

TRANSNATIONAL BENCHMARKING REPORT

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”

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Executive summary

The present Transnational Benchmarking Report was developed within the framework of the project “Unique – Equal Inclusion of LGBTIQ students in VET”, a two-year project implemented with the financial support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The UNIQUE project aims at reversing the perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTIQ learners in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector by introducing innovative, inclusive, and gender-sensitive training materials for VET teachers and trainers, as well as educating them in safeguarding and promoting a non-discriminatory classroom environment.

The current report presents a comparative analysis of the data collected through the primary and secondary research activities performed within the framework of the project in Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Poland. Through the comparative analysis of the national findings, the present report aims at identifying discrimination patterns and norms in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and providing a comparative framework for the development and implementation of training and capacity building activities of the project.

The responses of a total number of 333 VET students and 160 VET teachers that completed an online survey across all participating countries were analyzed. In addition, further insights were gathered through the focus groups and interviews that were performed with the participation of 50 individuals, including VET students and teachers, as well as LGBTIQ experts, in the five target countries.

A general conclusion drawn from the review of the relevant literature and the findings of the field research results presented is that, despite the important steps in recent years, discrimination against LGBTIQ people in various forms remains quite relevant in the VET sector. Notably, more than 50% of students and 40% of the teachers participating in the survey agreed, at least to a certain extent, that VET students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ.

Even though diverse rates and perceptions were in some cases expressed in the five target countries, similar issues and areas of need appear to emerge in all countries. Importantly, the most common patterns of discrimination, harassment, and bullying against LGBTIQ people in VET across all countries seem to take similar forms in terms of both nature and intensity. These include various forms of verbal abuse, ranging from offensive comments and mockery to verbal attacks, social exclusion and isolation, and more rare cases of physical attacks.



Finally, through the analysis of the relevant findings, two main areas that could be targeted through the development of relevant training materials and the capacity building activities for VET teachers appear to emerge. The first relates to knowledge-based and awareness raising training, in terms of understanding key terms and concepts but also increasing sensitivity and awareness regarding the existing situation and the issues that LGBTIQ people face. The second concerns the development of skills and capacity building, focusing primarily on more practical aspects, such as ways to approach these issues and directly dealing with incidents of discrimination or harassment.

Introduction

The project

The UNIQUE project aims at reversing the perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTIQ learners in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector by introducing innovative, inclusive, and gender-sensitive training materials for VET teachers and trainers, as well as educating them in safeguarding and promoting a non-discriminatory classroom environment.

Over the course of the project, the partnership will conduct a detailed mapping of the discriminatory norms and patterns met in VET Education in order to design a modern Training Curriculum for VET teachers and trainers. In addition, Ambassadors will be trained and appointed to diffuse the new training strategy through peer learning activities within their VET Providers at European level. The new curriculum developed by the project will be piloted in the participating countries to test its efficacy and relevance to the actual needs.

Within this framework, the UNIQUE project aims to:

- Introduce a “gender-sensitive” approach in order to reduce early school leaving among LGBTIQ students.
- Develop a mechanism that will detect existing discriminatory patterns in the VET sector.
- Design curricula/courses specifically addressed to VET teachers which will challenge discriminatory patterns and will favor gender diversity.
- Prepare an e-portfolio of relevant educational materials which will be up-to-date, inclusive, and aligned with social reality.
- Introduce Ambassadors to train VET teachers.
- Spread the developed methodologies in the formal VET system.

The project started on the 15th of January 2021 and will be completed after two years. The partnership, led by AKMI S.A., consists of 9 organizations from Greece, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, and Germany.

Overview and scope of the present report

The present report was developed under the scope of Work Package 1 (WP1) of the Unique project, entitled “Modeling Non-Discriminatory VET Educational Strategy”. The overall aim of this WP is to map the current situation regarding the existing forms of discrimination and stereotypes against LGBTIQ students in the VET educational sector. Within this context, the

current report seeks to provide a comprehensive methodological framework and evidence base to guide the design of the next activities of the project. In particular, based on the findings and conclusions of the present report, a methodological framework in the form of Manual on how to develop gender diversity friendly curricula, avoiding stereotypes and discriminatory patterns will be developed. The present Transnational Benchmarking Report and the Manual will be subsequently used to inform for the development of the Unique Training Curricula and Materials that will be piloted in the next phases of the project.

Methodological framework

For purposes of the primary and secondary research, a detailed methodological framework including research guidelines and tools was developed by Symplexis, as the WP leader, to ensure a common methodology for the activities undertaken by the partners in the target countries, namely: AKMI in Greece, KES College in Cyprus, NAVETS in Bulgaria, ALGEBRA in Croatia, and Internationaler Bund Polska in Poland.

Pursuant to the methodological framework, the main research objectives were:

- ▶ To detect the existing forms of discrimination and stereotypes in vocational education, as well as to scrutinize EU strategies at international and national level, and good practices against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics in VET institutions.
- ▶ To perceive discriminatory behaviors based on gender diversity against students and teachers in the vocational education sector, reflecting their personal aspirations, experiences, and examples from their daily life.

To that end, desk and field research, including an online survey, interviews, and focus groups with the participation of VET teachers and students, as well as LGBTIQ experts, was undertaken by the partnership. The results were subsequently analyzed and presented into National Reports, detailing the findings and national context in the target countries.

The current report seeks to compile some of the key findings of the National Reports into a Transnational Report, comparing the situation across the participating countries and identifying discrimination patterns and norms on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in the VET sector. The responses of a total number of 333 VET students and 160 VET teachers that completed the online survey across all participating countries were analyzed. In addition, further insights were gathered

through the focus groups and interviews that were performed with the participation of 50 participants, including students, teachers, and LGBTIQ experts.

Contents of the report

The first part of the present report presents a brief overview of some of the key findings of desk research performed by the partners in Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Poland. Given the limited available literature on discrimination against LGBTIQ students in the VET sector specifically, only a summary of the main findings of the desk research is presented in order to provide some context for the subsequent analysis of the field research results. More detailed information – including aspects pertinent to legislation as well as good practices and useful contacts on a national level – can be found at the respective National Reports.

The next and main section of the current report presents the VET students’ and teachers’ perceptions, as well as the views of the LGBTIQ experts, as those were gathered through the online survey and the interviews and focus groups performed by the partnership. The final section outlines the main conclusions of the report, seeking through the comparative study of the findings to identify the main discriminatory patterns in the VET sector and provide relevant recommendations for the development of training curricula and materials.

1. The national context at a glance: Facts and figures

Research across the EU indicates that although perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTIQ people in many Member States have been changing over the past decade (European Commission, 2019), the progress remains limited (FRA, 2020a). Even though more people are open about being LGBTIQ, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) remains quite prevalent (FRA, 2020a).

With the exception of a few studies on national level, there is lack of data and specialized research on the experiences of LGBTIQ students or teachers in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector across the EU. Large scale surveys, such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights’ (FRA) 2020 report and the European Commission’s 2019 Eurobarometer report, do, however, provide important information regarding the existing situation and especially the educational sector across the member states.

Overall, when the data available for the target countries of the present report – namely Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Poland – are considered, a clear trend is observed. Notably, all countries rank in the middle or lower groups of ILGA-Europe’s 2021 Rainbow

Europe Map and Index on the legal and policy situation of LGBTI people in 49 European countries. Greece is placed in the 18th position, followed by Croatia in the 19th place, Cyprus in the 29th, Bulgaria in the 37th, and Poland in the 43rd place out of the 49 countries.

To that end, as Table 1 below illustrates, the countries' scores in the FRA (2020b) survey on aspects such as openness about being LGBTI is around or well below the EU-28 average. Indicatively, in Bulgaria only 4% and 8.6% of the respondents are open about being LGBTI at school and at work, respectively, while 65.1% hide their LGBT identity at school and 48.1% hide it at work. Similar results are observed in Croatia and Poland for people's openness in school, while in Greece and Cyprus more than 70% completely hide their identity.

Table 1. Openness about being LGBTI

		Very open	Selectively open	Hide LGBT identity
At school	Bulgaria	4.0%	30.8%	65.1%
	Croatia	3.5%	33.5%	63.0%
	Cyprus	1.9%	27.5%	70.6%
	Greece	1.8%	22.2%	76.0%
	Poland	3.9%	37.0%	59.1%
	EU-28	5.0%	38.0%	57.0%
At work	Bulgaria	8.6%	43.3%	48.1%
	Croatia	9.2%	50.2%	40.6%
	Cyprus	9.0%	52.9%	38.2%
	Greece	8.3%	49.2%	42.5%
	Poland	10.1%	54.4%	35.5%
	EU-28	4.9%	37.7%	57.4%

Source: FRA, 2020b, LGBTI Survey Data Explorer.

The prevalence of discrimination, harassment, and bullying at school against LGBTI persons also appears to be rather high, even though the vast majority reportedly hides their identity at school. Table 2 below presents figures retrieved from the FRA (2020b) LGBTI Survey Data Explorer regarding experiences of discrimination and harassment due to being LGBTI during the past 12 months, as well as experiences of bullying at school (e.g., being ridiculed, teased, insulted, or threatened). The rate of discrimination ranges between 40% and 50% in all countries, equal or above of the EU-28 average. High levels of harassment were also observed in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Poland, reaching figures around 40%. Notably, more than half of the respondents in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Greece have also been bullied at school, while the respective rate in Poland was 38.8%.

Table 2. Experiences of discrimination or harassment in the past 12 months and experiences of bullying at school due to being LGBTI

	Discrimination		Harassment		Bullying at school	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Bulgaria	52.0%	48.0%	39.5%	60.5%	51.3%	48.7%
Croatia	42.8%	57.2%	38.2%	61.8%	51.5%	48.5%
Cyprus	49.4%	50.6%	28.9%	71.1%	51.8%	48.2%
Greece	51.5%	48.5%	33.1%	66.9%	55.2%	44.8%
Poland	47.2%	52.8%	42.0%	58.0%	38.8%	61.2%
EU-28	42.0%	58.0%	37.9%	62.1%	46.4%	53.6%

Source: FRA, 2020b, LGBTI Survey Data Explorer.

Similarly, according to the same source (FRA, 2020b), negative comments or conduct at school because someone is or is perceived to be LGBTI appear to be quite prevalent, as Table 3 below also illustrates. Approximately 50% of the respondents had heard or seen such behaviors often and 20% responded that these incidents always happened. The respective rates for always or often experiencing negative comments or conduct at school due to being LGBTI were slightly lower in Poland, around 10% and 30%, respectively.

However, a national survey conducted in **Poland** in 2015-2016 (Świder and Winiewski, 2017), showed that the most common place where the 2.666 young LGBT persons (aged 13-19) participating in study have experienced a violent attack (including physical, verbal, sexual, or other form of harassment) in the last two years, was school. Verbal aggression and taunts were the most often expression of violence, followed by spreading negative opinions about them, insults, humiliation, and constant negative comments. Notably 72% of LGBT youth felt like they had, at least in some situations, to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation at school.

Relatedly, a national survey in **Bulgaria** by the Single Step Foundation and the Bilitis Resource Center Foundation (2020) with 880 participants aged 14 to 19 years showed that 82.9% of the LGBTI students have often or frequently heard homophobic remarks (such as “fag”, “faggot” or “homo”) in school. More than half (57.4%) also reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or other school staff on one of more occasions. According to the same study, 70.6% had been verbally harassed and 34.2% physically harassed (e.g., shoved or pushed) at school during the past academic year, and 19.1% were assaulted at school due to their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender. When the participants were asked about the school staff’s responses when they reported the incident, the most frequent reactions were

responses prompting to ignore the incident (53.1%), the staff talking to the perpetrator (44.1%), and the staff doing nothing (28.6%).

Likewise, 84,9% of the participants in the first national survey conducted in **Greece** (Iliopoulou et al., 2020) on school climate responded that they have heard the word “gay” in association with negative connotations, and more than half of them (58.1%) had heard their teachers/trainers making homophobic comments. The study collected the views and experiences of 1.963 secondary school students (including learners of initial VET schools) between 13 to 20 years old who self-identify as non-heterosexual/cisgender. In addition, 34.3% of the participants responded that it was not likely that their teachers/trainers would intervene in such incidents. Even when they did, their responses were limited to verbal warnings and less often to disciplinary actions, unless there was a serious case of physical assault.

Table 3. Negative comments or conduct at school

Heard or seen negative comments or conduct at school because a schoolmate/peer was perceived to be LGBTI				
	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Bulgaria	22.8%	47.4%	21.9%	7.8%
Croatia	18.4%	49.7%	24.2%	7.7%
Cyprus	26.5%	55.0%	14.9%	3.7%
Greece	22.6%	57.5%	15.2%	4.8%
Poland	12.0%	52.6%	26.1%	9.2%
EU-28	16.4%	49.1%	25.1%	9.4%
Experienced negative comments / conduct at school due to being LGBTI				
	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Bulgaria	11.1%	27.3%	30.3%	31.4%
Croatia	8.7%	29.1%	34.6%	27.6%
Cyprus	11.4%	32.8%	29.1%	26.6%
Greece	11.3%	35.8%	28.2%	24.7%
Poland	5.7%	25.4%	32.8%	36.1%
EU-28	9.7%	28.1%	31.5%	30.7%

Source: FRA, 2020b, LGBTI Survey Data Explorer.

In **Croatia**, a large-scale study on the political literacy of high school graduate students with the participation of 1.122 students from gymnasias (30%) and VET schools (70%) was published in 2021 (Baketa et al. 2021). The results showed a significant shift towards a more tolerant attitude towards the LGBTIQ population when compared to the same survey performed a few years earlier (see Bagić and Gvozdanović, 2015). Nonetheless, one-third of the participants

still believe that homosexuality is a disorder or disease and almost 50% believe that homosexual individuals have the right to do whatever they want privately but should not express their sexual orientation in public. Importantly, the research also showed that students in gymnasias have more positive attitudes than students in the VET sector.

An analogous situation was also observed in the findings of the 2019 European Commission’s report for **Cyprus** where rather high rates of discrimination and lack of tolerance against LGBTIQ people were observed. Recent national research has also shown that teachers have not been successfully engaging in positive discourse surrounding gender and sexual identity in class (Evripidou and Çavuşoğlu, 2015; Evripidou, 2018). LGBTIQ related topics seem not to have a place in school classes as attempts to approach such issues were often met with verbal harassment or teachers’ neglect (Evripidou, 2020).

To that end, according to the FRA (2020b) report, addressing LGBTI issues at school, especially in a positive way, appears to be rather rare in all target countries (see also Table 4 below). In Bulgaria, only 2.7% reported that such issues are addressed in a positive way, while 13.4% responded that they were addressed in a negative way and 65.6% not at all. A similar percentage of 14.9% of addressing such issues in a negative was also observed in Cyprus, while in Croatia and Poland it reached a figure of 20% or more. In Greece, 71.7% responded that LGBTI issues were never addressed during school education.

Table 4. Addressing LGBTI issues during school education

	Bulgaria	Croatia	Cyprus	Greece	Poland	EU-28
Yes, in a positive way	2.7%	5.7%	3.1%	2.2%	2.9%	5.7%
Yes, in a neutral and balanced way	10.5%	13.0%	9.0%	8.1%	8.8%	11.3%
Yes, both in a positive and negative way	7.8%	18.0%	6.3%	7.2%	9.3%	5.2%
Yes, in a negative way	13.4%	21.3%	14.9%	10.8%	20.0%	6.8%
No	65.6%	42.1%	66.7%	71.7%	59.0%	71.0%

Source: FRA, 2020b, LGBTI Survey Data Explorer.

Notably, in **Greece**, such issues became part of the school curricula in June 2020, when a Ministerial Decision (No. Φ.7/79511/ΓΔ4/2020) introduced the concept of “skills labs” covering different thematic areas, including among other gender diversity and equality, in the primary and secondary schools. Considering the recent introduction of this reform, no official data are so far available on their implementation. A similar attempt to introduce such aspects was also made in 2016, in the context of “thematic weeks” that were organized in secondary

schools (Ministerial Decision No. Φ20.1/220482/Δ2), which were, however, discontinued two years later.

Likewise, in **Cyprus**, a 2010 curriculum reform introduced issues of sexual health, such as safe practices, and information on sexual orientation in health education at primary and secondary levels (Council of Europe, 2018). According, however, to the IGLYO 2018 report on LGBTIQ inclusive education, civil society organizations have reported that some teachers avoid discussing such topics, often choosing other health subjects which they feel more comfortable to teach.

According to the same report (IGLYO, 2018), in **Croatia**, also following a curriculum reform in 2015, it was established that topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity should be discussed in secondary education. Nonetheless, textbooks refer to "homosexuality" in a mainly negative context (sickness - HIV) in courses such as biology, psychology, and religion. In **Poland**, although information about sexual orientation is to a certain extent included in the school curriculum, there are no references regarding gender identity and expression, or variations in sex characteristics. Lastly, in **Bulgaria**, sex education and topics related to SOGIESC do not constitute part of the basic school curriculum.

Within this context, when it comes to supporting the rights of LGBTI people, as Table 5 demonstrates, the majority of participants in the FRA (2020b) survey responded that they never or rarely heard or seen anyone support, protect or promote the rights of LGBTI people at school, or have themselves experienced support, defense or protection. Importantly, less than 10% of the survey participating in the five target countries reported incidents of discrimination or hate-motivated harassment to the authorities or relevant organizations.

Table 5. Support, defense, protection or promoting of the rights of LGBTI people at school

Heard or seen anyone support, protect or promoting the rights of LGBTI people at school				
	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Bulgaria	3.7%	16.6%	40.9%	38.9%
Croatia	5.0%	23.0%	51.6%	20.4%
Cyprus	3.6%	29.7%	42.0%	24.6%
Greece	4.2%	35.3%	37.8%	22.6%
Poland	5.3%	21.6%	33.8%	39.3%
EU-28	6.6%	26.9%	37.7%	28.9%
Experienced support, defense or protection from anyone at school of respondent's rights as an LGBTI person at school				

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Bulgaria	9.5%	13.3%	26.1%	51.1%
Croatia	7.6%	15.3%	39.8%	37.4%
Cyprus	11.9%	16.3%	30.7%	41.1%
Greece	7.8%	20.4%	32.0%	39.7%
Poland	5.0%	16.4%	27.1%	51.6%
EU-28	9.2%	20.4%	28.5%	41.9%

Source: FRA, 2020b, LGBTI Survey Data Explorer.

In summary, as a prologue to the detailed analysis of the findings from the field research performed by the partnership in the VET sector specifically, this section attempted to offer some insights into the national context of the target countries. Even though research on the experiences of LGBTIQ students in the VET sector remains rather limited, the above overview of EU wide surveys and national studies provide significant information regarding educational sector. An overwhelming majority of people continue to hide, at least partially, their LGBTI identity at school and the prevalence of discrimination, harassment, and school bullying, including negative comments and behaviors, remains quite high. On the other hand, LGBTIQ topics and issues appear to remain outside of school curricula, with many LGBTI students feeling a lack of support and protection of their rights at school.

2. Primary research results: Students', teachers', and experts' perceptions

2.1 Online survey results

2.1.1 Students' Perceptions

A total number of 333 students from all participating countries responded to the survey. Out of the total sample, 14.4% ($n = 48$) of the respondents were from Bulgaria, 25.5% ($n = 85$) from Croatia, 22.2% ($n = 74$), from Cyprus, 15.6% ($n = 52$) from Greece, and the remaining 22.2% ($n = 74$) from Poland. The majority of the participants aged between 20 and 29 years (53.5%), followed by individuals between the age of 15 and 19 years (29.3%), and students belonging to the 30-39 age group (12.7%). Table 6 below presents the age range of the survey respondents across the five participating countries.

Most of the participants (61.3%) were women and 30.5% were men, with the remaining students opting not to answer the question (3%), identifying as non-binary (3%) or other (2.1%). With regard to sexual orientation, more than half of the respondents (57.2%) were heterosexual, 12.7% gay or lesbian, 9.3% bisexual, 5.4% pansexual and 4.2% other, while 11.1% of the participants opted not to answer this question. Table 6 below also illustrates the

students' responses regarding gender identity and sexual orientation in each of the five participating countries.

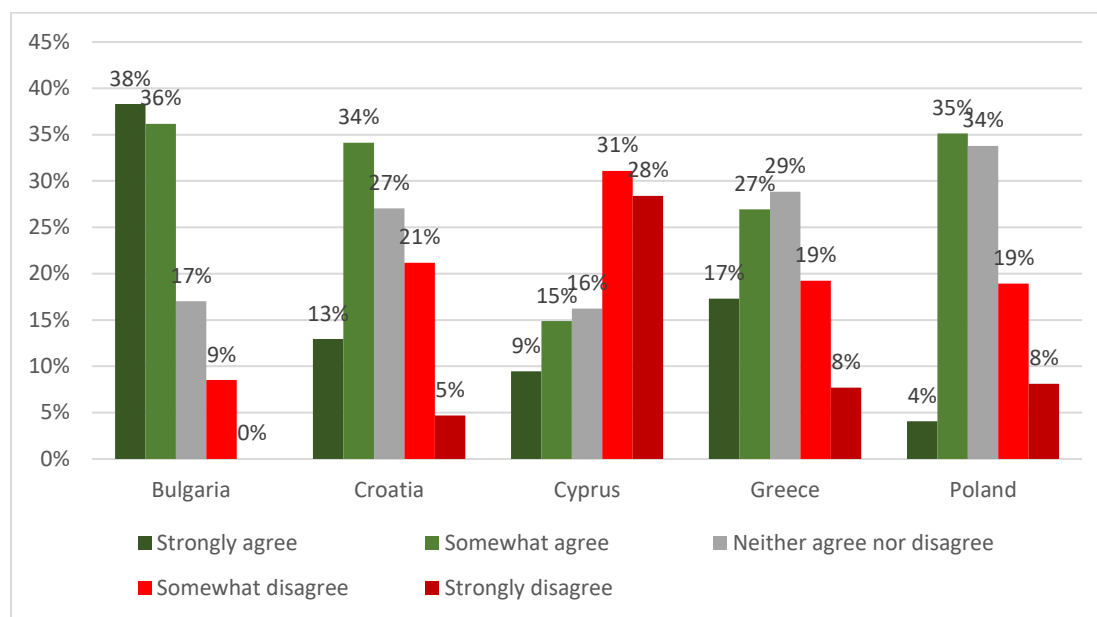
Table 6. Students' demographic characteristics

		Bulgaria	Croatia	Cyprus	Greece	Poland	Total
Age Group	15-19	30.4%	11.8%	29.7%	1.9%	67.6%	29.3%
	20-29	41.3%	77.6%	54.1%	61.5%	27.0%	53.5%
	30-39	15.2%	7.1%	13.5%	28.8%	5.4%	12.7%
	40-49	8.7%	2.4%	0%	5.8%	0%	2.7%
	50-59	0%	0%	0%	1.9%	0%	0.3%
	I'd rather not answer	4.3%	1.2%	2.7%	0%	0%	1.5%
Gender Identity	Man	25.5%	41.2%	5.4%	51.9%	31.5%	30.5%
	Woman	46.8%	52.9%	91.9%	46.2%	60.3%	61.3%
	Non-binary	12.8%	3.5%	0%	1.9%	0%	3.0%
	Other	4.3%	1.2%	0%	0%	5.5%	2.1%
	I'd rather not answer	10.6%	1.2%	2.7%	0%	2.7%	3.0%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	12.8%	61.2%	78.4%	71.2%	50.0%	57.2%
	Gay or Lesbian	42.6%	11.8%	2.7%	17.3%	1.4%	12.7%
	Bisexual	14.9%	15.3%	2.7%	3.8%	9.5%	9.3%
	Pansexual	14.9%	7.1%	0%	3.8%	4.1%	5.4%
	Other	4.3%	1.2%	4.1%	1.9%	9.5%	4.2%
	I'd rather not answer	10.6%	3.5%	12.2%	1.9%	25.7%	11.1%

When students were asked their views on whether LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET environments in their countries, the responses varied significantly among the participating countries. As Figure 1 below illustrates, 74% of the participants in Bulgaria agreed, strongly or somewhat, that LGBTIQ people are in fact respected with VET institutions in their country. None of the participants strongly disagreed with the statement and only 9% disagreed to a certain extent. In contrast, almost 60% of the respondents in Cyprus disagreed, somewhat or strongly, with this statement.

Slightly more comparable results were presented between Croatia and Greece, with more than 40% of the participants agreeing that LGBTIQ people are respected and approximately 25% disagreeing. Notably, in Poland 33% of the participants gave a neutral response, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. In total, across all five participating countries 14.5% of the participants strongly agreed with this statement, 29.2% somewhat agreed, 25.0% neither agreed or disagreed, 20.8% somewhat disagreed, and 10.5% strongly disagreed.

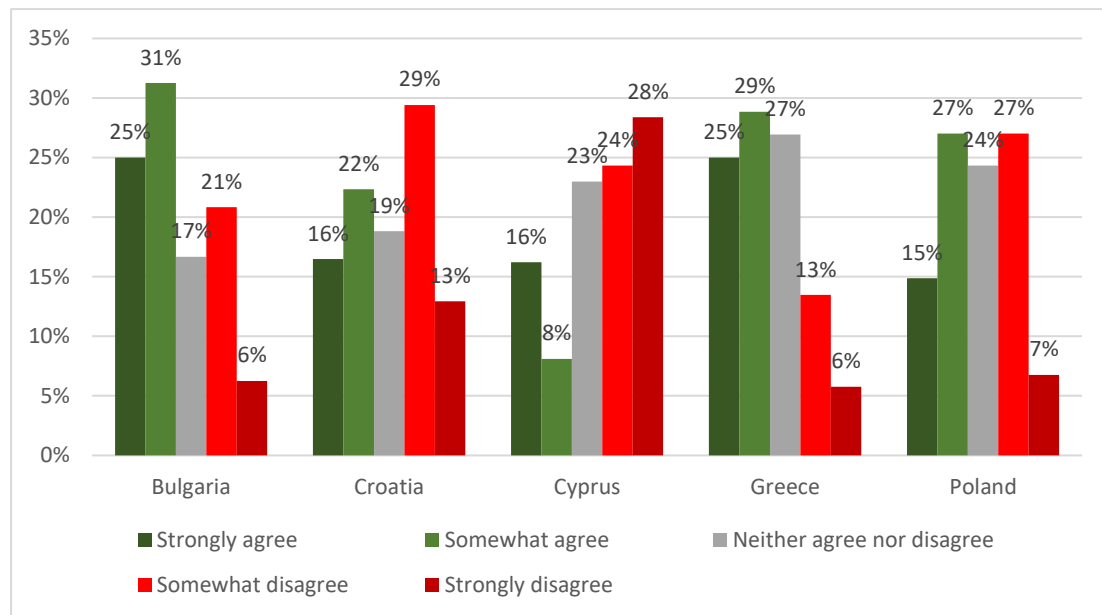
Figure 1. Students' Perceptions: LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET



Subsequently, participants were asked to indicate whether according to their opinion a student can be openly LGBTIQ in VET environments in their countries. As Figure 2 below illustrates, a diverse range of responses was observed, especially when the results are contrasted to the previous question regarding the acceptance of LGBTIQ people in VET. For instance, even though 47% of the respondents in Croatia believe that LGBTIQ people are generally accepted in VET, only 38% agreed either strongly or somewhat with the notion that a student can be openly LGBTIQ in VET environments, while 42% disagreed with the statement. Likewise, the percentage of agreement with the notion of being openly LGBTIQ in VET dropped to 56% in Bulgaria, in contrast to the 74% agreement in the previous question. In Cyprus, comparable results among the two questions were observed, with more than half (52%) of the respondents do not believe that a VET student can be openly LGBTIQ.

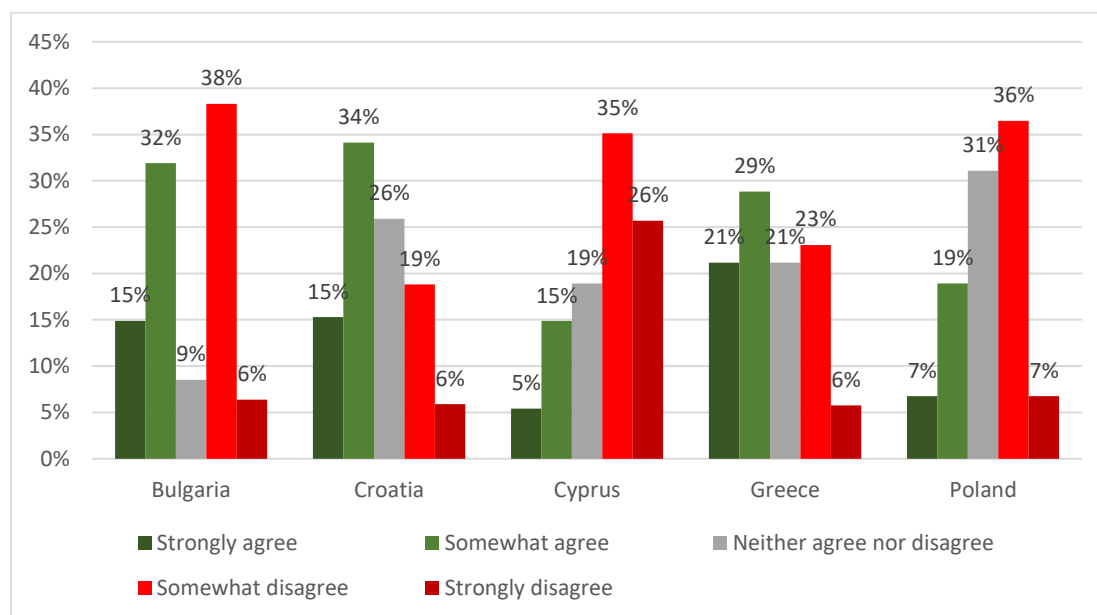
On the other hand, 54% of the respondents in Greece think that a student can be openly LGBTIQ in VET, compared to the previous question where a 44% level of agreement was observed. Increased levels of disagreement were also observed in Poland, where 35% of the respondents disagreed either strongly or somewhat with this statement. Overall, 18.6% of the participants across all five countries agreed strongly with the statement, 22.5% somewhat agreed, 21.9% gave a neutral response, 24.0% somewhat disagreed, and 12.9% disagreed strongly with the notion that a VET student can be openly LGBTIQ in their countries.

Figure 2. Students' Perceptions: A VET student can be openly LGBTIQ in VET



Further discrepancies were observed in the next question, where participants were invited to indicate the extent to which VET environments in their countries are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ people. As Figure 3 shows, only 20% of the students in Cyprus and 26% in Poland agreed strongly or to some extent with this statement, while 61% and 43%, respectively, disagreed. Approximately 47-49% of respondents in Bulgaria and Croatia also agreed that VET environments in their countries are safe and inclusive, however, 44% in Bulgaria and only 25% in Croatia disagreed with this statement. Notably, in Greece 50% of the students strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement, 29% disagreed, and 21% gave a neutral response. Finally, when the data are aggregated across all participating countries, 12.0% of the respondents agreed strongly with the statement, 25.3% somewhat agreed, 22.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 29.8% somewhat disagreed and only 10.5% disagreed strongly.

Figure 3. Students' Perceptions: VET environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students



A diverse range of responses was also observed in the next question, illustrated in Figure 4, where participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the fact that students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ. Remarkably, 80% of the students in Cyprus agreed with the statement, further corroborating the non-inclusive environment observed also in the previous findings in Cyprus. Likewise, 64% of the respondents in Greece also agreed that students are harassed, bullied, or discriminated against, which comes in direct contrast to the previous question where 50% of the respondents believe that VET environments in the country are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students. The findings in Croatia, Poland, and Bulgaria, appear to be slightly more consistent to the previous data with 38%, 40%, and 41%, respectively, agreeing with the statement. The corresponding rates for all participating countries show that 17.8% and 34.4% of the total sample agreed strongly or to some extent, 23.6% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 19.6% and 4.5% disagreed either to some extent or strongly.

Figure 4. Students' Perceptions: Students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ

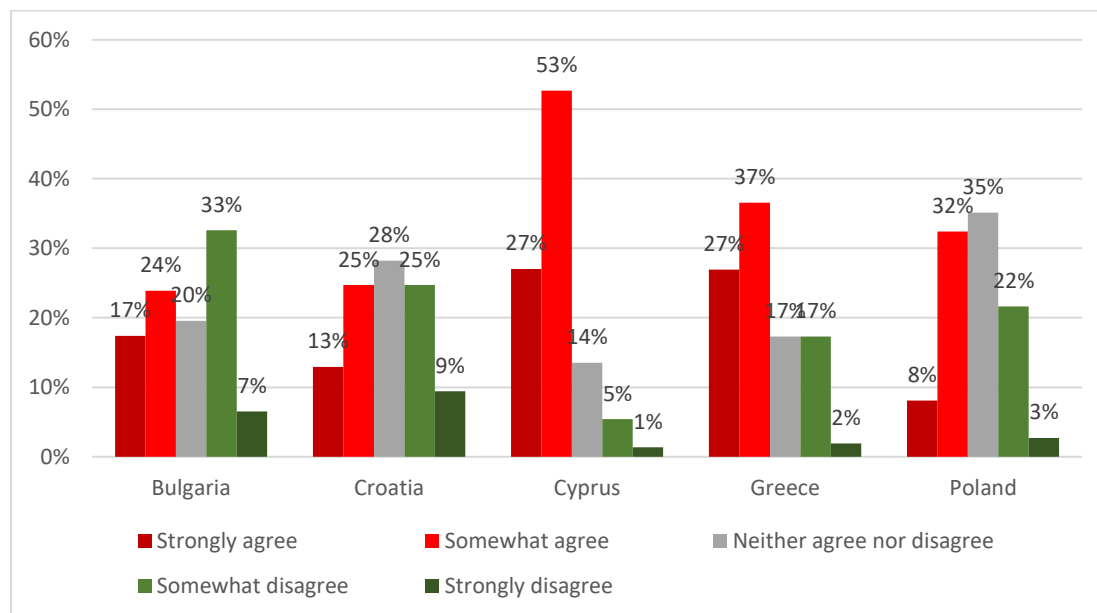
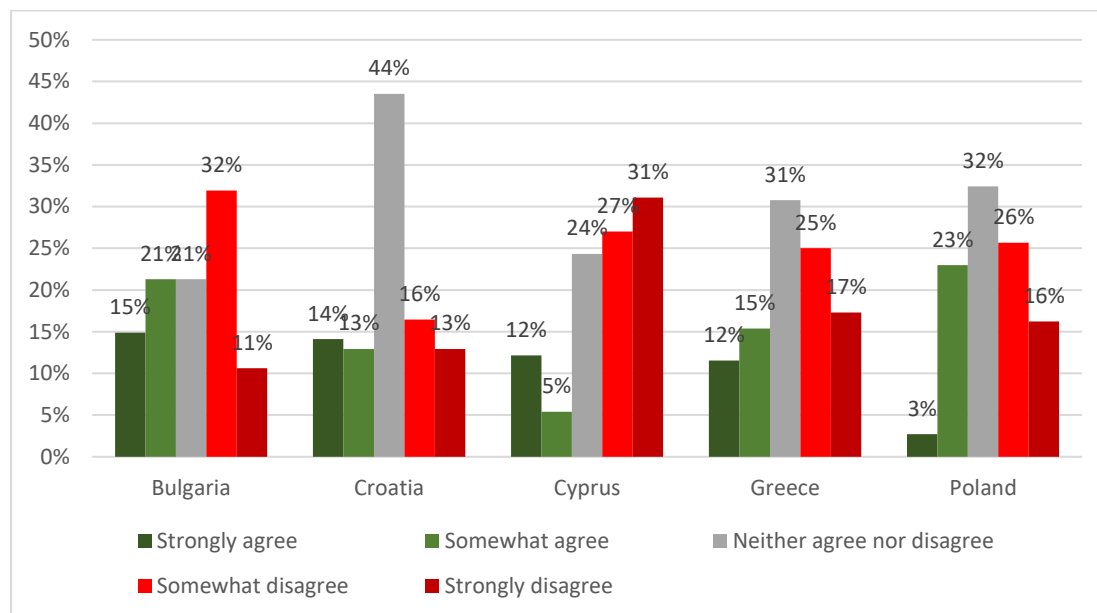


Figure 5 demonstrates the students' thoughts on whether teachers have the proper skills to handle cases of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students and support the victims. Relative consensus was observed among the respondents in Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland where 42-43% of the students disagreed, somewhat or strongly, with the statement. However, the most prevalent answer in Croatia was a neutral response, with 44% of the respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In line with the participants' responses in previous questions, 58% of the students in Cyprus do not believe that teachers have the proper skills to handle such cases and support victims, 24% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 17% agreed with this statement. In total, 10.8% of the participants across all countries, agreed strongly with this statement, 15.1% agreed to a certain extent, 31.6% gave a neutral response, 24.4% disagreed to a certain extent, and 18.1% disagreed strongly.

Figure 5. Students' Perceptions: Teachers have proper skills to handle cases of bullying, harassment, or discrimination and support victims



The following two questions, presented in Figures 6 and 7, aimed at examining if potential cases of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students are usually perpetrated by other students and/or professional staff, such as VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff, and so on. As the figures illustrate, a varied picture among the five different countries was observed, with a rather increased prevalence of neutral responses in both questions.

Indicatively, in Cyprus comparable rates were observed with 62% of the respondents agreeing, most of them to a certain extent, that students are potential perpetrators and 51% that VET staff are possibly those that bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students. In both questions, 35-39% of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. In Greece and Poland, a high level of agreement was also observed regarding students as perpetrators, with the corresponding figures being 67% and 57% respectively. However, fewer participants believe that VET staff could potentially bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students, with again 35-38% of participants giving a neutral response.

Likewise in Croatia more than one third of the participants gave a neutral response in both questions, but 44% did agree, at least to some extent, that students may be the potential perpetrators. However, only 9% agreed that VET staff could potentially bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students and 56% disagreed with this notion. Lastly, in Bulgaria 30-37% of the participants disagreed with both statements, 30% agreed that people who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students are usually other students,

and, notably, 41% agreed, somewhat or strongly, that these behaviors may originate from VET professional staff.

Across all five participating countries the participants' responses were formulated as follows. With regard to the relevance of such cases by students 19% of the participants strongly agreed, 38% somewhat agreed, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, 12% somewhat disagreed, and 4% disagreed strongly. The corresponding rates for the prevalence of cases perpetrated by VET professional staff were, 7%, 30%, 35%, 24%, and 4%, respectively.

Figure 6. Students' Perceptions: People who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students are usually other students

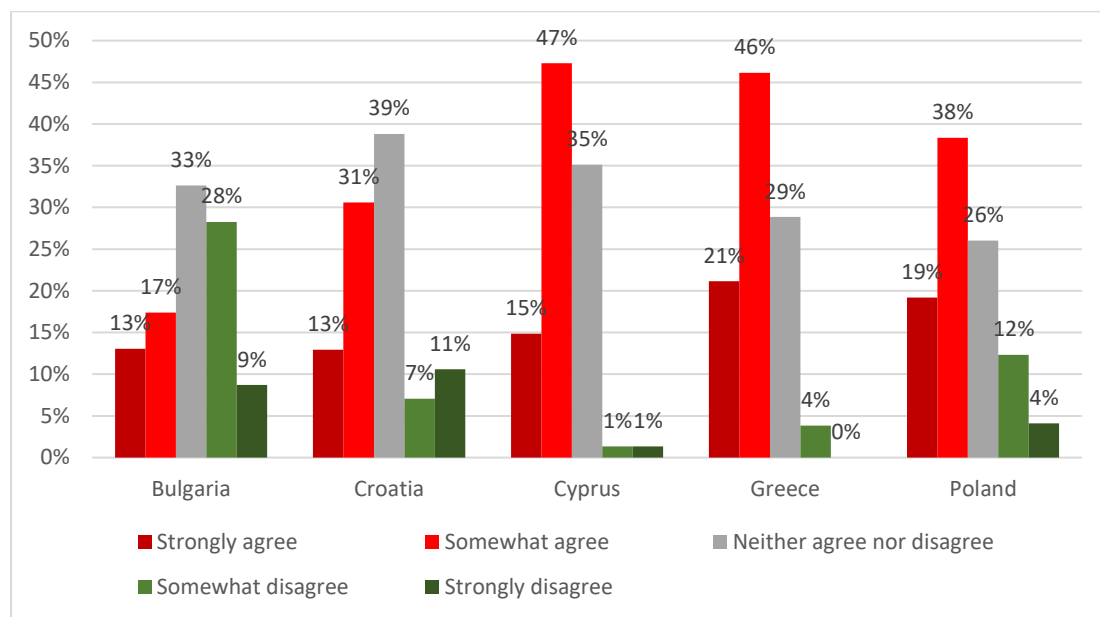
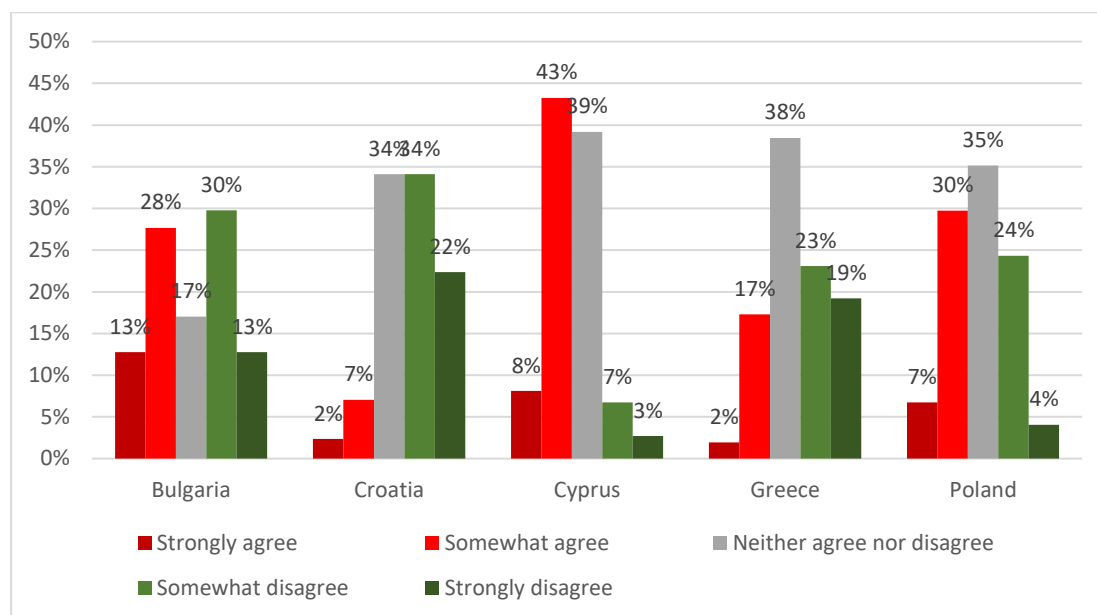
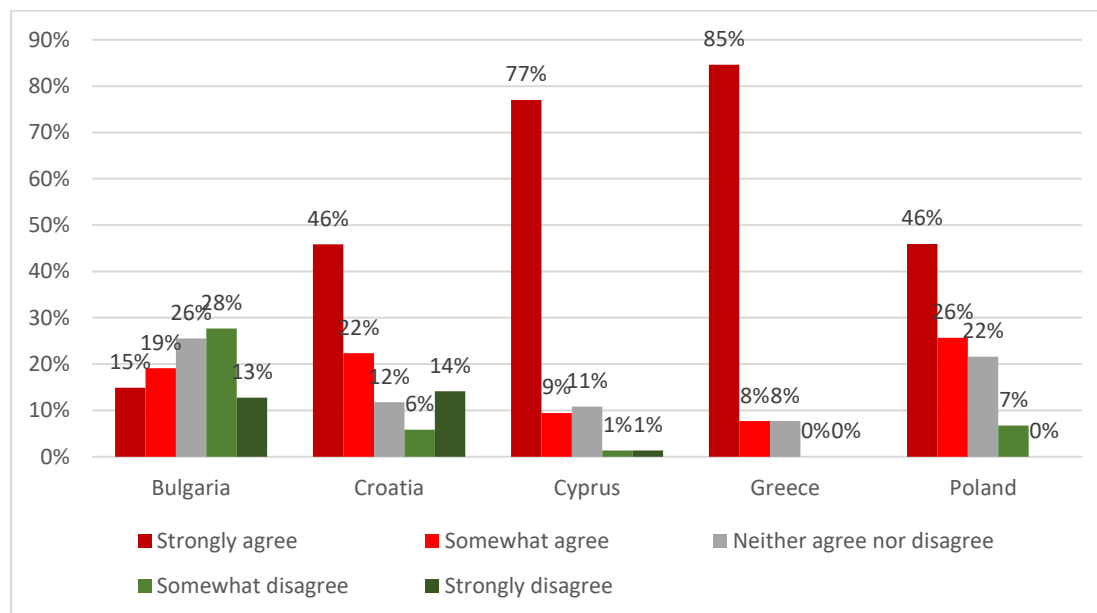


Figure 7. Students' Perceptions: People who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students are usually VET professional staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.)



The following question, the results for which are presented in Figure 8, sought to examine the students' perceptions regarding the need for the adoption of measures within VET for the prevention and combating of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students. In Greece 85% of the respondents strongly agreed that such a need exists and 8% somewhat agreed, while none of the participants disagreed and only 8% gave a neutral response. Similarly, 77% of the participants in Cyprus agreed strongly, 9% somewhat agreed, 11% gave a neutral response and only 2% disagreed. Comparable results were also observed between Croatia and Poland with 46% of the participants in both countries strongly agreeing with the statement. In Bulgaria, however, the most prevalent response was that of participants somewhat disagreeing with the statement at a rate of 28%, followed by those neither agreeing nor disagreeing at rate of 26%, while only 15% and 19% agreed strongly or somewhat with the need to adopt such measures. Nonetheless, except for Bulgaria, a consensus for the need of adopting relevant measures was clearly demonstrated among the remaining countries. The total results for all five participating countries indicated that 54.5% agreed strongly, 17.5% agreed to some extent, 15.1% neither agreed nor disagreed, 7.2% somewhat disagreed, and 5.7% strongly disagreed.

Figure 8. Students' Perceptions: Measures preventing and combatting bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students should be taken in VET



The final question addressed to the students participating in the survey aimed at providing an indication regarding their attitudes towards LGBTIQ people in the students' future professional environment. In particular, as Figure 9 below also shows, students were asked to indicate which statement better represents the way they are going to treat LGBTIQ clients that may seek their services. The overwhelming majority of students in Greece (82.4%), Cyprus (76.4%), and Croatia (70.7%) responded that they will be friendly/professional and take the needs of LGBTIQ persons into account while providing their services.

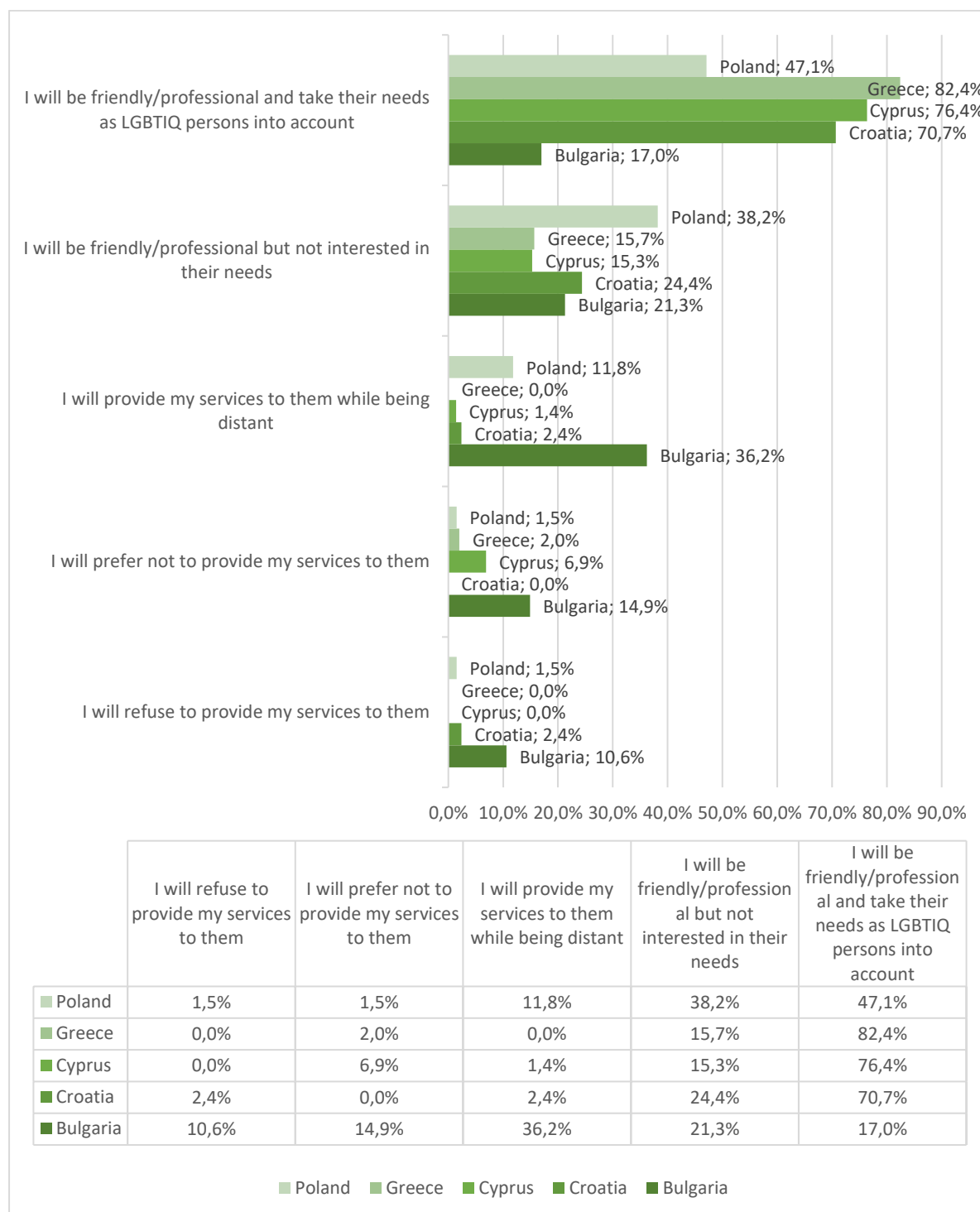
A slightly different range of responses was observed in Poland, where the aforementioned response was given by 47.1% of the participants, while 38.2% responded that they will be friendly/professional but not interested in their needs. In addition, 11.8% of the respondents in Poland answered that they will provide their services to LGBTIQ persons while being distant, and 3% would prefer not to or refuse to provide their services to LGBTIQ persons.

In Bulgaria, more than one third of the students (36.2%) indicated that will provide their services to LGBTIQ persons while being distant, followed by 21.3% that will be friendly and professional but not interested in their needs. Notably, only 17% would take the needs of LGBTIQ persons into account, while 14.9% would prefer and 10.6% would refuse to provide their services to LGBTIQ persons.

Lastly, in terms of the total number of 320 students that responded this survey question across all five participating countries, 60.9% would be friendly/professional and take their needs as

LGBTIQ persons into account, 23.4% would be friendly/professional but uninterested to their needs, 8.8% would provide their services while being distant, 4.4% would prefer not to provide their services, and 2.5% would refuse to provide their services to LGBTIQ people.

Figure 9. Students' Perceptions: 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?



2.1.2 Teachers' Perceptions

In total 160 participants completed the online survey, with 30.0% ($n = 48$) of the respondents being teachers in VET schools in Bulgaria, 10.0% ($n = 16$) in Croatia, 18.1% ($n = 29$) in Cyprus, 33.1% ($n = 53$) in Greece, and 8.8% ($n = 14$) of the sample being VET teachers in Poland. Table 7 below presents an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants in each of the five countries, including the participants' age and responses on gender identity and sexual orientation. As the table illustrates, the majority of the participants (49.4%) were between 30 and 39 years of age, more than 60% were women and identified as heterosexual.

Table 7. Teachers' demographic characteristics

		Bulgaria	Croatia	Cyprus	Greece	Poland	Total
Age Group	15-19	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	20-29	14.6%	12.5%	0%	32.1%	0%	16.3%
	30-39	52.1%	50.0%	58.6%	28.3%	100.0%	49.4%
	40-49	25.0%	18.8%	24.1%	26.4%	0%	22.5%
	50-59	8.3%	18.8%	10.3%	13.2%	0%	10.6%
	I'd rather not answer	0%	0%	6.9%	0%	0%	1.3%
Gender Identity	Man	22.9%	18.8%	20.7%	26.4%	35.7%	24.4%
	Woman	47.9%	81.3%	79.3%	71.7%	64.3%	66.3%
	Non-binary	14.6%	0%	0%	1.9%	0%	5.0%
	Other	8.3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2.5%
	I'd rather not answer	6.3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.9%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	27.7%	81.3%	89.7%	90.6%	42.9%	66.7%
	Gay or Lesbian	29.8%	12.5%	0%	3.8%	0%	11.3%
	Bisexual	25.5%	6.3%	10.3%	0%	0%	10.1%
	Pansexual	10.6%	0%	0%	1.9%	0%	3.8%
	Other	4.3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.3%
	I'd rather not answer	2.1%	0%	0%	3.8%	57.1%	6.9%

In line with survey questions addressed to VET students, teachers were also invited to indicate the extent to which they believe that LGBTIQ people are in general respected in VET institutions in their respective countries. The results, illustrated in Figure 10, present a diverse picture across the five participating countries, but also several differences with the students' responses in the same question (see Figure 1).

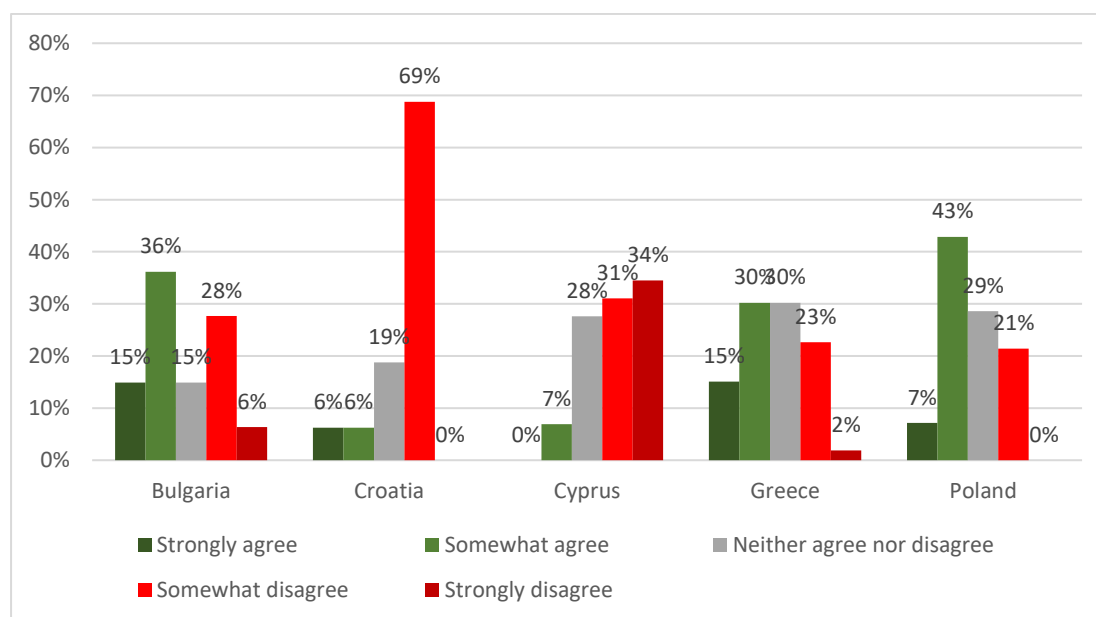
Indicatively, 69% of the VET teachers in Croatia disagreed to certain extent with this statement, while the respective rate in the students' responses was 26%. Likewise, 34% of the teachers in Bulgaria believe that LGBTIQ people are not generally respected in VET, in contrast

to only 9% of the students that gave the same response. More comparable results among students and teachers' perceptions were observed in the remaining countries.

In terms of cross-country observations, however, with the exception of Croatia (69%) and Cyprus (65%) where more than 60% of the teachers disagreed either somewhat or strongly with this notion, the corresponding rates in Bulgaria (51%), Greece (45%), and Poland (50%) show that approximately half of the teachers somewhat or strongly believe that LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET institutions in their countries. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the sample of teachers in Croatia ($n = 16$) and Poland ($n = 14$) were relatively small, which may have influenced the countries' results to some extent, an aspect that should also be kept into consideration when examining the results in the subsequent questions.

Overall, 10.7% of the respondents across all five countries strongly agreed with the statement, 26.4% somewhat agreed, 23.9% neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat disagreed, 30.2%, and 8.8% strongly disagreed. These overall results further highlight the different perspectives among the five target countries.

Figure 10. Teachers' Perceptions: LGBTIQ people are generally respected in VET

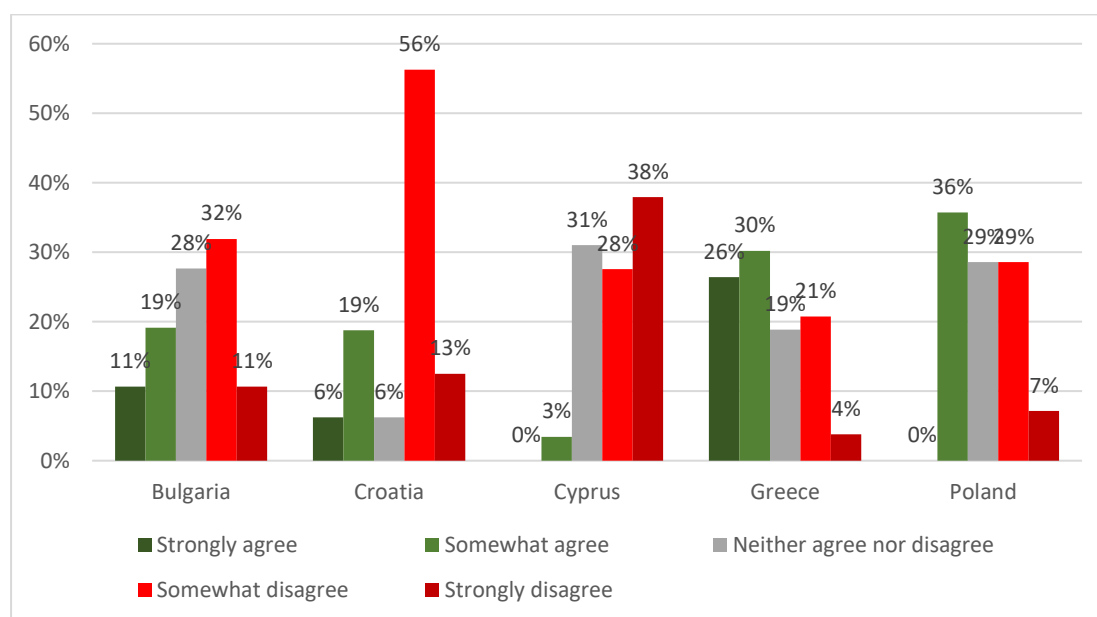


The following question, where teachers were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that a student could be openly LGBTIQ in VET institutions in their countries, presented a relatively similar pattern to the previous question. As Figure 11 shows, a slightly decreasing trend was observed in the participants' level of agreement with this statement in Bulgaria (30%), Cyprus (3%), and Poland (36%). Notably, though, more than half of the

teachers in Greece (56%) believe that students can in fact be openly LGBTIQ in VET institutions in the country.

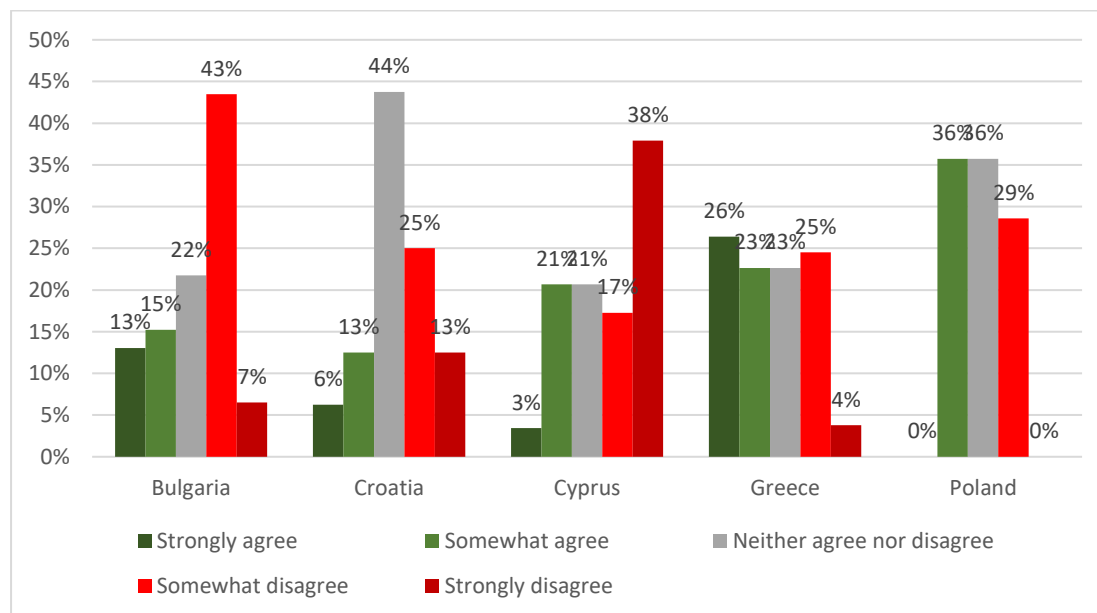
In all countries, however, when the present results are compared to the students' answers (see Figure 2) fewer teachers than students believe this statement to be true. In addition, among the five participating countries there appears to be limited consensus in the teachers' perceptions. For instance, the teachers' level of agreement ranges from 3% in Cyprus, to 25%, 30%, and 36% in Croatia, Bulgaria, and Poland respectively, up to 56% in Greece, as previously noted. Lastly, when the participants' responses are examined across all five countries, 12.6% of the total sample strongly agreed that a VET student/trainee can be openly LGBTIQ, 21.4% somewhat agreed, 23.3% gave a neutral response, 29.6% strongly and 13.2% somewhat disagreed.

Figure 11. Teachers' Perceptions: A VET student/trainee can be openly LGBTIQ in VET



In line with the students' survey, the next two questions addressed to the sample of VET teachers sought to examine if the VET environments in the participating countries are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students, and the extent to which VET students are harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ. As Figures 12 and 13 show, a rather diverse range of responses was observed among the five participating countries in the two questions.

Figure 12. Teachers' Perceptions: VET environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students



For instance, in Bulgaria half the respondents believed that the VET environments in the country are not safe and inclusive, while at the same time 66% of the teachers disagreed, somewhat or strongly, with the notion that VET Students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ.

In Croatia, the most prevalent answer in terms of the safety and inclusiveness of VET institutions was a neutral response, with 44% of the teachers neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. Nonetheless, 63% believed that LGBTIQ students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against, which is well aligned with the views of most of the teachers who believe that students cannot be openly LGBTIQ students in VET schools in the country.

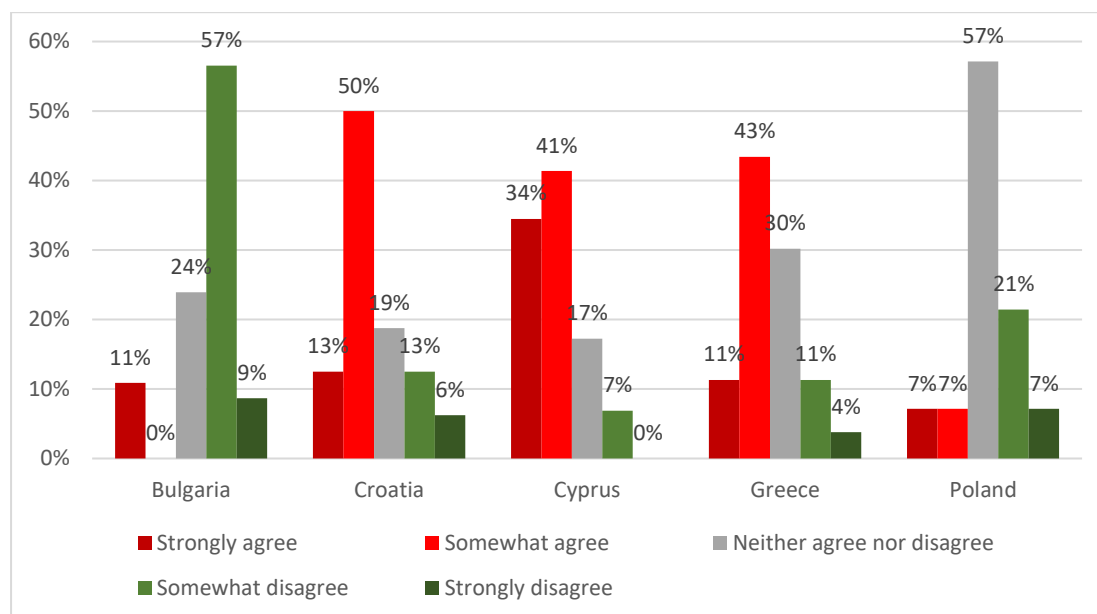
An interesting trend was also observed in Poland with 57% of the teachers providing a neutral response on the cases of harassment, bullying, or discrimination of LGBTIQ students and 28% in fact disagreeing with this statement. At the same time 36% somewhat agreed and an equal percentage gave a neutral response regarding the safety and inclusiveness of VET schools in the country, while only 29% disagreed.

In Greece, a rather notable observation is that even though 49% of the teachers think that VET institutions in the country are safe and inclusive, 54% also agreed that students are harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ. This finding is further in contrast when examined in conjunction with the previous question where (56%) of the teachers in Greece believe that students can in fact be openly LGBTIQ in VET institutions in the country.

A more consistent pattern with the previous questions is observed in Cyprus where 55% thinks that VET environments are not safe and inclusive and an overwhelming 75% agreed to various extents that students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ.

Lastly, in terms of the overall rates across the five participating countries, the results were formulated as follows. Out of the total sample, 13.9% of the teachers agreed strongly, 20.3% somewhat agreed, 25.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 29.1% somewhat disagreed, and 11.4% strongly disagreed that VET environments are safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ students in the country. The corresponding results on whether students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ where 15.2% (strongly agree), 27.8% (somewhat agree), 27.2% (neither agree nor disagree), 24.7% (somewhat disagree), and 5.1% (strongly disagree).

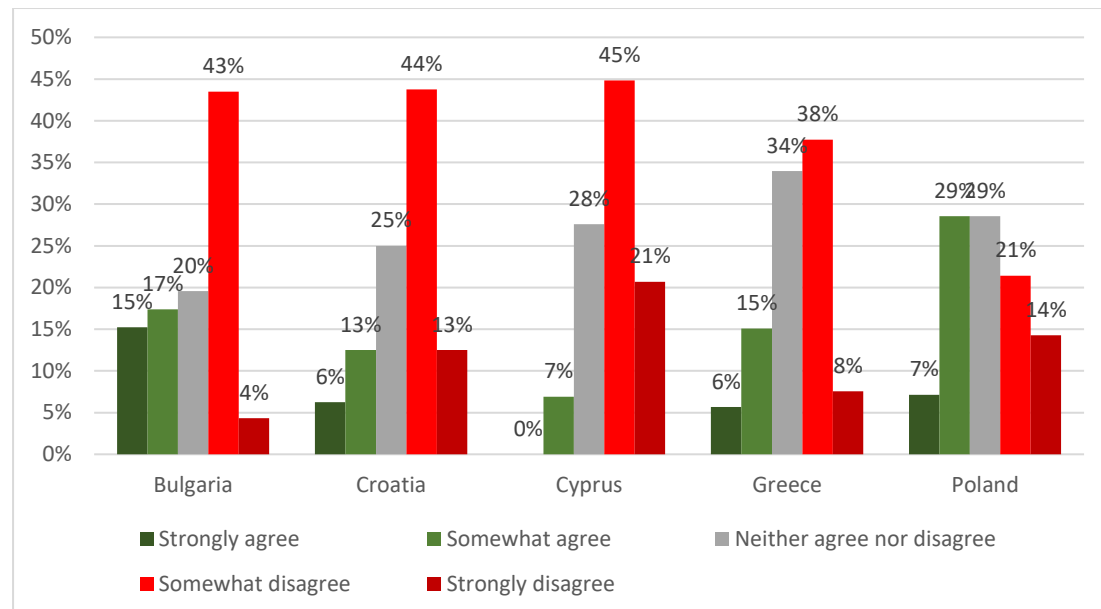
Figure 13. Teachers’ Perceptions: Students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ



Participants were asked next to indicate their views regarding VET teachers having the proper skills to handle cases of bullying, harassment, or discrimination and support victims, and the relevant results are presented in Figure 14 below. In most of the participating countries, the most prevalent response was teachers disagreeing, somewhat or strongly, with this statement, with figures ranging from 66% in Cyprus, 56% in Croatia, 48% in Bulgaria, and 45% in Greece. On the other hand, almost the same percentage of teachers in Poland agreed (36%) and disagreed (35%) with this statement. In total, 7.6% of the participants across all countries, agreed strongly with this statement, 15.2% agreed to a certain extent, 27.2% gave a neutral response, 39.9% disagreed to a certain extent, and 10.1% disagreed strongly. The overall

results appear to be rather comparable to the findings presented in Figure 5 above regarding the students' views on whether teachers have the proper skills to handle such cases and support victims.

Figure 14. Teachers' Perceptions: Teachers have proper skills to handle cases of bullying, harassment, or discrimination and support victims



The teachers' views on whether people who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students are usually other VET students or VET professional staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.) are presented in Figures 15 and 16, respectively. As Figure 15 illustrates, when it comes to students as possible perpetrators of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against other LGBTIQ students, a relatively consistent picture is observed among Croatia (69%), Cyprus (83%), Greece (56%), and Poland (78%) where the vast majority somewhat at least agreed with this statement. A different rate of responses was, however, evident in Bulgaria, where 46% of the teachers disagreed, 36% agreed, and 17% gave a neutral response. The total response rate for this question in all five countries shows that 15.1% of the teacher's sample strongly agrees, 43.4% somewhat agrees, 19.5% neither agrees nor disagrees, 17.0% somewhat disagrees, and 5.0% strongly disagrees that people who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students are usually other students.

With regard to VET professional staff as potential perpetrators of violence against LGBTIQ students, different perceptions were observed among teachers in the various countries. On one end most of the respondents in Croatia (81%), Bulgaria (57%), and Greece (53%) disagreed, at least to a certain extent, with the statement. On the other end, 50% of the

teachers in Poland and 41% in Cyprus agreed, at least somewhat, with the statement. Across all five participating countries 6.9% of the teachers' sample strongly agreed, 19.5% somewhat agreed, 22.0% neither agreed nor disagreed, 38.4% somewhat disagreed, and 13.2% strongly disagreed with the notion that VET professional staff may be potential perpetrators of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students.

Figure 15. Teachers' Perceptions: People who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ VET students are usually other students

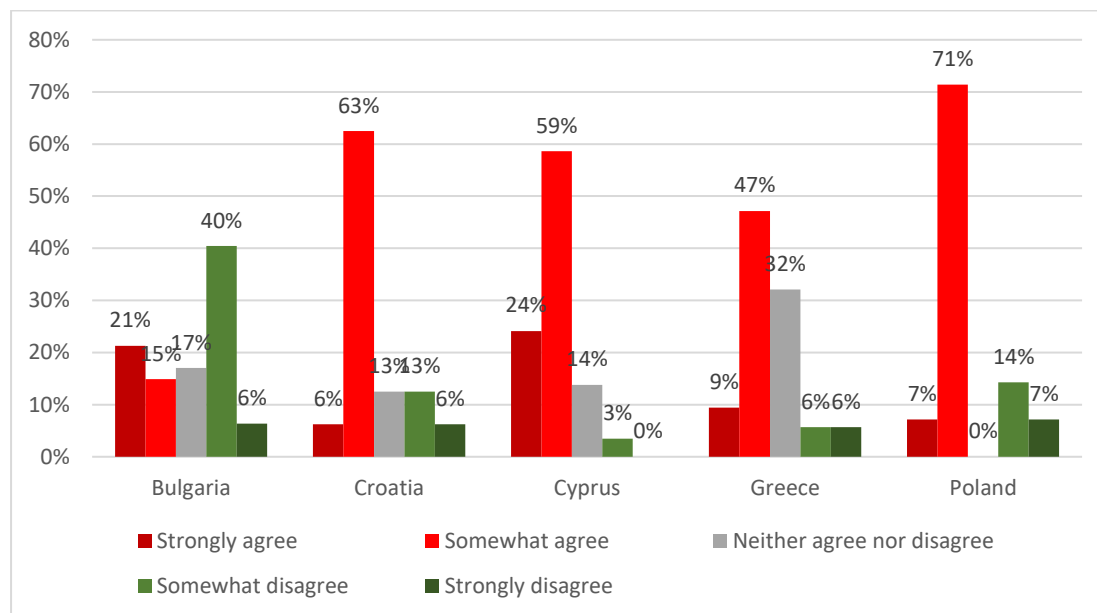
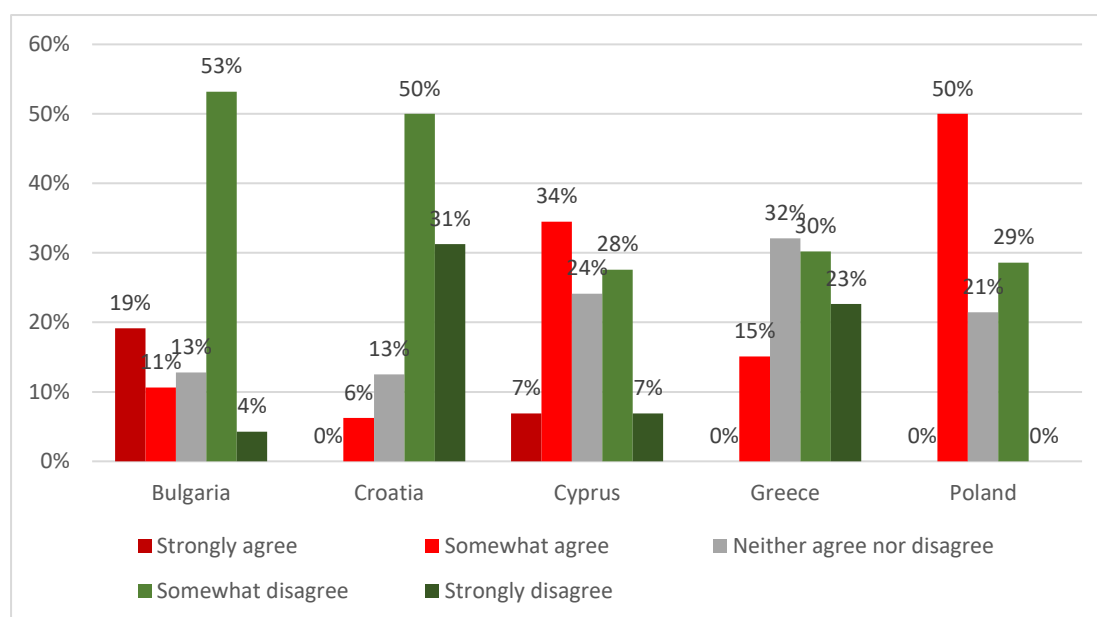
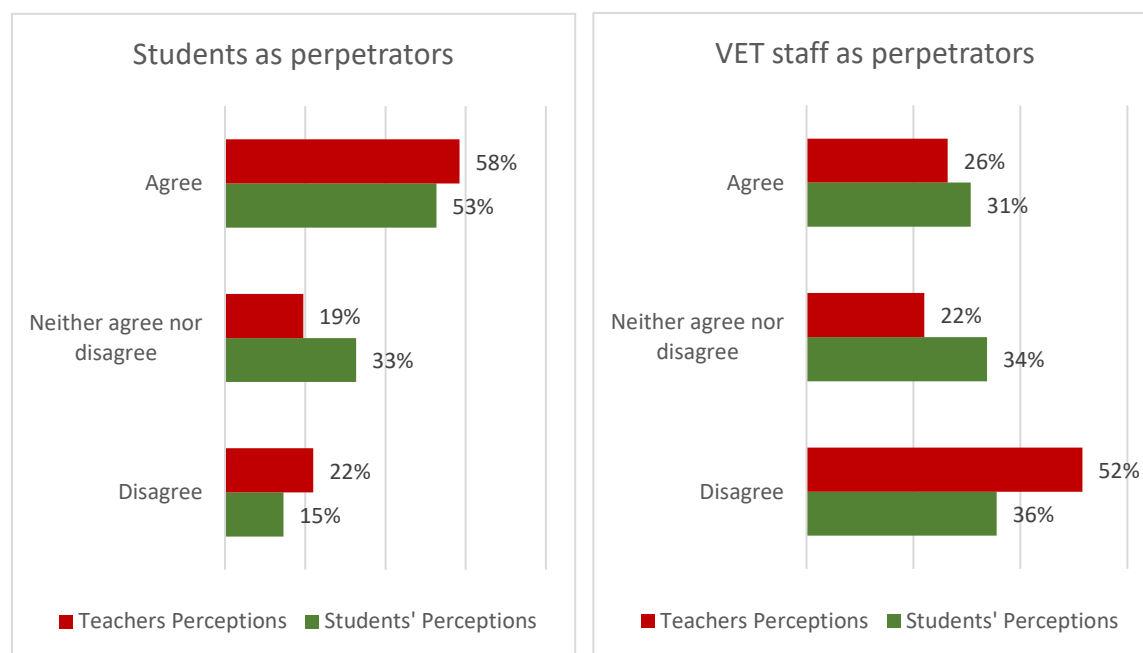


Figure 16. Teachers' Perceptions: People who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students are usually VET professional staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.)



A notable observation with regard to the aforementioned questions on students versus VET staff as potential perpetrators of violence against LGBTIQ students is the different perceptions of students, as illustrated in Figures 6 and 7, and teachers, as shown in Figures 15 and 16. To clearly showcase the different views of students and teachers, Figure 17 below presents two graphs comparing the responses of the two samples. As the figure shows the differences are smaller in regard to students as potential perpetrators. However, teachers appear to believe that potential cases of violence against LGBTIQ students perpetrated by VET staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.) are far less common than what students report. Notably, 52% of the teachers disagree with this statement in contrast to the 36% rate of disagreement by students.

Figure 17. Students' versus teachers' perceptions on people who (possibly) bully, harass, or discriminate against LGBTIQ students



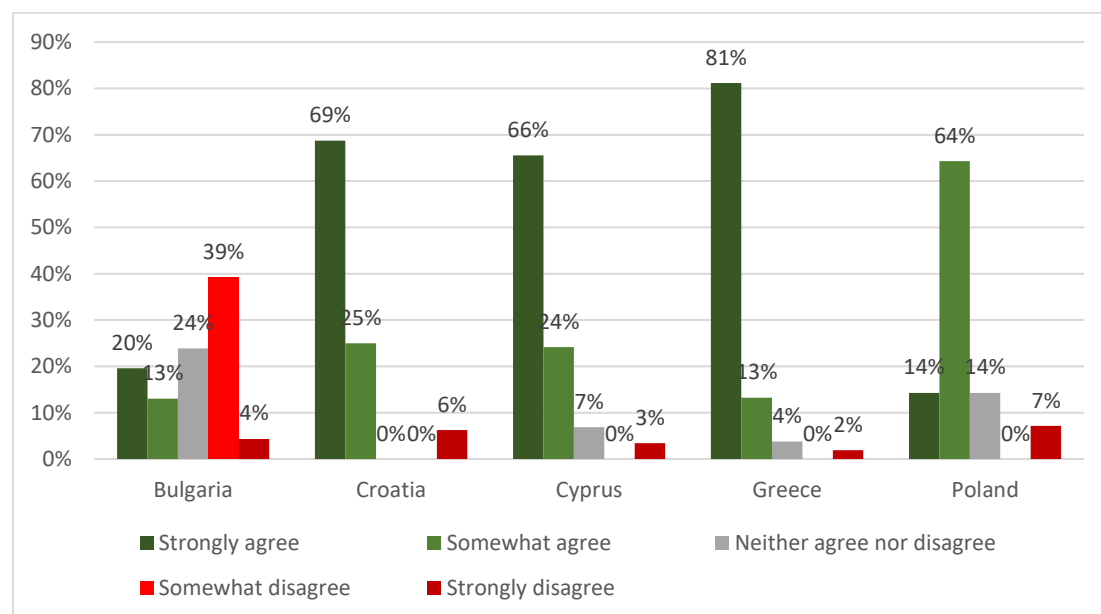
The next question, the results of which are presented in Figure 18, aimed at examining the teachers' views regarding the need to adopt measures for the prevention and combating of bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students in VET institutions in their countries. An overwhelming majority of participants in Greece (81%), Croatia (69%), and Cyprus (66%) strongly agreed with this statement, while less than 10% of the respondents in these countries disagreed or gave a neutral response on this question.

In Poland 64% of the participants somewhat agreed that such a need exists, 14% agreed strongly and an equal percentage of people gave a neutral response, with only 7% of the participants strongly disagreeing. Different results were, however, observed in Bulgaria with

the majority of the respondents (43%) disagreeing that there is a need to adopt such measures in VET schools in the country, 33% agreeing, and 24% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Nonetheless, when the abovementioned results are contrasted to the students' responses in the same question, illustrated in Figure 8 above, the responses of both teachers and students in each country appear to align.

Finally, in terms of the overall teachers' sample across all five countries, the results indicate that 53.2% of the sample strongly agreed with the need to adopt measures in VET, 20.9% somewhat agreed, 10.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 11.4% somewhat disagreed, and 3.8% strongly disagreed with the existence of such need.

Figure 18. Teachers' Perceptions: Measures preventing and combatting bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students should be taken in VET



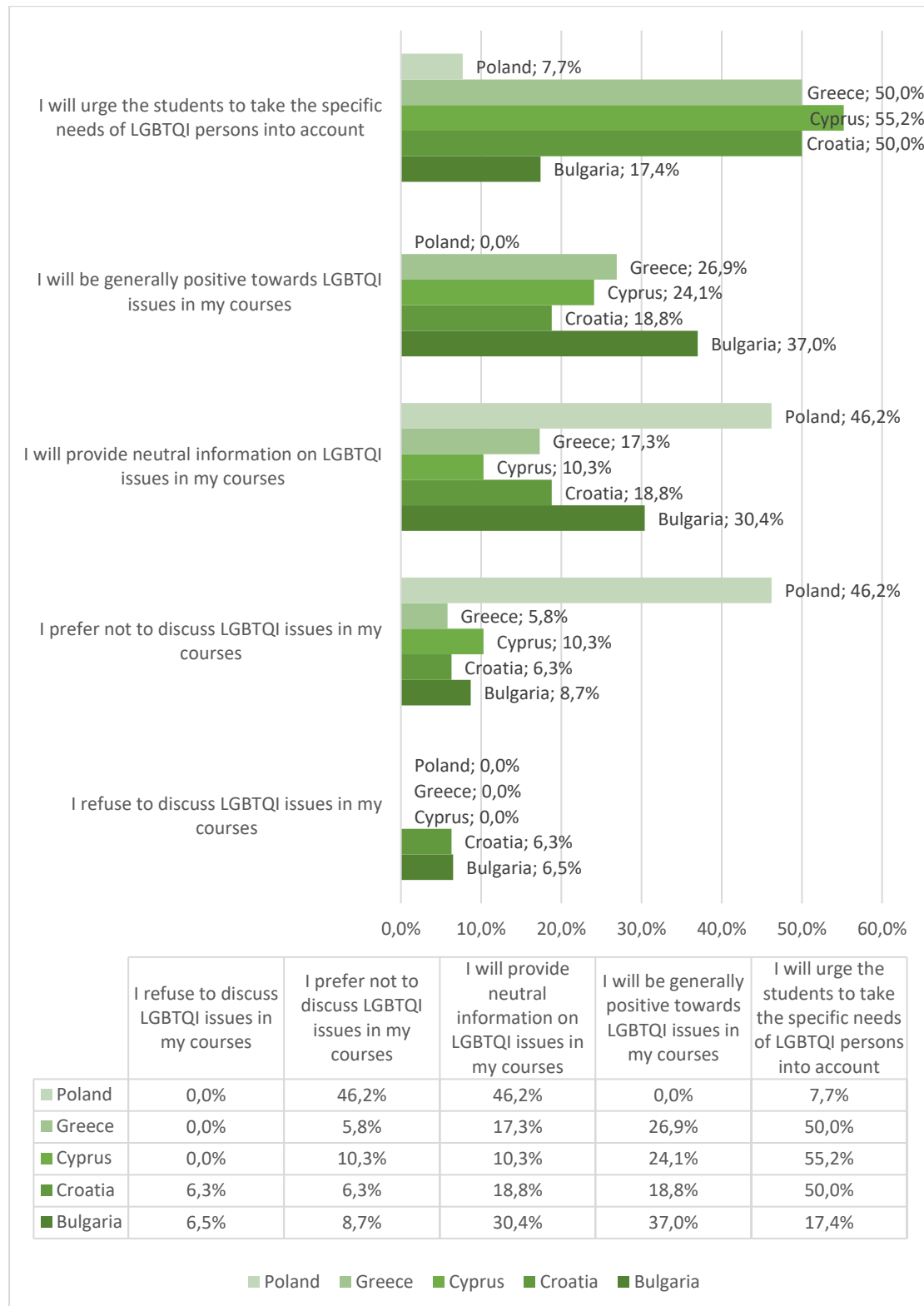
The last question which teachers were invited to answer sought to examine how VET teachers approach, if at all, the needs of LGBTIQ people in their courses. The results, presented in Figure 19, demonstrate a distinct pattern among the five target countries. In Cyprus (55.2%), Greece (50%), and Croatia (50%) half or more of the teachers responded that in their courses they urge students to take the specific needs of LGBTIQ persons into account. The remaining participants in these countries noted that they tend to be generally positive (ranging from 18.8% to 26.9%) or neutral (ranging from 10.3% to 18.8%) towards LGBTQI issues in their courses, with only 10% or less preferring or refusing to discuss such issues.

In Bulgaria most of the teachers responded that they are generally positive towards LGBTIQ issues in their classes (37%), followed by those that provide neutral information (30.4%), and

teachers (17.4%) that urge students to take the needs of LGBTIQ clients into account. From the remaining sample, 8.7% responded that they prefer not to discuss such issues in class and 6.5% refuse completely to do so. The teachers in Poland, however, appear to have a rather different approach with 46.2% of the participants responding that they provide neutral information during their courses, an equal percentage preferring not to discuss these issues in class, and only 7.7% urging students to take the needs of LGBTIQ clients into account.

When the teachers' responses in Figure 9 are compared to those of the students, shown in Figure 9, a cross cutting observation is that teachers across all five participating countries appear to be somewhat more reluctant than students in approaching the needs of LGBTIQ persons. Finally, regarding the results for the entire sample across all countries, the following results were observed: 2.6% of teachers responded that they refuse and 10.9% that prefer not to discuss LGBTIQ issues in their courses, 22.4% that they will provide neutral information, 26.3% will be generally positive towards LGBTIQ, and 37.8% that will urge the students to take the specific needs of LGBTIQ persons into account.

Figure 19. Teachers' Perceptions: 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?



2.2 Interview and focus group results

In an effort to collect further insights into potential discriminatory behaviors on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics in VET institutions, the partnership also performed a series of interviews and focus groups in the target countries with the participation of VET students and teachers, as well as LGBTIQ experts. The following sections present a brief overview of the students', as well as the teachers' and experts' views on the topic, aiming to identify common patterns but also potential differences among the participating countries.

2.2.1 Students' perceptions

A series of focus groups with the participation of VET students were held in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Greece. In Poland, despite the extensive efforts of the partnership to directly reach the target group, students were quite reluctant to participate in interviews or focus groups – presumably reflecting the national context regarding LGBTIQ rights in the country – completing the anonymous online survey instead. An overview of participants' demographic profile per country is provided below.

In Bulgaria, one focus group with a mix of five participants was held, including a VET student, 2 VET teachers and an LGBTIQ expert. Two focus groups were conducted in Croatia with a total number of 6 students aged between 20 and 46 years, all of whom were attending the same private VET institution. Two focus groups were also organized in Cyprus with a total number of 10 students. All students attended the same VET institution and their age ranged from 19 to 39 years old. Lastly, in Greece one focus group with the participation of 3 VET students was organized, including an undergraduate, a graduate, and a postgraduate student, aged between 20 and 29 years old, all coming from the same VET institute.

A. LGBTIQ people in the VET sector

The first discussion point among the students participating in the focus groups revolved around the extent to which students are or can be openly LGBTIQ in their VET environments. More specifically, participants were asked if they know or have ever heard of another student in their VET institution who is openly LGBTIQ. Also, they were asked if they believe that students could be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity in VET environments in general and their institution in particular. Overall, a diverse range of responses was observed among the target countries with varying responses regarding the extent to which students are or can be open about their identity, but also to the reasons why students may or may not choose to be openly LGBTIQ in their VET environments.

Notably, in **Cyprus** most of the participants in both focus groups noted that they have not heard of any person being openly LGBTIQ. The only exception was a trans participant that informed the rest of the students that LGBTIQ people do attend their VET school, but they are not open about their identity. Among the main reasons mentioned for which students are not open about the gender identity and sexual orientation were the fact that the VET environment is considered a “closed society”, a small place compared to universities where people may express themselves more openly, and as a result they could be subjected to mockery. Gender stereotypes, conservative and religious families, particularly in rural areas, and the distrust and fear people feel to talk about such issues, especially without support from family members, were among the other reasons noted by the students.

All the students participating in the focus groups in **Greece** replied that they know other students that are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity in their VET environment. Although participants believed that the teachers’ and staff’s attitudes towards LGBTIQ students, as far as they know, are nondiscriminatory, different opinions were expressed regarding the behavior of students. One of the participants noted that such behaviors do not exist in tertiary VET institutions, others highlighted that verbal and psychological abuse, gossip, intimidating language, glances, laughter, and abrupt manners do exist as signs of biased behavior towards LGBTIQ students. Remarkably, according to their views, an LGBTIQ person could openly express their sexual orientation or gender identity within VET environment, but it is important not to be “provocative” or “attracting the attention too much” and should keep a “low profile” instead. Although the participants clarified that they personally do not feel “offended or annoyed”, they have had experiences of others who may be hostile or biased towards the LGBTIQ community. The participants also noted that such behaviors, however, are not acceptable inside their VET schools and any discrimination is handled immediately by VET teachers, if it comes to their attention.

In contrast, all students that participated in the focus groups in **Croatia** mentioned that they believe their VET institution is very inclusive and that it shows no signs of intolerance, thus, allowing all students to be openly LGBTIQ without any reluctance. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that all students that participated in the focus group in Croatia attend private VET higher education institution where regulations are firmer than in public institutions and there is no tolerance for any kind of discrimination. Similarly, the students that participated in focus groups performed in Greece and Cyprus also attend private higher education VET schools, and certain differences could potentially exist in comparison to other public, for example, schools.

Thus, this aspect could potentially have an influence on the results of the present study to some extent and should be kept into consideration when interpreting the results in the subsequent questions as well. Finally, the student participating in the focus group conducted in **Bulgaria** noted that they do not know or have heard of any person in their school who is openly LGBTIQ. A different perspective was offered by the expert participating in the same focus group who was the only person that knew an openly LGBTIQ student and noted that the environment in their school appears to be tolerant. The VET teachers, however, participating in the same focus group believed that it would be difficult to have a tolerant environment in their school due to teachers being very conservative and rejecting the students' open behavior.

B. Incidents of harassment, abuse, or mistreatment

The next topic of discussion focused primarily on incidents of harassment, abuse, or mistreatment against LGBTIQ students that the focus group participants may have heard of or witnessed. Although a somewhat similar pattern of responses to the previous thematic area was observed, the participants' answers on this topic could be viewed as more revealing about the actual situation in the VET sector of the participating countries.

In **Cyprus**, considering also that almost all participants did not know any students that were openly LGBTIQ, most of them noted that they have not heard of any incidents of violence. One participant mentioned that men who are thought to be gay may be somewhat marginalized by other male students that avoid socializing with them. Another participant noted that he as a trans man was verbally attacked in the previous schooling years, but at his current tertiary VET institution others do not seem to care about his identity.

Likewise, students in **Croatia** also mentioned that none of them has witnessed an act of discrimination in their VET institution adding, however, that "in general, sexuality is not something we speak of because everyone is focused on work". Also, teachers do not participate in "conversations about student matters". On the other hand, groups of students with more conservative stances that may not be entirely inclusive might exist but given the affirmative environment in their VET institution, they are probably outnumbered and keep those conservative stances to themselves. Comparisons to urban cities like Zagreb and less urbanized areas where discrimination might be more prevalent were also made by one of the students. Another student also pointed out that technical subjects, in contrast to social sciences or humanities, provide less opportunities for discussions on LGBTIQ issues and thus, lower probabilities for discriminatory comments and stances to come up. The fact that future

employers might be discriminatory towards LGBTIQ people was also mentioned by some of the students as a potential factor preventing students from talking openly about their sexual orientation or gender identity “so their potential employers wouldn’t find out”, while one student disagreed noting that employers are interested in employees’ level of knowledge and not their sexual preferences.

In line with the answers to the previous question, only the expert participating in the focus group in **Bulgaria** has witnessed cases of abuse and mistreatment of LGBTIQ students. An incident where a girl was abused by their classmates for cutting her long hair into a short boy-like haircut and a case of a boy who came to school after the summer holidays having long hair and earrings were offered as examples, with the expert noting, however, that according to his opinion these were incidental and not common cases.

Answers indicating potential minimization of incidents against LGBTIQ students came up also during the focus group discussion with the VET students in **Greece** when asked if they have ever personally witnessed such incidents. Indicatively, the participants noted that when compared to cases of violence in the society in general, the incidents that have occurred within VET institutions are of less severity, involving mostly harassment, bullying and verbal/psychological abuse rather than physical assaults. Occasions where some students laugh and joke against an LGBTIQ classmate in a foreign language and ignoring or mistreating the student when asking questions was some of the incidents mentioned. Another incident that was witnessed by one of the participants, not involving, however, other VET students – took place outside of a school where “one person openly threatened one of his LGBTIQ classmates that he would kill him”.

Students in Greece also highlighted cases where assumptions or subjective conclusions about a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation can also become topic of discussion and comments, leading to harassment and constant gossip against students that are perceived to be LGBTIQ individuals. At the same time, however, the participants also highlighted cases where the acts of bullying are perpetrated by a gay VET student towards a heterosexual/cisgender classmate, justifying their behavior as a sign of “suppressed anger caused by constant bullying and exploded against the wrong person”. A final but important observation made by the participants was that the majority of the most serious incidents happen primarily outside of the classrooms, in corridors, common spaces, and outdoor surroundings. These are less often inside the classrooms where the perpetrators are engaged in “lighter”, and most of the times unnoticed by the teachers, acts of harassment. The

presence of teachers was perceived by the students to be preventing such incidents from happening or escalating, with tensions being transferred outside of the classroom.

C. Existing practices and recommendations

The final topics of discussion focused on existing measures or practices implemented in VET institutions for preventing or combating violence against LGBTIQ persons, as well potential needs and recommendations for the adoption of such measures. Participants across the four countries were mostly unaware of existing measures or practices against such phenomena in the VET sector, but all of them noted the need for the adoption and implementation of more comprehensive measures.

Indicatively, students in **Cyprus** were not aware of any existing measures or practices, while two of the students in **Croatia** gave the example of the option “other” in the gender section of official documentation in their VET institution, as well as the availability of the school’s psychologist, and programs for personal growth and wellbeing. The latter, however, is a program implemented in private VET institutions that could present several challenges in its application to the public VET sector.

Similarly, students in **Greece** noted that the most effective approach in preventing or combatting such phenomena is to ask for the support of their teachers, or even other students to whom they feel close to. Given that most incidents, according to the participants, are minor in nature, seeking the support of teachers was perceived as the most effective method to resolve them through conversation and verbal remarks. The participants did note, however, the mistrust against VET staff or other services within the institutions that might discourage from reporting such incidents in fear of reprisals, out of embarrassment or valid concerns of bullying intensification. The participants also admitted that they do not know if the incidents are being referred to senior levels of hierarchy, including the Board of Directors of their VET school.

Regardless of the existence or not of current practices, a series of recommendations were made by the participants in the focus groups across all target countries, stressing the need to adopt measures and mechanisms that would increase awareness for prevention but also readiness for tackling such phenomena.

More specifically, **awareness raising and educational initiatives**, including events, campaigns, and open discussions, but also workshops and training seminars for teachers and VET staff, students and parents, were among the most commonly suggested prevention measures. A

few of the examples mentioned by the participants included, among other, the organization of educative seminars or workshops for VET teachers and staff, but also students and parents, on inclusivity and acceptance, the use of inclusive language, issues of discrimination, respect and equality, awareness of the legal framework and human rights. Similarly, many of the participants in various countries suggested the organization of awareness raising events, such as debates and “awareness days” or workshops and open discussions with the active participation of the LGBTIQ community in an effort to increase visibility of LGBTIQ people in VET and raise awareness on the issues they face.

Several suggestions were also made by the participants for **handling phenomena and tackling violence or discrimination** perpetrated against LGBTIQ students. Protocols and guidelines to be followed in cases of such incidents, including procedures on how (e.g., report the incident to the police) and to whom (e.g., an officially designated person within the institution such as a psychologist or Ethics Committee) students could report the incident, were some of the key recommendations. The importance of policies that condemn all forms of discrimination or violence with clear sanctions for perpetrators were also highlighted. Finally, participants also stressed the need to educate teachers and VET staff on how to react in cases of violence, as one participant in Croatia mentioned "professors sometimes remain silent because they do not know how to adequately respond".

The need to enhance **support and empowerment initiatives** was also one of the most common recommendations. Student groups, clubs for LGBTIQ people, and one-to-one support from specialists for students that have experienced discrimination, were among the suggestions that could potentially offer empowerment and safety to students to express openly, but also send an affirmative message. Psychological and financial support groups for LGBTIQ students and stressing the fact that the institution's psychological help is intended for LGBTIQ issues as well were also noted, as "it can be understood that psychological help is only for problems of a different nature” according to one of the participants in Croatia.

The adoption of **more systematic approaches and measures on community and institutional levels** were also highly recommended by the participants. The representation of LGBTIQ people in the media as caricatures should stop, according to a participant in Cyprus, and instead the increased representation of same-sex relationships is needed to provide visibility. The employment of more LGBTIQ people in VET was another aspect raised as well as the need to prioritize preventative measures rather than carrying out crisis interventions. Similarly, participants suggested the adoption of multilevel approaches, including the formulation of

clear legal framework, involvement and training of police institutions, and awareness raising of the general population on issues of discrimination, respect, and equality.

Last but not least, a student in Greece suggested that the production of **LGBTIQ inclusive training materials in VET** could be an essential step towards equal representation not only in the VET sector but in the society in general “as they would present LGBTIQ identities and relationships as normal and not extraordinary and unnatural as is the case now”. Nonetheless, the introduction of such materials in all educational levels and earlier grades of the educational system would be rather important. The participants also noted that such a change could have adverse reactions from parents and teachers belonging to older generations and would, thus, require careful thought and planning.

2.2.2 Teachers' & Experts' perceptions

Interviews and focus groups with the participation of VET teachers, as well as LGBTIQ experts, were conducted in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Poland in an effort to gather further insights on the existing situation in each participating country. In total, 35 teachers and experts across all five target countries took part in interviews and focus groups, and a brief overview of the sample in each participating country is presented below.

In **Bulgaria** 5 VET teachers working in the sector for 8 to 12 years and two experts working in the field of LGBTIQ human rights and equality were interviewed. Interviews with 6 professors and 3 LGBTIQ experts on LGBTIQ inclusive practices in VET institutions were also conducted in **Croatia**. All participating teachers work at a private HEI VET institution, with 5 to 13 years of professional experience. The LGBTIQ experts are coordinators of civil organisations with 8 to 14 years of experience in this field.

In **Cyprus** 5 VET teachers and 2 experts were interviewed, with the teachers coming from different academic backgrounds and organizations and with a range of experience between 4 and 14 years. One of the LGBTIQ experts is the current president of the LGBT NGO in Cyprus and they have been involved in the organization since 2016, and the other expert was one of the co-founders and 1st president of their organization.

In **Greece**, two interviews with experts and one focus group with the participation of 6 VET teachers were performed. The experts have been working in LGBTIQ+ organizations for 5 and 9 years respectively and the VET teachers work in diverse departments and fields of expertise in private schools of continuing VET, teaching mostly young adult learners from the age of 18 years. In **Poland**, four interviews in total were conducted, with the participation of two

teachers (including a beginner as a professional counselor), an academic lecturer and a person working in higher education in the university's social responsibility department.

A. Definitions and national framework

As a starting point in the discussions with the VET teachers and the LGBTIQ experts, participants were invited to define discrimination on the grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics and provide some illustrative examples of such cases. Overall, teachers and experts offered various definitions, with a ranging extent of concrete descriptions and examples between the two target groups and among the participating countries.

For example, most of the VET teachers in **Bulgaria** defined discrimination as victimization due to perceived differences, and lack of acceptance or lack of desire to understand something or someone different. The examples offered associated mostly with social isolation and exclusion, unwillingness to communicate with someone, and rude comments, attitudes, behaviors. On the other hand, LGBTIQ experts focused primarily on the feelings of unsafety that students in Bulgaria often share that they feel because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or appearance.

In **Croatia**, nearly all teachers defined discrimination as any type of change in behaviour or acceptance towards an individual based on these characteristics, albeit an active or passive form of discrimination. The participants offered a series of general examples of discrimination against the LGBTIQ population in Croatia, ranging from mockery when an LGBTIQ person speaks in class, to teachers discriminating against students (e.g., giving better/worse grades) and vice versa (e.g., students rarely choosing LGBTIQ professors for mentorships). Notably, one of the teachers that denied having ever witnessed an act of discrimination, admitted that small jokes always happen, but does not consider them as anything serious, potentially indicating a lack of ability to recognize certain acts of discrimination. LGBTIQ experts defined discrimination as bringing an LGBTIQ group or a person in a disadvantaged position and denying a person's fundamental rights, such as denial/restriction of services, discrimination in the workplace, or humiliation and physical attacks.

A somewhat similar definition was also provided by the teachers in **Cyprus** that described discrimination as the change in behavior towards LGBTIQ+ people or because of the perception that someone could be LGBTIQ+, including direct and indirect forms of discrimination. Similar examples, such as marginalization, unequal treatment of students on behalf of teachers, and verbal attacks by parents towards teachers were also offered.

Likewise, the experts defined discrimination as any form of a different approach and or/treatment of any person on perceived grounds of SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics). Discriminatory practices in the workplace or health settings (e.g., when a transgender person is refused hormone treatment), non-validation of same sex relationships, including the right to adoption or vitro fertilization (IVF) funding, were also some of the other examples that came up.

In contrast, teachers in **Greece** had difficulties in providing a concrete definition of discrimination against LGBTIQ people, offering descriptions such as the following: “any form of intimidating behavior, covering derogatory and insulting language, gossip and physical assaults between heterosexual/cisgender and homosexual individuals or groups”. With regard to illustrative examples, participants referred to general incidents from their personal and professional experience, noting that they have witnessed incidents of verbal and emotional abuse but not physical assaults. Importantly, during their descriptions the VET teachers also referred to aspects such as the family values and the overall upbringing of a person, urban versus rural areas, but also social norms and stereotypes that may influence beliefs and attitudes associated with discrimination.

The LGBTIQ experts in **Greece** did however offer a concrete definition of discrimination as a different (negative) behavior towards another person due his/her/their SOGIESC, with one of the interviewees noting that it also refers to people who are or “perceived to be” LGBTIQ+. The latter constitutes an important distinction as according to Article 2 of Law No. 4443/2016, discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC against a person who is perceived to LGBTIQ is still a discrimination, thus focusing on the motivation of the action rather the actual status or identity of the victim. Examples of “negative” discrimination, such as denying the provision of services, and of “positive” forms of discrimination, such as prioritizing LGBTIQ+ candidates for a job position in a LGBTIQ+ focused project, were also offered.

Finally, all interviewees in **Poland** expressed the opinion that discrimination is the exclusion of certain groups due to specific characteristics. The participants noted that discrimination that can also take the form of a negative impact on people with said characteristics or the complete denial of the existence of a given group. Nonetheless, not all interviewees were able to provide examples of discrimination, emphasizing that they had not encountered discrimination in their practice and were not direct witnesses to it. The majority of the examples were offered by one of the teachers that has 30 years of experience working in schools, including examples of paying particular attention to the appearance of students or

the accessories they wear, and verbal taunts and jokes from both teachers and students. Another teacher, however, emphasized that for her a question about certain features, such as sexual orientation, may already constitute discrimination since this is irrelevant in education and does not affect what a student is.

Subsequently participants were asked if characteristics such as gender identity, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics are protected under the national legal framework on discrimination in general and in the educational and vocational training sector in particular. At the same time, participants were also asked about the existence of any central policies/strategies and good practices implemented by the government or state actors, and other bodies or organizations (e.g., civil society organizations) that facilitate the access and equal participation as well as the creation of a LGBTIQ safe and inclusive VET environment. As the discussion of the participants' responses outlined below indicate, the majority of the participating VET teachers in most countries were not familiar with the relevant framework. In contrast, as it would be expected, the LGBTIQ experts offered more detailed information on the national legislation and relevant policies.

For example, none of the VET teachers in **Croatia** could name a law addressing issues of discrimination against the LGBTIQ population in general and students specifically, presumably due to the fact that these issues are outside of their scope of expertise or specific interests. Based on the teachers' views, even if such laws exist, those are rarely implemented in practice due to lack of governmental interest in these issues. Notably, some of the interviewees also expressed concerns about the overprotection of certain minorities, including LGBTIQ people, which could lead to "the status of more equal among equals which shouldn't be the case". On the other hand, the LGBTIQ experts were well informed about the legal framework protecting LGBTIQ rights in general, but not the framework regarding education or the VET sector, which, according to the experts, are aspects covered by the national Anti-Discrimination Law.

Similarly, only one of the respondents in **Poland** was aware of whether these characteristics are protected under national law, mentioning the Diversity Charter or Labour Law, emphasizing the global dimension resulting from the respect of human rights. In addition, the same teacher noted that there is no direct reference to these issues in school regulations, other than general references to the respect of all human beings. The rest of the respondents replied that they were not aware of any regulations or frameworks of protection regarding the aspects in question. The participants were also unaware of any central practices or policies

aimed at counteracting discrimination. They also expressed the opinion that central solutions are not effective because imposing solutions from above does not bring the intended results.

The teachers in **Cyprus** also assumed there is national legal framework on discrimination of LGBTIQ people, but they have not come across it. Likewise, the interviewees were unsure if national legislation for the protection of LGBTQI+ people in the VET sector specifically exists, but they also assumed that a relevant framework should be in place. Some of the participants were aware of some EU projects, NGOs and initiatives, but noted that they do not know any policies or strategies implemented by the government. Participants appeared to believe that the Cypriot society is not ready to tackle LGBTIQ issues openly, while the influence of the church remains a factor that slows any progress made.

The experts in **Cyprus**, however, did note that technically laws pertinent to protection in workplace do exist, but these refer only to sexual orientation, and no framework specifically for the VET sector or education in general exists. Guidelines in the form of a “code of conduct” have been issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture, including several forms of discrimination, such as racism and discrimination against LGBTIQ people. The interviewed experts did emphasize, however, that the situation is far worse for transgender people as there is no legal gender recognition law, but only guidelines issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs for people to be able to change their personal details on their travel documents. Finally, with regard to EU policies, European directives to ensure equal treatment and opportunities in the workplace and educational environment do exist, but the directive in Cyprus does not include gender identity.

A similar range of responses was also observed in **Greece**, with VET teachers being unable to identify any specific laws and regulations or any national services to refer victims of bullying and discrimination to, in general or within VET environment. The participants also noted that irrespective of the legal framework, its application and respect in practice within the society remains the crucial point. The experts in Greece did confirm the existence of legal framework covering discrimination in all sectors, including the VET sector, but also noted the difficulties in its application and enforcement in practice. Both VET teachers and LGBTIQ experts were either unaware or confirmed the nonexistence of central policies and good practices implemented by state actors, referring instead to some practices implemented abroad.

Lastly, the teachers and experts interviewed in **Bulgaria** referenced the national law on Protection against Discrimination that covers the prevention of discrimination in the field of education, including incidents perpetrated by a person from the pedagogical or non-

pedagogical staff or from a student. In addition, some of the interviewees referred to the ministerial orders by the Ministry of Education regarding cases of bullying and the establishment of an anti-bullying mechanism in each school through an interdepartmental working group with representatives of the institutions and civil society.

B. LGBTIQ people in the VET sector

The next questions addressed to LGBTIQ experts and VET teachers sought to examine the national situation regarding discriminatory practices and incidents against LGBTIQ persons in each country's VET sector. In particular, participants were asked how serious – marginal or widespread – such phenomena are, and which are the associated crucial factors based on their knowledge, personal experience and/or opinion. Different perspectives with regard to the prevalence of such phenomena were offered by participants in the target countries, even though more consensus was observed regarding the crucial associated factors.

For instance, in **Poland** all respondents agreed that, unfortunately, discrimination constitutes a common phenomenon resulting from the overall situation prevailing in both schools and the country in general. Among the main factors giving rise to such incidents that the participants highlighted were the following aspects. The overall context, atmosphere and attitudes of the school principals and staff are thought to be one of the factors influencing the emergence of discriminatory behavior, associated primarily with lack of education and understanding. The negative media narratives that cultivate a fear for being “different” were another of the factors noted by the participants. Lastly, one interviewee highlighted that higher-level education, such as post-secondary schools, usually takes place in larger cities which may have a positive effect on countering such attitudes.

Mixed responses regarding the extent to which discrimination against LGBTIQ students is widespread or not were given by the participants interviewed in **Bulgaria**. Half of the experts and teachers stated that they believe it is common and the rest noted that it would be hard to say if this is marginal or a widespread phenomenon. To that end, some of the participants noted that homophobic and biased language is prevalent, tolerated, and still not perceived as a problem by either students or VET staff, thus, contributing to the creation of hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ students, but for any student outside of the accepted social norms. In relation to that, most of the respondents noted that the crucial factors associated with such phenomena are the society itself, the traditional and conservative stereotypes and the fact that such aspects are rarely discussed, resulting in increased ignorance, prejudice, and fear.

Relatedly, the VET teachers in **Greece** sought to distinguish between incidents they have heard of happening in other private and public VET institutions and the schools that they work at. Even though they believe that discrimination is an existing phenomenon on diverse events, it is marginal in their workplaces, possibly due to their supervision and interference when such incidents occur. In contrast, both experts believe that, even though no relevant data are available, taking into consideration the persistence of homo/transphobia in secondary and higher education, VET sector should not be an exception. One of the experts further highlighted that even though homophobia certainly exists in the VET sector, homophobic incidents may not be very serious ones – “microaggressions”, “homophobic comments” – while trans people will most likely have to deal with a very hostile environment. Both teachers and experts agreed that there are no particular reasons associated with the occurrence of discriminatory behaviors in the VET sector, other than those in other levels of education and the society in general.

Similarly, in **Cyprus** although the teachers agreed that discrimination constitutes a widespread phenomenon in the society, in VET environments people do not hear about any relevant incidents or any actions that would tackle discrimination. The respondents did note that they believe there is prejudice in VET schools, as “us Cypriots have a culture of being afraid of what we do not know.” Both experts participating mentioned an incident that occurred in the University of Cyprus, where the rainbow flag was lowered, stating that if it happens in the university premises, incidents happen elsewhere too. Lack of education awareness, the conservative and homophobic society and the existing gender stereotypes were among the key factors named by the participants. The fact that Greek is a binary language, making it difficult to come up with different pronouns, was also stressed by the participants. Finally, trainers observed that age also plays a role, as the older people are, the harder it is for them to change perceptions.

Notably, the VET teachers that participated in the interviews conducted in **Croatia** seemed to believe that these forms of discrimination are marginal in higher education VET institutions and might be more pronounced in VET high schools. They also added that “the environment is not affirmative and positive in general” and discrimination “exists implicitly... discriminatory practices, while low in intensity, are dominant”. On the other hand, the experts interviewed noted that, even though the organisation they work at has never received any attack/discrimination reports, this “does not mean discrimination does not exist...” as LGBTIQ persons “usually hide their sexual orientation or gender identity precisely to avoid any form

of discrimination or attacks” and rarely “report discrimination or attacks because that would automatically expose them.”

Based on the teachers’ perceptions, crucial factors that cause discriminative behavior towards LGBTIQ students in **Croatian** VET institutions include primarily the social environment and the conservative versus liberal bringing, followed by aspects such as the level of education and whether a person lives in urban or rural areas. On the other hand, one of the experts mentioned six crucial factors, namely: generally homophobic, biphobic, lesbophobic society, peer influence, lack of education on sexuality, teachers’ influence depending on their personal stances; Roman Catholic ideology and influence of church, and the stances of dominant political parties.

Participants were also asked to provide some **examples of anti-LGBTIQ discriminatory practices or behaviors** that occur in VET sector, and their responses are summarized in Table 8 below. As the table illustrates, the most common examples across all countries include various forms of verbal abuse, ranging from offensive comments and mockery to verbal attacks, social exclusion and isolation, and more rare cases of physical attacks.

Two noteworthy comments, however, that came up during the discussion with the VET teachers in Greece and in Cyprus may offer further insights in the teachers’ perceptions. More specifically, during the interviews conducted in Cyprus it was stated that LGBTIQ people “shouldn’t provoke” to avoid such behaviors, and teachers in Greece noted the rare cases where LGBTIQ persons deliberately have a “provocative behavior” in an attempt to be the center of their classmates’ attentions.

These comments are further exemplified by the examples offered by the LGBTIQ experts in Croatia that pointed out that school principals and deans often ignore discrimination towards the LGBTIQ students. As one of them notes they are “afraid of such situations because they are potentially explosive for their work...principals and deans are aware that the student who is openly LGBTIQ is very likely to be exposed to ridicule, ignorance, insults, gossip, isolation, psychological abuse, physical violence, humiliation...they don't want to deal with it”.

Table 8. Common forms of discriminatory practices or behaviors in VET institutions

Bulgaria	
Offensive comments	Prejudices or fear about the other's sexuality
Criticism	Offensive attitude
Harassment	Social distancing
Sometimes violence	Relationship tensions
Lack of acceptance due to sexual orientation	

Croatia	
Exclusion from social group/workgroup	Physical and psychological violence
Mockery	Passive aggression and ignoring
Teachers giving better/worse grades	School staff ignoring discrimination against LGBTIQ students
Cyprus	
Nasty comments/ labels/ name calling	Deprivation of socialisation
Stigmatisation	Physical attacks
Shaming and humiliation	Cyber bullying and/or bullying
Exclusion/ marginalization from other students and educational personnel	Victim blaming
	Discouragement to claim human rights
Greece	
Verbal abuse/ attacks	Rare cases LGBTIQ persons who deliberately
Laughter, targeting and making fun of others	have a “provocative behavior”
Gossip	Non-inclusion of trans identities in curriculum
Insults	Creation of a hostile environment
Rarely self-isolation and distancing	Misgendering and dead-naming
Poland	
Verbal acts, including jokes, taunts, ridicule	Exclusion from integration or group activities

C. Recommendations and need assessment

The final topics of the discussions with the VET teachers and LGBTIQ experts in the participating countries focused on existing need areas and the participants' recommendations. More specifically, the participants were asked to indicate initiatives, measures, and other aspects that could be taken on central (state) level and by the VET organizations/schools specifically in order to facilitate the access and equal participation of LGBTIQ people to the VET sector and to promote LGBTQI-inclusive and safe VET environments for learners/trainees. A series of recommendations in terms of both the VET sector/schools specifically and on a more centralized/policy level were offered by the participating across the various countries. Importantly, several aspects of convergence with the recommendations of the VET students outlined in previous sections were observed.

An aspect that was mentioned by the majority of the respondents across the participating countries was the need for increased **educational and awareness activities** addressed to both VET staff and students, but also parents. Some of the participants referred to workshops, training seminars, but also debates, round tables, discussions, campaigns, and other awareness raising events organized at school level and on institutional level (e.g., by the Ministry of Education). The need for such activities to be systematic and continuous, and not organized sporadically was also noted by some of the participants, as was the need for educational efforts to begin from very young ages.

Similarly, several of the participants noted that many teachers often feel unprepared to deal with incidents such as discrimination or harassment against LGBTIQ students in the VET sector. Thus, the need for **policies, guidelines and protocols, as well as practical tools** to be followed or used in such cases was often mentioned by the participants. Practical support by specialized staff – such as psychologists, experts on gender issues, and multidisciplinary teams – to act as the contact point within the schools, offering specialized support to both students and teachers, was another common recommendation among participants in different countries.

Another related suggestion was the establishment and enforcement of **codes of conduct and regulations**, for both teachers and students, of **zero tolerance and strict rules** against discrimination and harassment with clear consequences for such actions. Likewise, the establishment of procedures and frameworks for a LGBTIQ+ VET student to report incidents, even anonymously, were recommended.

Some of the other suggestions included the formulation of **LGBTIQ student committees**, clubs, or groups, as well as **allies' groups** that would offer opportunities for socialization but also for the organization of activities within the schools. The introduction of **inclusive policies** in terms of gender-neutral registration forms or documents, toilettes or other common spaces was also suggested. Finally, the LGBTIQ experts in Greece and Cyprus referred to changes in the existing **legal framework** or the introduction of new laws focusing on discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC in education/VET sector specifically, as well as the need for increased multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Lastly, the VET teachers and LGBTIQ experts were asked if, according to their views, the development of relevant training materials and the organization of training activities targeting VET teachers/trainers would be a useful and sufficient measure to tackle the phenomenon. All participants agreed with the usefulness of such activities, with most of them, however, noting that they would not suffice as a single action.

To that end, participants in Cyprus highlighted that continuity (e.g., recurring seminars) and assessment of the training activities would be needed, also recommending the participation of psychologists, sociologists and lawyers so as to have a holistic approach. Similarly, experts in Greece proposed the implementation of training activities also for students, and for seminars to be organized by or in cooperation with LGBTIQ+ organizations. In Croatia, the VET teachers interviewed believe that a more subtle approach is needed (e.g., in form of extracurricular lessons, such as workshops) due to the overall culture in the country, while the experts suggested that additional content about the LGBTIQ population should be introduced

into existing educational curricula (e.g., referring to the sexual orientation in biographies of writers, composers, etc.). Likewise, VET teachers in Greece recommended that increasing students' engagement could be achieved through more interactive methodologies, such as mentorship programs and identification with teachers they admire (mentors).

The need for both theoretical training, in terms of understanding key terms and concepts, but also for practical aspects, such as how to approach such incidents and talk to students was also highlighted by many of the participants. Thus, the need for knowledge-based training and awareness raising on why this is an important issue, and for skills' building on how to approach and react to such issues, appear to be two of the most common themes suggested. The use of inclusive and appropriate language and how to incorporate diversity in their classes and materials, were the other recurring themes. Finally, Table 9 below briefly summarizes some of the topics that participants proposed as useful for development of relevant training materials and the organization of training activities targeting VET teachers/trainers.

Table 9. Teachers' and experts' suggestions of topics for the development of training materials and activities

Proposed topics
- Understanding of key terms and concepts (e.g., diversity, discrimination, LGBTIQ+ as a "spectrum", heteronormative, patriarchy etc.).
- National and EU legal framework on discrimination/LGBTIQ rights, with a particular focus on the educational/VET sector.
- Familiarization with existing educational/awareness material.
- Challenging common stereotypes and prejudices, in general and of the teachers themselves, towards LGBTIQ+ people.
- Identification of discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC, of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.
- Use of appropriate/inclusive language.
- How to create an LGBTIQ-inclusive VET environment.
- How to introduce LGBTIQ+ issues and topics in class/lessons/training curricula.
- Reacting to and handling homo/transphobic incidents, including aspects on how to approach and talk to students.

3. Conclusions: Identification of discriminatory patterns

A general conclusion that could be drawn from the review of the relevant literature and the findings of the field research results presented is that, despite the important steps in recent years, discrimination against LGBTIQ people in various forms remains quite relevant in the VET sector. Notably, more than 50% of students and 40% of the teachers participating in the survey agreed, at least to a certain extent, that VET students are often harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ. At the same time, although 50% of the sample agrees that a student can be openly LGBTIQ in VET environments, 40% also believe that VET environments are not safe nor inclusive and LGBTIQ people are not generally respected in VET environments in their countries.

The findings of the field research performed by the partnership also appear to be in line with the results of EU wide surveys (e.g., FRA 2020a, 2020b), suggesting that people in VET environments tend to not be open about being LGBTIQ, at least to a certain degree. The mixed results observed in the survey responses regarding how safe and inclusive VET environments are, contrasted to how often people are harassed, bullied, or discriminated against for being LGBTIQ appear to corroborate in this respect. Relatedly, some of the students participating in the focus groups performed in few of the target countries have not heard of any person being openly LGBTIQ in their schools, with others noting sexuality is not something generally discussed at school as everyone is focused on their duties.

At the same time, when the findings of the present report are compared to the results of large-scale EU wide surveys (e.g., European Commission, 2019; FRA 2020a, 2020b; ILGA-Europe, 2021), noticeable differences in the overall country profiles of the five target countries appear to emerge. The large share of female participants that accounted for more than 60% of the survey respondents, and the fact that more than 50% of the sample is comprised of heterosexual participants could be some of the factors influencing, at least to a certain extent, the results of the present report. Likewise, most of the participants in research performed in Greece, Cyprus, and Croatia were VET students and teachers from private higher education VET institutions, while a relatively small of teachers took part in the surveys in Croatia and Poland.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, the present findings do however provide important insights and indicate some clear trends regarding the existing situation in the VET institutions of the participating countries. Even though diverse rates and perceptions were in some cases expressed in the five target countries, similar issues and areas of need appear to

emerge in all countries, to different perhaps, extents. Importantly, the most common patterns of discrimination, harassment, and bullying against LGBTIQ people in VET across all countries seem to take similar forms in terms of both nature and intensity. These include various forms of verbal abuse, as well as social exclusion and isolation, and more rare cases of physical attacks.

More specifically, verbal abuse ranges from offensive comments and jokes, criticism or gossiping, to insults, mockery, and humiliation, but also verbal attacks and harassment. Social exclusion from social or work activities, passive aggression and ignoring, leading eventually to marginalization or self-isolation, are also among the most common expressions. Cyber bullying and physical violence or attacks were less often noted by the research participants. Other forms of discrimination include teachers giving better or worse grades to LGBTIQ students and the overall creation of a hostile environment; the non-inclusion of LGBTIQ identities in curriculum; as well as discouragement to claim human rights, staff ignoring discrimination against LGBTIQ students and blaming the victims.

Importantly, similar results regarding the existing forms of discrimination against LGBTIQ students were observed in a smaller scale study conducted within the framework of the Unique project in the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands is considered a progressive country with adequate legislation, discrimination remains prevalent. Usually in the form of partly open discrimination and mostly characterized by offensive remarks, but also in the form of micro-aggression and social distancing. In addition, the Netherlands' study also highlighted that, even though relevant policies are in place, VET managers and teachers are often quite hesitant to engage with students on the topic of sexual and gender diversity.

In terms of whether bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ students in VET schools is perpetrated by other students or VET staff (e.g., VET teachers/trainers, administrative staff etc.), different views were observed among the participants in the online survey performed in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, and Poland. More than half of both teachers and students across the five target countries agreed that students may be potential perpetrators. On the other hand, VET teachers appear to believe that potential cases of violence against LGBTIQ students perpetrated by VET staff are far less common than what students report. Notably, similar observations were made during the interviews and focus groups, with many of the students and teachers highlighting repeatedly that such phenomena do happen in VET schools in general but are rare in their schools and are most often perpetrated by students and not teachers.

Another important observation relates to the findings of the online survey on how teachers and students approach the needs of LGBTIQ persons across the various countries. In some of the target countries especially, such as Bulgaria and Poland, teachers appear to be far more reluctant in approaching topics related to the needs of LGBTIQ persons in their courses. And although students are in general more inclined to consider the needs of LGBTIQ clients when offering their services, almost 40% of the students across all countries would remain uninterested or indifferent.

To that end, taking often more subtle forms, incidents of discrimination, bullying, or harassment may be regularly ignored or minimized, with VET teachers, but also students, having often limited knowledge and skills on how to identify and respond to such phenomena. This aspect was rather evident in the survey responses where an overwhelming majority of teachers and students believe that VET teachers do not have proper skills to handle such cases and support victims.

The more in-depth analysis of the comments and observations made by the participants in the interviews and focus groups appears to offer further support in this regard. Minimization of incidents, victim blaming – such as LGBTIQ students not being “provocative” – constitute few of the participants’ most noteworthy comments that were often repeated. This coupled with the evident, in some cases, restricted knowledge on the existing framework, including relevant laws, strategies, and policies, and the needs for training proposed by the participants that could offer further insights in some of the existing perceptions.

Nonetheless, a relative consensus regarding the need for the adoption of measures in the VET sector to prevent and combat phenomena such as bullying, harassment, or discrimination against LGBTIQ was observed. In particular, the organization of awareness raising and educational initiatives for students, teachers, and parents were among the most common suggestions offered by the participants in the focus groups and interviews.

The need for policies, guidelines, and protocols, as well as practical tools to address incidents was also repeatedly highlighted. Some of the participants also suggested the organization of support and empowerment activities, such students’ groups, as well as the need for LGBTIQ-inclusive training materials. Lastly, changes in the existing legal frameworks and more systematic approaches and measures on community and institutional levels were often recommended.

Within this context, through the analysis of the relevant findings, two main areas of need that could be targeted through the development of relevant training materials and the capacity building activities for VET teachers appear to emerge. The first relates to knowledge-based and awareness raising training, in terms of understanding key terms and concepts but also increasing sensitivity and awareness regarding the existing situation and the issues that LGBTIQ people face. The second concerns the development of skills and capacity building, focusing primarily on more practical aspects, such as ways to approach these issues and directly dealing with incidents of discrimination or harassment.

More specifically, the following constitute some of the proposed themes for the development of relevant training materials and activities towards increasing both awareness for prevention but also readiness for tackling such phenomena:

- Understanding of key terms and concepts.
- National and EU legal framework on discrimination/LGBTIQ rights.
- Existing anti-discrimination strategies, policies, and educational materials.
- Challenging common stereotypes and prejudices against LGBTIQ+ people.
- Identification of discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC.
- Use of appropriate/inclusive language.
- Creating LGBTIQ-inclusive VET environments.
- Introducing LGBTIQ issues and topics in class or training curricula.
- Engaging students in awareness or (peer) learning activities.
- Readiness to respond to incidents of bullying, harassment, or discrimination.
- Basic communication skills on how to approach and talk to students (including victims or perpetrators of violence).

Lastly, a few additional factors that should be taken into consideration in designing relevant training initiatives are needed for the sustainability of relevant activities, offering possibilities for systematic and continuous training or long-term impact rather than being organized sporadically. In addition, the importance of cross sectoral cooperation, with activities being organized in cooperation with LGBTIQ+ organizations and support from institutional levels should be highlighted. A final recommendation concerns the use of interactive methodologies, such as mentorship or peer learning programs, but also the organization of training activities in conjunction with awareness raising events such as debates, round tables, “awareness days”, or open discussions.

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