicator, not just a legal obligation. Their procurement policies require accessibility compliance from digital tool vendors, and their curriculum design processes include regular accessibility audits. By making accessibility a structural feature of their digital ecosystem, these institutions ensure that every learner can engage with training on an equal footing.

Key actions for VET centres in this dimension include:

- Auditing existing digital content and platforms against WCAG 2.1 standards.
- Establishing procurement policies that require accessibility compliance from vendors.



- Training content developers and educators in Universal Design for Learning principles.
- Creating a regular review cycle to identify and address accessibility gaps.

2.2. Dimension 2: Assistive Devices and Adaptive Tools

The second dimension, Assistive Devices and Adaptive Tools, encompasses the wide range of specialised technologies that directly support learners with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions in their daily learning activities. These tools act as bridges between the learner's individual needs and the demands of the VET programme, enabling participation that would otherwise not be possible.

Screen readers convert digital text to speech or braille, enabling learners with visual impairments to access written content. Speech-to-text software allows learners with motor difficulties, dyslexia, or other writing challenges to produce text through voice. Augmented Reality (AR) guidance systems can overlay step-by-step visual instructions onto physical workspaces, supporting learners who struggle with sequential processing. Adaptive hardware, such as ergonomic keyboards, joystick mice, and eye-tracking devices, ensures that learners with physical disabilities can interact with digital systems effectively.

The provision of assistive technologies should not be reactive — waiting until a learner discloses a need — but proactive, with tools available as standard options within the learning environment. Research consistently shows that assistive technologies benefit not only the learners for whom they are primarily designed but also a much wider group of students, including those learning in a second language, mature learners, and those with temporary injuries or stress-related difficulties.

To achieve excellence in this dimension, VET centres should:

- Develop and maintain a catalogue of available assistive technologies across all learning spaces.
- Train educators to recommend and support the use of assistive tools.
- Establish a loan or on-demand system for learners to access devices as needed.



- Invest in emerging technologies such as AR and AI-powered learning aids that offer adaptive support.

2.3. Dimension 3: Inclusive Learning Environments

The third dimension, Inclusive Learning Environments, addresses the design of both physical and virtual spaces in which VET training takes place. Even where platforms are accessible and tools are available, a learning environment that is poorly designed can undermine inclusion by creating sensory overload, physical inaccessibility, or social barriers that discourage engagement.

Physical learning environments in VET centres must comply with accessibility standards for built environments, including ramp access, accessible toilets, clear signage in alternative formats, and sensory-friendly design features. However, the shift towards digital and hybrid learning has made the design of virtual learning environments equally important.

Virtual laboratories and simulation tools used in VET training should incorporate accessibility options such as adjustable speed settings, audio descriptions, colour-blind-friendly interfaces, and the ability to pause and replay sequences. For learners with autism spectrum conditions or sensory processing differences, environments that allow customisation of visual complexity, background noise levels, and interaction pace can significantly improve learning outcomes.

An important aspect of inclusive environments is the role of flexible and alternative assessment methods. Traditional written or oral assessments may create unnecessary barriers for learners who have the competences required by an employer but struggle with the specific format of an assessment. VET centres that offer alternative assessment pathways — such as portfolio-based evidence, practical demonstrations, or digitally-assisted examinations — are more likely to accurately capture the true ability of all learners.

Best practices in this dimension include:



- Designing virtual labs and simulators with built-in accessibility modes as a default, not an option.
- Introducing flexible assessment formats that allow learners to demonstrate competence in ways that match their abilities.
- Conducting annual accessibility audits of both physical and digital learning spaces.
- Creating dedicated sensory-friendly spaces within VET centres for learners who need reduced stimulation.

2.4. Dimension 4: Safe Work-Based Learning

The fourth dimension, Safe Work-Based Learning, addresses one of the most critical aspects of VET for learners with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions: the transition from the learning environment to the workplace. Work-based learning, including apprenticeships, internships, and dual education models, is central to VET's value proposition — but for learners with disabilities, accessing and thriving in these settings requires careful preparation, partnership, and monitoring.

VET centres must build and maintain relationships with employers who are genuinely committed to inclusive workplace practices. This goes beyond legal compliance with anti-discrimination legislation; it involves active employer engagement in adapting roles, workspaces, and supervision approaches to meet the needs of diverse learners. Employers who participate in VET programmes should receive guidance and support from VET centres on reasonable adjustments, assistive technologies in the workplace, and strategies for inclusive supervision.

Digital monitoring and communication tools play an increasingly important role in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of learners with disabilities during work placements. Remote check-in systems, digital logbooks accessible to both learners and their VET supervisors, and real-time communication channels can provide reassurance for learners and their families while enabling timely intervention if difficulties arise. Wearable technology and IoT-enabled safety systems can also contribute to creating safer practical training environments for learners with physical conditions or epilepsy.



For neurodivergent learners, the transition to a workplace setting may introduce new challenges related to unstructured time, social expectations, and changes in routine. VET centres that prepare learners thoroughly for this transition — through structured social skills development, workplace simulation exercises, and mentorship support — significantly improve employment outcomes.

Key actions for VET centres include:

- Developing a database of inclusive employers committed to accessible workplace practices.
- Providing employer training and guidance on inclusive supervision and reasonable adjustments.
- Implementing digital monitoring tools that support learner safety without being intrusive.
- Designing preparatory programmes that support neurodivergent learners in transitioning to workplace settings.

2.5. Dimension 5: Empowering Learners through Digital Tools

The fifth dimension, Empowering Learners through Digital Tools, shifts the focus from institutional provision to individual agency. While the other four dimensions address what institutions need to put in place, this dimension asks how those provisions enable learners to take ownership of their learning journeys and develop the confidence and autonomy needed for long-term employability.

Personalised digital learning plans are a powerful mechanism for learner empowerment. When learners with disabilities or neurodivergent conditions co-develop their own learning plans — identifying the tools that work best for them, the support they need, and the goals they are working towards — they experience greater engagement and motivation. Digital tools that allow learners to track their own progress, set personal goals, and communicate with educators and support staff contribute to a sense of self-efficacy that is critical for success in both education and employment.



Self-paced e-learning modules, available on-demand and compatible with assistive technologies, give learners the flexibility to study at their optimal time and pace. For learners with conditions that affect concentration, energy levels, or consistency — such as ADHD, chronic pain conditions, or mental health challenges — the ability to pause, revisit, and consolidate learning without time pressure can make a transformative difference to outcomes.

VET centres should also invest in digital career guidance tools that are accessible to all learners. Career exploration platforms, job matching algorithms, and virtual employer engagement events can open up employment pathways for learners who may face social anxiety or physical barriers to attending in-person career events.

Empowerment strategies should include:

- Introducing personalised digital learning plans co-designed with learners and support staff.
- Providing on-demand, self-paced digital learning content compatible with assistive technologies.
- Developing accessible career guidance platforms with employer engagement features.
- Supporting learners in developing digital self-advocacy skills to communicate their needs in future workplaces.

Together, these five dimensions form an interconnected framework that enables VET centres to move from fragmented or reactive approaches to inclusion towards a genuinely embedded and comprehensive model of inclusive excellence through digital technology.



3. Inclusion Assessment Methodology

In order to effectively strengthen their approach to digital assistive technologies and inclusive learning, VET institutions must first develop a clear and objective understanding of their current performance. The Inclusion Assessment Methodology developed within the VETInnovate framework provides a structured approach for evaluating institutional readiness, identifying development gaps, and planning targeted improvement actions.

The methodology is based on a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework designed to measure the core elements of digital inclusion performance across the five strategic dimensions outlined above. These indicators provide measurable criteria that allow VET institutions to benchmark their current practices, set improvement targets, and monitor progress systematically over time.

The framework consists of ten key performance indicators, each addressing a specific aspect of institutional performance in digital accessibility and assistive technology. Together, they provide a comprehensive and evidence-based overview of how well a VET centre is equipped to serve learners with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions.

Institutions are encouraged to score each indicator on the five-level scale, drawing on concrete evidence such as staff training records, technology inventories, policy documentation, budget allocations, and learner satisfaction survey results. The use of evidence ensures that the assessment is grounded in institutional reality rather than aspirational descriptions.

Importantly, this methodology is not intended as a one-time evaluation exercise. It functions as a continuous improvement tool that should be integrated into institutional planning cycles. Regular reassessment — recommended at least annually — allows VET centres to measure the impact of implemented improvements, adjust strategies in response to new technologies or learner needs,



and ensure that inclusion remains a living commitment rather than a static policy document.

Score Interpretation Guide:

Score Range	Level	Description
1–2	Emerging	Fragmented or ad-hoc practices; inclusion is reactive rather than embedded.
3	Developing	Systematic approaches are being introduced and gradually institutionalised.
4	Advanced	Strong, integrated practices with consistent application across programmes.
5	Leading	Best-in-class inclusion; the centre defines regional and European standards.

The Self-Assessment is available at: <https://vetinnovate.eu/self-assessment/>



4. Practical Implementation for VET Centres

For the inclusion assessment framework to generate meaningful institutional change, VET centres must integrate it into their regular planning and development processes. The assessment is not an end in itself but a starting point for targeted action that strengthens the institution's capacity to serve all learners effectively.

The implementation process should begin with the formation of an internal inclusion assessment team. This team should bring together diverse perspectives — institutional leadership, educators, support staff, IT specialists, and ideally, representatives of learners with disabilities or neurodivergent conditions themselves. The involvement of learners with lived experience of disability or neurodivergence is particularly valuable, as it ensures that the assessment reflects real barriers and not just institutional assumptions about need.

Once constituted, the assessment team should collect evidence relevant to each of the ten key performance indicators. This may involve reviewing institutional policies, conducting technology audits, analysing staff training records, reviewing budget allocations, and gathering learner feedback. The goal is to assemble a reliable evidence base that supports objective and honest scoring.

After completing the scoring process, the team should analyse results to identify patterns and priorities. Institutions are likely to find that performance varies significantly across the ten indicators — perhaps strong in policy documentation but weaker in actual technology availability, or well-resourced in terms of equipment but lacking in educator training. These patterns reveal where strategic investment and action will have the greatest impact.

Improvement plans should be specific, time-bound, and resourced. Rather than broad commitments to 'improve accessibility', effective plans define concrete actions such as: training thirty educators in Universal Design for Learning methods by the end of the academic year; procuring three additional speech-to-text licences



for shared use in practical training areas; or conducting an accessibility audit of the learning management system and addressing identified gaps within six months.

The results of the self-assessment should feed directly into the institution's broader strategic planning. Inclusion should be visible as a strategic priority in institutional development plans, with dedicated budget lines, performance targets, and leadership accountability. This ensures that accessibility and assistive technology are treated as strategic investments rather than discretionary expenditures.



5. Self-Assessment Process (Step-by-Step Guide)

This ensures that accessibility and assistive technology are treated as strategic investments rather than discretionary expenditures.

The following six-step process is designed to support VET institutions of all sizes and organisational structures in conducting a rigorous and meaningful self-assessment of their digital inclusion performance.

Step 1: Establish an Inclusion Assessment Team

The first step is to form a small, cross-functional internal team responsible for coordinating the assessment. The team should ideally include a member of institutional leadership, at least two educators from different programme areas, a member of IT or digital learning support staff, an administrative representative with knowledge of budgets and procurement, and — where possible — a learner or alumni representative with experience of disability or neurodivergent conditions. Their collective role is to ensure that the assessment is comprehensive, balanced, and representative of the institution's actual experience.

Step 2: Collect Institutional Evidence

The team should gather concrete evidence relevant to each of the ten KPIs before scoring takes place. Evidence may include: the institution's accessibility policy and its date of last review; training records for educators in inclusive digital pedagogy; inventories of assistive technologies available across learning spaces; data from learner satisfaction surveys relating to accessibility; records of employer engagement activities focused on inclusive work placements; and budget documentation showing allocations to accessibility and assistive technology. The quality of the evidence collected directly determines the reliability of the assessment results.

Step 3: Score the Indicators



Each KPI is scored on the five-level scale from 1 (Emerging) to 5 (Leading). The team should discuss the evidence collectively and reach a consensus on scores that honestly reflect the institution's current situation. It is important that this discussion is open, respectful, and focused on improvement rather than blame. Scores that are either overly optimistic or unnecessarily harsh will diminish the value of the assessment and undermine trust in the process.

Step 4: Analyse the Results

Once all ten indicators have been scored, the team should review results holistically, looking for patterns, strengths, and development gaps. Particular attention should be paid to indicators with scores of 1 or 2, as these represent areas where learners are most likely currently experiencing barriers to full participation. High-scoring indicators can serve as models for best practice to be shared across the institution or within regional VET networks.

Step 5: Define Improvement Priorities

Based on the assessment results, the team should identify a set of specific priority actions. These should be realistic, achievable within the institution's resource constraints, and ranked by likely impact on learner experience. Each action should have a named lead, a target completion date, and a defined measure of success. Priorities might include updating an outdated inclusion policy; procuring new assistive technologies; launching a staff training programme; or developing a systematic approach to individual digital learning plans.

Step 6: Integrate Results into Institutional Planning

Finally, the findings and improvement priorities should be embedded in the institution's strategic development plan. This step is critical: without formal integration into planning processes, assessment results risk remaining as documents that are reviewed once and then forgotten. By incorporating inclusion as a standing agenda item in management meetings, a budgeted priority in annual plans, and a reported metric in institutional performance reviews, VET centres



ensure that their commitment to accessibility is sustained and continually strengthened.



6. Conclusions and Next Steps

The integration of digital assistive technologies is not merely a compliance requirement or an act of charitable provision — it is a fundamental dimension of educational quality and institutional excellence. VET centres that embed inclusive technology practices into their core operations do not simply serve a minority of learners better; they demonstrate the adaptability, innovation, and social responsibility that defines a Centre of Vocational Excellence.

One of the most important outcomes of the self-assessment process described in this booklet is the increased institutional awareness and collective ownership of inclusion as a shared responsibility. When leadership, educators, support staff, and learners engage together in an honest evaluation of how well the institution serves everyone, it creates a culture of transparency and shared purpose that is the essential foundation for meaningful change.

Based on the strategic framework and assessment methodology presented in this booklet, several practical next steps can support VET centres in strengthening their performance in digital assistive technologies and inclusive learning.

First, institutions should develop or update a comprehensive Digital Inclusion Strategy that covers all five dimensions outlined in this pillar. This strategy should be formally adopted at institutional leadership level, publicly available to learners and families, and reviewed on a regular cycle. A written strategy without active implementation has limited value, so its adoption should be accompanied by clear action plans and resource commitments.

Second, investing in educator training is among the highest-impact actions a VET centre can take. Many educators are willing to support learners with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions but feel uncertain about how to adapt their teaching or use assistive technologies effectively. Targeted professional development programmes, combined with peer learning and expert mentoring from specialists in inclusive pedagogy, can rapidly transform institutional practice.



Third, establishing systematic partnerships with inclusive employers is essential for ensuring that inclusive learning does not stop at the classroom door. VET centres should identify and cultivate relationships with employers who have demonstrated a genuine commitment to workplace accessibility, and should provide these employers with guidance and resources to support diverse learners effectively during work placements.

Fourth, institutions are strongly encouraged to move towards the co-creation of learning experiences with learners who have disabilities or neurodivergent conditions. Learner participation in the design of accessible content, the selection of assistive tools, and the evaluation of institutional performance creates a feedback loop that is more reliable and more transformative than any externally imposed quality standard.

Finally, establishing an annual KPI monitoring process — using the framework outlined in this booklet — allows VET centres to track improvements systematically, demonstrate progress to funders and stakeholders, and maintain the momentum of institutional transformation over the longer term. Inclusion is not a problem to be solved once; it is a commitment to be renewed continuously as learner needs, technologies, and labour market contexts evolve.

By taking these steps, VET centres across Europe can fulfil their potential as genuine Centres of Vocational Excellence — institutions that do not merely prepare learners for the jobs of today but actively shape a more inclusive, equitable, and innovative world of work for tomorrow.

