



EDUCATION
ARCHITECTS

INTEGRATION OF INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION IN VET DESIGN THINKING PRACTICE



SUPPLEMENT TO THE 'DESIGN THINKING
IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION' MANUAL



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Introduction

Inclusive communication refers to the strategies and practices that ensure everyone—regardless of ability, language, background, or learning style—can access, understand, and participate in learning and collaborative processes. In Vocational Education and Training (VET), where learners often come from diverse social, linguistic, and cognitive backgrounds, inclusive communication is not just a pedagogical consideration; it is essential for ensuring equitable access to learning and skill development.

Design Thinking (DT), as a learner-centered and iterative methodology, offers great potential for fostering creative problem-solving and collaborative innovation in VET. However, without conscious attention to communication barriers, the DT process may unintentionally exclude certain learners or hinder their full engagement.

This supplement aims to bridge that gap by offering practical guidance on how to apply inclusive communication within each phase of the Design Thinking process, adapted to VET contexts. It builds upon and complements the existing Design Thinking manual and teaching materials, deepening the focus on accessibility, participation, and equity.

Rather than replacing the core DT methodology, this supplement serves as an enhancement, a set of flexible tools, strategies, and examples that can be used by educators, trainers, and facilitators to make Design Thinking more inclusive and effective for all learners.

Through concise guidance, examples, and resources, this document supports the application of inclusive communication practices across various VET learning environments.

Whether you're introducing Design Thinking for the first time or looking to improve your facilitation with diverse groups, this supplement can help make your practice more inclusive, accessible, and impactful.



Inclusive communication ensures that all voices are heard, understood, and valued, regardless of language ability, cultural background, or disability. In vocational training environments, this is not only a value it's necessity.

How to use this supplement?

This supplement is designed to be used alongside the Design Thinking (DT) manual and teaching materials already in place for Vocational Education and Training (VET). While the main manual focuses on the methodology of DT, this document emphasizes inclusive communication practices that support equitable participation throughout the process.

Before Implementing Design Thinking

Begin by exploring the concepts presented in this supplement to develop a deeper understanding of inclusive and empathic communication. Reflect on your current teaching and facilitation practices—how inclusive are they? Consider how your communication style impacts learners from diverse backgrounds and identify areas for growth. This phase offers an opportunity for self-assessment and mindset preparation before engaging with the DT process.

During the Implementation

As you familiarize yourself with each phase of the Design Thinking methodology and plan your lessons using the manual, refer to this supplement to identify practical strategies that support inclusive communication at every stage. Each section is aligned with the DT phases to help you adapt your facilitation, materials, and group dynamics in ways that include all participants—especially those with different needs.

After Implementation

Once your DT sessions are complete, use this supplement to reflect on outcomes and analyze feedback from learners. What worked well? Where could communication have been more inclusive or effective? Drawing on the real-world examples and tools provided, you can continuously refine your approach to inclusive communication—ensuring that each new iteration of the DT process becomes more responsive, accessible, and empowering for all learners.

Familiarizing with the concepts

Despite increasing awareness of the importance of inclusion, integrating individuals from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds into VET programs remains a significant challenge. Barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, limited access to resources, and entrenched biases in teaching methods often exclude these groups. Recent academic studies highlight the disparities in participation rates and outcomes for marginalized individuals who face systemic or structural barriers to accessing VET programmes, emphasizing the urgent need for tailored solutions.

For instance, learners with disabilities often encounter physical barriers that limit their access to vocational training facilities. Addressing these requires not only physical adaptations like ramps and elevators but also digital tools, such as screen readers or captioned video content, to support their learning experiences. Similarly, ethnic minorities or non-native speakers may face language barriers that can be mitigated by offering multilingual resources or culturally relevant teaching materials.

Economic disadvantages are a significant barrier to accessing education and training opportunities. For example, one VET program successfully increased attendance and engagement by providing participants from low-income backgrounds with free toolkits and financial support for transportation. This shows how adapting inclusion strategies to the specific needs and realities of learners —such as economic hardship— can lead to more equitable and meaningful participation. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, these tailored measures help ensure that all learners are genuinely supported and included in VET programs.

According to the VET Toolbox partnership, “Inclusive VET means that persons with and without disabilities, females and males, people living with HIV, people living in remote areas, and people not meeting behavioral norms have the right to access VET as well as the labor market, and participate in the same activities and interact on an equal basis with others”¹.

Through inclusive communication, we can better understand and address the specific needs of individuals with fewer opportunities by acknowledging the barriers they face in their educational journey. By adopting tailored approaches, we can create learning environments that value diversity and promote equitable participation. This not only ensures full integration of diverse groups into vocational education and training (VET) programs but also strengthens their confidence, skills, and sense of belonging. Inclusive communication thus becomes a powerful tool for reducing inequalities, eliminating discrimination, and ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities for success and development.



See online tool, https://vettoolbox.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/VET7-Manual-v3-interactive.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

1

What is inclusive communication?

Inclusive communication ensures that everyone, regardless of their abilities or background, can participate, share, and learn effectively. It involves recognizing differences, adapting approaches, and fostering environments that prioritize mutual understanding and respect.

Think of inclusive communication as building bridges. Imagine learners are on one side of a river and educational goals are on the other. While some may cross easily on steppingstones (mainstream methods), others need a sturdy bridge with ramps, clear signs, and support systems. Inclusive communication is that bridge.

Inclusive communication in VET teaching refers to creating interactions and learning environments that actively remove barriers to participation for all learners. It is characterized by the deliberate use of language, tools, and methods designed to accommodate a diverse range of needs and perspectives. This means going beyond accessibility to embrace a pedagogical approach that values every learner's unique contribution.

For example, in a vocational training program for automotive mechanics, an instructor might use visual demonstrations, tactile learning tools like engine models, and simple language to ensure that learners with varying literacy levels or sensory abilities could fully engage. A study by Smith et al. (2021) on inclusive practices in technical education highlights how combining visual aids with simplified language significantly improves comprehension for learners with learning differences, demonstrating the efficacy of such inclusive communication strategies.

Individuals from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds in VET often face barriers that are invisible to those not familiar with their experience. These may include physical inaccessibility, language barriers, socioeconomic challenges, or stigma.

Maria, a young woman from an economically disadvantaged community, dreams of becoming a carpenter. However, her limited access to resources and technology poses a challenge. By integrating inclusive design principles into her VET program, her instructors provided hands-on learning kits and visual tutorials that she could access offline. Maria's confidence and skills flourished.



When Planning inclusive communication always ask:

What barriers might this learner face?

How can I adapt my teaching methods to address these barriers?

According to the VET Toolbox, it's not just learners with impairment who may be held back by their environment. All learners who are excluded from VET — for example, women — can face barriers because of how others treat them. This might include negative attitudes, unfair expectations about their role, or even inappropriate behavior. So, it's the environment and how people are treated that can either help them succeed or make it harder for them to take part fully in education and training.

Sometimes, the need for inclusion is obscured by our own prejudices. Our education, societal norms, and habits can unconsciously lead to exclusionary behaviors or become obstacles to integration. For example, when presented with the same mathematical problem, there is often an implicit bias that men are naturally better at mathematics. This bias directly affects learning dynamics: if a man struggles with math, he might receive less support because it is assumed he is simply not making enough effort rather than needing additional help to overcome challenges. This issue is compounded if the man belongs to a vulnerable group. Conversely, women may receive less encouragement because of the presumption that they are not as capable in mathematics. However, women possess the same potential as any other learners. The difference may lie in confidence, often undermined by societal expectations that do not envision academic success for girls. When a woman receives proper support, encouragement, and affirmation of her abilities, the performance gap diminishes or even disappears.

This highlights the core of inclusive communication: refraining from judgment, avoiding stereotypes, and believing that everyone has equal potential but that some learners may need specific support to reach it. Inclusive communication is the lever that provides this support.

A study published in *Educational Psychology Review* (2022) emphasizes that inclusive pedagogical practices can significantly reduce performance gaps in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), particularly for girls and learners from marginalized groups. The research highlights that shifting from deficit-focused language to strength-based communication encourages resilience and fosters equitable outcomes.



Inclusive communication helps reduce and even eliminate barriers that limit equal access to high-quality education for everyone, regardless of ability. By systematically including all individuals, we erase these gaps and create equitable and complete integration for all members of the learning community.

a - Assessment activity- Reflecting on biases and prejudices

Understanding and evaluating our biases and prejudices is a critical step toward fostering an inclusive VET environment. Unconscious biases, shaped by societal norms, personal experiences, and cultural influences, can inadvertently impact how educators interact with learners.

By identifying these biases, educators can:

- Cultivate self-awareness, which is the foundation of personal growth and professional development.
- Create equitable learning environments where all learners feel valued and supported.
- Improve the quality of teaching by addressing unintentional barriers to inclusion.
- Enhance their ability to adapt to diverse needs, ensuring that VET programs are accessible and inclusive for all groups.

Assessing biases is not about judgment but about opening the door to positive change and improvement in inclusive practices.



Objective:

The following exercise is designed to help VET educators identify and reflect on their potential biases. By doing so, they can explore how these biases may influence their teaching methods and interactions with learners, particularly those from vulnerable groups. The ultimate goal is to create actionable strategies to foster inclusivity in VET programs.

PRE-JUDICIOMETER

Instructions

1. Take 15–20 minutes to complete the survey in a quiet, reflective environment.
2. Respond honestly to each question; this is a personal exercise with no right or wrong answers.
3. After completing the survey, review your responses and consider areas where you might improve your inclusivity practices.

Self-assessment 1 : Reflecting on beliefs and attitudes

Rate your agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5:
1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

- | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. I believe all learners, regardless of background, can achieve the same level of success with the right support. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I feel more comfortable working with learners who share my cultural or social background. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I sometimes make assumptions about a learner's abilities based on their gender, ethnicity, or economic status. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I often think that learners from vulnerable groups might struggle more in vocational training compared to others. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I consciously adapt my teaching methods to ensure inclusion for all learners. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. When I notice a learner struggling, I first consider whether my teaching methods could be improved to help them. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |

PRE-JUDICIOMETER

Self-assessment 2 : Evaluating Behaviors in Practice

Answer these questions with YES or NO:

1. Have I ever assumed that a learner's poor performance was due to lack of effort rather than external barriers? Yes No
2. Do I actively seek to understand the unique challenges faced by learners from vulnerable groups? Yes No
3. Have I ever avoided addressing an issue of discrimination in my class because it felt uncomfortable? Yes No
4. Do I ensure that my teaching materials are accessible to learners with different abilities (e.g., visual, auditory, or physical impairments)? Yes No
5. Have I received feedback from learners about feeling excluded or misunderstood? Yes No

b - Group discussion: Scenario-based reflection

Objective:

This activity is designed to highlight how our perceptions of others influence our interpretation of their behavior and to uncover how biases and prejudices shape our judgments and interactions. Through structured discussions, participants will develop greater awareness of their own biases and explore strategies to mitigate them in the VET environment.

Preparation: Divide participants into small groups of 3–4 members. There must be at least two groups to allow for diverse perspectives.

Tips for the facilitator: Ensure everyone has a chance to express their thoughts without judgment and to encourage open-minded exploration of ideas.

Emphasize the importance of:

- Respectful listening.
- Non-judgmental dialogue.
- Honest self-reflection.

Material needed:

- Copies of the scenarios for each group.
- Writing materials for participants.
- A whiteboard or flip chart for recording group reflections.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Choose one scenario from the options provided (the same for all groups). Each group will focus on this scenario for the duration of the exercise.

Scenario 1:

A male learner from an economically disadvantaged background consistently arrives late to class.

- What is your initial assumption about the reason for their tardiness?
- How would you address the situation?

Scenario 2:

A female learner in a traditionally male-dominated field like construction raises her hand less often in group discussions.

- What do you believe might be causing this behavior?
- How would you encourage her to participate more actively?

Scenario 3:

A learner with a physical disability is unable to use certain tools during a practical session.

- What is your immediate reaction?
- What steps would you take to ensure the learner can fully participate?

2. Group work | 20-25 minutes

- A member of each group reads the chosen scenario aloud.
- Each participant writes down their individual answer to the first question in the scenario.
- The group discusses their answers for five minutes, seeking clarification and reflecting on the diversity of perspectives.
- Repeat the process with the second question.
- Again, discuss the answers and explore different viewpoints.

3. Group presentations | 30 minutes

Each group presents their answers to the first question.

The facilitator records these on a whiteboard or flip chart, noting any recurring themes or prejudices that emerge.

After all groups share their answers, the facilitator asks participants to identify any prejudices, biases, or discriminatory attitudes in the responses.

Categorize the answers (e.g., prejudice, direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, bias) and record them on the board. See this small glossary to help guide the categorization activity, together with some practical examples in order to better understand the depth of each concept:

1. Prejudice is when someone forms a negative opinion about a person based on their identity (like gender or background) without any actual knowledge of the individual or their abilities.

VET Example:

At a technical school specializing in mechatronics, an instructor assumes that a female student is unlikely to succeed in PLC programming, believing it to be more suited for male students. As a result, he does not invite her to participate in an advanced practical project. This decision is not based on her performance or skills, but on a gender-based stereotype, thereby limiting her opportunity to grow and demonstrate her capabilities.

2. Bias refers to having an unfair preference for—or against—certain people or groups, often unconsciously. It can influence decisions in ways that exclude individuals based on assumptions rather than facts.

VET Example:

During the recruitment process for a vocational training course, the organisers only select candidates who speak with a local accent, assuming—without verification—that those with foreign accents will struggle to follow the course material. As a result, **refugees and migrants**, despite meeting all formal criteria, are unfairly excluded due to assumptions about language ability rather than actual qualifications or potential.

3. Direct discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly or denied opportunities specifically because of a characteristic such as their race, age, gender, or disability.

VET Example:

A vocational school rejects a student on the autism spectrum from an IT technician course, claiming he “will not cope socially.” This decision is made despite the student’s strong academic performance and positive feedback from previous educators. The refusal is based solely on his disability, not on his qualifications or potential—making it a clear case of direct discrimination.

4. Indirect discrimination occurs when a rule, policy, or practice appears neutral but unintentionally disadvantages certain individuals or groups—often without the intent to exclude.

VET Example:

A vocational training programme requires all applicants to complete an online application form in Polish and upload scanned documents. While this requirement applies to everyone, it creates barriers for individuals with visual impairments and for migrants with limited Polish language skills. The form lacks accessibility features—such as an audio version, translated instructions, or technical support—making it difficult or impossible for some eligible candidates to apply. Although the rule seems fair, it results in unequal access and therefore constitutes indirect discrimination.

Engage in a broader conversation on the origins of these biases:

- Why do we have these prejudices?
- How do cultural, societal, and educational factors contribute to these perceptions?

Follow the same process to present, analyze, and reflect on the answers to the second question.

After analyzing both questions, lead a discussion around solutions:

- Are the proposed solutions practical and actionable in vocational training settings?
- How can these solutions be effectively implemented in VET programs?



2

Inclusive, empathic communication and active listening



a - Inclusive Communication VS Empathic Communication

- Inclusive communication focuses on ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs, can access and engage with information effectively. Its primary goal is to remove barriers and create environments where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.
- Empathic communication, on the other hand, emphasizes understanding and sharing the feelings of others. It is deeply personal and emotional, aiming to build a connection through sensitivity and compassion.

Example: In a VET class, inclusive communication might involve providing written instructions alongside verbal explanations for learners with hearing impairments. Empathic communication would involve recognizing a learner's anxiety about a task and offering reassurance or encouragement.

By integrating all aspects — such as empathic communication (the ability to understand and share another person's feelings), active listening (truly paying attention to what someone is saying without interrupting or judging), and systemic inclusivity (designing education systems and practices that remove barriers and ensure equal participation for all learners) — educators can create an environment that genuinely supports and values every individual.

b - Difference between inclusive communication and active listening

- Active listening is a skill within the broader framework of inclusive communication. While active listening focuses on fully engaging with and understanding the speaker's message, inclusive communication encompasses a wider array of practices, including accessibility, representation, and adaptability.

Example: A teacher practicing active listening might nod and ask clarifying questions to understand a learner's concern. Inclusive communication would go further, ensuring that all learners have the tools and opportunities to express their concerns, such as providing multilingual support or alternative communication formats.

c - Empathic communication and active listening: Partial solutions to inclusion

While empathic communication and active listening are essential for fostering connection and understanding, they address only part of the challenges in achieving inclusive communication. These approaches rely heavily on interpersonal skills and may overlook systemic or structural barriers that prevent true inclusivity.

Active listening Alone



During a group activity in a construction VET program, the instructor listens carefully to a student's complaint about difficulty using certain tools but fails to provide alternative options, leaving the issue unresolved.

Empathic communication Alone



A teacher might actively listen to a learner from a refugee background who shares their struggles with understanding technical jargon. This demonstrates empathic communication. However, the communication is not fully inclusive if the course materials remain inaccessible or culturally irrelevant.

Inclusive communication in practice



In the same scenario, the instructor not only listens but also ensures that adapted tools are available for learners with physical limitations, enabling full participation.

d - Soft skills, foundational for success in Vocational Education Training

Soft skills are essential tools that **facilitate the identification of barriers to learning, particularly in diverse and inclusive settings**. These skills enable educators to approach differences and the need for adapted tools with empathy and respect. Soft skills such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability are crucial for fostering positive and constructive feedback, ensuring that inclusion in the learning process is both relevant and sustainable.

While their importance is clear, **soft skills are rarely taught explicitly**. This makes it necessary to practice and recognize them consistently in educational contexts. Learning to highlight and develop these competencies is key to building a solid foundation for inclusive communication.

Below are actionable strategies and exercises to help educators and learners acquire and strengthen these skills.

Skill 1: Active Listening





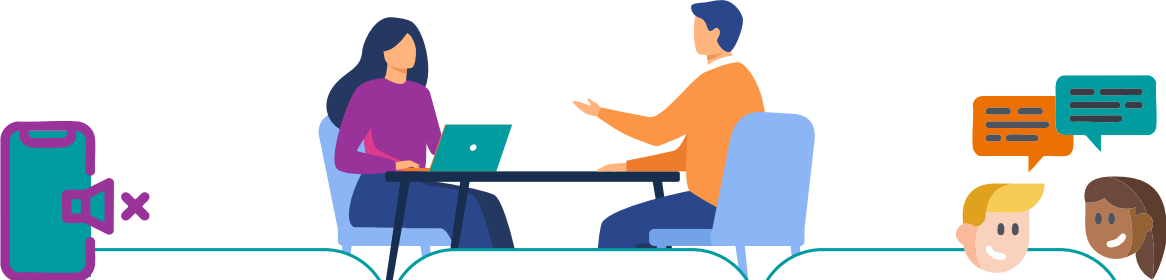
Definition: The ability to fully concentrate, understand, and respond thoughtfully during conversations.

+ Practice: "15 Minutes of Silence"

- Set a timer for 15 minutes.
- Pair learners into groups. One learner speaks about a topic of their choice, while the other listens without interrupting, reacting, or giving opinions.
- After 15 minutes, the listener reflects on what they learned and how it felt to focus solely on listening.

Outcome: Learners experience the challenge of active listening and begin to recognize their habits.

Concrete instructions to achieve active **listening**:



Eliminate distractions:
Before engaging in a conversation, put away electronic devices and choose a quiet space.

Adopt open body language:
Face the speaker, maintain eye contact, and nod occasionally to show engagement.

Paraphrase and reflect:
After the speaker finishes a point, summarize it in your own words to confirm understanding (e.g., "What I hear you saying is...").

Ask clarifying questions:
Use open-ended questions like "Can you tell me more about that?" to delve deeper into the speaker's perspective.

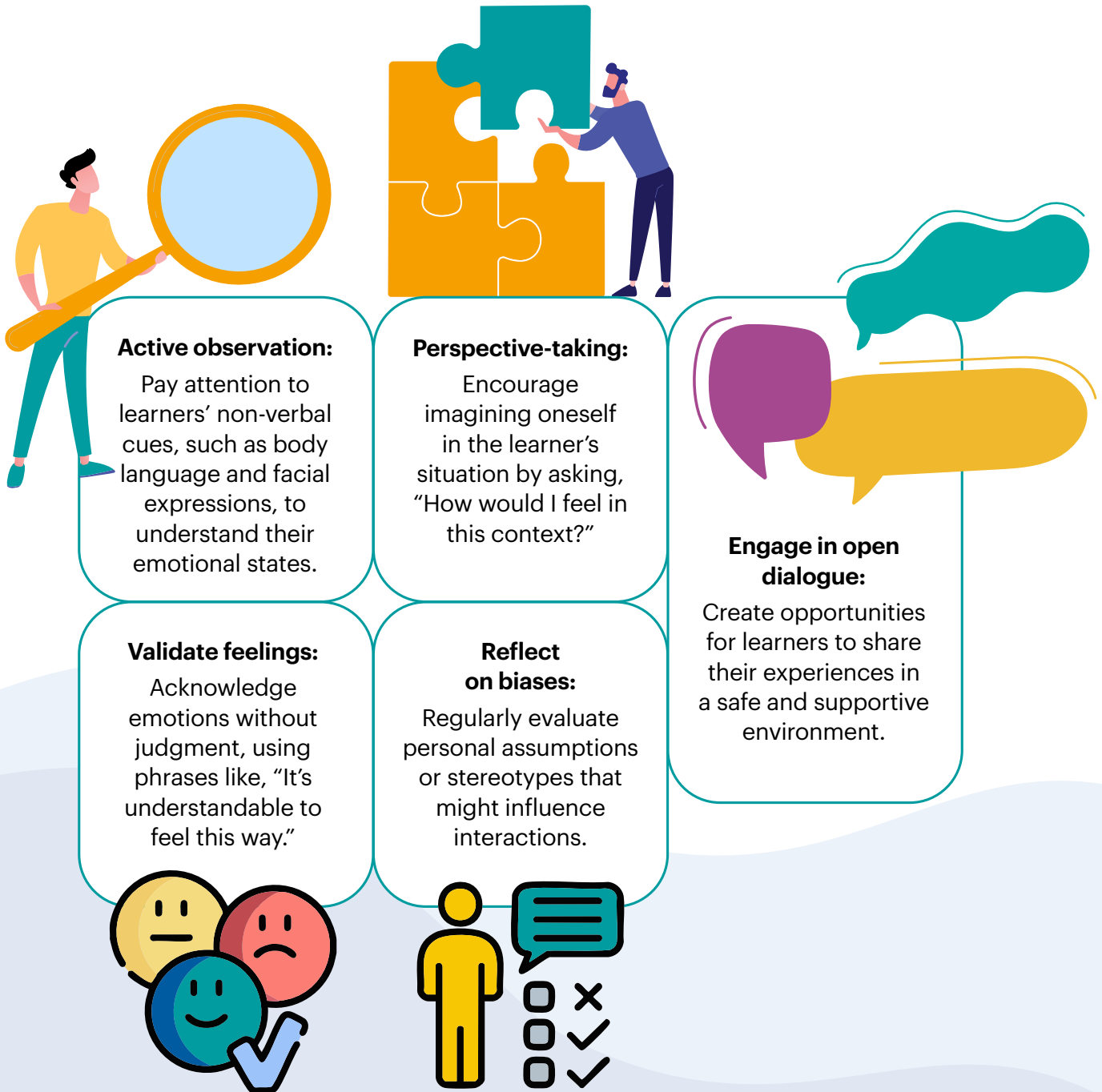
Practice silence:
Resist the urge to interrupt or interject; instead, count to three before responding to ensure the speaker has finished their thoughts.

Evaluate your listening:
After a conversation, reflect on what you learned and identify moments where you might have been distracted or judgmental.

Skill 2: Empathy in Action

Definition: The capacity to understand and share the feelings of others.

Instructions to develop **empathy**:



+ Empathy skills in practice: Role-play

Understand the barriers faced by refugees from different cultural and economically challenging backgrounds when integrating VET education for their integration.

Educators could participate in a simulated exercise where they are given a limited budget and tasked with navigating essential services, such as securing housing or healthcare, in an unfamiliar language or with bureaucratic restrictions.



This exercise could include steps like:

1. Attempting to complete essential paperwork in an unfamiliar language or without adequate translation tools.
2. Simulating the challenge of managing expenses with minimal resources, such as choosing between food or transportation.
3. Facing scenarios that highlight cultural misunderstandings, such as different norms in workplace etiquette or communication styles.

Evaluation: Participants would reflect on their experiences, documenting the emotional and practical challenges they encountered. Group discussions could then explore solutions, such as providing translation services, culturally sensitive materials, and economic support mechanisms in VET programs. This approach builds both awareness and actionable strategies for inclusion, ensuring that educators are better equipped to support refugee learners. Evaluation: Participants would reflect on their experiences, documenting the emotional and practical challenges they encountered. For example, a scenario could involve a refugee learner navigating a VET course without adequate language support. They might feel isolated, struggle to understand instructions, and miss out on key learning moments. During group discussion, participants could explore solutions such as introducing peer language buddies, offering translated course materials, or providing culturally relevant examples in the curriculum. Economic barriers — such as transport or childcare — could also be highlighted, prompting ideas for financial aid or flexible scheduling. This approach not only builds awareness but also encourages participants to co-develop realistic, actionable strategies that educators can implement to better support refugee learners.

3

APPLYING SOFT SKILLS TO VULNERABLE GROUPS IN VET

3.1 Persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are individuals who experience **physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments** that, in interaction with societal and environmental barriers, hinder their ability to participate fully in society on an equal basis with others. This definition is rooted in the social model of disability, which highlights the interaction between an individual's condition and the world around them, emphasizing that it is often societal structures, not just the impairment itself that create barriers.

Traditionally, the focus has been on visible disabilities, such as physical impairments (e.g., mobility challenges) and psychiatric disabilities (e.g., bipolar disorder). However, modern understandings of disability have expanded to include less visible forms of neurological spectrum diversity, such as **autism, ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), dyslexia, and other cognitive variations**, which result from different ways of processing information, learning and functioning in society. These aspects are often termed neurodiversity.

The modern understanding of disability also includes less visible forms of neurological spectrum diversity, such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia, which result from different ways of processing information, learning and functioning in society. These aspects are often termed neurodiversity.

While not all neurodivergent individuals identify as persons with disability, many face challenges due to environments that are not designed with cognitive and sensory diversity in mind.

- **Overstimulating spaces** can be overwhelming for individuals with different sensory processing needs.
- **Strict routines and inflexible systems** in educational or workplace settings can create unnecessary barriers for those who benefit from options like extended deadlines, alternative communication methods, or quiet workspaces.

Recognising **neurodiversity as a natural aspect of human diversity** encourages the creation of more inclusive, responsive, and supportive learning and working environments. By broadening our understanding of accessibility to include **neurodivergence and other less visible forms of diversity**, we move toward systems that honour and value the full range of human experiences and ways of thinking. This approach ensures:

- Greater access to inclusive education that considers diverse learning needs.
- Better support in workplaces, such as providing neurodivergent-friendly policies.
- Reduced social isolation by fostering environments that embrace all types of abilities.

Inclusion is not about forcing individuals to conform to societal norms; it is about adapting societal structures to accommodate the diversity of human experiences. By embracing this broader perspective, we can create a society where everyone, regardless of their abilities, can thrive.

a. Exploring inclusion scenario for person with disabilities

Scenario 1:

Mateo, a 16-year-old learner in a vocational education and training (VET) program, **has dyslexia**. He struggles with reading instructions and completing written assignments within the given time limits.

In his carpentry class, the teacher often provides critical instructions in written format without additional verbal explanations. Mateo finds it difficult to keep up and frequently misses key steps in the projects. His peers assume he is lazy or uninterested, which affects his confidence. Despite his evident potential in hands-on tasks, he feels excluded and inadequate.

IMPACT



Mateo avoids participating in group discussions and refrains from asking for help, fearing judgment from both his classmates and teacher. His learning experience is significantly hindered due to the lack of accommodation.

Scenario 2 (VET Context+):

Aisha, 20, is enrolled in a VET programme in hospitality management, which includes both classroom instruction and hands-on training in kitchens and service areas. She has a **moderate hearing impairment** and relies on lip-reading and occasional use of a hearing aid.

During group activities, Aisha struggles to follow conversations in noisy training environments like industrial kitchens, where background noise makes communication difficult. In the classroom, her instructor often speaks while facing the whiteboard, making it impossible for her to lip-read. Despite her repeated requests for captions on training videos and more inclusive communication practices, her needs are consistently overlooked.

IMPACT



Aisha begins to feel isolated and frustrated. She is often excluded from group tasks because her peers assume she will slow them down. Over time, she loses confidence in her abilities and considers leaving the programme, questioning whether she has a future in the field.



b. Inclusivity for people with disabilities in VET Teaching

VET practitioners can employ a variety of strategies to foster inclusivity for learners with disabilities, ensuring equal access to education and a supportive learning environment. Here are several solutions:

Accessible teaching materials

- Use assistive technologies like screen readers, speech-to-text software, or magnification tools.
- Provide captions or transcripts for videos.
- Use large print, high-contrast visuals, and braille materials when needed.
- Simplify and clarify written instructions.

Adapted Learning Environments to create a physical environment that accommodates all learners.

- Ensure classrooms and workspaces are wheelchair-accessible, with adjustable desks and tools.
- Use soundproof rooms or provide hearing aids for learners with hearing impairments.
- Arrange seating to promote visibility for learners who rely on lip-reading or sign language interpreters.

Individualized Support Plans to tailor the teaching approach to meet individual learner needs.

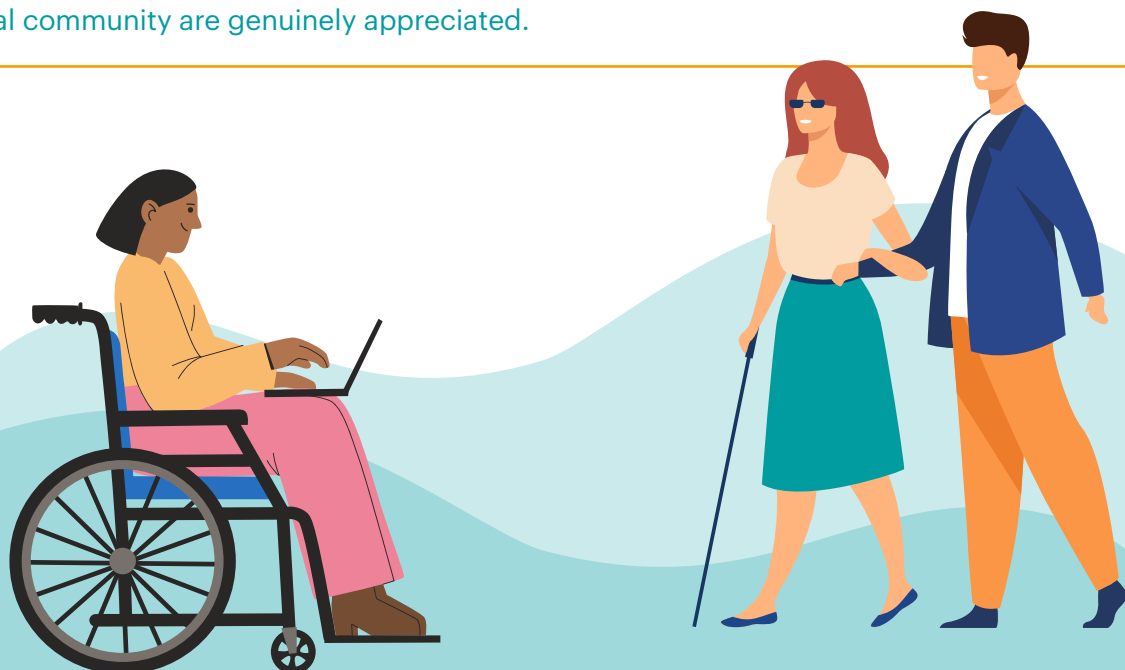
- Conduct an initial assessment to identify each learner's strengths and challenges.
- Develop personalized learning plans, including accommodations like extended time for assignments or alternative assessments.
- Schedule one-on-one mentoring sessions to provide additional guidance and support.

Promote Peer Support and Collaboration to encourage teamwork and collaboration among all students to foster inclusion.

- Pair learners with disabilities with empathetic peers for group projects.
- Facilitate ice-breaker activities to build mutual understanding.
- Organize mentorship programs where experienced students help their peers navigate challenges.

When designing inclusive educational environments, the diverse needs of all students should be taken into account, regardless of whether they result from physical disabilities, learning difficulties or different ways of processing information characteristic for neurodivergent people. Each of these perspectives deserves recognition and appropriate accommodation to ensure equal access to education.

Providing students with disabilities with equal access to education – on the same level as others – strengthens their sense of belonging, agency and value. It shows that their skills, potential and contribution to the educational community are genuinely appreciated.



3.2 LGBTQIA+ Individuals

The term LGBTQIA+ was created to represent the **diverse spectrum of sexual orientations**, gender identities, and sex characteristics. It evolved over time as society recognized the need for more inclusive language to describe individuals who exist outside of cisgender and heterosexual norms.

Originally, LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) was used in activism and advocacy. It later expanded to LGBT to include transgender individuals. As awareness grew, additional letters were added to reflect intersex, asexual, and other identities. The “+” acknowledges that identity is fluid and that there are many experiences beyond those explicitly listed.

Each letter represents a different identity within the spectrum:

- L – Lesbian: Women who are attracted to other women.
- G – Gay: Typically refers to men attracted to men, but can be used broadly for same-gender attraction.
- B – Bisexual: Individuals attracted to more than one gender.
- T – Transgender: People whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned at birth.
- Q – Queer/Questioning:
 - Queer is a broad term for non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities.
 - Questioning refers to those exploring their gender or sexual orientation.
- I – Intersex: People born with sex characteristics that don't fit traditional definitions of male or female.
- A – Asexual/Aromantic/Agender:
 - Asexual: Little or no sexual attraction to others.
 - Aromantic: Little or no romantic attraction.
 - Agender: Identifying as having no gender or a neutral gender.
- + – Represents other identities and the inclusivity of the spectrum.

Key considerations for fostering inclusivity:

- LGBTQIA+ people exist in all cultures and have throughout history.
- Everyone deserves respect, acceptance, and equality, regardless of their identity.
- Gender identity (who someone is) and sexual orientation (who someone is attracted to) are different.
- Being LGBTQIA+ is natural, just like being heterosexual or cisgender.
- Some people may still be discovering or exploring their identity, and that's okay.



a. Exploring inclusion for LGBTQIA+ individuals in education

SOPHIA'S PERSPECTIVE

Sophia, 20 years old, considers herself queer because **she does not identify strictly as heterosexual or conform to traditional gender norms**. She feels most comfortable dressing in androgynous clothing and prefers to use the pronouns "she/they." Sophia attends a VET programme university but often **feels judged by peers for her appearance** and experiences anxiety when filling out forms that only offer "male" or "female" gender options.

ALEX'S PERSPECTIVE

Alex is a 24-year-old attending a vocational training program for graphic design. Alex identifies as bisexual, meaning he is attracted to individuals of multiple genders. However, they often feel compelled to "prove" their sexuality because some peers dismiss bisexuality as "just a phase." During group discussions, Alex overhears comments like, "Bisexual people are just indecisive," which makes them feel invalidated and reluctant to share personal experiences. While Alex has supportive friends, he feels excluded when conversations veer into heteronormative assumptions about relationships.

b. What are some of the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ Individuals?



In Education:

- Fear of being outed or bullied, especially in environments with limited awareness or support for LGBTQIA+ issues.
- Lack of representation in the curriculum or inclusive policies, making them feel invisible.



In Social Settings:

- Assumptions or stereotypes about their gender or sexuality can lead to microaggressions (e.g., "You don't look gay").
- Exclusion from social groups or activities, particularly in conservative regions or communities.



In Professional and Vocational Training (VET):

- Gender-segregated facilities (e.g., bathrooms, changing rooms) can create discomfort or distress.
- Limited access to mentors or role models who share their experiences.

Imagine being given a key that almost fits a lock but doesn't turn. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, many societal systems feel like they're designed for someone else, leading to constant adjustments or being shut out altogether.

c. Practical ways to foster inclusivity in VET practice

Here are some simple but effective ways to ensure your practice is inclusive, particularly to LGBTQIA+:

- Reorganize activities to **avoid gender-based divisions**: Use mixed groups for activities or group students based on interests or skills rather than gender.

Example: Instead of “boys vs. girls” in a debate exercise, use color-coded teams or assign roles like “proponents vs. opponents” based on topic preferences. Incorporate discussions about gender and sexuality diversity into the curriculum to normalize these topics.

- Cultivate a **classroom culture where diversity is celebrated**, and stereotypes are addressed: Foster discussions that celebrate all forms of relationships and avoid activities requiring students to disclose personal details unless they are comfortable.

Example: Replace “ideal romantic partner” discussions with “ideal collaboration partner” scenarios, focusing on qualities like teamwork and communication. Establish clear ground rules for respectful dialogue and address harmful jokes or stereotypes immediately. Provide anonymous channels for students to report discrimination or microaggressions, ensuring swift action and follow-up.

- Create a **learning environment that affirms and respects gender diversity**: Allow students to self-identify their pronouns during introductions or in digital profiles used in class. Use gender-neutral language in all activities and materials.

Example: Instead of grouping students by gender, organize activities based on random pairings or areas of interest. Use phrases like “Group A” and “Group B” rather than “boys” and “girls.” By proactively addressing exclusion and adapting practices, VET educators can create a supportive and equitable learning environment that benefits all learners.



3.3 Refugees & Immigrants

According to the European Commission, immigrants, in the global context, are non-resident arriving in a State with the intention to remain for a period exceeding a year.

We recognize them as **individuals who voluntarily leave their home countries to seek better opportunities, such as employment, education, or quality of life.** They may be **fleeing discrimination, life threat,** and other crises but not necessarily.

The term refugees refer to individuals that are typically recognized under international laws, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention. In this legal framework, refugees represent individuals who flee their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or violence, and are unable to return because of a well-founded fear of harm. While their motivations for migration differ, both groups often **face exclusionary behaviors and systemic challenges that hinder their integration,** particularly in educational contexts.

Examples of exclusion



In Education Fields:

- **Language Barriers:** Refugees and immigrants might struggle to participate in class discussions or comprehend instructions due to limited proficiency in the local language.
- **Stereotyping:** Teachers and peers may assume that these individuals lack academic abilities, leading to lowered expectations.
- **Isolation:** Cultural differences can lead to social exclusion, with local students forming cliques (very closed groups) that exclude newcomers.

In Society:

- **Bureaucratic Challenges:** Refugees often face delays in processing legal documents, hindering access to education or work.
- **Discrimination:** Prejudices against their background or religion may result in unfair treatment.
- **Economic Barriers:** Immigrants and refugees often face financial struggles that limit access to resources, such as books or extracurricular activities.

Try my shoes

Imagine a game where every player starts with the same tasks, but refugees and immigrants are given incomplete rules or tools in a foreign language. Others may unfairly assume they're not playing correctly when in reality, they lack the support to succeed.

a. Practical ways to foster inclusivity in VET practice

Here are some simple but effective ways to ensure your VET practice is inclusive, particularly for learners with migrant or refugee backgrounds:

- **Adapt language use to increase accessibility:** Simplify language without simplifying content - use plain language, avoid slang, idioms, or culturally specific references that may not be familiar. Provide visual aids, translated keywords, and use gestures to reinforce meaning.

Example: Instead of saying “Let’s hit the ground running,” use “Let’s start working quickly.” Prepare bilingual glossaries for technical terms and invite students to create pictorial dictionaries of key vocabulary.

- **Integrate culturally relevant examples and materials:** Incorporate diverse cultural references into lessons to make learning more relatable. Choose examples, case studies, and success stories that reflect students’ cultural backgrounds and migration experiences.

Example: When teaching entrepreneurship, include stories of migrant-owned businesses or trades that are common in students’ home countries to foster a sense of pride and relevance.

- **Foster peer support and buddy systems:** Pair migrant or refugee learners with supportive peers (ideally same language, if possible, but not necessarily) to assist with both upskilling and social integration. Structure the peer helper role to avoid dependency and ensure mutual respect. This approach strengthens learners’ sense of belonging, agency, and recognition of their knowledge and experience. It also helps demonstrate the value of their cultural backgrounds, builds pride in their roots, and supports identity development by treating diverse experiences as assets in the learning process.

Example: Create “learning partner” assignments where each pair helps each other summarize key points after each session, fostering communication and mutual support.

- **Create spaces for sharing experiences—but make participation voluntary:** Offer creative projects (art, video, storytelling) where learners can share aspects of their background if they wish, without pressure to disclose personal migration stories.

Example: In a hospitality course, students can create posters about “Hospitality Traditions in My Culture,” sharing unique customs without discussing personal trauma.

- **Establish clear anti-discrimination policies and rapid response systems:** Clearly communicate zero tolerance for discrimination or xenophobia. Set up anonymous reporting channels and act swiftly and visibly on any incidents.

Example: Introduce a “Community Agreement” at the start of the course, co-created with learners, that emphasizes respect, inclusion, and celebrating different cultures. Post the agreement visibly in the classroom.



“Care Across Cultures” Project Work

Within a VET program for **social care workers the VET** educators noticed that **migrant learners struggled to see how their personal experiences could be assets** in their future careers.

Trainers launched a project called “Care Across Cultures,” where learners researched and presented how elderly care, disability care, or mental health care is approached in their countries of origin. They worked in small groups to create posters or short videos, using visuals, storytelling, and cultural artifacts (e.g., music, textiles) when possible.

Thanks to the project, the knowledge and background of migrants and refugees have been recognised as an integral part of the shared educational/social experience.

3.4 Youth from under-resourced communities

Students coming from **socio-familial environments with limited resources** face a range of challenges that significantly impact their educational experience and increase their likelihood of feeling excluded. These students often come from families with low incomes, where basic necessities take priority, **leaving little room for educational support**. In many cases, households lack critical resources such as a stable internet connection, which is increasingly essential for completing homework, accessing online learning platforms, and staying informed. Additionally, these homes often do not have dedicated spaces for studying, forcing students to work in shared or distracting environments that hinder concentration and productivity.

Stress within the home is another key factor contributing to exclusion. Students may experience high levels of anxiety due to family instability, financial struggles, or other household issues. For those placed in foster care or institutional settings, the lack of consistent support systems can further **exacerbate feelings of disconnection and insecurity**, making it harder to focus on academic success.

These circumstances collectively create significant **barriers to academic engagement and personal growth**. Even though living in harsh environments can provide students with special abilities like solving problems, and a better capacity to direct goals, when students lack access to resources, face overwhelming stress at home, and are physically and mentally drained from overworking, they may feel isolated from their peers and excluded from the learning process. They often perceive their challenges as insurmountable, **leading to reduced self-esteem and motivation**.

Addressing these issues requires educational systems and practitioners to adopt inclusive practices that recognize and accommodate the unique struggles of students from poor resource environments. **Providing accessible resources, fostering a supportive and understanding classroom culture, and implementing flexible policies** can help bridge the gap, ensuring all students feel included and valued in their learning journey.



Here are two scenarios that illustrate how youth from poor resource environments can face systemic and interpersonal exclusion in VET settings, highlighting the importance of inclusive practices to create equitable learning opportunities.

Scenario 1:

Ali, a 17-year-old student in a vocational education and training (VET) program for electrical engineering, comes from a low-income household. His family does not have an internet connection at home, and Ali lacks a quiet space to study because his home is small and shared with four siblings.

In his VET program, instructors often assign online research tasks and expect students to watch instructional videos before class. Ali cannot access these materials at home and often comes to class unprepared. When group projects are assigned, his peers grow frustrated because Ali is unable to contribute fully. The instructor assumes Ali is lazy or uninterested in the subject and reprimands him in front of the class.

IMPACT



Ali begins to feel embarrassed and disconnected from his peers. He avoids participating in discussions and stops asking questions, fearing judgment. Over time, his grades decline, and he considers dropping out of the program.

a. Practical solutions to create an inclusive environment

To ensure inclusion and prevent exclusion for youth growing in poor resource environments, vocational education and training (VET) practitioners can adopt several strategies tailored to address their unique challenges. They can create an environment where youth from poor resource environments are supported, empowered, and included in their educational journey. This ensures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have equal opportunities to thrive.

Here are some practical solutions:

- Provide flexible learning options: Design flexible schedules or offer asynchronous learning opportunities to accommodate students who work part-time jobs.

Example: Allow students to access recorded lectures and submit assignments on extended deadlines to balance their learning and work responsibilities.

- Facilitate access to resources: Create equitable access to learning tools such as internet access, laptops, or study materials.

Example: Establish resource-sharing programs like lending libraries for laptops or organizing study spaces with internet access on campus that remain open after hours.

- Offer peer and mentorship support: Pair students with mentors or supportive peers who can guide them and provide encouragement.

Example: Implement a peer-to-peer tutoring system where students who excel can assist others, creating a collaborative learning environment.

- Create a supportive classroom culture: Build an empathetic and inclusive classroom environment that recognizes diverse student backgrounds.

Example: Incorporate discussions about socio-economic diversity to foster understanding among peers, emphasizing that everyone brings unique strengths to the table. Incorporating soft skills such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability in communication ensures that Design Thinking processes in VET are inclusive for all learners. Tailored approaches for different vulnerable groups help dismantle barriers and foster equality, empowering every individual to contribute meaningfully.

4

Incorporating inclusive communication in the Design Thinking methodology.

As you become familiar with each phase of the Design Thinking (DT) methodology and begin planning your lessons using the accompanying manual, this supplement offers practical strategies to support inclusive communication at every step. In this section, you will find the DT phases helping you adapt your facilitation techniques, learning materials, and group dynamics to ensure meaningful participation from all learners—particularly those with diverse communication needs.

Phase 1: Empathize

The Empathize phase is about gaining a **deep understanding of users' experiences, needs, and perspectives**. In a VET context, this means connecting with learners, colleagues, or stakeholders to uncover what helps—or hinders—their learning and working environments.

Inclusive communication is critical here: **it ensures that everyone's voice is heard and understood**, especially those who might otherwise be overlooked due to language, ability, cultural background, or communication preferences.

- Learners may feel intimidated or unsure how to express needs.
- Standard interview or observation tools may exclude people with communication or cognitive challenges.
- Language barriers, cultural norms, or neurodivergence may prevent full participation.
- Overreliance on verbal communication can unintentionally exclude non-native speakers or learners with disabilities.

Inclusive tool: Persona Co-Creation with Visual Prompts

A collaborative tool that uses images, icons, and guided questions to help participants describe and build a fictional user or learner based on real needs and challenges. Instead of relying on verbal storytelling alone, participants select from visual cards representing feelings, actions, barriers, and goals.

Why it works inclusively:

- Reduces language dependency
- Engages visual and tactile learners
- Encourages quiet or less confident participants to express themselves
- Promotes empathy through co-creation

How to apply it:

1. **Provide visual prompt cards** (e.g., emotions, challenges, tools, learning preferences).

Example:

FEELING / EMOTION CARDS	ACTION / DAILY ACTIVITIES CARDS	BARRIERS / CHALLENGES CARDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">😊 Happy😟 Worried😡 Frustrated😕 Confused😴 Tired😄 Excited😞 Sad😎 Proud	<ul style="list-style-type: none">🚶 Walking🚌 Taking transport📖 Studying🔧 Using tools🔧 Asking for help⌚ Waiting🍴 Eating🏫 Attending class	<ul style="list-style-type: none">🚫 Stairs without ramp📄 Hard-to-understand materials🗣️ Communication difficulties⌚ Long waiting times🖥️ No access to technology🗺️ Getting lost💡 Not being listened to🗣️ Language barrier
TOOLS / SUPPORTS CARDS	GOALS / DREAM CARDS	CREATE AND ADAPT VISUAL PROMPTS CARDS TO YOU NEEDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">👁️ Visual instructions (pictograms)🎵 Audio support / screen reader👤 Peer helper🚪 Elevator🌐 Multilingual resources📄 Easy-to-read handouts🌈 Safe space policies🚌 Transportation support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">🎓 Finish training💼 Get a job📖 Pass exams🌍 Make friends🌐 Learn new skills🏆 Be independent🏠 Support family🗣️ Speak new languages	

2. **Lay out the cards** on a table or wall (physical or digital).

3. Ask participants to **pick cards** that describe:

- How they feel about their daily learning experiences.
- What challenges they face.
- What tools/supports they would find helpful.
- What goals they are working toward.

4. **Co-create** a learner persona together by combining cards into a story.

5. Capture their selections by taking a photo, drawing it, or recording voice notes.

In practice: Real-Life Example

In a hospitality training program for young adults with intellectual disabilities, facilitators noticed learners were hesitant during initial interviews. Instead of formal Q&A, they introduced a “day in the life” collage activity using picture cards (e.g., food, transportation, emotions, clothing). Learners pieced together a story showing how they felt during their workday and what made it easier or harder.

The insights were richer than previous verbal-only interviews—and led to adjustments like:

- Simplified schedules
- Pictogram-based instructions
- Paired peer support during assessments

This example shows how empathy can be drawn out with accessible, visual storytelling.

Phase 2: Define

The Define phase is about synthesizing insights gathered during Empathize into a clear, actionable problem statement. In VET, this means capturing the real challenges your learners face — not just what is assumed or generalized.

Inclusive communication ensures that the needs of all participants are truly represented, especially those from vulnerable or underrepresented groups.

To define challenges effectively and inclusively, it is essential to recognize how communication practices can either support or silence different learner voices. Without careful attention, the Define phase risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them. Below are key communication pitfalls that can hinder the accurate and respectful representation of diverse learner experiences:

- Risk of dominant voices overshadowing marginalized perspectives.
- Technical language or jargon may alienate learners with different literacy levels.
- Simplifying complex experiences into a single “problem” can erase nuanced needs.

Inclusive tool: Collaborative Problem Framing Board

A visual board where participants co-create the “problem space” using simple terms, visuals, sticky notes, and storytelling, ensuring multiple viewpoints are visible at once.

Why it works inclusively:

- Visualizes diverse needs without prioritizing one over another.
- Reduces reliance on formal written or spoken summaries.
- Encourages contributions from non-verbal communicators.

How to apply it:

- Use categories like “Challenges,” “Barriers,” “Opportunities” on a wall or digital board.
- Ask learners to place written or drawn notes under each.
- Group similar ideas collaboratively to define core issues together.

Tip: Offer colored cards/sticky notes for different themes (e.g., emotional barriers, physical barriers).

In practice: Real-Life Example

In a VET carpentry program with deaf learners, the Define phase was conducted using a visual map. Challenges were illustrated through simple sketches (e.g., inaccessible machinery, unclear safety signals) rather than through long discussions. The final problem statement reflected the authentic needs of the group — leading to inclusive workshop redesigns.

Phase 3: Ideate

Ideate focuses on generating a wide range of creative solutions to the problem defined. It's about **thinking expansively—without judgment**—to find possibilities.

Inclusive communication in this phase ensures that every participant feels empowered to share ideas, not just the most outspoken.

- Participants with language barriers or low confidence may hesitate to share.
- Neurodivergent learners may prefer structured ideation over chaotic brainstorming.
- Physical or cognitive disabilities may affect participation in rapid activities.

Inclusive tool: Brainwriting Circles

Participants silently write or draw their ideas on paper, pass it to the next person, who builds on it—repeating in a circle.

Why it works inclusively:

- Reduces pressure from speaking in front of a group.
- Gives time for reflection and processing.
- Encourages contribution from quieter or multilingual learners.

How to apply it:

- Set clear prompts (“How might we...?”)
- Allow writing, sketching, or using pictograms.
- Celebrate all contributions equally at the end.

In practice: Real-Life Example

In a green technology VET programme, students with dyslexia actively participated in brainwriting sessions, thanks to the use of support tools (computer programmes with automatic text correction) and the absence of formal assessment of linguistic correctness (as already mentioned in the introduction to the programme).

Phase 4: Prototype

Prototype is about making ideas tangible. It allows teams to quickly test and refine solutions based on feedback. In VET, it could involve creating models, roleplays, processes, or mock-ups.

Inclusive communication ensures **prototypes are accessible** and that **all learners can interact** meaningfully with the creations.

- Prototypes may not be accessible for people with physical disabilities or sensory impairments.
- Feedback may be limited if learners don't feel empowered to criticize designs.

Inclusive tool: Multi-Modal Prototypes

Encourage creating prototypes using multiple formats (physical models, diagrams, videos, role-plays) so different learners can engage.

Why it works inclusively:

- Accommodates different sensory and mobility needs.
- Encourages creative expression beyond words.
- Enables better feedback from diverse users.

How to apply it:

- Offer materials: modeling clay, cardboard, software, video apps.
- Allow oral, visual, or kinesthetic demonstrations.
- Ask learners to co-create prototypes, pairing diverse strengths.

Tip: Use tactile materials and visual supports for blind/low vision learners.

In practice: Real-Life Example

During a prototype session for a tourism services course, learners who were visually impaired created a tactile visitor map prototype. Their innovation led to major improvements in accessibility initiatives for local tourism sites.

Phase 5: Test

Testing helps assess whether solutions meet real needs. In education, testing means involving users (learners) in evaluating prototypes and gathering honest feedback for iteration.

Inclusive communication ensures that all participants feel safe, respected, and able to express feedback in diverse ways.

- Standard feedback forms or interviews may exclude participants with literacy, language, or confidence challenges.
- Feedback environments may not feel psychologically safe for vulnerable learners.

Inclusive tool: Multi-Channel Feedback System

Offer different ways for participants to provide feedback—written, verbal, visual, anonymous forms, or peer-led discussions.

Why it works inclusively:

- Respect different comfort zones.
 - Allows for more nuanced, honest feedback.
 - Captures insights that formal evaluation may miss.
-

How to apply it:

- Provide audio, video, and easy-read feedback options.
- Allow anonymous submission via digital tools.
- Run small peer-led feedback circles.

Tip: Include emotional check-ins before and after testing activities.

In practice: Real-Life Example (VET Context)

In an automotive VET program, non-native speakers provided richer feedback when they could record short audio comments instead of filling out complex forms. This led to improvements in the design of hands-on learning assessments.

By applying the strategies outlined in this section, VET educators and trainers will not only master the stages of the Design Thinking (DT) process but will also develop a deeper, practical understanding of how to make each phase more inclusive and accessible to all learners. Through careful adaptation of communication methods—whether by using visual prompts during Empathize, simplifying language during Define, encouraging silent brainstorming in Ideate, creating multi-sensory prototypes, or offering diverse feedback channels during Test—educators can ensure that every participant's voice is heard, respected, and valued. Ultimately, this supplement helps VET professionals transform Design Thinking from a methodology into a mindset—one that sees diversity as a source of creativity, inclusion as a foundation for excellence, and communication as a bridge that connects every learner to opportunity. Inclusive Design Thinking is not just about better ideas. It's about building better futures—for everyone.

5

Recommendations for VET Practitioners

Inclusive communication has been widely recognized and advocated for across different levels of education. While theoretical frameworks and institutional policies emphasize its importance, **there remains a significant gap in the practical implementation and evaluation of tangible changes that promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups.** This discrepancy often leaves these groups **underrepresented and underserved**, particularly in vocational education settings.

Through the use of design thinking tools in VET, the chances of including each participant are already enhanced. This is largely due to the potential offered by design thinking, where active listening and empathetic communication are central to the approach. It creates genuine opportunities for holistic engagement and the integration of diverse perspectives. However, to **reinforce this process, it is crucial to evaluate progress** and identify areas for improvement in terms of inclusion using relevant inclusion indicators.

a. Indicators of inclusion for VET based on EU resources

The **Five Key Messages for Inclusive Education** from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education provide a foundation for developing inclusion indicators in Vocational Education and Training (VET). These indicators serve as benchmarks for creating equitable and supportive learning environments that address the diverse needs of all learners. Below is a summary of key indicators tailored to VET:

Key indicators of inclusion in VET

1. Accessibility of Learning Materials and Environment:

- Materials should be universally designed, providing multiple formats (e.g., audio, visual, Braille).
- Physical spaces must accommodate students with disabilities, ensuring accessibility to all facilities.

2. Student Participation:

- All students should have opportunities to contribute actively to discussions, projects, and decision-making processes.
- Design Thinking methodologies should foster collaboration, ensuring every voice is heard.

3. Cultural and Social Responsiveness:

- Recognize and value cultural diversity, adapting teaching approaches to students' backgrounds.
- Encourage practices that respect gender identities and neurodiversity.

4. Support Systems and Flexibility:

- Provide tailored support, such as mentoring, tutoring, or adaptive technology.
- Allow flexible deadlines or alternative assessment methods for students with specific needs.

5. Teacher Training and Awareness:

- Equip educators with training on inclusive practices and unconscious bias.
- Promote a growth mindset and openness to continuous professional development.

The goal of these indicators and tools is not to apply them rigidly but to use them as **guides for reflection and continuous improvement.** By consciously embedding inclusion in VET practices, educators can create a collaborative, equitable environment where all students, not just those with recognized needs, can thrive.

b. Full methodology for monitoring inclusivity

Establishing indicators is crucial, and to ensure a thorough evaluation of VET sessions, they should be incorporated into a fully monitored process. At every stage, from initial preparation to final assessment, indicators must be defined and regularly reviewed for their relevance.

A. Pre-Session: Planning and Preparation

1. Needs Assessment:

Distribute pre-session surveys or conduct interviews to identify student needs and analyze results to understand accessibility gaps.

Example Questions:

- Do you have specific accommodations that help you participate effectively?
- What challenges have you faced in past group activities?

2. Session Design:

Develop materials in multiple formats (visual, auditory, tactile).

- Plan a variety of activities to cater to different learning styles (e.g., individual tasks, group discussions, hands-on projects).
- Pre-assign roles in team activities to ensure equitable participation.

3. Set Goals and Indicators: Define measurable outcomes for inclusivity.

Example: 100% of students will contribute at least one idea during brainstorming.



B. During the Session: Active Monitoring

1. Observation and Data Collection:

Use a facilitator or designated observer to monitor inclusivity indicators in real-time.

Example Observation Checklist:

- Are all students actively engaged?
- Are accommodations being utilized effectively?
- Is anyone dominating discussions while others remain silent?

2. Immediate Feedback Mechanisms:

Use digital tools (e.g., live polls, feedback apps) to collect student input mid-session.

Example: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how included do you feel in today's activity?"

3. Adapting in Real-Time:

If exclusion patterns emerge (e.g., some students are not contributing), adjust on the spot:

- Pair students who are struggling with supportive peers.
- Pause to re-explain instructions or adapt group tasks.

C. Post-Session: Reflection and Evaluation

1. Feedback Gathering:

Conduct a debrief with students using open-ended questions:

- What aspects of today's session made you feel included?
- What could we improve to make the session more inclusive?

Collect anonymous feedback to encourage honesty.

2. Data Analysis:

Analyze participation data (e.g., contributions per student, tool usage).

Cross-check against predefined indicators:

- Were all students able to contribute?
- Were accommodations sufficient?


3. Follow-Up Actions:

Share findings with educators and stakeholders and develop actionable steps for improvement

Example: Schedule additional training for teachers on using assistive technology.

INDICATORS FOR INCLUSIVE VET SESSIONS

	INDICATOR	EXAMPLE
Accessibility	Percentage of learning materials available in multiple formats (audio, large print, Braille, digital with screen readers).	For a prototyping session, ensure instructions and templates are accessible in visual, auditory, and tactile forms.
Participation	Ratio of active contributions (e.g., ideas shared, tasks completed) from all participants, ensuring no single group dominates.	In brainstorming, use “round-robin” speaking methods to ensure each student contributes equally.
Cultural Responsiveness	Number of culturally diverse examples and scenarios used in teaching materials.	Include case studies from various cultural contexts to foster relatability and inclusion.
Support systems	Availability and utilization of accommodations like assistive technologies, flexible deadlines, or mentoring.	Allow a dyslexic student extra time to complete a written component of a project.
Teacher preparedness	Frequency of teacher training sessions on inclusive practices within the past academic year.	Train educators to cater to diverse needs.

An illustration showing four people interacting with a large, stylized lightbulb. One person is on a ladder on the left, another is on a platform at the top, a third is sitting on a base, and a fourth is pushing a base from the right. A rocket is launching from the top left, and another is on the right. The background has orange and purple abstract shapes.

Conclusion: Building inclusive VET systems

Design Thinking offers a transformative approach to learning and idea development by emphasizing participation and collaboration. For this approach to achieve its full potential, it is essential to integrate inclusive communication as a foundational element. This involves a deliberate effort to recognize and address barriers to participation, including visible and invisible disadvantages, and the prejudices that hinder the inclusion of all learners.

Inclusive communication requires cultivating skills such as active listening and empathy. These soft skills are vital for breaking down barriers and truly understanding the needs of participants, enabling them to feel integrated into both the learning and group dynamics. It is crucial to continuously develop and practice these skills with kindness and an open mind. Regularly placing oneself in the position of excluded individuals, whether they are persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, migrants, or youth from underprivileged backgrounds, can deepen our understanding of exclusion. Experiencing the effects and emotions tied to exclusion in a group dynamic fosters the ability to devise more effective, relevant, and context-specific solutions to address these challenges.

Importantly, the most valuable insights and solutions for fostering inclusion often come from the excluded individuals themselves. Their lived experiences uniquely position them to identify barriers and propose solutions that are both practical and impactful. This collaborative approach not only empowers marginalized individuals but also ensures that the solutions are grounded in reality.

To maintain the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive practices in vocational education and training (VET), it is essential to integrate measurable indicators throughout the teaching process. These indicators serve as a guide to assess the relevance and impact of inclusive actions at every stage, from planning to execution and evaluation. They ensure that inclusion is not treated as a one-time objective but as an ongoing commitment to creating equitable learning environments.

Ultimately, fostering inclusivity through Design Thinking and inclusive communication enriches the learning experience for all participants. By addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups and promoting a culture of empathy and understanding, VET programs can unlock the full potential of every learner, ensuring that no one is left behind.

By combining empathy, innovative design, and practical strategies, educators can create a VET environment where all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

What is good for people who need an inclusion process is good for all of them.

**Let's not just teach -
let's connect, understand, and inspire.**

**Together, we can build bridges that make vocational
education accessible and empowering for all.**

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