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NAVIGATING LABOR MARKET THROUGH SCHOOL-BASED CAREER GUIDANCE IN VET INSTITUTIONS IN KOSOVO

Achievements, challenges, and the way forward

30 August, 2024

BACKGROUND

From 2013 to 2024, the Enhancing Youth Employment (EYE) project in Kosovo, facilitated addressing youth unemployment. The facilitation focused on bridging the communication gap between policymakers and businesses. This gap often results in outdated laws, curricula, and insufficient career guidance. Unlike other initiatives that operate independently, EYE promoted collaboration among stakeholders. EYE is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by HELVETAS and Management Development Associates (MDA).

EYE used the Market Systems Development (MSD) approach to address labor market complexities by promoting system changes such as

- **The professional development of career advisors**
- **Challenging traditional gender roles**
- **Improving the relationship between educational institutions and employers**

EYE's primary goal has been to support young people in finding a new or better job. This was achieved by improving skills development and better labor market information and services.

One of EYE's significant contributions has been its focus on career guidance within Kosovo's Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions. **EYE's strategy for career guidance in VET institutions is the facilitation of effective, quality, and sustainable career services provided through the School-Based Career Center (SBCC) with qualified career advisors. This required the empowerment of municipal leadership and effective public funding mechanisms to support the sustainability of career services.**



The project worked with local municipalities to develop models for sustainable career guidance. It supported the qualification of career advisors and secured ongoing public funding. Despite challenges, such as the dependency on donor funding and limited availability of career guidance services, EYE's efforts have led to a growing demand for career advice. This is particularly true among young people transitioning from school to work. By treating the labor market as a dynamic and evolving entity, EYE has facilitated the creation of an adaptable system that is capable of meeting the needs of Kosovo's youth and businesses.

CAREER GUIDANCE OFFERS YOUNG PEOPLE THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

Over the past decade, global studies have shown the positive impact of career guidance. It improves students' skills, knowledge, and career-related decision-making. Those who received such guidance showed better outcomes compared to their counterparts.

Also in Kosovo, there is an increasing demand for career guidance as young people transition from school to work. As societal norms shift and social media influence individual choices,

more young Kosovars are enrolling in VET institutions, with 53% of upper secondary students choosing VET in 2020/21, including 42.3% of girls.

This trend addresses youth employability and employer demands, though a skilled workforce shortage persists, and many youths seek opportunities abroad. Living costs have increased, and people want more independence. Families and young people are focused on finding work and starting businesses independently.

Employers are also taking notice. They are adapting their hiring and team management strategies.

Opportunities exist in Kosovo to leverage the benefits of decentralized governance and empower local municipal authorities. These opportunities create a high-quality, well-funded career guidance solution by improving career advice access, facilitating smoother transitions to employment, and promoting collaborations between VET institutions, government, and industry, stimulating sustainable employment opportunities. These changes aim to make VET institutions more appealing by offering clearer pathways to employment and enhancing collaboration prospects with businesses to ensure educational programs meet industry needs.

Yet young people, especially women and disadvantaged groups, struggle to find decent jobs

Despite efforts from various groups like the government, businesses, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish an inclusive, relevant, and sustainable career guidance system, these initiatives have not sufficiently supported young Kosovars. Without proper support, students navigated a maze of educational and career choices. This led to study and career decisions that did not match their interests, talents, or job market demands.

In 2013, VET institutions provided no career guidance, public funding for such services was absent, and there was a severe shortage of career professionals. Instead, decisions often came from donor priorities and central government directives, leaving VET institutions to navigate uncharted territory in their career guidance efforts.

One key problem was the lack of integration of career services into the VET system. Without this integration, students lacked access to important career guidance resources, leaving them feeling lost in their pursuit of meaningful careers.

Financial constraints added to the challenge. Limited public funding made it difficult for VET institutions to establish effective career guidance services. Despite its importance, there has been no clear strategy for comprehensive funding, resulting in underfunding and complicating an already costly system. This lack of resources meant that crucial support systems were slow to develop, leaving students to make important decisions about their futures on their own.

Additionally, a lack of collaboration between VET institutions and businesses widened the gap between education and industry needs. Students often graduated without exposure to real-world career opportunities or insights into what industries were looking for in new hires.

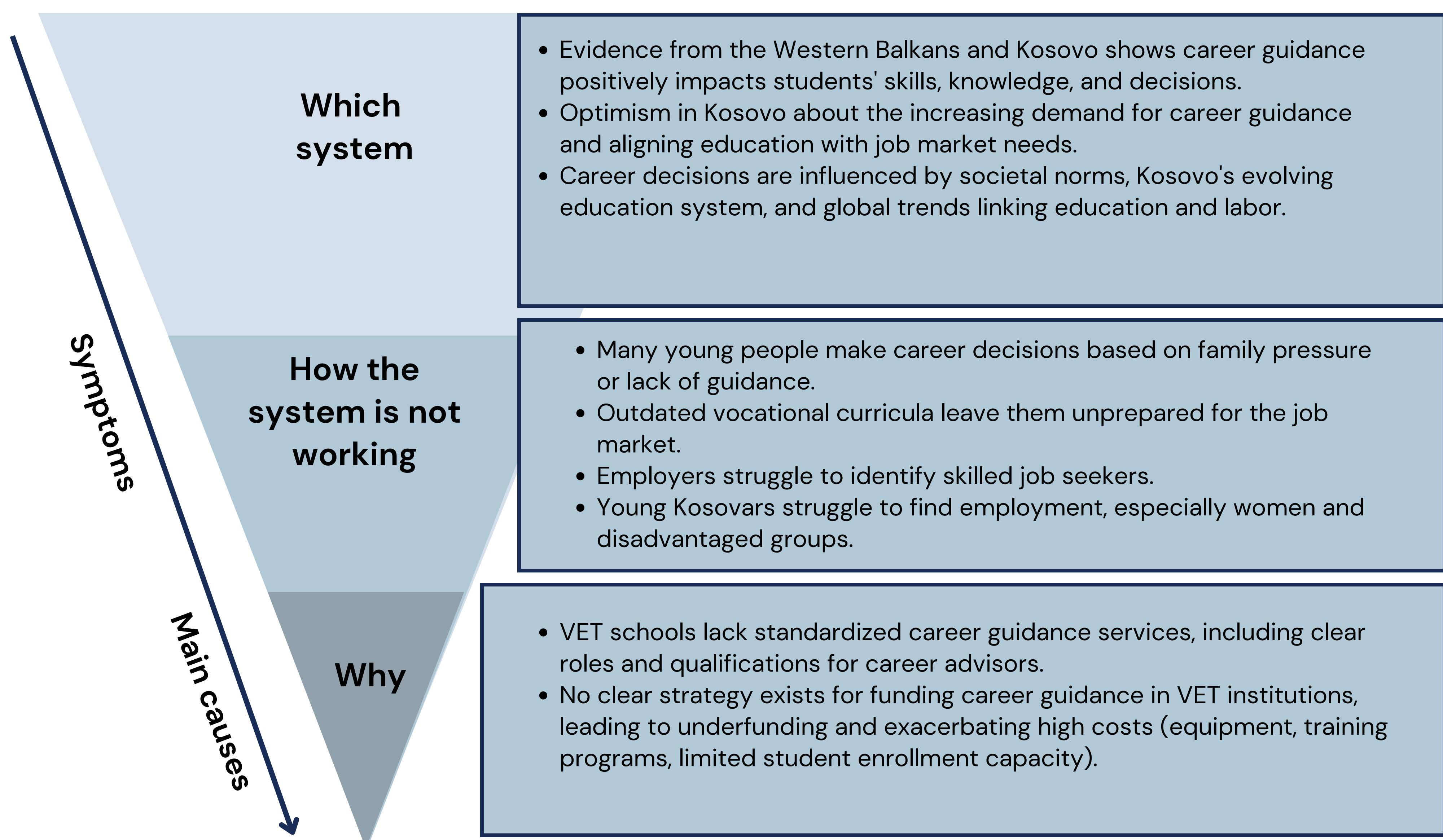


Figure 1: "Symptom-cause" analysis of career guidance in the VET system in Kosovo.

FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION: FACILITATING SCHOOL-BASED CAREER GUIDANCE SERVICES

The value proposition of the SBCC model lies in three main areas. First, the project supported the development of a sustainable solution for VET teacher training in career guidance, accrediting a qualification program through a public institution to minimize costs and swiftly equip teachers with vocational qualifications. This excluded unsustainable, costly short courses from external providers.

The second focus was facilitating the institutionalization of career services within VET institutions, formalizing the role of career advisers to efficiently use public resources for the provision of standardized VET career guidance services through the administrative instruction approved by MESTI. EYE provided technical assistance, external expertise, and project staff knowledge to support this initiative.

The third key area was the sustainable national-level expansion in partnership with municipalities to jointly invest in VET capacity building for the provision of career guidance services. This approach reduced dependence on donor funding, enhancing accountability in managing and delivering quality career guidance services aligned with MESTI's strategy, and minimizing divergent donor agendas.

Key Achievements for the SCBB Model

- **Using Existing Experience and Partnerships:** The model brought onboard government agencies, VET institutions, private sector enterprises, and community leaders together.
- **Careful Selection and Training of Career Guidance Advisors:** The model carefully picked teachers to be career guidance advisors. Chosen teachers were trained to become certified career advisors to guide students well.
- **Flexible Service Delivery:** The model made sure career guidance advisors offered both in-person and online support.
- **Innovative and Locally-Based Career Guidance:** The model created new ways to offer career advice by integrating global best practices with local needs.
- **Support from Local Institutions:** Local schools, governments, private sector enterprises, and community groups strongly supported the model, ensuring its success and lasting impact.
- **Cooperation and Unified Efforts:** The model worked with other partners to avoid repeating efforts with the persistent efforts and strategic thinking of the Intervention Manager of EYE.

Without the above strategic intervention, there was a clear risk of fragmented, financially unsustainable models emerging, thereby risking the continuity of career guidance in VET institutions in Kosovo. However, with the introduction of the EYE proposal, the trajectory of career guidance within Kosovo's VET education system shifted positively, offering a more organized and optimistic outlook for the future.

The model was facilitated through a bottom-up, participatory approach that emphasized local ownership and reduced dependency on external funding. The model, as opposed to direct approaches, facilitated the empowerment of local authorities and the use of pilot projects to showcase feasibility before scaling up. Consequently, the project promoted lasting impacts on Kosovo's VET institutions by ensuring financial and operational sustainability.

EYE championed operational excellence, quality assurance, and stakeholder engagement as cornerstones of its implementation strategy. With Kosovo's decentralized education system, local municipalities now manage and fund pre-university education, including VET, aiming to align it better with local job market needs.

The number of financially sustainable SBCCs established has reached 19 in EYE’s partner VET schools which have around 12,000 students, while another 6 SBCCs have been established by other donors, copying the SBCC model. Since the first SBCC started operating in 2016, around 150,000 career services have been provided to VET students and 9th graders. Of the users, 41% were women and 2% were minorities.

The number of businesses involved in the activities of VET schools through SBCCs has reached over 2,300, offering VET students more opportunities for employment and work-based learning. This cooperation with businesses has resulted in about 1,600 students being matched with jobs. The participation of women is 31% while that of minorities is 2%.

Public funds invested for setting up SBCCs and building capacities of VET institutions for the provision of career services reached 100,305 CHF by June 2024, far exceeding the target of 55,000 CHF. These achievements highlight the project's impact on labor market access and support for youth and businesses in Kosovo.

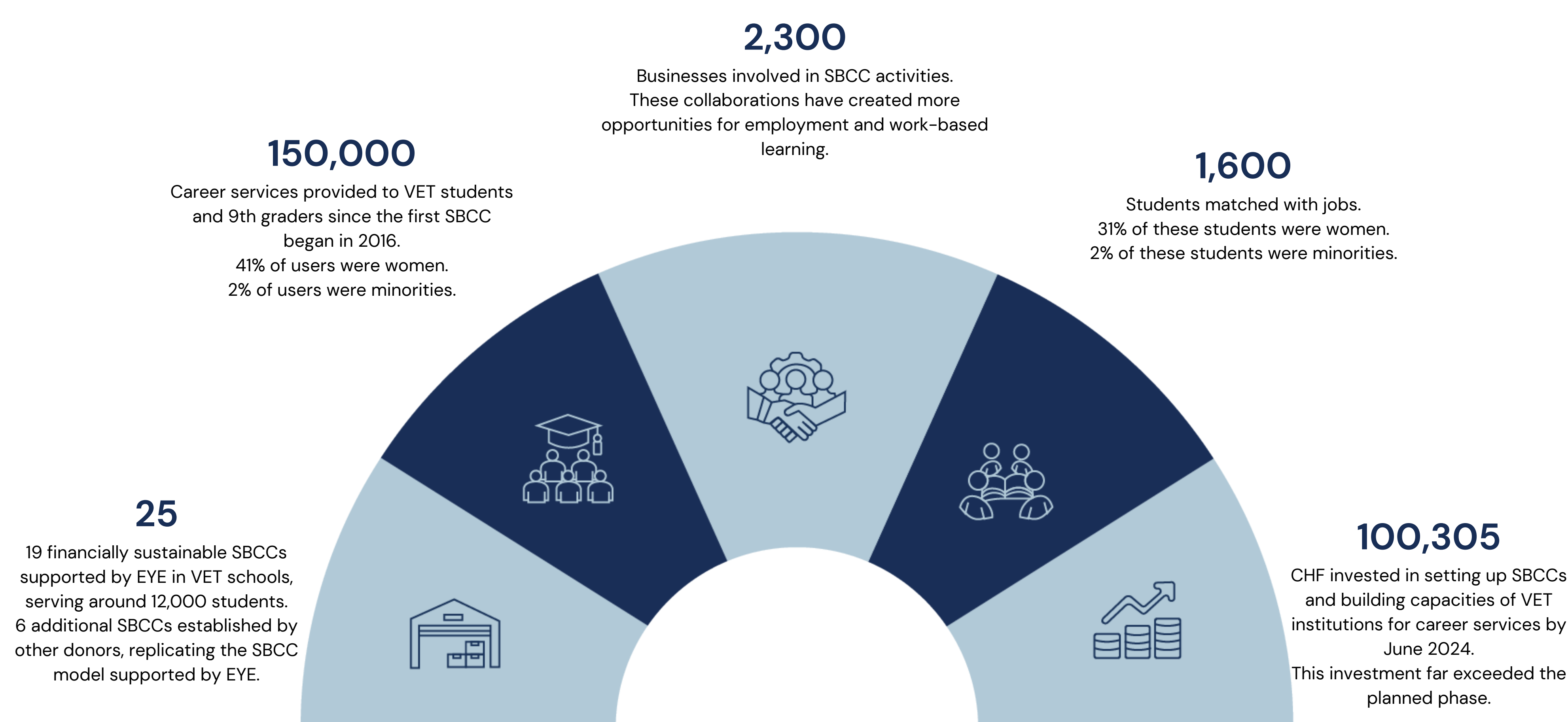


Figure 2: Key achievements of EYE project

KEY LESSONS

Sound analysis – seeing what was below the surface: The EYE project avoided blanket solutions, instead tailoring strategies to address the unique career guidance challenges of different groups and municipalities in Kosovo.

Vision of inclusion, sustainability, and scalability: The project supported key partners, piloting a bottom-up, low-cost model to foster ownership, reduce dependency on external funding, and ensure a lasting impact on Kosovo's career guidance in VET institutions. Ensuring that minority groups benefitted equitably from these initiatives strengthened their overall impact on Kosovo's VET landscape. In the end, the aim of the career guidance intervention was centered on reducing youth unemployment and enhancing vocational education standards nationwide in Kosovo. The intervention underscored the transformative potential of structured, sustainable approaches to career development and education.

Incentives for behavioral shifts: The SBCC model integrated stakeholder incentives, promoting new practices and standards in career guidance through ongoing training, advocacy, and institutionalization within national policies. Engaging stakeholders actively promoted vocational training and inclusivity, challenging traditional norms, and fostering a more inclusive approach to career development. Advocacy efforts also played a crucial role in institutionalizing career guidance within national policies for sustained, long-term impact.

Key system changes were at the heart of the SBCC model which the EYE project gave the highest attention in its strategy of engaging partners and providing support to the main stakeholders in career guidance. These system changes include behavioral and practical shifts (e.g., piloting and expansion of SBCC with public funds, adoption of new career guidance practices, improved standards and training for career advisors, and strengthened engagement with employers); normative and value improvements (e.g., redefining perceptions of VET, gender equality efforts, and community engagement); and structural and procedural changes (e.g., institutionalization of career guidance, standardization of services, sustainable funding models, and partnerships and collaboration).

Clarity of stakeholder roles: The project clarified roles through MESTI's Administrative Instruction, aligning local and national objectives, engaging businesses, and enhancing VET curricula to meet labor market needs
Strategic partnerships: EYE formed strategic partnerships with municipalities, VET institutions, businesses, and national agencies, tailoring global best practices to local contexts, fostering institutionalization, and increasing student enrollment.

KEY LESSONS

Dedicated leadership: The Senior Intervention Manager, Valbona Rraci, showed resilient leadership and innovative thinking that were key in overcoming challenges, refining the SBCC model, and empowering stakeholders in Kosovo's VET schools.

Strategic partnerships: EYE formed strategic partnerships with municipalities, VET institutions, businesses, and national agencies, tailoring global best practices to local contexts, fostering institutionalization, and increasing student enrollment

Large-scale impact and outreach: The project adopted inclusive targeting and sustainability efforts, relying on best practices, standardized processes, stakeholder engagement, policy integration, and capacity building, contributing to significant advancements in career guidance across 25 VET institutions in Kosovo.

THE WAY FORWARD

- Improving career guidance in Kosovo's 69 VET institutions requires addressing both current challenges and future aspirations. This complex process demands a systemic approach, including careful resource allocation, infrastructure development, adequate staffing, and stakeholder collaboration to ensure sustainable improvement.
- The law allows VET institutions to generate income, but this has not been implemented for a reason that is not clear. Moreover, advocating for government investment and institutionalizing funding mechanisms requires leveraging existing initiatives of advocacy (e.g., potentially by the networks of career professionals) to ease dependency on external donors.
- The limited and sporadic involvement of private sector enterprises significantly hampers the ability to provide students with practical experiences and real-world skills. This issue can be addressed through a multifaceted approach that fosters stronger partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector.
- Addressing parental influence on career choices is vital. Despite the growing role of peers and social media, parents still play a key role. Effective strategies include targeted outreach, parental engagement, and successful practices like integrated career centers and standardized training.

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EYE Enhancing Youth
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