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AgriNext project

Proposal for flexibilization of vocational education and training (VET)

Slovenia

Partners



BC Naklo - Naklo
Biotechnical Centre



OnP - On Projects
Advising, SL



COAG Jaén -
Coordinadora de
Organizaciones Agrarias



IES Galileo - Consejería
de educación - Junta de
Andalucía



CPI - Centre for Vocational
Education



ARCTUR - Computer
Engineering, d.o.o.



SLOGA - Agricultural and
Forestry Cooperative
Society sloa Kranj, z.o.o.



TUS - Technological
University of the Shannon:
Midlands Midwest



VUKA - University College
near Karlovac



SKINK - Skink, d.o.o.

Summary

The proposed VET flexibilisation model is designed to create a sustainable ecosystem of lifelong learning in agriculture and allows for the integration of content, knowledge, skills and other activities of **multifunctional agriculture** within the ten domains of the flexibilisation model. The model is designed in the form of a sunflower and is transferable to other areas of vocational and professional education, fostering innovation, personal and professional development and enhancing the connection between the education system and the labour market to expedite adaptation to the rapidly evolving landscape of multifunctional agriculture and related industries. The model is based on an analysis of the possibilities for flexibilization of existing systems in the AgriNext partner countries (Output D2.1¹).

The AgriNext project, within the work package Flexibilisation of the school system, prepared two documents [Existing adaptations](#) and [Proposals for the flexibilisation of VET at national level](#), which were presented at the interactive consultation MODERN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR RURAL AREAS, which took place on 2 February 2024 at the Biotechnical Centre Naklo. The following participants: representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, KGZ Kranj, employers, representatives of the management of BC Naklo, representatives of the CPI, students and other interested participants (representatives of the CPI, students, students and other interested participants), gave their opinions, observations and comments.

¹ <https://www.agrinext-project.eu/en/about-the-project/results/>

Abbreviations/acronyms

CPI	Institute of the RS for Vocational Education and Training
C-VET	Continuing Vocational and Technical Education and Training
I-VET	Initial Vocational and Vocational Education and Training
KGZ	Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry
NQF	National vocational qualifications
VET	Vocational education and training (VET)
WBL	Work based learning

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1. Introduction

"In the world of the future, the illiterate will be those who do not learn how to learn."

Alvin Toffler

AgriNext, or the **Agricultural and Rural Excellence Incubator and Competence Exchange Platform**, is an Erasmus+ project. The aim of the project is to create a flexible learning environment that responds to the demand for skills on the labour market in the field of multifunctional agriculture.

The agricultural sector is facing a number of changes that require adjustments. Successful adaptation requires cross-sectoral cooperation between all key stakeholders.

The AgriNext project will facilitate an international exchange of knowledge and competencies for achieving rural excellence through innovative pedagogical approaches, lifelong learning, continuous professional learning of teachers/trainers/mentors and business incubator activities. The exchange of good practices at the international level will enable individuals to gain good, innovative ideas for personal and professional development.

The objectives of AgriNext are:

- Developing a career guidance model (GSM) that adapts quickly to the changing needs of the labour market;
- Integrating systemic change at the national level to make the school system more flexible and responsive;
- Empowering teachers to respond quickly to labour market demand;
- Establishing a cooperation system for continuous exchange between employers, teachers, and trainers;
- Creating physical and virtual environments for interaction, demonstration, development and individualisation;
- Promoting rural development and vitality, presenting the potential of multifunctional agriculture;
- Increasing digital competencies among students and teachers.

The international AgriNext project aims to establish a collaborative system of continuous exchange between employers, teachers, mentors, students and other stakeholders by creating a networking platform that enables interactive collaboration and by setting up business incubators in each partner country to create a safe environment to support innovation and project development in agriculture.

1.1. In Slovenia

The proposal for the flexibilization of VET for agriculture in Slovenia developed within the AgriNext project, focuses on the need for a flexible education system that can respond **quickly to changing labour market demands, including in the area of multifunctional agriculture**. The proposal therefore stresses the importance of the autonomy of schools to adapt their curricula to local needs and trends. A learner-centred approach, with individualised plans and support, enables pupils to enrol throughout the school year and to move between different programmes and levels of education. The modular structure of the programmes increases the choice and flexibility of learning objectives, allowing for a more individualised approach where curricula are adapted to the interests and needs of individuals.

In addition, the proposal includes various options for programme delivery, such as work-based learning and the use of modern technologies for adaptive education. The active involvement of employers (farms, agricultural cooperatives, farms with complementary activities, etc.) and other social partners is crucial to the design of educational processes, which helps to prevent early school leaving and ensures that students acquire vocational, key and general competencies. Another important part of the proposal is the establishment of a system for the evaluation and recognition of prior learning, which facilitates the transition between different educational and career pathways.

With the proposal for flexibilisation for vocational and professional education and training in Slovenia, we want to present to all those involved in the education system, especially political decision-makers, legislators and their providers, the different levels, areas and possibilities of the rapid response of the school system to the demands for knowledge, skills and competences reflected by the changes in the agricultural labour market, with a focus on multifunctional agriculture.

The document Proposal for Flexibilisation of VET in Slovenia is a summary of the analysis of the possibilities for flexibilisation of existing systems in the AgriNext partner countries and of the comments made at the Modern Development of Vocations for Rural Areas consultation, which presents ten areas in the model of VET where the education system can respond quickly and continuously to the needs for knowledge, skills and competences on the labour market in different ways and with the involvement of different providers, with a focus on multifunctional agriculture (MA).

1.2. Multifunctional Agriculture in Slovenia

In the Resolution on the strategic orientations for the development of Slovenian agriculture and food sector until 2020 - "Zagotovimo.si hrano za jutri" (securing food for tomorrow) (ReSURSKŽ), under² 1.1 Multifunctional Agriculture Facing New Challenges, it is stated that "*The European and Slovenian public is accepting this multifunctional role of agriculture. Agriculture is facing new challenges arising from the globalisation of the world economy, a growing population and the impact of climate change.*"

An agricultural holding is an organisationally and commercially integrated whole of agricultural land, forests, buildings, equipment and labour, engaged in agricultural production and managed in a unitary manner, which means that it is managed in a unitary manner in the distribution of profits and losses, regardless of the number of persons who manage it. **In addition to the main activity, a farm may also be the site of several different non-agricultural activities, for which**

² Source: <https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=RESO80>

the term multifunctional agriculture is used in Slovenia. Multifunctional farming is defined as adding value to the basic agricultural activity by introducing complementary activities based on the existing resources of the holding. The concept of multifunctional agriculture implies that agriculture has other functions than food production, such as developing rural landscapes, preserving natural and cultural heritage, supporting the rural economy and strengthening the food supply. The results show that multifunctional agriculture stabilises the economic situation of agricultural holdings and contributes to the development of the rural areas in which they are located. Complementary activity is a legal form through which farmers can enter the market.

2. Flexibilizing Vocational and Technical Education And Training

The path to a transformative and sustainable learning ecosystem.

Flexible VET systems are the pathway to a transformative and sustainable learning ecosystem. They can be transformative in the sense of promoting diverse learning pathways that follow the interests of learners (school pupils, students, formal and non-formal adult learners, people with disabilities) and sustainable in the sense of enabling lifelong learning for all those who co-create the VET system.

A flexible education system allows individuals to move between education, training and employment. This means that trainees can adapt their educational pathway to their interests and abilities, both during their training and later on when they enter their careers.

The model has been developed based on the results of an analysis of conditions and examples of flexicurity (level of legislation and implementation) in the four consortium countries and consists of 10 elements that are interlinked and complementary:

1. Flexibility in educational programming and school autonomy;
2. Flexibility in the enrolment process;
3. Allowing horizontal and vertical passage;
4. Providing a range of options for implementing programmes;
5. Splitting the programme into modules, allowing for choice, customisation and portability;
6. Integrating and developing key competencies;
7. An individualised approach to planning and delivering education;
8. Involving the social partners and responding to labour market needs;
9. Preventing early school leaving;
10. Recognition of prior learning, credit transfer and qualifications framework.

The flexibility model is designed as a sunflower, with the central part of the inflorescence consisting of a large number of individual flowers that merge. The metaphor of connectedness can also be applied to the creation of an ecosystem in which professionals, schools, teachers, learners, social partners and others reduce barriers and increase opportunity towards permeable education and training systems. Only together can we create a flexible VET system that responds to the current challenges in agriculture and related industries. This is the pathway to transformative and sustainable education and training that enables lifelong learning and the development of competencies for all involved.

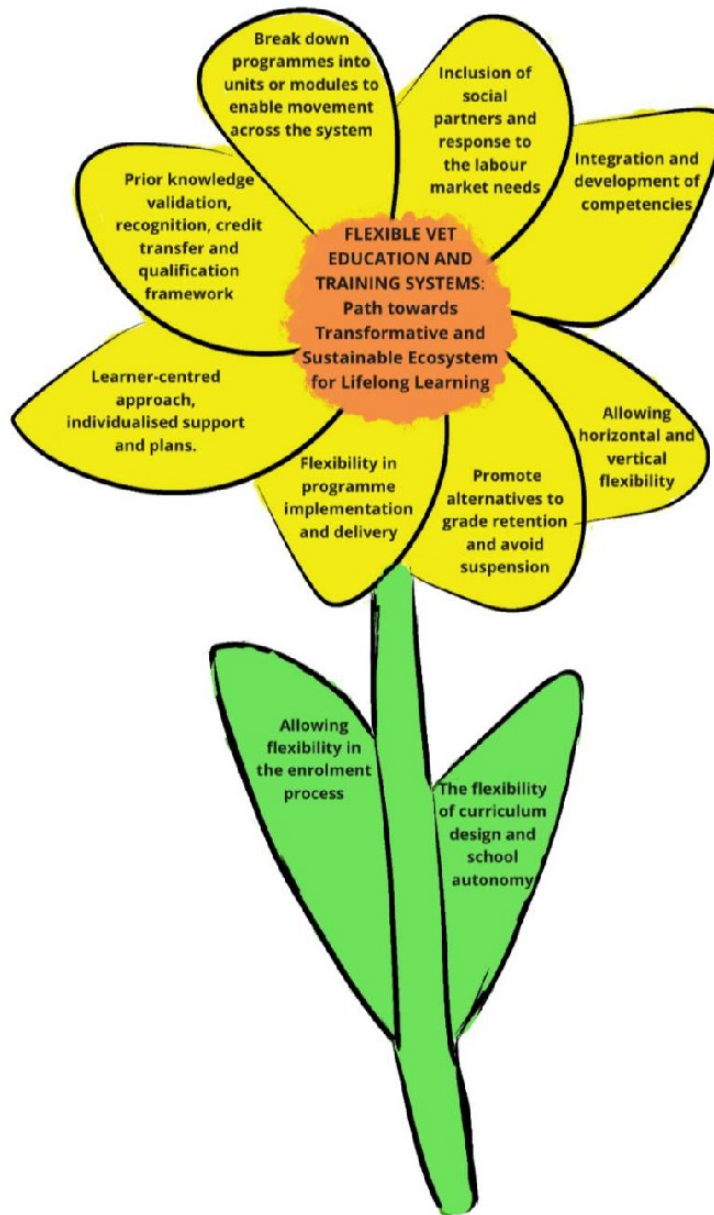


Figure 1: A model for the flexibilisation of A model for flexicising vocational and professional education and training - Sunflower.

2.1. Flexibility in curriculum design and school autonomy

Flexibility in the design of educational programmes and curricula/skills catalogues and the autonomy of schools form a stable basis for responsiveness and adaptability at many levels of the educational process. The curriculum policy is developed in dialogue with schools, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, the Slovenian Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Slovenian Centre for Vocational Education, employers, professional and trade associations and other social partners, and allows for the development of optional modules and open curriculum modules in addition to compulsory modules. The open curriculum allows schools to respond quickly to the needs of employers and learners, who can choose between different contents defined at the national or school level. In this way, they can create their mix of competencies to meet the needs of the labour market or their agricultural activity.

Adaptation of the curricula/skills catalogues of the programmes "Rural Farmer", "Agribusiness Technician", "Food and Nutrition Technician", "Rural and Landscape Management", etc., also refers to practical work-based learning (WBL). In agreement with the trainee, the mentor in the agricultural enterprise and the organiser of the practical training, the proportion of work-based learning in the secondary vocational education programmes may be increased from the compulsory 24 to 53 weeks. It is important to consider the actual needs and capabilities of employers and the knowledge and skills of trainees, rather than uncritically following policy trends and theoretical documents.

At the implementation level, schools: teachers/mentors/professors have a high degree of autonomy to integrate modern professional content and pedagogical forms and methods.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- A better balance between theory and practice is in favour of the latter.
- Systematic and ongoing consideration of employers' needs in terms of the knowledge, skills and competencies required by learners on leaving school and entering the labour market.
- Considering economic, environmental and social trends and orientations in agriculture in line with the various strategic documents: multifunctional agriculture (MA), precision agriculture, circular agriculture
- Better integration of business and education through Inter-enterprise Training Centres, incubators and other forms of cooperation at school, local and national levels.

2.2. Flexibility in the enrolment process

Rigid entry requirements and application deadlines can hinder participation in VET, so flexibility in the enrolment process is another important element that builds a solid foundation for a flexible VET system.

To enable flexible enrolment, it is necessary to train teaching staff in the use of individualised working methods, from the preparation of an individual work plan for each student, through their implementation and follow-up. This way, pupils do not have to wait a whole school year to enrol in the desired programmes or to move from one programme to another or from one level to another under certain agreed conditions.

This allows pupils, especially those who, for various reasons, did not enrol on time or later changed their minds because they were too busy, to start their education at any time during the school year.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- Improved opportunities for enrolment from post-secondary to higher education within comparable programmes within the biotechnical field, especially between different institutions (better cooperation between universities and vocational training centres).
- The results of the National Primary School Examination can be a barrier to the entry to secondary school that you want.

2.3. Flexibility in the implementation and delivery of the training program

The VET education system allows programmes to be delivered in different settings: at school and in the employer's workplace, as practical training with work, or in a dual mode of education with different employer responsibilities. Schools mustn't narrow the legal possibilities available to them when delivering a programme in their environment, but make the most of them and link up with the local, national and international environment.

Education takes place within an official school calendar, which determines the start and end of school, school holidays and other days off, but which does not coincide with the growing season, plant and animal care and processing.

Knowledge catalogues or curricula define the learning outcomes to be achieved in the course of education. Managers, teachers, trainers and others involved in education can choose different pedagogical approaches, teaching methods and content, adapting them to the needs of learners and employers.

Learning with the help of modern technology enables different methods such as distance and blended learning with different implementation models, the use of simulations, and artificial intelligence, which allows learners to adapt their time, space and pace of learning.

Inter-enterprise training centres have specially equipped classrooms and other suitable facilities that allow trainees to actively engage in practical training, and participate in business incubators and various projects (e.g. Erasmus+).

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- The school calendar should be more adaptable to the needs of certain disciplines, e.g. agriculture, nature conservation, and horticulture (e.g. the agricultural season is mainly in summer, during the holidays).
- Modular educational programmes allow for a better link between theory and practice, which is often not possible in the "desired form" due to a lack of staff, equipment and facilities, and it is, therefore, necessary to ensure the "renting" or "exchange" of staff, facilities and equipment between different schools, entrepreneurs, institutions, agencies, etc., with a focus on the development of multifunctional agriculture (e.g. invited lectures, on-farm lectures with complementary activities).
- A systemic solution to increase the involvement of mentors and entrepreneurs in the classroom and to transfer practical knowledge, skills and experience to trainees.

- Continuous motivation of training providers (teachers, trainers, etc.) to work with employers and the local community, integrating new content and teaching methods
- Provide tailored, combined teaching for trainees, especially those in agricultural professions, who are engaged in work on farms with complementary activities and other suitable workplaces (distance learning may be used during seasonal tasks)

2.4. Student-centred approach; individual support and plans

Participants learn the most when they are motivated and take an active approach to learning, critical thinking, research and practical training in as real a working environment as possible, such as a farm with complementary activities. This requires flexibility in the perception of learning and the definition of the roles of teacher/lecturer and participant/learner. A learner-centred approach requires a change in the role of the teacher. Teachers create a supportive learning environment for learners and play more of a mentor, motivator, and counsellor role. This role requires teachers to have additional didactic skills to enable an individualised approach so that participants/learners can fully acquire knowledge and develop their skills, abilities, potentials and personal qualities. To this end, they can make use of learning estates as excellent examples of outdoor classrooms that allow real-world problem solving, integrating theory and practice, while providing peer support in a safe and stimulating learning environment.

Formal agricultural education programmes in VET offer various possibilities for partial individualisation, such as **optional modules in an open curriculum** or a range of non-formal courses, employer choice in practical training and a range of compulsory electives.

Individualisation is also present in the organisation of additional professional support for pupils with special needs, teacher support, peer support, volunteer support and more.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- Individualisation can be supported by recommendations from the Ministry of Education or even by legislation, through measures such as individual learning plans.
- Structuring an individual education programme of different optional modules and other activities, with the possibility of linking up with other schools and educational institutions.
- Providing a choice of employer and a variety of work placements for practical training with work, with the possibility of a prior discussion between the trainee and the employer/farmer and the complementary activity promoter within the career centres or business incubators.
- Different ways of involving trainees/learners in the transfer of knowledge, skills and experience: peer-to-peer learning.
- Considering previously acquired knowledge, skills and competencies also in regular school programmes
- Continuous improvement and introduction of new knowledge, skills, and generally accepted principles/orientations in the form of transversal competencies (digitalisation, artificial intelligence, sustainable development, climate change)

2.5. Division of programmes into units or modules

VET programmes are modular, allowing trainees to benefit from a better link between theory and practice, and greater choice and transitions between programmes. This modularisation of programmes allows VET to adapt more quickly to changes in the labour market by providing relevant skills for employment. Modular structures can be organised as compulsory, optional, vocational or core modules.

Modular structures in VET are based on a credit system based on learning outcomes, which allows for progression and the recognition and validation of non-formal learning.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- Development of optional modules related to multifunctional agriculture in existing agricultural programmes, such as "The role and importance of multifunctional agriculture in Slovenia", "forms of complementary activities on the farm", "Entrepreneurial and managerial skills in multifunctional agriculture", "examples of good practices in multifunctional agriculture and implementation", etc.
- Modules that are not delivered due to insufficient enrolments should be delivered in an individualised, tailored manner or in cooperation with adult education, to enable trainees to acquire the desired knowledge, skills and competencies.
- Employers, teachers, trainees, the local community and other stakeholders work together to design optional modules and other activities within training programmes that allow education to be tailored to the needs of employers and the self-employed.

2.6. Inclusion and competence development

Vocational and technical education and training (VET) provides students with vocational and key competencies, combining knowledge, skills and attitudes. This enhances their employability, supports personal development and emotional intelligence, and promotes interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and active citizenship.

In developing and accessing competencies, we need to consider the following:

- Competences are individual and collective (collaborative learning and expertise).
- Competences are acquired through formal, non-formal and informal education (experiential learning). Many participants enter the agricultural sector with valuable experience and background knowledge that must be considered.
- Competence means knowing and being able to do your job. Social interaction also becomes more pronounced (team learning).
- Competencies are about flexibility, tolerance of uncertainty, responsibility and a positive attitude to change.
- Competences require continuous evaluation, assessment and development. Evaluation is both self-assessment and external assessment.
- Competences are context-dependent, so competence assessment is linked to prevailing values and the work environment.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- During education, it is necessary to develop and acquire the competencies necessary for personal growth, social skills, responsible communication and emotional intelligence.
- The competencies needed to function in the modern world are critical assessment of information, interdisciplinary thinking, critical thinking, and social inclusion.
- The competencies for working in multifunctional agriculture (MA) are those related to the development of basic agricultural industries, as well as the development and establishment of complementary activities, entrepreneurship, marketing, management and coordination of different activities, networking with the local environment, monitoring of strategies and development trends at local, national and European level.

2.7. Validation, recognition, ETCS transfer and the qualifications framework

Genuine flexibility must allow learners to transfer and build on all kinds of prior learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings, whether they have learned at school, in the workplace or in their leisure time. Recognition of prior learning means the evaluation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education or from non-formal or informal learning, which were acquired before the request for evaluation was made.

A single system for recognising prior learning (with the possibility of transfer to formal education) and the development of self-assessment tools could play an important role in making education more flexible and individualised. For trainees, "this broader view" of what is considered relevant knowledge is very important and motivating.

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) play an important role in this by classifying qualifications according to a set of levels based on learning outcomes. The NQF levels reflect what the holder of a certificate or diploma should know, understand and be able to do. By linking or 'referencing' NQFs to the EQF, learners and employers can compare the levels of qualifications awarded at home and in other countries.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- A single system for recognising prior learning that can be transferred into formal education is an important element in making education more flexible and individualised. For trainees, "this broader view" of what counts as relevant knowledge is very important and motivating.
- Developing self-evaluation tools for acquired knowledge and skills

2.8. Involving the social partners and responding to labour market needs

Involving the social partners in VET systems helps to improve labour market outcomes and address employers' needs for knowledge, skills and competencies. Cooperation with the social partners is planned strategically and in the long term. The social partners play an important role in policy and decision-making by participating in the design of specific programmes, the development of vocational standards, curriculum design, apprenticeships, work-based learning, assessment, etc.

Their active participation in the VET system can:

- Effectively mediate between work and education.
- Help to identify new professional standards and qualification requirements in companies.
- Ensure that vocational and professional qualifications are recognised within the country and, increasingly, beyond its borders.
- Help to design new educational programmes and promote learning processes in schools, dual systems, etc.
- By mentoring students in practical training through work or by mentoring them in projects, diplomas can contribute to the development of well-trained future employees and enable the development of some competencies that cannot be acquired in agricultural schools.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- Involving mentors in practical training through work in monitoring the career paths of trainees.
- Systemic involvement of mentors in mentoring and training programmes for teachers of technical and practical subjects on farms with complementary activities and other suitable workplaces.
- Systematic follow-up of students on their career paths, including after leaving school (obtaining consent for follow-up to protect personal data).

2.9. Allowing horizontal and vertical flexibility and passability

There should be no restrictions on the progression of I-VET and C-VET. The transition between different education sectors (formal, non-formal, informal) and institutions should be systematically enabled and facilitated. Through lifelong learning, we develop professional and key competencies that enable us to advance in our respective agricultural sectors, remain competitive, solve professional and private problems creatively, and be socially inclusive. Participants in training should be able to move between different levels at their discretion: shorter and longer training programmes in secondary vocational education, secondary technical education, post-secondary education, higher education and adult education. The NQF system allows the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge for a whole range of NQFs that live in practice etc.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- Linkage agreements between training providers (full-time education, adult education) and individual learning plans that consider the educational levels, qualifications and valued non-formal and informal learning acquired, in line with the trainee's career path.

2.10. Preventing early school leaving

Options to prevent repetition include individual learning support, small group learning, tutoring or counselling, cooperative learning, peer support, increased practical training with an employer, parental involvement, positive teacher-student relationships, participation in extracurricular activities, support from the class community, etc.

Repeating a year should only be used in exceptional circumstances because of its proven negative effects on learning. If, due to specific circumstances, this does happen, we suggest monitoring progress and providing activities that promote the development of the social skills of repeaters to ensure that repetition has a positive impact on students.

Proposals made at the consultation included:

- A pedagogical contract between the school, the learner and the guardian (if the learner is not of legal age) to give the learner additional time to complete his/her obligations, to provide various forms of support and to draw up an individual education plan.
- An individual teaching contract between the school, the student and the parents (not yet of legal age) and the employer, allows for work-based learning with a higher proportion of the teaching taking place in the employer's workplace.
- Organising peer support within the classroom community and at the school level.

3. Conclusion

The rapid development of technologies such as digitalisation and artificial intelligence, climate change, sustainable development and its objectives within individual agricultural sectors, the development of agricultural technologies themselves, an inclusive and just society, a stable food supply are all contemporary demands that we need to continuously keep up with and adapt to. At the same time, Slovenian farms are very small and mostly located in less-favoured areas (76% of the total agricultural area), which means that the number of employees per farm is small and specialisation is not possible. This means that farms are forced to diversify their agricultural production and often also their processing (forced by their small size and limited farming possibilities), as well as the promotion and sale of their products. To keep pace with these changes, which are reflected in the labour market, it is necessary for the vocational and professional education system to continuously respond and adapt to new technologies, new ways of marketing and communicating with consumers, etc., and for all those involved in this system. First and foremost, teachers, trainers, school management and other educational staff, employer mentors and trainees. All other stakeholders, such as political decision-makers, the local environment and, last but not least, parents, should be supportive and helpful.

The consultation on the **CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TRAINING** highlighted some general recommendations that follow the trends of modern society:

- **Individualisation and cooperation with stakeholders are needed:** more communication and cooperation, long-term networking, involving employers in the learning process (representing employers, presenting their activities, etc.) and allowing trainees to choose practical training or VET according to their interests within career centres and other networking formats (e.g. incubator). Mentors - placement providers must be pedagogically qualified to work with trainees (school pupils, students, adult trainees).
- **The importance of developing key competencies** Trainees acquire key competencies in their regular education and in the work environment, in particular, to take responsibility, develop emotional intelligence and critically assess information.
- **Open educational programmes with an open curriculum defined at the school level should be maintained as they allow** planning in cooperation with different stakeholders (learners, employers, local community, experts and scientists, etc.). The open curriculum can also include the results (such as curricula developed for shorter educational programmes) from different international projects, as well as students attending courses aimed at adult education.
- **Creating a learning community:** building good relationships between teachers and learners and fostering a supportive learning environment such as fostering classroom community, acceptance of all learners, emphasis on peer support, respectful communication, teamwork, etc.
- **Supporting teachers to cope with professional and daily stress:** teachers face daily challenges of decision-making, inappropriate behaviour and lack of motivation of students. Adequate professional support would contribute to their well-being, work and motivation. Shifting responsibility for learning to students and linking general and key competencies to vocational and professional competencies can increase motivation to learn and relieve the burden on teachers.
- **Raising awareness of the present and future relevance of the profession:** schools need to create a **stimulating** learning environment and have **well-equipped classrooms and**

workshops for tutorials and practical training. Continuous promotion of careers is important, with a focus on green jobs and opportunities to create new career paths. The following project activities (Green Job = Dream Job and business incubator) will support these opportunities.

