

NATIONAL REPORT - BULGARIA

WP1: Modelling Non-Discriminatory VET Education Strategy

ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

KA03 SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COMMON VALUES

THE CONTRIBUTION IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING – LOT 1

EqUal iNclusion of LGBTIQ stUdents in VET: “UNIQUE”

Project no. 621478-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN

Start date of the project: 15-01-2021

Duration: 24 Months

Project No: 621418-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN



PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Acronym	UNIQUE
Project Title	Equal Inclusion of LGBTIQ students in VET
Agreement Number	621478-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN
EU Programme	ERASMUS+ KA3 Support for Policy Reform
Project Website	https://uniqueproject.eu/

Authoring Partners	NAVETS
Date	October 2021
Version	Final
Approved by	Symplexis & AKMI S.A.
Dissemination Level	Public

Disclaimer

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
<i>The project</i>	5
Part A: Desk Research Results	7
<i>Existing Legal Framework for LGBTIQ rights</i>	7
<i>History of LGBTIQ movement in Bulgaria</i>	9
<i>LGBTIQ people in the VET sector</i>	11
<i>Good practices</i>	12
<i>Useful contacts</i>	13
Part B: Primary Research Results	15
<i>B1. Interviews with professionals/experts working in the field</i>	15
<i>B2. Summary Analysis of Focus Groups with VET trainees/learners</i>	19
<i>B3. Online Survey with VET students/learners and teachers/trainers</i>	21
Part C: Conclusions	31
References	32

Executive Summary

This report constitutes the findings from a research that was carried out in Bulgaria for the development of a non-discriminatory VET educational strategy that will promote gender equality and inclusion, challenging discrimination and human rights violations based on gender and gender identity, and other forms of exclusion. Specifically, the report summarizes the information that was collected through the conduction of field-specific literature review, focus groups and in-depth interviews regarding the level of discrimination encountered by LGBTIQ learners in the national VET environment. This way, it will contribute to the development of a training methodology for VET Teachers/Trainers which is expected to foster a more inclusive VET environment for the benefit of LGBTIQ students.

Introduction

The project

Discrimination against LGBTIQ people is a reality, even in countries where LGBTIQ individuals' civic rights are well established. Despite the progress that has been made and their legal recognition in all OECD countries, LGBTIQ people are still far from being offered equal opportunities in education, work or healthcare. They are stigmatized and frequently refused access to normal jobs. The study of the Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2019 on how comfortable the respondents would feel if one of their colleagues would be a transgender person, is revealing, with the EU average to be below 50%. ***The exclusion of LGBTIQ people from the professional field could be further spiralled by early school drop-out and low performance which is an imminent result of constant bullying and direct discrimination*** (2015, Overview of Youth Discrimination in the European Union).

Nevertheless, ***current educational structure is distant from being characterized as inclusive***. On the contrary, it seems to be lagging the social reality, particularly *in the VET sector, which, counter to the compulsory education, has been neglected*.

Taking those elements into consideration, our proposal aims at ***reversing the perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTIQ learners in VET education***. Classic educational material replicates the traditional gender norms, contributing, thus, to the perpetuation of the discrimination and stereotypes, even unintentionally or unconsciously. Besides, ***VET teachers are not trained or prepared to openly discuss*** in the classroom issues that are considered "sensitive" or *may be biased themselves*.

The objectives of UNIQUE could be summarized as follows:

- **O1: Provide a renewed skillset** to VET teachers
- **O2: Highlight the significance of diversifying manuals and educational materials**
- **O3: Introduce new training methods** which promote the active involvement of **VET teachers**
- **O4: Reduce school drop-out rates**
- **O5: Motivate LGBT people and provide a clear pathway towards employment**
- **O6: Set up effective monitoring mechanisms**
- **O7: Raise awareness on LGBTIQ issues**, combat stereotypes
- **O8: Promote equality, human rights and EU values**
- **O9: Support local economies with qualified workforce**

TARGET GROUPS

The UNIQUE project has a solid and coherent **multi-level approach** that is going to target both **individuals** (A) and **institutions** (B), ensuring that a useful transition from policy change to policy implementation is succeeded.

More specifically, the project strategy aims at engaging the following target groups:

Individuals

1. LGBTIQ People (i.e., VET students and communities)
2. VET teachers and Staff
3. Others (including): NGOs, Parents of LGBTIQ, employers, representatives of the educational or professional sector, trade unions etc.

Institutions

4. VET Providers
5. LGBTIQ organized communities and established institutions at European and national level
6. European and national authorities

EXPECTED RESULTS

- 1) A comprehensive methodology on how to develop gender diversity friendly curricula, avoiding stereotypes and discriminatory patterns
- 2) A Curriculum that will promote gender-based diversity for the benefit of LGBTIQ students
- 3) Introduction of UNIQUE Ambassadors in VET environment
- 4) Roll out of the methodology on the field by screening VET curricula

Part A: Desk Research Results

Existing Legal Framework for LGBTIQ rights

Since 1 January 2004, the Protection Against Discrimination Act of 2003 has prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, disability, age and sexual orientation in all areas (employment, social security, membership of professional organizations, and associations, the provision of goods and services, education, military service, health services, housing, etc.). Under the law, sexual orientation is defined as "heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual orientation". Nevertheless, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people continue to face discrimination and exclusion across all social areas in Bulgaria.

The Act Against Discrimination is a single equality act integrating the EU Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC). The Act bans discrimination unequivocally on any ground protected under international law or domestic legislation, including sexual orientation. The Act explicitly bans direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, incitement to discrimination and victimisation. However, transgender persons are not protected from discrimination based on gender, gender identity or gender expression, as the Bulgarian legislation does not differentiate "sex" from "gender".

There is little representative and reliable information about the situation of LGBTIQ persons in Bulgaria. The national census data does not include LGBTIQ people. There are no governmental researches and monitoring mechanisms in relation to LGBTIQ issues.

In general, the extensive anti-discrimination legislation is hindered by, among other things, police reluctance to report and prosecute cases of LGBTIQ violence. Besides, the society itself is not tolerant towards LGBTIQ people. In a nation-wide survey, more than two-thirds of the participants (68.3%) said they would not enrol their child in a school if they knew one of the teachers was homosexual, and 45.5% said that they would not hire a homosexual. Discrimination remains difficult to identify or address due to the general invisibility of LGBTIQ persons. (COWI, 2010 Bulgaria Sociological study). 46% would find it unacceptable if their child was homosexual (Sociological Agency Skala, 2007).

NGOs report discrimination and bullying at school against LGBTIQ people. According to the data, the Bulgarian educational curriculum is strictly gender biased, representing strong heteronormative and sexist role of the man and the woman, excluding LGBTIQ people. Their research also shows that 70% of the responding homosexual students drop out school or miss classes because of systematic harassment and 50% of them attempt suicide after such bullying in school. There is no evidence for follow-up or preventative measures taken by the Ministry

of Education and Science, nor other governmental agencies. There is a clear evidence of discrimination and bullying against LGBTIQ people in the educational system and it can be assumed that such homophobic environment leads to low education levels, lack of professional experience and social skills for the LGBTIQ people, which makes them vulnerable on the labour market. Additionally, there are no vocational training programmes developed by the government to tackle this issue, therefore there is no objective to raise LGBTIQ people's competitiveness and equal opportunities on the labour market.

For the above-mentioned reasons, recommendations have been made to the Bulgarian government to:

- Ensure that education is directed to the development of each student's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, and that it responds to the needs of students of all sexual orientations and gender identities;
- Ensure that education methods, curricula and resources serve to enhance understanding of and respect for, inter alia, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including the particular needs of students, their parents and family members related to these grounds;
- Take proactive and adequate measures to address homophobic and transphobic bullying and discrimination against LGBTIQ students and teachers.

With regards to the educational sector, the Ministry of Education established, in 2012, the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in the institutions of preschool and school education (Order of the Minister of Education, RD09-611/18.05.2012). This Mechanism was developed by an interdepartmental working group with representatives of the institutions and civil society, with the aim to protect the rights of all students and learners in education and training, against discrimination of any kind. The Mechanism is in line with some provisions of the Protection Against Discrimination Act:

“Art. 29. (2) The management of an educational institution shall take effective measures for the prevention of all forms of discrimination that take place in an educational place in the country and are exercised either by a person from the pedagogical or non-pedagogical personnel or by a student.

Art. 30. The head of the educational institution shall put in an accessible place the text of the law, as well as all the provisions of the internal school regulation that is in place regarding the protection from discrimination.

Art. 31. The head of an educational institution, having received a complaint of a student who considers himself/herself/themselves a subject of harassment by a person from the pedagogical or non-pedagogical personnel or by another student, shall be obliged to inquire the incident immediately and take measures for the termination of the harassment, as well as for imposing disciplinary liability.”

History of LGBTIQ movement in Bulgaria

The inception of the LGBTIQ rights movement in Bulgaria was in 1992 when the **Gemini Bulgarian Gay Association**, based in Sofia, was legally registered by an HIV-positive gay couple and became the main LGBTIQ organization in the country. Gemini launched the first Bulgarian gay radio broadcast in 2006. The show enjoyed widespread popularity and was aired live every Sunday. In October of the same year, Gemini hosted the International Lesbian and Gay Association’s annual European conference, after being elected by 221 representatives of national and European member organizations two years ago. The conference, focusing on European families, was attended by delegates of ILGA member organizations, as well as other human rights activists.

In 2006, the same organization hosted the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) European Conference in Sofia. The theme was "We Are Family - Our Families in Europe and the European Family". Later Gemini continued with several projects, focusing on enforcing the anti-discrimination law at schools and workplaces. It also organized the Pride event for Saturday, 28th of June, 2008. Shortly after, in 2009, Gemini discontinued its work and is currently non-operational.

Currently, there are several LGBTIQ rights organizations in Bulgaria:

Foundation Bilitis, established in 2004. In the first few years since its inception, Bilitis Resource Center was working primarily on the grassroots level with the purpose to contribute to the social inclusion of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender people. Typical activities of that period were the organization of self-support groups for lesbians and bisexual women, leadership camps, sports activities, and discussion clubs. Since 2005, Bilitis has become co-organizer of the annual LGBTIQ cultural festival at the Red House Center for Culture and Debate in Sofia, which exhibits art work of LGBTIQ artists, and increases the visibility of queer art in Bulgaria. Besides being a unique cultural event, the LGBTIQ festival also is a platform for voicing the opinions of LGBTIQ people on topics of interest to them, such as the media coverage of LGBTIQ issues, the same-sex registered partnerships, and incidents of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender expression. In 2009, in partnership with a wide informal

group of LGBTIQ activists, Bilitis co-organized the second annual LGBTIQ Pride event in Sofia, that was held on the 27th of June under the motto “Rainbow Friendship”. It is noteworthy that their participation in the preparation and carrying out of this event raised their confidence that about undertaking national-level advocacy work for LGBTIQ rights.

LGBT Youth Organization “Deystvie” – <https://en.deystvie.org/about-us>, is a non-profit human rights organization, formed in the beginning of 2010 and officially registered in May 2012. Its main purposes are to ensure and defend the rights of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people, fighting against homophobia, overcoming society’s disinformation regarding sexual orientation and gender identity and developing a confident young LGBT community in Bulgaria, <https://www.facebook.com/lgbtdeystvie>

GLAS / Gays and Lesbians Accepted in Society / – <https://glasfoundation.bg/en>, established in 2014, is a non-governmental organization which aims to deliver positive change for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Bulgaria, ensuring full equality and protection from all forms of discrimination. GLAS Foundation focuses on headline targets like positive representation of the LGBT community in the society, working with parents of gay people and holding public campaigns, combating homophobic hate crimes and promoting tolerance. <https://www.facebook.com/glasfoundation>

Single Step Foundation – <https://singlestep.bg/en>, founded in 2016. Its mission is to help LGBTI youth, their families, friends and allies in Bulgaria in the process of recognizing, coming out and affirming their sexual orientation and gender identity. It launched the first licensed online support chat in the country in October 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/singlestepbg>

LGBT Plovdiv – a small LGBT organization based in Plovdiv and its suburban region, <https://www.facebook.com/lgbt.plovdiv>

Pride Parades – <https://www.facebook.com/sofiaprideparade>, have been organized in Sofia in June every year, drawing more and more participants as well as the support of political parties, local businesses and embassies. In 2017, the parade was attended by more than 3,000 participants and was supported by 18 diplomatic missions. The Pride Week also included a film programme and an art festival. In 2019, around 6,000 attendees marched in the gay Pride Parade. This year’s event was supported by 25 diplomats and representatives of international organizations and foundations.

It should be emphasized that, despite LGBTIQ activism, in 2020 Bulgaria was ranked 37 of 49 European countries for LGBTIQ rights protection by ILGA-Europe. Like most countries in Central and Eastern Europe, post-Communist Bulgaria holds socially conservative attitudes when it comes to such matters as homosexuality.

LGBTIQ people in the VET sector

Although there is a lack of statistics and data regarding LGBTIQ people in the VET sector in Bulgaria and their treatment, the discrimination patterns against them are similar to those reported in other levels of education.

According to a survey of Sociological Agency Skala, 48.3% of the respondents felt insecure at school because of their sexual orientation and 31.2% felt insecure about the way they expressed their gender. The vast majority (82.9%) of LGBTIQ students reported that they were coming across insults by other students often or very often at school. In addition, more than half (57.4%) of the students reported that they had heard homophobic insinuations at least once by their teachers or other school staff. Students who reported hearing homophobic comments in school, were asked how often teachers or other school staff were present and, if so, how often they intervened. As much as 46.6% replied that the staff never intervened.

Participants in the survey were asked how often they were verbally bullied during the past year (e.g., insulted or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Most of them (70.6%) reported that they had been verbally harassed at some point based on any of these three characteristics. Regarding physical bullying, one third (34.2%) of LGBTIQ interviewees admitted they had been victims of abuse (e.g. being pushed) and 19.1% of them had been attacked because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. More than half of them (54%) never reported these incidents to the staff or shared these incidents with a member of their family (55%). It is also revealing that, in this study, 51,9% of the students who answered that they intended to emigrate declared that the main reason for their consideration was the discrimination they experienced based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The results of the report show that the school environment in Bulgaria tolerates homophobic behaviour and offensive language towards students, and cases of harassment are widespread. Simultaneously this trend is not yet perceived as a serious problem that needs attention from students, school staff and the family. Lack of attention to the problem contributes to the formation of a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ students, but also for every student

subject to hate speech. These are just a small part of the worrying trends that the study identified, and they show the presence of a hostile learning environment, which has a tangible negative impact on students in Bulgaria. As a result, those of them that are perceived as "different" or a minority, suffer verbal and physical harassment and even violence, which leads to an overall feeling of non-belonging at school, insecurity and deteriorating mental state.

Good practices

The above-mentioned LGBTIQ organizations in Bulgaria, focusing on protecting the rights of lesbians, bisexual women and transgender people, have implemented and are currently involved in various projects for combatting discrimination or raising awareness around LGBTIQ people's needs around the country. However, it should be noted that, even if there are projects which deal with inclusive education, none of them is exclusively focused on the VET sector.

For instance, Bilitis Foundation is implementing the *School's Out Project*: <https://schools.bilitis.org>, which aims to create a better school environment for LGBTIQ students by increasing the knowledge of teachers on including LGBTIQ topics in classes and on addressing the issue of school bullying. It deals with the challenges LGBTIQ and gender non-conforming students face at schools, by training teachers and guiding schools on how to implement LGBTIQ and gender inclusive policies.

Furthermore, the *Rainbow Hub* project <https://lgbti-center.bg/en> is executed by Bilitis Foundation, GLAS Foundation and LGBTI Youth Organization Deystvie and is being implemented with a financial support of 110 147€, funded by Iceland, Leichteinsten and Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism. Its overall aim is to increase the capacity and mobilize the LGBTIQ community by supporting 8 self-support groups at Rainbow Hub Community Center, to provide advocacy training and to support advocacy initiatives for each group. Its main activities are: conducting research on the needs of the LGBTIQ community representatives within the identified groups; providing 6-module training to members of the eight groups aimed at enhancing their advocacy skills and applying them in the implementation of real advocacy actions; disseminating information for the project and, especially, the advocacy activities and campaigns.

Another important initiative is the *Rainbow Over Hate* project <https://bilitis.org/portfolio/rainbow-over-hate>, funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, with the aim to increase the capacity of professionals working with victims of anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes. The project envisages an evaluation of the

implementation of the European Directive on the Rights of Victims of Crime (Directive 2012/29/EU) and the development of a document with recommendations for its transposition in view of the needs of LGBTIQ people in Bulgaria. At national level, the project also aims to raise awareness of the LGBTIQ community on the consequences of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes, and to generate support for changing the legislation on this type of crime.

The main goal of the *CHOICE* project: <https://bilitis.org/portfolio/choice>, funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, is to prevent and combat all forms of intolerance and discrimination at schools, as well as harassment and violence. The project envisages building a sustainable mechanism to support victims of bullying at school, as well as increasing the capacity of teachers and school authorities to prevent school violence by promoting tolerance. The initiative aims at promoting more inclusive school environments and combating intolerance on the grounds of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics in Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania. *CHOICE* is also based on the online platform LiveWithoutBullying (livewithoutbullying.com) that offers support from trained experts and peers to children and teenagers who are victims of bullying, as well as to parents and educators.

Last, we should make a reference to Single Step Foundation's licensed helpline and online support chat which was launched in October 2017, being the first such initiative to be introduced in the country: <https://singlestep.bg/en/>.

Useful contacts

A. Independent bodies and official authorities:

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria is the national human rights institution, which handles cases of discrimination, in addition to the normal range of its functions in relation to public mismanagement. The institution was created as the 'Citizen's Defender' in 1998 but the first Ombudsman was elected in April 2005. Since 3 September 2019 the office has been held by Ms Diana Kovacheva.

Address: 1202 Sofia, No 22, "George Washington" St.

Website: <https://www.ombudsman.bg>

E-mail: priemna@ombudsman.bg

The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) is an independent non-governmental organization for the protection of human rights, established in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1992. The objectives of the BHC

are to promote respect for the human rights of every individual, including children, women, LGBTI persons, asylum seekers, ethnic and religious minorities and people with intellectual and mental health disabilities; to stimulate legislative reform to bring Bulgarian legislation in line with international human rights standards; to trigger public debate on human rights issues; to carry out advocacy for the protection of human rights; and to popularize and make widely available human rights instruments.

Address: 1504 Sofia, No 7 “Varbitsa” St.

Website:

E-mail: bhc@bghelsinki.org

B. LGBTIQ Organizations

Foundation Bilitis

Websites: <https://bilitis.org/about-us/?lang=en>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/bilitisfoundation>

LGBT Youth Organization “Deystvie”

Website: <https://en.deystvie.org/about-us>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lgbtdeystvie>

GLAS

Website: <https://glasfoundation.bg/en>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/glasfoundation>

Single Step Foundation

Website: <https://singlestep.bg/en>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/singlestepbg>

LGBT Plovdiv

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lgbt.plovdiv>

Sofia Pride parade

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sofiaprideparade>

Bulgarian LGBT representative of the international LGBT community

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LGBT.bg/>

Part B: Primary Research Results

B1. Interviews with professionals/experts working in the field

To check the relevance of our findings from the Desk Research and enrich the data for the VET sector which is currently very limited, we interviewed 5 VET teachers who had been working in the sector for 8 to 12 years, and 2 experts in the field of LGBTIQ human rights and equality. Below, we have summarized the answers provided by the interviewees.

With regards to the definition of discrimination on the grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics and the description of respective examples, VET teachers said that this kind of discrimination is felt by children and young people at school who become victims of harassment due to the lack of acceptance of their difference in terms of appearance and gender expression. VET teachers also point out that LGBTIQ students often feel insecure at school because of their sexual orientation and due to an open homophobic attitude towards them exercised by their classmates and even teachers. Some typical examples are unwillingness to communicate with them, isolation of weaker boys who are not interested in sports or boyish things, rude attitude towards them, etc. On the other hand, the experts promoting LGBTIQ human rights and equality were adamant that discrimination against LGBTIQ students exists; the latter feel unsafe at school for a variety of reasons, for example for their sexual orientation, gender expression (i.e., how traditionally “masculine” or “feminine” they are in appearance or behaviour, which generates homophobic remarks such as “fag”, “faggot” or “homo”).

When asked to inform the interviewer if, according to their knowledge, these characteristics are protected under the national legal framework on discrimination in general and in the education and vocational training sector in particular and if they could provide some details, the VET teachers pointed to one of the key documents regulating school policies for providing support in cases of bullying and violence – the Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in the institutions of preschool and school education – Order of the Minister of Education (RD09-611/18.05.2012) which obliges every school to adopt such a mechanism and to draw up a plan for its implementation. The VET Teachers quoted articles 29, 30 and 31 from Protection Against Discrimination Act (01/2004), dedicated to the protection of students and learners in exercising their right of education and training. The above-mentioned articles from the same law have been quoted by the experts promoting LGBTIQ human rights and equality as well.

The next question was about the seriousness of anti-LGBTIQ discriminatory practices and incidents in the country's VET sector. The interviewees were asked if, according to their knowledge, personal experience and/or opinion, they believed this was a marginal or a widespread phenomenon.

The VET Teachers replied that anti-LGBTIQ discriminatory practices and incidents are very common, not only in the VET sector, but at schools in general and the society as a whole. On the one hand, this is a problem of society itself and it indicates its slow development and maturity on this topic. On the other hand, it is connected with the traditional culture and stereotypes imposed by family, society, the past and its cultural understanding of what is "right" and "wrong". They also underlined that an educational environment in which homophobic and biased language is prevalent, tolerated and is still not perceived as a problem that needs to be addressed by both students/learners and staff, is very common – a trend contributing to a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ students, but for any student outside of the accepted social norms. Most of the interviewed teachers said that a hostile environment is a widespread phenomenon that has a tangible negative impact on students, and only one said he had no observations.

According to the experts, the views on gender expression in Bulgaria are still very traditional and this fact is supported by the high trend of negative comments when a student does not look masculine or feminine enough, even on the part of school staff. Because gender expression is still a new concept in our society, it causes negative reactions more often than sexual orientation. Guys who may not be gay or trans, but who are not masculine enough according to traditional views, may fall victims to a hostile school atmosphere. Moreover, homophobic and offensive language is used, tolerated and not yet perceived as a problem that needs to be counteracted by learners and employees. This trend contributes to a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ learners, but also for anyone who goes beyond the standard social norms, either because of his/her appearance, weight or any other kind of difference. It is more likely to be a widespread phenomenon.

When asked why, to their opinion, such phenomena occur in the VET sector and which are the crucial factors, the VET teachers gave diverse answers. One of the respondents said that the topic had not been much discussed and had been even ignored, and believed that if more attention was paid to the prevention of this problem, there would be no such consequences. He pointed to crucial factors such as family environment, upbringing, stereotypes, prejudice,

and views imposed by more conservative-minded people. The opinion of another teacher is that such phenomena occur everywhere – at schools, in VET, at universities, workplace- and the crucial factor is connected with lack of support and understanding of LGBTIQ people in the process of self-awareness, discovery and affirmation of their sexual orientation and gender identity. According to one of the respondents, people are in a hurry to judge others without being well informed or are somehow afraid. At the same time, he believes that young people are much more open to anything new and that today's generation has a much broader horizon. Yet another view is that misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about biological differences, personal choices that people make, including attractiveness of the same sex and maybe physiology are some of the other reasons.

According to the experts promoting LGBTIQ human rights and equality, the crucial factors are that this problem concerns the whole society and that the environment massively tolerates homophobic behavior and offensive language towards LGBTIQ students and VET learners, while cases of harassment are widespread and this trend is not yet perceived as a serious problem that needs attention from students/VET learners, school staff and the family. They underlined that the lack of attention to the problem contributed to the formation of a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ students, but also for every student subject to hate speech.

The LGBTIQ experts referred to the survey which was conducted by the Sociological Agency Skala and proved that more than half of the young people and students intending to emigrate, they would do so because they were not well accepted by their classmates and the society due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The VET Teachers' opinion about the forms of the anti-LGBTIQ discriminatory practices or behaviours that usually take in the VET sector, is that society often imposes norms on how it is appropriate to express gender identity, and those who express themselves in a way that is considered atypical can be subject to criticism, harassment and sometimes violence and xenophobia. In VET specifically, discriminatory practices expressed through the use of offensive comments about someone who is not behaving "as a man" or "a woman" or through social distancing. In general, discrimination takes place when someone is not accepted due to the fact that he/she is attracted by the same sex. The interviewed experts gave similar examples of anti-LGBTIQ discriminatory practices and behaviours.

With regards to any central policies/strategies implemented by the government or state actors – both in Bulgaria and across the EU – that facilitate the access and equal participation of LGBTIQ people in the VET sector as well as the creation of a LGBTIQ safe and inclusive VET

environment or the interviewees' awareness about other bodies, institutions and organizations (e.g., civil society organizations) and any relevant good practices implemented by them, the VET teachers admitted that they were not aware of any other policies/strategies implemented by the Bulgarian government apart from the above-mentioned Mechanism for counteracting bullying and violence in the institutions of preschool and school education, introduced by an Order of the Minister of Education in 2012. They were also adamant that a monitoring mechanism needed to be in place in order to observe the applicability of the internal regulations, norms and etiquette of behaviour that should have been reinforced following the adoption of the Mechanism because only few teachers and students were familiar with them.

However, the experts share the opinion that students and young people are not familiar with school policies and this causes an attitude of aggression and bullying at school. The experts pointed out that LGBTIQ organizations collaborated in a mission to help LGBTIQ youth, their families, friends and allies in Bulgaria in the process of recognizing, coming out and affirming their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Recommendations and need assessment

During the last section of the interview, the interviewees were asked what they thought it should be done at central (state) level in order to facilitate the access and equal participation of LGBTIQ people in the VET sector and to promote LGBTIQ-inclusive and safe VET environments for learners/trainees as well as what VET organizations/schools can/should do on their behalf. VET teachers feel, in cases of conflict and violent incidents, especially when involving LGBTIQ students, unprepared to intervene; they also think that teachers and all school staff need to be informed about the consequences of tolerance of hate speech and should be assisted by a set of tools for dealing with such behaviours. They pointed out that more time should be devoted to this topic, and that society needs to mature, change and eradicate this kind of thinking and intolerant attitude to LGBTIQ people. According to one of the teachers, more severe penalties should be introduced in cases of harassment.

The opinion of experts is that school administrations have the full authority to create and communicate anti-bullying policies within their respective schools although this is not the case at present, and further efforts should be made in this direction. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should strengthen the existing framework and support towards school administrations in order the latter to apply the anti-bullying mechanism at school efficiently and help, this way, the most vulnerable students. They were confident that implementation of

anti-bullying and harassment school policy is the most logical answer to the troubling findings related to the high percentage of students reporting being victims of such incidents.

Last, the interviewees were asked to give their opinions on the development of relevant training materials and the organization of training activities targeting VET teachers/trainers as a useful and sufficient measure to tackle the phenomenon and which topics should be covered. All interviewed VET teachers concluded that this was a very good idea and that the development of relevant training materials would be very useful in tackling related problems.

B2. Summary Analysis of Focus Groups with VET trainees/learners

Profile of participants

Within the field research activities, NAVETS organized 2 focus groups with the following synthesis and characteristics:

- Focus Group 1 was organized on 28th June 2021 with 5 participants: 3 VET teachers, 1 VET learner and 1 LGBTIQ expert (psychologist).
- Focus Group 2 was organized on 30th June 2021 with 5 participants: 4 VET teachers and 1 LGBTIQ expert (psychologist).

The opinions of the participants in both focus groups were quite convergent. For example, all of them -except for the experts- answered negatively to Question 2 with regards to having heard or known of any person at their school who is openly LGBTIQ. On the other hand, the expert from the first focus group said he knew of a student who was openly LGBTIQ but clarified that the environment in his school was tolerant towards LGBTIQ people.

2 VET teachers shared the opinion that it would be difficult to have a tolerant environment at their school because the teachers are very conservative and reject free behaviour of students. 1 VET teacher said that in her school they plan to launch a training course for the prevention of discrimination.

Only the expert has witnessed cases of abuse and mistreatment of LGBTIQ students. For instance, he described an incident where classmates abused a girl who had cut her long hair into a short haircut like a boy, and a boy who came to school after summer holidays having long hair and bearing earrings. Nevertheless, the psychologist is of the opinion that this is accidental and not common.

Recommendations

The respondents were not aware of existing measures or practices implemented in VET institutions in order to promote an inclusive and open to diversity based on SOGIESC environment. It's important for schools to be inclusive and host safe spaces for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

What can be done to improve the situation? Schools play an important role in the dissemination of norms and values that regulate the acceptance of diversity and non-discrimination in society. Making schools more inclusive and free from discrimination, prejudice and harassment of different minority groups requires a multi-level approach, i.e. simultaneous changes in curricula, school climate, establishment of school support structures that work with both victims and perpetrators, teacher and administrator training, partnerships between schools, families and the community, and leadership in collaboration with other organizations (e.g. LGBTIQ + NGOs).

Preventing bullying at school requires a norm-critical approach that addresses the prejudices, stereotypes and power dynamics that lead to bullying, harassment and even physical violence against some students. The victims of anti-LGBTIQ harassment should not be viewed in isolation from other different individuals and groups because they often belong to other socially vulnerable (or often discriminated against) groups – namely Roma, people with disabilities and members of national and/or religious minorities.

Strategies do not always have to be specific to LGBTIQ in order to be successful. Some broad general approaches that apply to all students can help address the many needs of LGBTIQ people. School internal regulations (school policies) play a significant role in regulating undesirable behaviour if they are developed in accordance with national anti-discrimination policies, taking into account the needs of vulnerable groups, and if implemented systematically. It is recommended that explicit aspects of vulnerability be mentioned in school policy documents, as this will help raise awareness of these aspects among students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Defenders of LGBTIQ rights can be a valuable resource for disseminating information about the real needs of LGBTIQ students, and their professional development. Therefore, cooperation between schools and NGOs that support a human rights-oriented approach to education must be encouraged and maintained.

Teachers, coaches and school administrators who are openly LGBTIQ can also play a central and very positive role in this regard. School workplace policies must ensure a safe environment for the detection and non-discrimination of LGBTIQ teachers and staff.

Speaking openly and without shame on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and gender characteristics is important for creating a school environment that includes LGBTIQ staff and students. Even when there is not enough space for these issues in the curriculum, the teachers and the administration should be able to discuss the topic openly, politely, respectfully and professionally and in all possible situations. Schools need to create safe spaces to introduce the topic of LGBTIQ identities in an age-appropriate way. Discussions on this topic should be led by well-trained teachers or external consultants. Cooperation with LGBTIQ organizations and other experts in the field is strongly recommended.

All school staff members should be instructed on how to recognize hate speech and how to respond appropriately in such cases, as well as how to encourage students' intolerance to hate speech. Hate speech prevention is very important in preventing other forms of bullying at school. Hate speech refers (by most definitions) to speech that can encourage or incite violence.

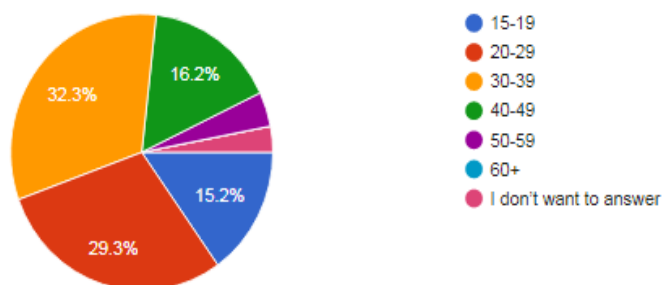
B3. Online Survey with VET students/learners and teachers/trainers

The survey was conducted in the cities of Sofia, Pernik and Gabrovo, among 96 participants from 3 VET schools and 4 VET providers, including 48 students and 48 teachers/trainers.

Social/demographic data

1. Age group.

99 responses



1. Age group

As it can be seen in the chart the age group includes almost all groups (except 60+)

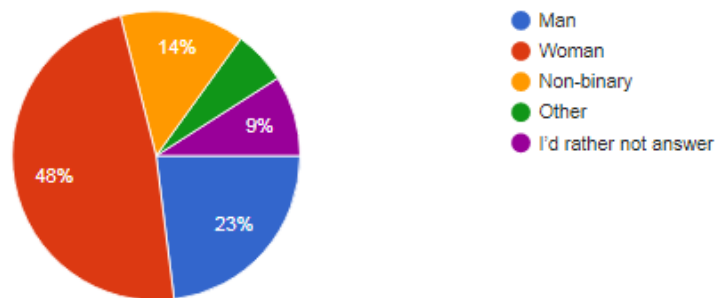
- a) 15-19 are 15,2% of all responses.

- b) 20-29 are 29,3% of all responses.
- c) 30-39 are 32,3%, which makes them the biggest group.
- d) 40-49 are 16,2% of all responses.

Most of the participants in the online survey were from the 30-39 age group (32.3%) and the 20-29 age group (29.3%).

2. Gender identity.

100 responses



2. Gender identity.

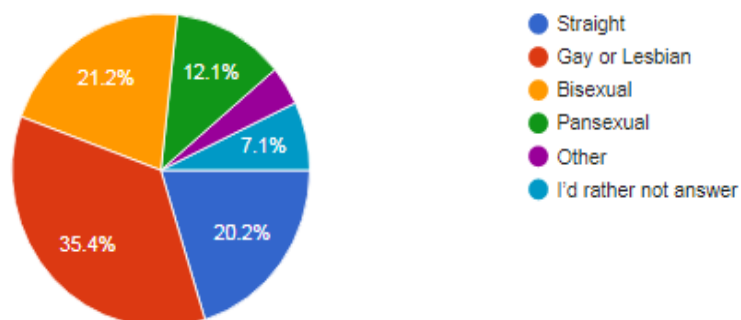
Regarding the gender identity the situation is as follows:

- a) Man – 23%
- b) Woman – 48% the biggest group.
- c) Non-binary – 14%
- d) Other – 6%
- e) I'd rather not answer – 9%

Most of the respondents identified themselves as women (48%), and 23% – as men.

3. Sexual orientation.

99 responses



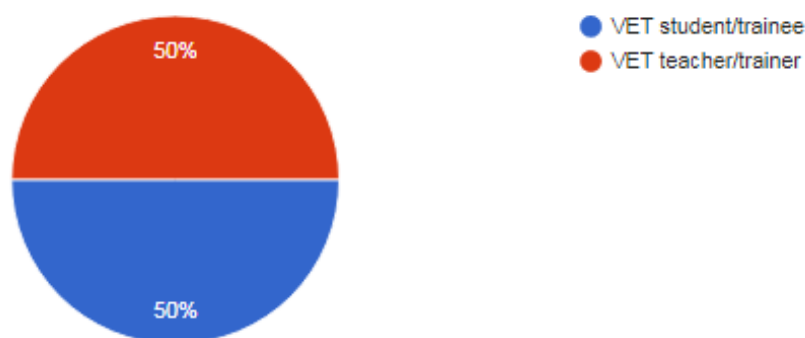
3. Sexual orientation.

- a) Straight – 20,2%
- b) Gay or Lesbian – 35,4% - the biggest group of all representatives
- c) Bisexual -21,2% - second big group
- d) Pansexual – 12,1%
- e) Other -4%
- f) I'd rather not answer -7,1%

Almost the same percentage – around 20% of the interviewees were straight and bisexual.

4. Position/role.

96 responses



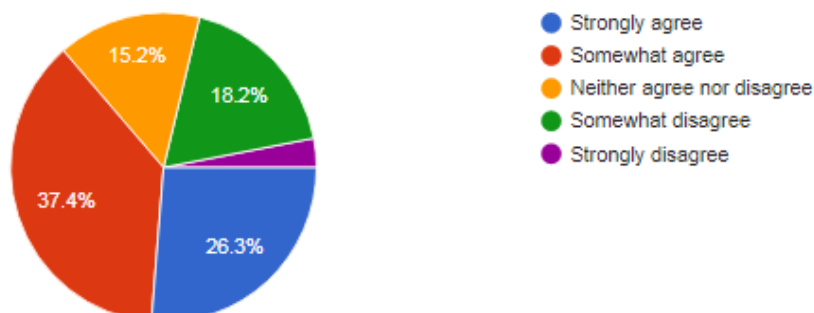
4. Position/role.

- a) VET student/trainee – 50%
- b) VET teacher/trainer – 50%

Same number of interviewed people were students and trainers.

5. LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET environments (in the country).

99 responses



LGBTIQ students/trainees in VET environments

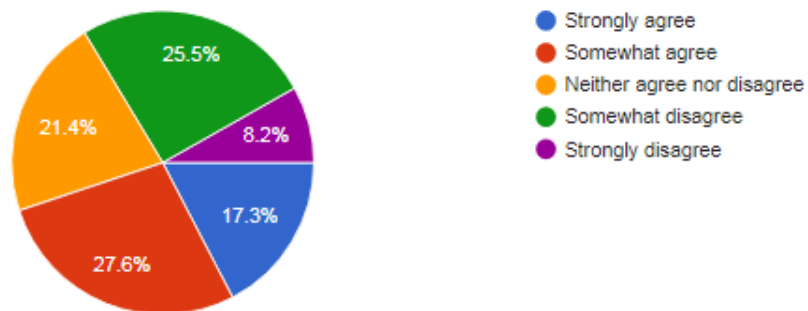
5. LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET environments (in the country).

- a) Strongly agree – 26,3% (second big group)
- b) Somewhat agree - 37,4% (biggest group)
- c) Neither agree nor disagree – 15,2%
- d) Somewhat disagree – 18,2%
- e) Strongly disagree – 4%

The majority of respondents agreed, strongly or somewhat, that LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET institutions.

6. A VET student/trainee can be openly LGBTIQ in a VET environment (in the country).

98 responses



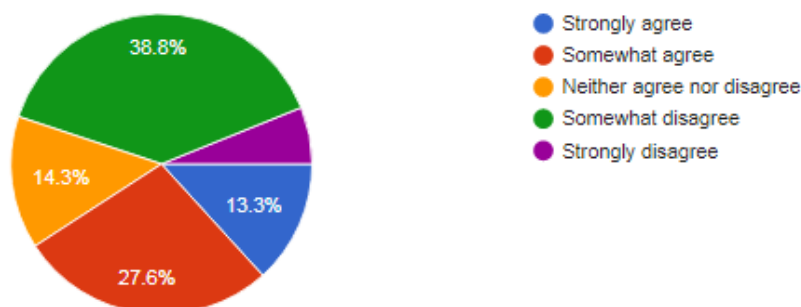
6. A VET student/trainee can be openly LGBTIQ in a VET environment (in the country).

- a) Strongly agree – 17,3%
- b) Somewhat agree – 27,6% (biggest group)
- c) Neither agree nor disagree – 21,4%
- d) Somewhat disagree – 25,5% (second big group)
- e) Strongly disagree – 8,2%

About 45% agreed, strongly or somewhat, that a VET student can be openly LGBTIQ in a VET environment. This percentage is considerably lower than that of the majority of the results regarding the acceptance of LGBTIQ people in VET institutions.

7. VET environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students/trainees (in the country).

98 responses



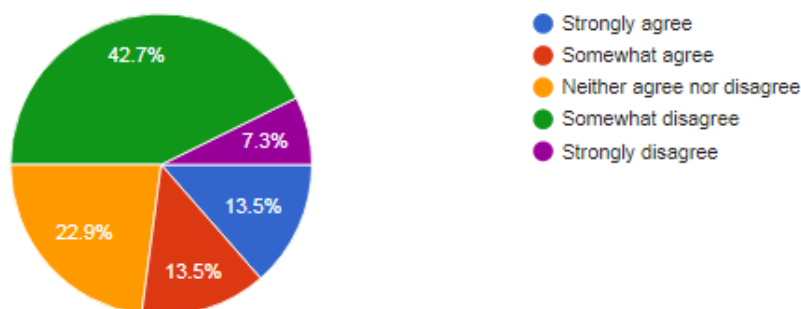
7. VET environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students/trainees (in the country).

- a) Strongly agree - 13,3%
- b) Somewhat agree – 27,6% (second big group)
- c) Neither agree nor disagree- 14,3%
- d) Somewhat disagree – 38,8% (biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree - 7%

The answers to this question are somewhat contradictory because approximately 41% of the respondents agreed that VET environments in the country are safe and inclusive. At the same time 45% disagreed, somewhat or strongly with this statement.

8. Trainees/students are often harassed, bullied and/or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ in VET environments (in the country).

96 responses



8. Trainees/students are often harassed, bullied and/or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ in VET environments (in the country).

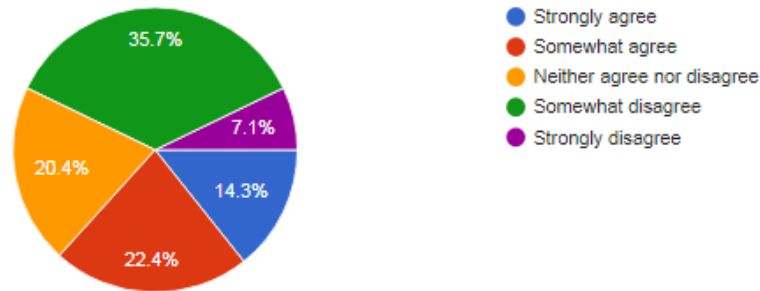
- a) Strongly agree -13,5%
- b) Somewhat agree - 13,5%
- c) Neither agree nor disagree - 22,9% (second big group)

- d) Somewhat disagree – 42,7% (biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree – 7,3%

Half of the respondents (50%) disagree with the above statement which is consistent with the answers to the previous question about the safety of LBGTIQ students in VET establishments.

9. VET teachers/trainers usually have the proper skills to effectively handle cases of bullying, harassment and/or discrimination against LGBTIQ students/trainees and support the victims.

98 responses



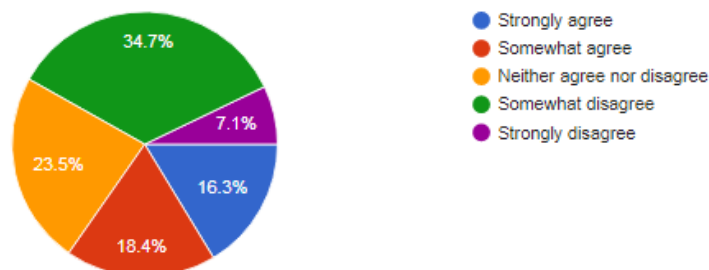
9. VET teachers/trainers usually have the proper skills to effectively handle cases of bullying, harassment and/or discrimination against LGBTIQ students/trainees and support the victims.

- a) Strongly agree – 14,3%
- b) Somewhat agree – 22,4% (second big group)
- c) Neither agree nor disagree – 20,4%
- d) Somewhat disagree – 35,7% (biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree – 7,1%

Nearly 43% of the interviewees responded negatively to the statement that VET teachers/trainers have proper skills to effectively handle cases of discrimination or violence regarding LGBTIQ students and to support the victims in such cases.

10. People who (possibly) bully, harass and or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students/trainees in a VET environment, are usually other VET students/trainees.

98 responses



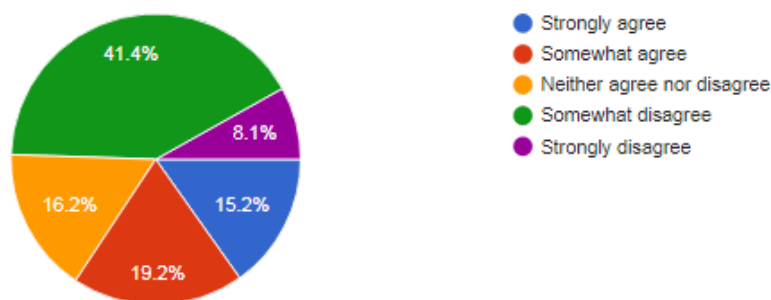
10. People who (possibly) bully, harass and or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students/trainees in a VET environment, are **usually** other VET students/trainees.

- a) Strongly agree - 16,3%
- b) Somewhat agree -18,4%
- c) Neither agree nor disagree - 23,5% (second big group)
- d) Somewhat disagree – 34,7% (Biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree - 7,1%

Some 35% of the participants agreed with the above statement while nearly 42% disagreed.

11. People who (possibly) bully, harass and or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students/trainees in a VET environment, are usually VET professional staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.).

99 responses



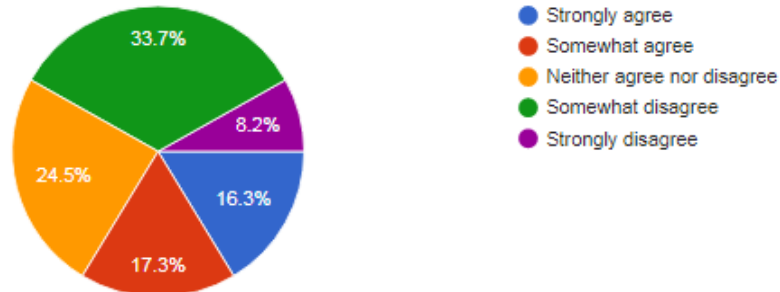
11. People who (possibly) bully, harass and or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students/trainees in a VET environment, are **usually** VET professional staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.).

- a) Strongly agree – 15,2%
- b) Somewhat agree – 19,2% (Second big group)
- c) Neither agree nor disagree – 16,2%
- d) Somewhat disagree - 41,4% (Biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree - 8,1%

Notably, half of the respondents disagreed with the statement that such a behaviour may originate from VET professional staff.

12. Measures preventing and combatting bullying, harassment against and/or discrimination against LGBTIQ students/trainees should be taken in VET environments.

98 responses



12. Measures preventing and combatting bullying, harassment against and/or discrimination against LGBTIQ students/trainees should be taken in VET environments.

- a) Strongly agree -16,3%
- b) Somewhat agree – 17,3%
- c) Neither agree nor disagree -24,5% (Second big group)
- d) Somewhat disagree – 33,7% (Biggest group)
- e) Strongly disagree – 8,6%

About one third of the respondents shared the opinion that such measures are needed and should be adopted, while as much as 42% do not believe such measures would be necessary.

13. For VET teachers/trainers only:

After students have completed their training, they may have to provide LGBTIQ clients with their services. Which of the following answers represents the way you think this should be dealt with in your VET courses?

3 responses



13. For VET teachers/trainers only:

After students have completed their training, they may have to provide LGBTIQ clients with their services. Which of the following answers represents the way you think this should be dealt with in your VET courses?

- a) I refuse to discuss LGBTIQ issues in my courses
- b) I prefer not to discuss LGBTIQ issues in my courses – 33,3%
- c) I will provide neutral information on LGBTIQ issues in my courses– 33,3%
- d) I will be generally positive towards LGBTIQ issues in my courses– 33,3%
- e) I will urge the students to take the specific needs of LGBTIQ persons into account

Equal answers to b), c) and d) – 33,3%

For VET students/trainees only:

After having completed your training, you may have to provide LGBTIQ clients with your services. Which of the following answers better represents the way you are going to deal with them?

98 responses



14. For VET students/trainees only:

After having completed your training, you may have to provide LGBTIQ clients with your services.

Which of the following answers better represents the way you are going to deal with them?

- a) I will refuse to provide my services to them – 8,2%
- b) I will prefer not to provide my services to them – 11,2%
- c) I will provide my services to them while being distant – 36,7% (Biggest group)
- d) I will be friendly/professional but not interested to their needs as LGBTIQ persons despite the fact that these needs may be linked to the services provided – 27,6% (Second biggest group)
- e) I will be friendly/professional and take their needs as LGBTIQ persons into account - 16,3%



More than one third of the students (36.7%) said they would provide their services to LGBTIQ persons while being distant, followed by 27.6% that will be friendly and professional but not interested in their needs. Notably, only 16,3% would take the needs of LGBTIQ persons into account, while 11.2% would prefer not to, and 8.2% would refuse to provide their services to LGBTIQ persons.

Part C: Conclusions

The results of the research (the desk research and the online survey, focus groups and interviews) show that the school environment in Bulgaria massively tolerates homophobic behaviour and offensive language towards students, and cases of harassment are widespread. Simultaneously, this trend is not yet perceived as a serious problem that needs attention from students, school staff and the families. Lack of attention to the problem contributes to the formation of a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ students but also for every student subject to hate speech. These are just a small part of the worrying trends that the study has identified, and they show the presence of a hostile learning environment, which has a tangible negative impact on students in Bulgaria. As a result, those of them that are perceived as "different" or a minority, suffer verbal and physical harassment and even violence, which leads to an overall feeling of non-belonging at school, insecurity and deteriorating mental state.

In order to facilitate the access and equal participation of LGBTIQ people in the VET sector and to promote LGBTIQ-inclusive and safe VET environments for learners/trainees, VET organizations/schools need to be adequately informed and prepared to intervene. School administrations have the full authority to create and communicate anti-bullying policies within their respective schools. Currently, this is not the case and further efforts should be made in this direction. As there is an overall Mechanism in regulation, we urge the Ministry of Education to strengthen the existing framework and support school administrations to apply it efficiently. This will help school staff effectively address reports of harassment and assault by students and will help nurture the trust of the most vulnerable students in the school authorities. Development of relevant training materials and organization of training activities targeting VET teachers/trainers would be a useful and sufficient measure to tackle the phenomenon. Last but not least, it would be useful to hold training courses for teachers and students and parents for tolerance, health, sexual issues, etc.

References

- BULGARIA: The Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights*
Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council for its Universal Periodic Review of Bulgaria (9th Session) Available at:
https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/bulgaria/session_9_-_november_2010/lgbtlesbiangaybisexualtransexualassociation.pdf
- Council of Europe (2018). *Safe at school: Education sector responses to violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity/ expression or sex characteristics in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/prems-125718-gbr-2575-safe-at-school-a4-web/16809024f5>
- European Commission. (2019). *Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2019: The social acceptance of LGBTI people in the EU*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/eurobarometer-social-acceptance-lgbtqi-people-eu-2019_en
- FRA - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2020a). *EU LGBTI Survey II - A long way to go for LGBTI equality*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-lgbti-equality-1_en.pdf
- IGLYO - The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation. (2018). *LGBTQI inclusive education report (preview)*. Brussels: IGLYO - The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation. Available at: <https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/lgbtqi-inclusive-education-report-preview>
- ILGA-Europe. (2021). *Rainbow Europe 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2021>
- Single Step Foundation & Bilitis Resource Center Foundation. (2020). *Attitudes Towards LGBTI Students in Bulgarian Schools*. Available at: https://singlestep.bg/wp-content/uploads/LGBTI_students_survey.pdf