

Getting Skills Right



Agile Occupational and Training Standards for Responsive Skills Policies



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Foreword

Occupational and training standards define the skills, abilities, and attitudes necessary for individuals to perform competently in a given job. They form the backbone of recruitment benchmarks and job-related training programmes. Keeping them up to date is therefore crucial to develop a skilled, adaptable workforce that drives economic growth and innovation. Responsive standards also enable policy makers to develop targeted measures that promote inclusive growth, reduce unemployment, and increase competitiveness, fostering a resilient economy capable of navigating the challenges of the 21st-century.

Yet, despite their importance, developing agile occupational and training standards that can keep pace with rapidly evolving economies and societies remains a challenge. To help policy makers improve the quality, relevance, and attractiveness of job-related education and training, this report provides a novel comparison of government efforts in selected OECD member countries to ensure the timely and efficient production of agile, user-friendly, and responsive standards. It highlights good practices from Flanders, France, French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

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Table of contents

Foreword	3
Executive summary	6
1 Setting the scene	8
2 A digital platform for the development of standards in France	10
Context	10
Production, update and use of occupational standards	11
Production, update and evaluation of certification standards	12
3 Strong stakeholder collaboration in Flanders	13
Context	13
Production, update and use of occupational standards	14
Production, update and evaluation of training standards and vocational qualifications	15
4 The central role of employers in the United Kingdom	16
Context	16
Production, update and use of occupational standards	16
Production, update, and evaluation of training standards for apprenticeships	19
5 A dedicated organisation for occupational and training standards in French-speaking Belgium	21
Context	21
Production, update and use of occupational and training standards	22
6 The close link between occupational and training standards in Germany	24
Context	24
Production, update and use of occupational and training standards	24
7 Similar standards for different linguistic regions in Switzerland	27
Context	27
Production, update and use of occupational and training standards	27
8 Key takeaways for agile occupational and training standards	30
The production of occupational and training standards should be timely and efficient	30
Occupational and training standards should be labour market relevant, up-to-date, agile, and user-friendly	31

Training standards should be closely linked to occupational standards	32
Effective quality assurance and oversight mechanisms should be established	33
References	35
Notes	38
FIGURES	
Figure 1. Overview of the production process for occupational and training standards by SFMQ	22
Figure 2. Overview of the process to develop or update an occupational standard in Germany	26

Executive summary

As job roles evolve and new professions emerge, keeping occupational and training standards up to date and relevant is key to ensure that education and training programmes remain responsive to these changes and to foster a skilled workforce that is agile and capable of meeting the dynamic demands of the job market, with large benefits at both individual and societal level. For individuals, updated standards enhance labour market mobility and facilitate career progression, as workers can more easily transition between jobs when their skills are aligned with recognised occupational standards, reducing frictional unemployment and underemployment. For employers, a good alignment of skill requirements with technological advancements and industry trends boosts firms' innovation and competitiveness, since workers are equipped with the latest tools and knowledge necessary to navigate contemporary challenges. From a public policy perspective, maintaining up-to-date occupational and training standards supports economic growth by reducing skill mismatches and unemployment, as decision makers can use these standards to design effective training programmes and educational curricula, thereby promoting a more efficient allocation of human capital.

This report seeks to provide policy makers and relevant stakeholders with key insights on how to improve the elaboration and update of occupational and training standards with a view to mitigating persistent labour shortages and skill mismatches across different sectors. To select relevant good practices, the report identifies five criteria that are at the foundation of efficient standard setting: (1) responsiveness to labour market needs, (2) timeliness, (3) agility, (4) user-friendliness, and (5) quality. Based on these selection criteria, this report discusses the case studies of Flanders, France, French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

In Flanders, occupational standards are included in the “Competent” database. The content of the database is managed and updated by the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB) but the database is a joint product of the Belgian public employment services Actiris, ADG, Bruxelles Formation, Forem and VDAB. Standards are periodically reviewed to ensure they remain relevant and responsive to changing labour market needs. Updates are informed by analyses of labour market data, including online job vacancies.

In France, occupational standards are organised through the ROME system (*Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*), which helps match job offers with job seekers, and is managed by the French Public Employment Service, France Travail. The recent transition to ROME 4.0 marks a significant update, with a shift to a skills-based approach to meet evolving labour market demands. A dedicated online platform, where sectoral funds, social partners, training providers and other key actors can suggest updates, review and provide feedback on draft profiles prepared by France Travail, has been developed to facilitate stakeholders' involvement.

In French-speaking Belgium, a dedicated organisation, the Service Francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications (SFMQ), has been established to manage the creation and update of both occupational and training standards. The SFMQ organises and supervises the whole process, but expert groups composed of employers hiring for the specific occupation and training providers offering the corresponding training programmes are tasked with the drafting of occupational and training standards, respectively.

In Germany, occupational standards serve as the basis for curriculum development in vocational schools and company-based training. They also guide the assessment and certification of trainees, which are standardised in all industries. This approach ensures that training content is harmonised across regions and companies. The organisation in charge of developing the standards is the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). Based on extensive research, BIBB prepares a draft proposal for occupational and training standards which is then subject to consultation and discussion with relevant stakeholders and social partners.

In Switzerland, occupational and training standards are combined in the same legal document, an ordinance that defines skills required in the occupation and contains a training plan outlining the necessary qualification(s). Ordinances are legally binding and applicable in all regions of Switzerland to ensure recognition and validation of skills in a coherent manner and promote labour mobility. The State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) oversees the overall process for the development and update of occupational and training standards, and representatives from all linguistic regions are involved.

In the United Kingdom, occupational standards are co-created alongside training standards for apprenticeships and a set of indicators to measure their quality, to ensure that training curricula align with labour market needs. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) is responsible for overseeing the overall process, but the development and revision of occupational and apprenticeship standards are the responsibility of trailblazer groups composed of employers who intend to hire apprentices in that field.

Several lessons can be drawn from the case studies:

- It is essential that the production process of occupational and training standards is timely and efficient. To this end, the tasks and responsibilities of the main entity in charge of the standards, as well as those of other relevant stakeholders, should be clearly defined and allocated. All case studies also highlight the importance of well-structured and transparent processes, with explicitly listed procedures and steps. To ensure the timeliness of such a demanding process, adequate human and financial resources must be allocated.
- Occupational and training standards should be labour market relevant and user-friendly. For this, the involvement of a diverse mix of stakeholders is crucial, including the active participation of employers which is necessary for standards to accurately reflect their skill requirements. Involving end-users, particularly training providers, in the process helps ensure that standards are accessible, intuitive, and user-friendly.
- A systematic link between occupational and training standards ensures that the training offer effectively meets labour market needs. The case studies examined show that such connection is stronger when a single organisation is responsible for the development and maintenance of both standards. Moreover, the link can be reinforced if the two sets of standards are prepared by the same group of experts.
- Sound oversight mechanisms are essential to foster transparency, accountability, quality of the standards and trust among stakeholders. Countries can adopt different types of quality assurance frameworks, including regulatory mechanisms imposing minimum quality requirements (e.g. quality labels or external audits) and internal monitoring tools.

Overall, the good practices presented in this report can help practitioners and policy makers reflect on and improve their own system for the production of occupational and training standards, to ensure that they remain of high quality and that their production is timely and efficient.

1 Setting the scene

Occupational standards are recognised documents that define the skills, abilities and attitudes that workers in an occupation must possess to effectively carry out their tasks (OECD, 2023^[1]). Similarly, training standards serve as crucial benchmarks that define a course's learning objectives and make sure that learners have developed the necessary skills and knowledge to be competent in a given occupation. Employers rely on these standards to define tasks and responsibilities, set recruitment criteria, and develop internal training programmes. This ensures that employees have the requisite skills and knowledge to boost firms' productivity and innovation. For individuals, standards provide clear guidelines on the skills and competencies needed to succeed in various occupations, thereby serving as a roadmap for career development. For policy makers, occupational and training standards help address skill mismatches.

Over the past years, OECD economies have faced important shifts – such as fast advances in artificial intelligence and urgent calls for a net-zero transition – that brought along rapid changes in the skills needed to adapt and succeed in the labour market. In this constantly evolving context, governments need to step up their efforts to keep occupational and training standards relevant. In particular, the timely production of occupational and training standards requires a clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities, well-structured processes, adequate human and financial resources and strong collaboration between relevant stakeholders to be able to continuously review and update standards to reflect the realities of labour markets. It is also crucial that the formulation and revision of these standards are underpinned by sound data and evidence on labour market needs, including through skills assessment and anticipation exercises, while considering the context in which the profession takes place, including its economic, regulatory, and learning environments to ensure the alignment of training provision to labour market needs.

Yet, policy makers are offered little guidance on how to produce high-quality occupational and training standards. The fragmented and decentralised nature of these processes, coupled with the multitude of stakeholders involved – including government agencies, industry associations, education and training institutions, and professional bodies – make information gathering and benchmarking difficult. Additionally, the methods and criteria for establishing standards can differ widely between countries and even within regions of the same country, further complicating the landscape.

This report represents a pioneering effort to compile and analyse the diverse approaches to occupational and training standards production in Europe, marking a significant and innovative contribution to understanding how to improve the relevance of workforce development practices to labour market needs. Good practice examples are identified based on the following five criteria:

- *Responsiveness to labour market needs* entails that occupational and training standards reflect the realities of labour markets and are based on an analysis of current and future skill needs in various sectors. Ensuring that standards are responsive to labour market requirements is key to maintaining a skilled and competitive workforce and meeting the dynamic needs of employers.
- *Timeliness* means that the production and update of standards occurs within a reasonable timeframe. Timeliness is vital in the context of constantly evolving labour markets, as it ensures that the skills and competencies they encompass are current and relevant. Delayed updates or slow response to changing trends can lead to a widening skill gap, where the workforce skills are outdated or misaligned with market needs.

- *Agility* means that standards remain relevant even after slight changes in the tasks performed by workers, for instance because of the introduction of new machinery. A certain degree of agility implies that standards require less frequent updates. Yet, while it is important that occupational and training standards are not too rigid and allow enough flexibility to adapt to rapid changes in the labour market, they should also provide clear information on required skills and knowledge.
- *User-friendliness* enables accessibility and practical utility of standards. User-friendly occupational and training standards facilitate better decision-making in career development, curriculum design, and workforce planning. By presenting information in a standardised, accessible format, they also help maintain consistency across various training programmes and institutions.
- *Quality assurance and oversight mechanisms* play an important role to ensure that occupational and training standards are labour market relevant, timely, agile, and user-friendly and foster accountability and transparency. Trust between involved stakeholders contributes to strong ownership and buy-in and facilitates co-operation.

Based on these criteria and following documentary research and semi-structured interviews with government representatives and experts, six case studies have been selected to inform the content of the report, namely Flanders, France, French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In its analysis, this report pays particular attention to production timeframes, procedures to revise existing standards, and the way different stakeholders are involved in these processes. The preliminary findings and analyses presented in the report have been also discussed with European experts at a peer-learning workshop which was held in Brussels in January 2024.

The rest of this report is structured as follows. Sections 2 to 7 present the case studies in detail. Each of these case studies includes concrete examples and insights on the production, update, and use of occupational and training standards. The report analyses processes, stakeholders, timelines, governance, funding arrangements and requirements for the production, update and use of occupational and training standards and explores the links between these and education and training. Section 8 concludes with a hands-on discussion on the key considerations that policy makers need to reflect on to improve their current standard-setting systems.

2 A digital platform for the development of standards in France

Context

In France, occupational standards are centrally organised through the ROME system (*Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*), which is a comprehensive repository of jobs, developed and regularly updated by the French Public Employment Service (*France Travail*, formerly *Pôle Emploi*). This system classifies jobs into broader categories and includes occupational standards that provide job definitions, skills required, working contexts, and pathways for professional mobility. The ROME framework is a crucial instrument to help match job offers with job seekers in the labour market (Pôle emploi, 2023^[2]).

In March 2023, a new version of ROME (i.e. ROME 4.0) was introduced, representing a significant update of the system (Pôle emploi, 2023^[2]). In fact, ROME 4.0 proposes a skills-based approach to address the evolving needs of the labour market, particularly in response to technological advancements and changing employment trends and aims to alleviate the high recruitment pressures that are observed in the French labour market. The new system includes revisions to the classification of occupations and recognises new emerging professions in order to remain relevant and responsive to the dynamic nature of the labour market. It also provides a structured and shared language for skills by developing a new nomenclature that facilitates access and understanding of the main competencies in demand on the market.

To enhance the clarity of job descriptions, the ROME 4.0 system incorporates nuanced classifications such as “principal” and “emerging” skills and knowledge (Pôle emploi, 2023^[2]). A “principal” skill is deemed indispensable for a role, independent of the working environment. On the other hand, an “emerging” skill is one that surfaces in response to the ongoing shifts in ecological, digital, and demographic landscapes. Recognised by industry experts, these skills are flagged as increasingly important for certain jobs, even though they may not be fully established in current roles. This helps job seekers and training providers anticipate the training needed to develop skills that will be required in the future.

The new system is also aimed at helping recruiters streamline the hiring process. In fact, ROME 4.0 provides a precise definition of job roles and skill requirements, leading to a more efficient and targeted search for suitable candidates. Not only does the ability to better describe the position and the expected skills yield a more qualified pool of applicants but it also facilitates the adaptation and development of employees’ skills to meet the roles’ evolving demands. The breadth of the ROME system also allows for a wider, more inclusive applicant pool, welcoming individuals from diverse backgrounds and work histories, thereby enhancing the potential for finding the right match for each job.

ROME 4.0 may serve as a useful resource also for job seekers, as it enables them to clearly articulate their skills and experiences, enhancing their confidence and efficacy in taking action towards their career goals. The system supports applicants in highlighting their competencies during interviews, opening new professional pathways, and framing their experiences as transferable skills that can pivot them into new career trajectories. Furthermore, the system guides individuals in identifying the most pertinent training, thereby carving out a clear pathway for skill development and career advancement.

Currently, ROME 4.0 contains 532 job descriptions along with a new nomenclature of skills organised into 6 areas of know-how and soft skills as well as work contexts and opportunities for professional mobility (Pôle emploi, 2023^[2]). It includes 491 macro competencies and 6 000 associated specific skills. The macro competencies allow identifying related occupations through AI-supported semantic proximity analysis while the specific skills help contextualise the macro competencies. However, the current number of job descriptions is insufficient to describe all occupations comprehensively. The goal of the French PES is to expand these standards to up to 2 500, ensuring more precision and homogeneity, especially in terms of granularity, level of details, terminology, qualification levels, type of skills included, and better alignment with training offers. Hence, *France Travail* is planning to improve ROME 4.0 by producing more than 2 000 new job descriptions over the next years by drawing on the expertise and occupational standards of ROME partners, including education and training institutions and professional branches and unions (Pôle emploi, 2023^[3]).

Contrary to occupational standards, the creation and update of training standards in France is not centrally organised and training providers are free to use a standard of their choice. Certification standards are, however, regulated and included in the official directory of professional certifications, known as *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* (RNCP). The link between occupational and certification standards – i.e. between the ROME system and RNCP – has been historically weak, although the recent reform of the ROME system may allow for a better mapping between the two databases in the future.

Production, update and use of occupational standards

Stakeholders

The French PES plays the leading role in managing the development and update of the occupational standards. Yet, it collaborates closely with several stakeholders throughout the process. Employers and sectoral representatives provide real-time insights into job requirements and the skills needed within their industries. Operators of Competencies (OPCOs)¹ contribute to the definition of occupational standards by providing information on jobs requirements that they collect via observatories of the member sectors (OPCO, 2023^[4]). Different research institutions and various occupational analysts also contribute to the empirical analysis and definition of job roles and competencies. Furthermore, training and educational institutions, in particular those that play a structural role in certification such as the Association for Adult Vocational Training (AFPA), ensure that learning curricula align with content of the occupational standards. Finally, trade unions and professional associations represent the workers' interests and contribute to the dialogue about skills and working conditions reflected in the standards. Other key actors include the Association for the Employment of Executives (APEC) for the definition of senior positions and the Directorate-General of Public Finances (DGFIP) of the French Ministry of Economy for public sector jobs.

Process

The creation of a new occupational standard begins with a thorough analysis of the labour market, which includes identifying emerging sectors, technological trends, and shifts in employment patterns. This is typically informed by labour market studies, employment statistics, and forecasts that highlight skills in demand, generally undertaken by OPCOs.

Once the background research has been conducted, partners work on the creation of new occupational standards and on the update of existing ones using an online platform set up by the French PES. This collaborative platform allows stakeholders to propose their own occupational standards and links them with ROME 4.0 and standardised competencies. With inputs from all relevant stakeholders through the collaborative platform, a preliminary occupational standard is developed by *France Travail*. This draft

includes detailed job descriptions, skills and competencies needed, qualifications required, career progression paths, and related training and education opportunities.

The preliminary draft is then subject to a consultation process, where stakeholders are invited to provide feedback. This iterative process ensures that the draft accurately represents the occupation in the context of the French labour market. Once consensus is reached, the occupational standard is finalised and it receives a specific ROME code to facilitate its classification and retrieval within the system. While the content of occupational standards can be proposed by all actors involved and the process to create an occupational standard is collaborative, the decision on job titles is up to *France Travail*, that aims for homogeneous job titles in terms of skill requirements and qualification levels. The finalised standard is then published online making it accessible to employers, job seekers, and learning institutions.

To maintain their relevance, occupational standards undergo regular reviews and updates by the French PES. Changes in the labour market, such as the introduction of new technologies or methods, can prompt revisions to ensure that the standards remain a reliable resource. Updates can also be proposed by other stakeholders via the online platform.

Production, update and evaluation of certification standards

Stakeholders

The main stakeholder involved in the development of certification standards is *France Compétences*. Created in 2019, *France Compétences* is the single national authority for regulating and financing vocational education and training and apprenticeships. One of its tasks is to manage the *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* (RNCP) – which is a comprehensive, official directory of professional certifications in France – and to ensure that certifications listed in the RNCP are relevant, high-quality, and aligned with the current and future needs of the labour market. Training providers are also key actors as they can directly propose their own certifications to be listed in the RNCP.

Process

When training providers want to propose their own certifications, they need to apply for their certification to be listed in the RNCP justifying that this does indeed correspond to a new certification (i.e. that it does not overlap with an existing one). They must provide a certification standard, including a framework of tasks and activities, a skills framework, and an assessment profile. They must also provide the associated ROME code. With the previous versions of ROME, this was not obvious as one RNCP code could correspond to multiple ROME codes and vice versa. On the other hand, with ROME 4.0 the mapping between RNCP codes and ROME code will be easier as occupational codes now correspond to a single qualification.

3 Strong stakeholder collaboration in Flanders

Context

In Flanders, occupational standards are included in the “Competent” database (VDAB, 2023^[5]). The content of the database is managed and updated by the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB) but the database is a joint product of the Belgian public employment services Actiris, ADG, Bruxelles Formation, Forem and VDAB, under the Synerjob partnership.² Competent is initiated by the social partners and builds on inputs from various stakeholders, including sectoral training funds and associations. Competent is used to develop labour market tools (orientation, matching, training and education) and a labour market monitoring framework (vacancies, jobseeker profiles, labour shortages).

The origins of Competent date back to 2012. The Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) launched its initial version with 537 occupational standards covering a wide spectrum of the labour market (CEDEFOP, 2023^[6]). These standards were based on the French ROME system (more specifically ROME v3), which was expanded and adapted to fit the Belgian and Flemish regulations. SERV partnered with VDAB to ensure the ongoing relevance and approval of the standards by social partners. Since then, VDAB has been using Competent as the basis for their services, including guiding jobseekers, providing training, and carrying out automatic job matching (CEDEFOP, 2023^[7]).

In 2015, all public employment services in Belgium agreed to use the Competent database in their labour market services to support interregional labour mobility. Since January 2021, the Dutch Public Employment Service (UWV) has also based its occupational standards and services on Competent by tailoring it to the specific context of the Netherlands. Having a common set of competencies allows for exchange of CVs and vacancies between the Synerjob partners.

While the Competent database builds on the French ROME system as well as the European classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO), it remains unique in that it adopts a practical and flexible approach and provides short and clear formulations. An occupational standard in the Competent database contains two types of competencies:

- Essential skills and knowledge that are required in every position.
- Optional skills and knowledge that are specific to the work context and may not be required in all positions.

Skills could also be technical or soft, the latter being skills that describe how one works and interacts with others. Some occupational standards also indicate mandatory or frequently requested certificates or legally required diplomas for the profession. The latest version of the database (Competent 2.0) includes approximately 600 professions featuring 4 000 technical skills, 4 000 knowledge areas and 26 soft skills (VDAB, 2023^[5]). The compact nature of the Competent database facilitates frequent reviews and updates.

The Competent database is a central part of the Flemish Government's policies in the field of education and lifelong learning (VDAB, 2023^[5]). Linkages between occupational standards, training standards, and vocational qualifications are ensured by anchoring Competent in the existing legislation for vocational education. In particular, the 2009 Decree on Flemish Qualification Structure formally establishes a link between occupational standards (now part of the Competent database) and professional qualifications. In order to minimise potential discrepancies between training standards and the taxonomy of occupations and skills included in the Competent database, VDAB collaborates closely with the department of education and the possibility to use an AI-based conversion tool between Competent and the Flemish qualification structure (FQS) is under investigation.

Production, update and use of occupational standards

Stakeholders

The development and revision of occupational standards are managed by VDAB through a collaborative process which mainly includes the Synerjob partners, the social partners (employer organisations and trade unions) and sectors (CEDEFOP, 2023^[7]). Synerjob participates in the process of defining, creating, and updating the occupational standards in the database, bringing a comprehensive regional perspective reflecting the realities of labour markets in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels Capital Region. Employer organisations and trade unions initiate and support the process. Sectoral training funds, associations, federations and expert organisations are responsible for ensuring the representativeness of the industry, including small and medium enterprises.

Process

Any user of Competent, including job seekers and employers, can request VDAB to create new occupational standards in order to respond to new or emerging labour market needs. In this case, VDAB considers the request by consulting stakeholders and by analysing labour market data and insights from AI dashboards and tools and, when the request is relevant, it formally starts the process. First, the Competent team prepares a proposal by analysing similar standards in the French ROME database, international databases such as ESCO, existing sectoral profiles, professional qualifications, labour market information, and insights from AI dashboards and tools (VDAB, 2023^[5]). A draft proposal for a new occupational standard is then submitted to stakeholder consultations and quality control before being finalised and published in the Competent database. The quality control is assured through three main channels: (1) internal quality control carried out by dedicated teams at the VDAB; (2) feedback from sector contacts; and (3) feedback from Synerjob partners. From the moment of initiating the request to the final approval, the whole process can take between 3-6 months depending on the number of meetings and consultations required and the availability of stakeholders.

Nevertheless, the bulk of the work carried out to maintain the Competent database consists in updating existing occupational standards rather than creating new ones. The updating process follows a similar approach. The occupational standards included in Competent are reviewed four times a year by the VDAB and updated when deemed necessary. The standards are revised in alignment with:

- Information provided by the sector;
- Updates to ROME v3 and ESCO;
- Updates to existing qualifications and trainings;
- Feedback from users and stakeholders;
- Labour market monitoring and analysis, including the analysis of online job vacancies and insights from AI dashboards and tools.

Relevant information and updates are processed and translated into a proposal for stakeholder consultations and quality control. The approved updates are then reflected into the database.

Production, update and evaluation of training standards and vocational qualifications

Stakeholders

The development and updating of training standards and vocational qualifications in Flanders involve a collaborative effort among various stakeholders and is co-ordinated by the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (AHOVOKS). VDAB is an important player in the development and update of training standards and vocational qualifications, ensuring that they align with the current and future needs of the labour market. More precisely, VDAB participates in the development of training standards by providing figures and expertise on occupations, skills and knowledge, and labour market trends. Furthermore, it also acts as a training provider and offers flexible, short-term non-qualifying training programmes, which allow job seekers to integrate the labour market quickly. It also publishes calls for tenders to outsource the provision of some training programmes to external providers that have obtained an accreditation. Education and training institutions (such as the Adult Education Centres) are responsible for providing the actual learning opportunities, aligning their curricula with the established training standards.

Employer organisations provide crucial industry insights and feedback on the skills and competencies needed in various sectors. They ensure that training programmes are aligned with industry requirements and job market demands. For their part, sectoral funds and associations are responsible for assessing skill needs within firms in specific sectors, including SMEs. They provide sector-specific insights and data which are crucial for tailoring training programmes to the unique requirements of different industries. Trade unions represent the workforce's interests in the development of training standards and vocational qualifications. They ensure that the training programmes are designed to enhance employability and career progression for workers, advocating for fair and relevant training opportunities.

Process

The development of training standards in Flanders starts with the creation of a working group that will be responsible for drafting the standard. The group includes representatives from the specific industry, including employers and trade unions with relevant knowledge, and in some cases VDAB. The drafting of a training standard relies on information from the Competent database, as occupational standards contain job-specific skills that are then translated into competencies in training standards. Sectoral associations review and provide feedback on the draft and may add information from their own sources. The final approval often involves a regulatory body or a consortium of stakeholders that make sure that the standard meets both educational and industry needs. Once approved, the standard is implemented in education and training programmes. Training standards and qualifications are periodically reviewed to ensure they remain relevant and responsive to changing market needs. When new skills and roles emerge in the labour market, the Competent database is updated, which in turn may trigger revisions in training standards and qualifications.

4 The central role of employers in the United Kingdom

Context

In the United Kingdom, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) is responsible for overseeing the coherence of technical education provision and ensuring that the range and availability of apprenticeships and technical qualifications are appropriate, and as such, it manages the production of occupational and training standards. Established in 2017, IfATE is funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and is an Arm's Length Body of the Department for Education (IfATE, 2023^[8]).

The 2021 White Paper “Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity” introduced a series of reforms to the UK’s further education and technical training system, including measures to guarantee closer ties of technical education to labour market needs, notably through a strong involvement of employers in the production of occupational standards (Department for Education, 2021^[9]). As a result, between 2021 and 2023, IfATE collaborated with thousands of large and small employers to develop over 600 occupational standards – called occupational routes – across 15 sectors, ranging from agriculture to construction and hospitality (IfATE, 2023^[8]). These routes are brought together in 15 occupational maps, which help employers and individuals understand pathways for career progression and how occupations at different levels link together (IfATE, 2023^[10]).

Occupational standards are essential for technical and higher technical education in the United Kingdom, since they provide a detailed description of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) required to be proficient in the specific position (IfATE, 2023^[11]). As a result, they serve as comprehensive guides to define the content of training. In particular, they are used for:

- Curriculum development: Education and training providers, as well as employers, use occupational standards to design curricula and training programmes (including T-Levels)³ that align with the requirements of specific occupations.
- Assessment: Occupational standards guide the development of methods and tools to evaluate whether individuals have acquired the necessary KSBs to excel in a particular occupation.
- Apprenticeship creation: When developing a new apprenticeship, occupational standards must be met to ensure its quality and relevance (IfATE, 2023^[12]).

Production, update and use of occupational standards

Stakeholders

Under the responsibility of IfATE, the development and revision of occupational standards are managed by so-called trailblazer groups, composed of employers who represent the occupation and intend to employ apprentices in that field (IfATE, 2023^[13]). Trailblazer groups can create a new apprenticeship for a specific

occupation, which entails drafting the occupational standard and end-point assessment plan (EPA), as well as gathering evidence on the potential cost of training and assessment.⁴ They can also update existing apprenticeships as necessary, following for example a route review or a request for changes.

The role and requirements for the development of occupational standards and apprenticeships are defined in detail by IfATE (IfATE, 2023^[13]). These requirements stipulate that a trailblazer group should convene a group of employers recognised by IfATE and representative of all categories, including small employers. Non-employers, like apprentices and representatives of training providers and end-point assessment organisations, may also be involved, but employers have the final say in the development process. Trailblazer chair (or co-chairs) plays a significant role in leading the group and facilitating communication with IfATE. IfATE provides support to these groups through Product Managers (PMs) who guide them throughout the process. PMs facilitate communication and collaboration among stakeholders.

Participation in a trailblazer group is voluntary without any compensation, which can sometimes create challenges for small employers to dedicate necessary time and resources to take part in the process. However, efforts are made to ensure that several small enterprises are represented and that the group reflects their specific needs. More specifically, the Trailblazer Chair must ensure that the group's membership remains representative of the employers likely to use the apprenticeship in terms of sector, size, and geographical spread. IfATE needs to approve the composition of the trailblazer group and can request that specific members are added to the group (IfATE, 2023^[14]).

Trailblazer groups are not only responsible for the development of occupational standards, but they also need to remain active once the occupational standard has been approved, to respond to modification requests, and to update the standard when necessary.

In addition to trailblazer groups, 15 route panels (one for each major business sector) help ensure the labour market relevance of occupational standards. Route panels are composed of important employers in an industry and provide a strategic view of skill needs in their sector. They review and make recommendations on the quality and relevance of standards for their sector.

Process

When recognising the need for a new occupational standard (for example when they would like to hire apprentices in job roles for which no standard exists yet), or when an existing occupational standard needs to be updated, a group of employers, the so-called trailblazer group, gathers and initiate the process by sending an enquiry to IfATE, containing the title of the proposed occupational standard. The enquiry is forwarded to one Product Manager tasked to support the trailblazer group for the development of the occupational proposal. (IfATE, 2023^[13]). An occupational proposal includes the following key elements:

- **Occupation profile:** The heart of the occupational proposal is the occupation profile, which presents an overview of the occupation, typical job titles, and a set of duties. It must provide concise yet informative statements that shed light on the occupation's purpose, typical interactions, and responsibilities. Readability and gender-neutrality of the language used is also important.
- **Progression routes:** Identifying typical progression routes for individuals in the occupation plays a crucial role in helping individuals identify career opportunities and goals. These routes can be at the same level or higher than the proposed occupational standard level, and they may cut across different occupational routes.
- **Duties:** Duties represent what individuals typically undertake in the workplace within that occupation. They should be distinct, complete activities, yielding specific outcomes. An occupational standard should typically list around 10 to 20 duties. The occupational proposal must also determine the number of off-the-job training days required for each duty, especially if it is for an apprenticeship. This allows ensuring that full-time apprentices meet the off-the-job training criteria.

- Occupational level and duration of the apprenticeship: The occupational level is the level assigned to an occupation, based on its difficulty and degree of autonomy. This information is vital for aligning the occupation to the required level of an apprenticeship correctly. The occupational standard also indicates the typical duration of the apprenticeship.
- Core and options: In cases where multiple related occupations share common knowledge, skills, and behaviours, the occupational proposal can be structured into a core component specific to the occupation and an optional component indicating additional knowledge and skills.
- Assessment methods and additional information: All proposals are required to include the end-point assessment (EPA) methods likely to be used to assess the KSBs. The EPA can take various forms, including observation in the workplace, practical and written tests and interviews. Proposals must include a minimum of two distinct assessment methods. Other factors and considerations may be additionally addressed in the occupational proposal, such as typical entry points to the apprenticeship, transferability across employers, equity, diversity, and inclusion, and recognition by statutory regulators. Mandated qualifications and the significance of professional bodies or regulators should also be included where relevant in the proposal.

From the moment of initiating the request to the final approval, the whole process can take between 6 months to a couple of years depending on the scale of changes and the number of trailblazer group meetings and consultations required. If a proposed change to an occupational standard corresponds to a simple correction (e.g. correcting a spelling mistake) or an adjustment (e.g. updates that do not require changing skills or assessments), it usually takes a shorter timeframe to finalise the process. If it entails major revisions (e.g. changing the content of an occupational standard), the process can take longer. IfATE reviews occupational standards regularly and in case an occupational standard needs to be updated, it convenes the trailblazer group back together.

Once the occupational proposal is ready, IfATE analyses it against several criteria (listed in Box 1) to decide whether to agree to its development as an occupational standard (IfATE, 2023^[13]). Upon IfATE's approval, the next stage is to develop the occupational standard and the end-point assessment (EPA) plan and collect evidence on the potential cost of the training and assessment. The detailed process is as follows:

1. The trailblazer group meets to discuss the different components of the occupational standard. A workshop may be held by the Product Manager when necessary.
2. The occupational standard must be recorded online in a dedicated application (the "apprenticeship builder").
3. During this development phase, a survey is available online to gather views on the occupational standard from employers who are not part of the trailblazer group.
4. An IfATE Product Manager must agree that all documents are ready for submission. If significant work is needed, feedback is provided, and submission is delayed.
5. Once the occupational standard has been submitted, the relevant route panel reviews the standard to ensure its alignment with the needs of employers and learners.
6. An approval committee validates the occupational standard, ensuring that it is consistent with the relevant requirements. They base their decision partly on the recommendation made by the route panel.
7. Submissions may be returned, approved with conditions, or fully approved. Feedback is provided for returned submissions or those approved with conditions, with the possibility to resubmit a proposal.
8. An apprenticeship is approved for delivery once the occupational standard and EPA plan (see below) are approved and published, and a final funding band⁵ is allocated by the Secretary of State.

Box 1. Criteria for the development of an occupational standard in the United Kingdom

To secure approval for an occupational standard in a specific field, the occupation must be:

- **Relevant and transferable:** The occupation must be widely sought after in the job market and have KSBs that cater to a variety of employer needs and support career advancement. IfATE assesses whether the occupational standard is agreed across the different employers in the trailblazer group and provides opportunities to progress. The alignment with the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) and other relevant benchmarks is also examined.
- **Skilled:** The occupation should require a minimum of 12 months of practical work experience and educational or training inputs for a newcomer to attain proficiency. This aspect is crucial for apprenticeships, where full-time apprentices are expected to spend a significant portion of their working hours in off-the-job training.
- **Exhaustive:** The occupational standard must fully encapsulate what employers expect from a skilled individual in that occupation. This is confirmed by making sure the occupational standard accurately represents the necessary competencies and considers the expected initial knowledge or skills of new entrants.
- **Recognised:** The occupation should be acknowledged and recognised across a broad spectrum of employers within that field, as well as by pertinent professional bodies and regulatory agencies, where applicable.
- **Distinct:** The occupation must have a distinct role on the occupational map, being classified at a single level (from Level 2 to Level 7) and having unique characteristics that differentiate it from other occupations on the map. IfATE confirms this distinct status by verifying the occupation's unique title and content, ensuring it stands apart from other listed occupations.

Source: IfATE (2023^[15]), DfE apprenticeship standard criteria, www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/resources/dfе-apprenticeship-standard-criteria/.

Production, update, and evaluation of training standards for apprenticeships

Stakeholders

Trailblazers lead the development of curriculum requirements of apprenticeships. Giving employers the responsibility to map out their specific skill needs for apprenticeships aims to facilitate smoother transitions from apprenticeships to work by ensuring that graduates possess the right skills sought after in the labour market. In addition to trailblazer groups, training providers and end-point assessment organisations are also involved in the process. As for the development of occupational standards, IfATE plays a central role in supporting trailblazers through Product Managers who lead the development of training standards.

Process

The training standards for apprenticeships are co-created alongside occupational standards by trailblazer groups. More specifically, for each new apprenticeship, trailblazer groups develop end-point-assessment plans that detail the independent assessment that apprentices must take to graduate. This helps confirm whether they have acquired the skills needed to undertake the occupational standard's duties (IfATE, 2023^[13]).

IfATE also monitors the quality of apprenticeships through a set of relevant benchmarking indicators. These indicators are grouped in two sets. A first set aims to assess how well apprenticeships meet the skill needs of both employers and apprentices and includes: the number of learners and graduates in the apprenticeship compared to the size of the occupation in labour market, the number of employers of different sizes and sectors recruiting and training apprentices, the development and implementation of standards, and the proportion of apprenticeships that start with a vacancy or a new employee or role. A second set of indicators aims to measure the outcomes of the training provided and includes: retention rates until the end-point assessment, the success ratio in end-point assessments (including grades), employment destinations post-apprenticeship, and educational or occupational advancement within three to five years after completion. These indicators initially establish a baseline, followed by regular data collection to determine necessary actions. Employers, colleges, providers and universities are expected to use these indicators when considering the design and quality of their own apprenticeships (IfATE, 2023^[12]).

Feedback from employers and apprentices is also actively sought through existing Department for Education surveys, with plans to enhance these surveys to cover various aspects like skills needs, standards, job roles, training programmes, and end-point assessments. Additionally, the Apprenticeship Service has planned to develop a new online method for employer feedback.

5 A dedicated organisation for occupational and training standards in French-speaking Belgium

Context

In French-speaking Belgium, a dedicated organisation, the Service Francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications (SFMQ), was created in 2009 solely for the purpose of producing and updating occupational and training standards. Established by a co-operation agreement between the College of the French community commission in Brussels, the Government of Wallonia and the government of the French-speaking community (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*),⁶ the SFMQ brings together social partners and various stakeholders involved in vocational education and training and in the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

The SFMQ plays a central role in the education and training landscape of French-speaking Belgium. Its main responsibility is to provide a common language and set of references for the otherwise very diverse providers of vocational education and training. Such standardisation can foster mobility of learners between different providers, thereby facilitating lifelong learning. Indeed, in theory, a learner who validates units of learning outcomes within one provider could transfer to another operator without having to study for these units and pass the corresponding exams once again. A common language also encourages mobility between different regions of French-speaking Belgium and between VET providers and labour market institutions, such as the public employment services. Furthermore, the involvement of social partners in drafting occupational standards and the systematic link between occupational and training standards ensure that companies' skill needs are taken into account and that the training offer is aligned with labour market needs. SFMQ also takes part in the positioning of vocational qualifications on the Francophone Qualifications Framework.

Occupational standards produced by SFMQ detail the tasks performed in occupations and list the skills required to perform these tasks. Occupational standards characterised by the same type of production or service form "occupational clusters". This permits the identification of links between different occupations as well as possible professional pathways. Training standards translate professional skills contained in occupational standards into learning outcomes that are subsequently gathered into units of learning outcomes. This facilitates training modularisation. Training standards also contain assessment profiles, which present common assessment frameworks to be used by education and training providers and by the organisation in charge of RPL. Assessment profiles define tasks to be executed, elements of complexity in the execution of determined tasks as well as minimum performance standards required to obtain the qualifications. Additionally, training standards include equipment profiles, which determine the equipment and infrastructure needed to implement training standards. Since its creation, more than 180 standards have been created by SFMQ.

Production, update and use of occupational and training standards

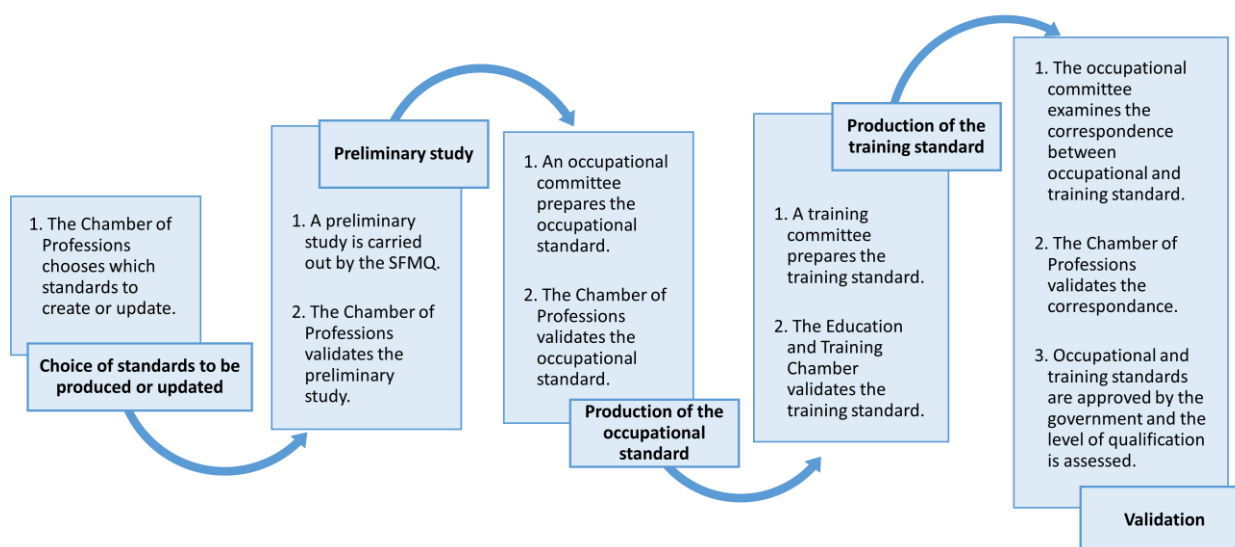
Stakeholders

The production of occupational and training standards is a collective effort involving various stakeholders. SFMQ is the main responsible organisation, but it collaborates with many other institutions, gathered in different chambers and committees. The Chamber of Professions brings together organisations representing either workers or employers, as well as the public employment services and appoints experts that will take part in committees responsible for the development of occupational standards. These experts usually come from firms that employ workers in the specific occupation. The Education and Training Chamber is made up of representatives of education and training providers and of the organisation responsible for the recognition of prior learning (*Consortium de Validation des Compétences*) and appoints members that will take part in training standards committees. Most of these members themselves come from public education and training providers and from the RPL operator and are experts of the training in question.

Process

The production of an occupational standard and its associated training standard is organised around five main stages displayed in Figure 1. At present, the whole process takes between two and three years on average.

Figure 1. Overview of the production process for occupational and training standards by SFMQ



Source: Author's elaboration.

Every year, the Chamber of Professions chooses which occupational standards to create or update. This decision is based on requests and recommendations emanating from the different ministries responsible for education, training, and employment, as well as proposals put forward by representatives of industries, by the public employment services, and by the Education and Training Chamber. Among its selection criteria, the Chamber of Professions must consider the economic context, the labour market situation, regional priorities, and, in the case of an update, the number of learners concerned by the associated training programmes.

A preliminary study is then carried out by SFMQ, to gain a better understanding of the job, its technical, regulatory and training environments, and the skills required. This study also investigates closely related occupations, to create job clusters for which the occupational standards will be developed simultaneously by the same committee of experts to exploit synergies and make the production process as efficient as possible. The preliminary study is based on existing occupational standards in other countries, such as the French ROME repository, the Flemish database Competent, documents provided by industry associations, desk research, field visits and interviews of experts.

Once the preliminary study is ready and validated by the Chamber of Professions, the occupational committee discusses the tasks performed in the occupation and the skills required to perform these tasks to establish the occupational standard. Once the occupational standard has been validated by the Chamber of Professions, the Education and Training Chamber is responsible for producing the corresponding training standard. More specifically, the training committee is tasked with translating the skills required in the occupation into learning outcomes organised into unit of learning outcomes. The training standard is based mainly on the occupational standard, but also on existing training programmes. This training standard needs to be validated by the Education and Training Chamber and by the Chamber of Professions, that checks whether it effectively corresponds to the occupational standard. Finally, the qualification issued from the training standard is positioned on the Francophone Qualifications Framework. A proposal is made by SFMQ and validated by the Francophone Qualifications Framework itself.

When major changes need to be made to occupational and/or training standards, for example to take account of changes in skill requirements following the introduction of new technology, standards are reviewed and updated. The update of an occupational standard and its associated training standard is initiated by the Chamber of Professions upon request or acting on its own initiative, and generally follows the same process as the creation of new occupational and training standards. However, a simplified procedure may be implemented when changes are deemed minor (for example if the update is related to a small modification of the legislation). When this is the case, changes to the standards are proposed by SFMQ, after consultations with occupational or training experts, and are validated by the Chambers.

6 The close link between occupational and training standards in Germany

Context

In Germany, dual training, which combines practical training in companies with theoretical learning in vocational schools, is at the heart of the VET system.⁷ Occupational and training standards play a fundamental role in the quality assurance of vocational training nationwide, as they are used to design curricula in vocational schools and company-based training (BIBB, 2014^[16]). Occupational and training standards in Germany are defined in two documents, the training regulation, and the skeleton curriculum. The training regulation provides a description of the occupation – including information on its tasks, and required skills and qualifications – and a training framework plan – a description of the corresponding vocational training programme.⁸ The training regulations also guide the assessment and certification of trainees, which are standardised in all industries. This ensures that all apprentices receive the comparable training regardless of region and company (BMBF, 2023^[17]). The skeleton curriculum is the basis for vocational instruction at the vocational school and is harmonised in terms of time and content with the training framework plan. This aims to ensure that vocational training is closely aligned with actual job requirements (BIBB, 2023^[18]). The implementation of vocational training in private companies and public administrations is monitored by the competent authorities (usually the chambers), whose tasks include monitoring vocational training, checking the suitability of the training personnel and the training centre and conducting intermediate and final examinations.

The development and regulation of occupational standards are guided by the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) and the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (HwO) (BMBF, 2022^[19]). The BBiG provides the legal framework for vocational training and outlines the requirements for vocational education and training, including the structure and content of training programmes. The HwO specifically governs the skilled crafts and trades sector in Germany. It sets out the requirements for training and qualification in this sector, which is a significant part of the vocational training landscape. These legislative frameworks provide the legal and regulatory backbone for the development, maintenance, and adaptation of occupational and training standards in Germany, ensuring that vocational training remains responsive to the evolving demands of the labour market. They also set the foundation of occupational standards and ensure uniformity and standardisation across the country.

Production, update and use of occupational and training standards

Stakeholders

The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) plays a central role in the development of occupational and training standards in Germany. The BIBB is overseen by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and operates within the scope of the education policy of the

Federal Government (Ulmer, 2021_[20]). Its responsibilities include contributing to the VET system by carrying out academic research and supporting the preparation of training regulations and other legal ordinances (Ulmer, 2021_[20]). The BIBB collaborates with a wide array of stakeholders including industry associations, trade unions, federal and state governments to update and adapt occupational and training standards to changing labour market demands (BIBB, 2023_[18]).

Other stakeholders are involved in the production and update of occupational and training standards. For instance, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) leads the implementation and observance of the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (HwO) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). It includes the federal states in the updating and harmonisation process. The German Employers' Organisation for Vocational and Further Training (KWB) co-ordinates and represents the position of employers' associations and trade and industry associations. It appoints policy co-ordinators and experts for the development of new training regulations. The German Trade Unions Confederation (DGB) co-ordinates and represents trade unions. As KWB, it also appoints policy co-ordinators and experts for the development of new training regulations. Finally, federal states (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Federal Republic of Germany, KMK) provide feedback and inputs on the initiatives put forward by social partners and respond to the drafts that have been prepared. They appoint experts for the preparation of skeleton training curricula.

Process

The process of creating and updating occupational and training standards is typically initiated by the social partners, represented by KWB and DGB, as stakeholder within the VET field, motivated by new developments or emerging challenges (BIBB, 2014_[16]). To foster the modernisation of occupational and training standards, BIBB sometimes carries out an occupation-specific preliminary study upon request formulated by the responsible federal ministries.

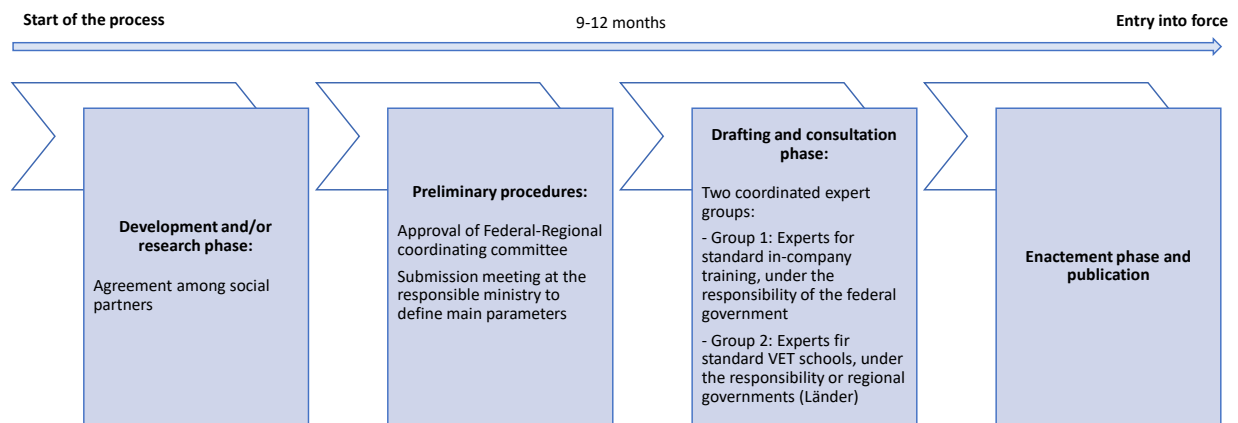
The detailed process is shown in Figure 2 and outlined below:

- **Initiation:** The process is typically initiated by KWB and DGB as representatives of the social partners, who recognise the need for new or updated training standards based on technological, economic, and social developments. This need can be brought to attention by trade associations, employers' organisations, trade unions, the BIBB itself or relevant ministries.
- **Preliminary discussions:** Initial discussions and co-ordination take place internally among social partners. These discussions aim to establish benchmarks for the new developments, which are essential for setting the direction of new or revised standards. These benchmarks include occupational title, duration of training, structure and composition of training, assessment type, catalogue of skills, knowledge and abilities.
- **Application discussions:** Benchmarks are then debated in so-called 'application discussions' involving responsible ministries, the BMBF and the KMK, alongside the BIBB. The outcomes of these discussions are then forwarded to the Federal Government/Federal States Co-ordination Committee for Training Regulations/Skeleton Curricula (KoA).
- **Advisory council formation:** The BIBB forms an advisory council by asking experts from the KWB and the DGB to collaborate in processing the new developments. These experts, who represent the interests of the social partners, draft the new training regulations.
- **Curriculum development committee:** Federal state experts draft the skeleton curriculum for vocational schools. The co-ordination of training regulations and the curriculum takes place through joint participation in meetings, often chaired by the BIBB as the project lead.
- **Final consultation and harmonisation:** A joint meeting between federal government, federal state experts and other experts, who represent the interests of the social partners, is held to finalise and harmonise the drafts of the training regulations and the skeleton curriculum.

- Approval and recommendation: The draft training regulations are submitted to the BIBB Board, whose positive response also acts as a recommendation to the federal government for enactment. KoA's approval is obtained, and the Federal Ministry of Justice checks the legal form.
- Enactment and publication: Responsible ministries enact the training regulations in agreement with the BMBF and publish them in the Federal Law Gazette. The skeleton curriculum is typically adopted directly by the individual federal states or implemented as state-specific curricula for vocational schools.

While the development of standards is in the hands of experts, the BIBB guides the full process through dedicated project managers who play a moderating and advisory role, in particular for the advisory council formation and for the development of the training regulations.

Figure 2. Overview of the process to develop or update an occupational standard in Germany



Source: Adapted from an infographic provided by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB).

7 Similar standards for different linguistic regions in Switzerland

Context

The Swiss VET system is one of the most responsive to labour market needs in Europe thanks to the active involvement of employers and professional associations and the importance of work-based learning. Its flexibility allows training provision to be adapted to the needs of different learners, and the good articulation between different VET programmes offers learners many opportunities for progression (Fazekas and Field, 2013^[21]). This makes VET a popular option among trainees with around two-thirds of young people completing a VET programme after compulsory education. Learners can choose to train for one of more than 230 recognised occupations.

Each occupation is regulated by a specific VET ordinance, which combines in a single document both the related occupational and training standards. Indeed, an ordinance specifies the job title, the skills and knowledge required to successfully perform the occupation, as well as a training plan with objectives and requirements, training programme, training duration, qualification procedures and other parameters related to the vocational training in question. Despite important regional differences, the same ordinances are used in all regions of Switzerland to ensure the recognition and validation of skills in a coherent manner and to promote labour mobility.

In 2004, the Swiss VET system underwent a major reform with the new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act (VPETA). This was an important step towards modernising the VET system and making it more flexible and more responsive to changing labour market needs, including those resulting from technological advances and the changing demands of the world of work. Following the entry into force of the new law, all training ordinances have been revised, and the content of training courses has been updated. In order to facilitate this important work, a specific handbook entitled “Process of professional development in basic vocational training” was developed. Published in 2007 and updated in 2017, this handbook is now used for the continuous improvement of occupational and training standards (SERI, 2017^[22]).

Production, update and use of occupational and training standards

Stakeholders

The State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation (SERI) is the federal government body responsible for overseeing and co-ordinating education, research, and innovation policies in Switzerland. As such, SERI plays a crucial role in setting the framework for the development and update of occupational standards in co-ordination with professional organisations, industry associations and cantons (SERI, 2022^[23]). SERI’s involvement ensures that occupational standards and training curricula are not only in line with the needs of the labour market but also supportive of broader educational and economic goals. SERI oversees the overall process for the development and update of occupational and training standards

and ensures their alignment with federal standards, including the level and number of skills to be included, and approves curricula for vocational training programmes. SERI's responsibilities also include the development, enactment, and revision of ordinances and regulations that govern vocational training at the federal level.

The Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET) is another key player, responsible for training VET professionals, conducting research, and contributing to the development of occupational standards (SFUVET, 2023^[24]). One of the SFUVET's critical roles is the training of instructors and experts who will be delivering vocational education. This includes providing them with the latest pedagogical skills and knowledge about the current trends and requirements in various industries (SFUVET, 2023^[24]).

Other key stakeholders include professional organisations, cantons, training and educational institutions (including vocational schools), and the Commissions for Occupational Development and Quality (also known as the B&Q Commissions). Professional organisations consist of employers, social partners, trade associations, and other responsible organisations. They play a key role in determining labour market needs and shaping the content of occupational standards. They also provide feedback to determine whether an occupational or training standard needs to be created or updated. Cantons are mainly involved in organising and delivering education and training programmes. They also actively participate in the development of occupational standards to make sure that training standards and programmes deliver on occupational standards. The composition of professional organisations steering the development and update of occupational and training standards should reflect all linguistic regions with a balanced representation of genders (SERI, 2017^[22]). Cantons play a significant role in the practical implementation of occupational and training standards and co-operate closely with the SERI. Training and educational institutions use occupational standards to design VET programme curricula and to provide career guidance and quality assurance. Finally, the B&Q Commissions are responsible for maintaining and enhancing the quality of vocational training programmes. This involves ensuring that the training provided meets the required standards including by keeping key documents such as training regulations and curricula up to date. These documents provide the framework and guidelines for vocational training and need to be regularly reviewed (at least every five years) and revised to reflect changes in labour market demands. Representatives from all linguistic regions must be involved in the B&Q Commissions.

Process

The process to create and update occupational and training standards is described in the handbook "Process of professional development in basic vocational training", published by SERI in 2010 and updated in 2017 (SERI, 2017^[22]). The process starts with professional organisations (employers' organisations, trade associations, or other responsible organisations) identifying the need for the creation of a new standard or the update of an existing one in their respective industries. Following the request from professional organisations, a partnership is formed between SERI, professional organisations and cantons, which collectively share the responsibility for the quality of professional development and training (SERI, 2017^[22]). The responsibilities of the partners are regulated through the Vocational Training Act and the Vocational Training Ordinance (SERI, 2022^[25]). This collaborative framework – which takes practical form in the work of the B&Q Commissions – is vital for ensuring that the development of occupational standards is comprehensive and in line with governing laws.

The development or update of a standard entails defining specific competencies, skills, and knowledge areas necessary for the occupation and follows a competency-based approach to ensure practical relevance. Employers' organisations play a leading role in the development of the standard content by assessing labour market needs (SERI, 2017^[22]). The proposal for a new standard is informed by surveys conducted among companies, as well as cantons, training providers, teachers, and graduates to capture their experiences and needs. In addition, data on the future needs of the industry and the employability of

graduates are also collected. SERI oversees the entire process, ensuring that federal standards are met and maintaining a balance in the level and number of skills incorporated into the standards. Each occupational and training standard is accompanied by dedicated assessment plans and qualification procedures that are prepared based on a template provided by SERI. Learners who successfully complete the qualification procedure with a final examination receive the EBA (Federal Certificate of Vocational Education and Training) or the EFZ (Federal Diploma of Vocational Education and Training). Apprentices who wish to prepare for higher vocational studies can follow a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate course at the same time as their apprenticeship and obtain this qualification at the same time as the EFZ.

Every five years, thanks to surveys sent to the main stakeholders and to analyses of data on future skill needs of the different industries and the employability of recent graduates, the B&Q Commissions review the timeliness and quality of vocational training and evaluates existing occupational and training standards to determine whether any update is necessary (SERI, 2017^[22]). Based on its findings, the B&Q Commissions determine the need for action and inform the partnership. The following decisions are possible: (i) no need for action; (ii) there is a need for information and training measures; (iii) the development or adjustment of implementation provisions and other tools to promote quality is necessary; (iv) a partial revision to an existing decree is needed, although no significant changes are made and the structure of the occupational and training standards is retained; and (v) a complete revision of the education ordinance and educational plan is required.

To increase the responsiveness and agility of the process to revise standards, SERI also developed an accelerated procedure. Introduced in 2021, this allows for quick implementation of changes in occupational and training standards and is particularly relevant for professions affected by digital transformation (SERI, 2021^[26]). The steps of the accelerated process are identical to the normal process, but stakeholders need to come to a consensus under a binding timeline and raise the necessary resources to complete the process faster. The conditions for the accelerated procedure are the following:

- Engagement of all partners: All vocational education partners (cantons, employers' organisations, and SERI) should support the accelerated process, considering their roles and resources.
- Well-planned steps and resources: The planning of the sequence of steps is crucial. It is important to inform external parties in advance and ensure that pedagogical support and necessary resources can be mobilised quickly. Accelerated procedures do not require additional resources but do require concentrated resource allocation over a short period.
- Strict adherence to timelines: Project management should create a detailed schedule in consultation with all parties, setting binding milestones. This plan should specify responsibilities and resources.
- Flexible and competent work structure: The project team must be readily available and capable of regular exchanges, with members being deployable at short notice if necessary.
- Early implementation planning: The implementation of a newly introduced or revised vocational training programme should start early, possibly right after the educational ordinance is finalised.

8

Key takeaways for agile occupational and training standards

Previous chapters presented several examples of how countries ensure that occupational and training standards are of high-quality, that they are aligned with labour market needs and that their production is efficient. Despite their heterogeneity in terms of methodologies, formats, tools, governance, and processes, the case studies reviewed highlight key good practices, which can be used by practitioners and decision makers to improve their own standard setting systems. In particular, when reflecting on the system in place in their country, policy makers should consider the following four recommendations.

The production of occupational and training standards should be timely and efficient

What does it mean and why does it matter?

Timeliness of the production process means delivering new or updated standards within a reasonable timeframe and minimising delays. Timeliness is vital in the context of dynamic and continually evolving labour markets, as timely production and update of standards ensure that the skills and competencies they encompass remain relevant. This is crucial for equipping the workforce with in-demand skills, enhancing employability and addressing immediate labour market shortages. Delayed updates or slow response to changing needs can lead to widening skills gaps, where the workforce's skills are outdated or misaligned with market needs.

An efficient production process optimises the use of resources – time and labour – by streamlining operations and minimising waste and costs. Efficiency is critical because developing occupational and training standards is a demanding process, requiring significant time and resources from the main entity as well as for all stakeholders involved, including social partners and experts. Efficiency allows for a better allocation of public resources and is particularly important in times of tight budget constraints.

Best practices from the case studies in this report suggest that the development of entirely new standards should occur within a year. Standards updates are usually faster, especially when countries have developed fast-track procedures, such as French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland.

How to ensure a timely and efficient production process?

Three ingredients are necessary to ensure timely and efficient production of occupational and training standards. First, establishing well-structured processes is essential. Despite differences in their institutional structures and governance systems, all case studies have put in place a clear and transparent process, with explicitly stated procedures and steps involved, from the start of the process to the approval of occupational and training standards. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the organisation overseeing the development of standards has created a list of criteria for the creation of a new occupational standard. In Switzerland, a detailed handbook and separate guidelines for an accelerated procedure are available to

ensure common understanding and agreement on the process by all relevant stakeholders. Similar documents are also published online by the SFMQ in French-speaking Belgium. In Germany, each step of the process is assigned a specific timeframe to limit the length of the entire process and allow for the creation of an occupational and training standard within one year.

Well-structured processes are typically accompanied by a clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities. Clarifying the mandate and responsibilities of the main entity in charge of occupational and training standards, as well as other relevant stakeholders, is essential for ensuring an efficient process. The role of the co-ordinating entity can be embedded in legal frameworks, such as in Germany, French-speaking Belgium and the United Kingdom, to ensure that the role of the supervising body is clearly recognised by all stakeholders, to provide it with necessary convening power, and to guarantee financial and human resources. This is particularly important as, in all case studies examined, the main entity plays an important role during the development phase of standards, either by co-ordinating the process or by drafting the standard.

Digital tools can be introduced to ensure a timely and efficient production process. In Flanders, the focus is primarily on updating existing occupational standards rather than creating new ones, and an AI dashboard has been developed to inform the updates. As a result, these updates require less resources. In France, an online platform is used to collaborate with stakeholders more efficiently.

Occupational and training standards should be labour market relevant, up-to-date, agile, and user-friendly

What does it mean and why does it matter?

Labour market relevance means that occupational and training standards accurately reflect the realities of labour markets. Up-to-date standards mirror the *current* needs of employers, as opposed to outdated practices and requirements that no longer align with evolving industry demands and technologies. Ensuring that standards are responsive to labour market requirements is key to maintaining a skilled and competitive workforce and meeting the dynamic needs of employers. The concepts of labour market relevance and up-to-date standards are closely related to the timeliness of the production process discussed in the previous section: timeliness is necessary for standards to remain up to date, yet it is not sufficient. A number of other ingredients are needed, which are discussed below. Agility means that standards remain relevant even after slight changes in the tasks performed by workers, for instance as a consequence of the introduction of new machinery or equipment. A certain degree of agility implies that standards require less frequent updates.

User-friendliness means that standards are accessible and practical. They should be easily understandable and useable by a wide range of stakeholders, including trainers, learners, employers, and policy makers. User-friendly occupational and training standards facilitate better decision making in career development, curriculum design, and workforce planning. By presenting information in a standardised, accessible format, they help maintain consistency across training programmes and institutions. When standards are not user-friendly, their uptake is generally low, or if their use is mandatory, their adoption is difficult and time-consuming.

How to ensure labour market relevant, up-to-date, and agile occupational and training standards?

To incorporate the needs of employers and make occupational and training standards labour market relevant, employers and sectoral organisations are actively involved in the production process in all countries analysed in this report. However, the extent of involvement varies, ranging from employers

attending consultation meetings to them being jointly responsible for the production of standards. In France for instance, standards are mainly developed by France Travail, the Public Employment Service, but employers and sectoral funds provide material to inform the preparation of the draft standard and give feedback. At the other extreme, in the United Kingdom, employers that compose trailblazer groups are responsible for the production of standards and lead the process. The advantage of a strong business involvement in the process is that employers can directly express their needs, which are then precisely transcribed in the documents. Participation in the standard-setting process also fosters ownership and buy-in. One main disadvantage is that firms do not always have the time to be involved in the process.

When assessing labour market needs, it is important to ensure the representativity of firms involved or consulted. Particular attention should be devoted to the inclusion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In order to facilitate their participation, SMEs may receive a small compensation, as in Germany and Switzerland. In some cases (like Switzerland and the United Kingdom), the composition of consulted groups must satisfy a set of criteria to ensure the representativeness of employers in terms of sector, size, and geographical spread.

To keep standards up-to-date, frequent reviews are necessary, where the organisation in charge analyses and assesses whether an update is needed. Importantly, a review does not always trigger a modification of the standard. In the case studies presented in this report, standards are reviewed between four times a year (Flanders) and every five years (Switzerland). In several instances, updates can be requested by stakeholders, in particular employers and sectoral organisations. In France, updates can be proposed via the online platform dedicated to the production of standards. In the United Kingdom, when an existing occupational standard needs updating, employers initiate the process by completing a first draft proposal. Although not widespread, informing updates with labour market monitoring and analysis, including the analysis of online job vacancies as in Flanders, is a best practice that should be generalised.

Agility necessitates standards to be general and broad enough so that full updates are not needed after slight changes in the tasks performed by workers, such as the introduction of new software. It is however important to balance agility and precision. While occupational and training standards should not be too rigid and should allow enough flexibility to adapt to rapid changes in the labour market, they must also provide clear information on required skills and knowledge. The right balance between agility and precision and the necessity for updates is best assessed by end-users, who should be asked to provide feedback on the content and quality of the standards.

While strong involvement of employers and sectoral organisations is key to ensuring labour market relevance, strong collaboration with end-users is essential to develop user-friendly standards. However, the needs of employers and those of end-users may not always be aligned and finding a compromise between the two groups is not straightforward.

Training standards should be closely linked to occupational standards

What does it mean and why does it matter?

Training standards are closely linked to occupational standards when they align with the requirements described in the latter. A systematic link between the two ensures that the training offer meets labour market needs. By closely reflecting the skills and knowledge outlined in occupational standards, training standards can be used to develop programmes that meet businesses' requirements. This connection not only ensures that the workforce is capable, certified, and ready to perform their job roles proficiently, but it also enhances the quality and relevance of the training.

How to ensure a strong link between occupational and training standards?

Findings from the case studies show that the connection between occupational and training standards is stronger when a single organisation is responsible for the development and maintenance of both, as the case of French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In these countries, occupational and training standards are developed within the same production cycle (i.e. the training standard is created or updated right after the occupational standard). This approach alleviates the complexity of managing two different processes at the same time. Furthermore, in all countries except France and Flanders, occupational and training standards are combined into a single document per profession.

The link between occupational and training standards is further reinforced when they are prepared by the same group of experts. In Switzerland, a partnership is formed between SERI (the organisation in charge of developing the standards), professional organisations, and cantons to create VET ordinances, which combine occupational and training standards in a single document. In the United Kingdom, trailblazer groups lead the development of both occupational standards and curriculum requirements of apprenticeships. However, other countries have chosen to assign these tasks to different groups of experts. For instance, in French-speaking Belgium and in Germany, two distinct groups – one composed of experts of the occupation and the other of training experts – are responsible for writing the occupational and training standards, respectively. The advantage of this approach is that training standards benefit from the input of training experts, making them more tailored to the needs of training providers. When the two-group approach is preferred, good communication and co-ordination between the expert groups are essential, though not always easy to achieve.

Effective quality assurance and oversight mechanisms should be established

What does it mean and why does it matter?

Quality assurance and oversight mechanisms are sets of procedures designed to ensure that occupational and training standards and standard-setting processes meet specified quality criteria. Quality assurance mechanisms are established formally and usually include external, independent audits of the processes in place. Oversight mechanisms are less formal and monitor, regulate, and ensure compliance with established criteria internally.

Quality assurance and oversight mechanisms are crucial in the production and update of occupational and training standards to guarantee their consistency and credibility. Indeed, they ensure consistency by requiring standardised procedures and criteria for developing and updating occupational and training standards. Uniform practices are necessary to guarantee that all standards meet the same high-quality benchmarks, regardless of by whom they are produced. This consistency in standards setting makes learning opportunities based on training standards reliable and comparable across different regions and providers. At the same time, strong quality assurance also aims to foster two types of trust: (i) trust among the different stakeholders involved in the standard-setting process, thereby facilitating co-operation and contributing to heightened ownership and buy-in; and (ii) trust in the process by the community, promoting a reliable framework that supports continuous improvement and accountability.

How to ensure strong quality assurance and oversight mechanisms?

Quality assurance frameworks take very different forms across countries and contexts (OECD, 2021^[27]). They can be formalised regulatory tools imposing minimum quality requirements that a system needs to meet in order to be put in place (e.g. quality labels or external audits) or they can be optional support tools that use guidelines and good practices to inspire quality development efforts (e.g. self-evaluations). In

Flanders, for example, for a new occupational standard to be included in the Competent database, it must go through a thorough quality control. First, dedicated staff at VDAB carries out internal quality checks, and then the proposed standard is sent to sector contacts and Synerjob partners for their external feedback. In the United Kingdom, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) has recently moved to a framework where the quality of their apprenticeships and occupational standards is ensured by external bodies – namely, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and the Office for Students (OfS) for integrated higher and degree apprenticeships.⁹

However, not all standard setting procedures reviewed in this report are subject to a formal quality assurance mechanism. Yet, this does not mean that internal oversight mechanisms are not present. For instance, when training providers in France want to create a new certification, they are required to list it in the *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles* (RNCP). Among the various documents to submit in their application, providers also need to include the proposed certification standard, which *France Compétences* – the authority in charge of the RNCP – can reject. Indeed, *France Compétences* assesses applications based on the content of the certification standard, an analysis of the adequacy of the certification to the needs of the economy, and the career prospects of the learners. Proving that this approach contributes (at least partially) to quality assurance is the fact that the rejection rate remains very high – 50% in 2022 (Besson et al., 2023^[28]).

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Notes

¹ Established in April 2019, the 11 OPCOs replaced the former Joint Collecting Bodies (OPCAs). The OPCOs are responsible for supporting vocational training. They play a crucial role in financing apprenticeship and professionalisation contracts, helping professional branches in developing certification processes, and aiding SMEs in defining their training needs in line with sector-specific economic and technical changes. OPCOs must ensure representativeness of employers involved in the process in terms of company size (e.g. very small, small and medium-sized businesses). The grouping of professional branches around a designated OPCO is based on the criteria of coherence of professions and skills, sectors, common skills issues, training, mobility, local services and needs of businesses.

² Actiris is the public employment service of the Brussels capital region. Le Forem is the public employment service of Wallonia and stands for “*Office de la formation professionnelle et de l’emploi*”. ADG is the public employment service of the German Community of Belgium and stands for “*Arbeitsamt der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft*”.

³ T-Levels are two-year, technical qualifications designed to give students the skills that industry needs. They bring classroom learning and an extended industry placement together, providing a mixture of i) technical knowledge and skills specific to their chosen industry or occupation, ii) an industry placement of at least 45 days in their chosen industry or occupation, and iii) relevant math, English, and digital skills.

⁴ Employers must provide at least three training provider quotes and at least one end-point assessment organisation quote to receive a funding band recommendation for the apprenticeships (IfATE, 2023_[12]).

⁵ The funding band is the maximum amount of funds an employer (who pays the training levy) can use towards an individual apprenticeship, or for employers that do not pay the levy, this is the maximum amount that the government may co-invest towards an individual apprenticeship.

⁶ Co-operation Agreement concluded on 27 March 2009 between the French Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission concerning the creation of the Service francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications, replaced by the Co-operation Agreement concluded on 29 October 2015 between the French Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission concerning the Service francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications.

⁷ The defining feature of dual training in Germany is the collaborative relationship between primarily small and medium-sized enterprises and government-funded vocational schools (BMBF, 2023_[17]). Apprentices in this system usually divide their week between attending a vocational school and working at a company, or they alternate between these two settings for extended periods. The dual system leads to high-quality vocational qualifications and enables smooth education-to-work transitions. Each year, around half of

Germany's school leavers opt for vocational education and training, illustrating their trust in the VET system (BIBB, 2023^[18]).

⁸ The training content formulated in the training regulations represents minimum standards but every company has the opportunity to include additional topics in the training programme and to offer and teach trainees additional skills.

⁹ For more information about IfATE's quality assurance efforts, please refer to the following website: www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/quality/external-quality-assurance/.

Getting Skills Right

Agile Occupational and Training Standards for Responsive Skills Policies

Occupational and training standards play a crucial role in defining the skills, competencies, and attitudes required for effective performance in occupations. As they serve as foundational tools for recruitment and job-related training, their regular update is essential to promote a skilled, adaptable workforce that drives economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness. However, creating agile standards that keep pace with rapidly changing economies remains a significant challenge. This report offers a comparative analysis of efforts in selected OECD countries, showcasing best practices from Flanders, France, French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It focuses on methods to ensure that occupational and training standards are produced efficiently and remain relevant for the labour market and user-friendly. Containing numerous practical details, the report provides valuable insights for policy makers aiming to improve their standard-setting mechanisms.



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