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ЗАЈАКНУВАЊЕ НА МЛАДИТЕ ГРАДЕЊЕ ВЕШТИНИ, КРЕИРАЊЕ ИДНИНА

Policy Framework Outputs for Vocational Education and Training, Self-employment and Social Entrepreneurship

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Author: Association of Small and Medium Enterprises of Macedonia

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Проектна канцеларија: Битпазарска 12, 1000 Скопје

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Executive summary

North Macedonia has entered a crucial 2024–2026 window where several policy “building blocks” for EU-accession alignment in skills, labour market activation, and inclusive entrepreneurship are in place—or have been recently strengthened—yet implementation capacity, quality assurance, and market-relevance mechanisms remain the binding constraints. In VET, the adoption of a new Law on VET (December 2024) and related reforms (including NQF and adult education legislation) creates an opportunity to standardise and scale work-based learning (WBL) and dual education, expand Regional VET Centres, and improve transitions into employment through stronger employer engagement and system-level quality assurance.[1] However, current evidence highlights persistent curriculum–labour-demand gaps and variability in WBL quality, including uneven employer readiness and limited incentives/quality controls that would make WBL reliably “high-quality” across sectors and regions.[2]

In self-employment policy, the country operates a familiar active labour market policy (ALMP) toolbox (grants, training, entrepreneurship education, internships, wage subsidies, and selected “green” job creation measures) through annual Operational Plans aligned to the National Employment Strategy (2021–2027).[3] Yet uptake and survival are constrained by predictable bottlenecks: (i) implementation capacity in employment services, (ii) weak post-start aftercare and market linkage, and (iii) informality-related disincentives compounded by administrative burden and underused digitalisation potential.[4] The 2025 Operational Plan architecture and state-aid documentation indicate grant-style self-employment support and training measures, but the policy package is still better at “getting people to register a business” than at ensuring survival and income growth—particularly for women, youth, long-term unemployed persons, and beneficiaries of minimum-income support.[5]

In social entrepreneurship, a National Strategy for Development of Social Enterprises (2021–2027) exists and explicitly targets legal recognition, a registry, better market access (including reserved procurement), tailored finance, and impact measurement.[6] The binding constraint is not the absence of strategic intent; it is the incomplete “enabling environment” needed for scale: legal recognition and a workable registry/certification approach, procurement capacity to use reserved contracts, and a minimum viable social-impact measurement system that is feasible for micro and small entities.[7]

This paper proposes three “quality-bar” adjustments: (1) shift VET governance toward enforceable WBL quality criteria, trained workplace mentors, and employer co-ownership of standards; (2) redesign self-employment support into a staged pathway combining grant tranches with mandatory mentoring and aftercare; and (3) operationalise social enterprise recognition and market access through a two-option legal model, procurement entry points, and blended finance aligned with local service delivery. Cross-cutting design features embed gender equality, inclusion of marginalized groups (Roma communities, persons with disabilities, rural youth, NEETs, long-term unemployed), and environmental



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sustainability through green skills, green conditionality, and circular-economy incentives.[8] [1]

VET policies

Research insight

Binding constraint / opportunity: North Macedonia has recently strengthened the legal and strategic scaffolding for VET and WBL (including dual education), but the system's binding constraint is **quality and consistency**—specifically, the absence of a fully operational, enforceable quality regime for work-based learning that aligns incentives for employers, schools, and learners and produces predictable labour-market outcomes.[9] [2]

Current policy direction and governance context (2024–2026):

The European Commission[3] reports that a Law on VET was adopted in December 2024, formalising dual education partnerships, emphasising WBL, and establishing a legal basis for a network of Regional VET Centres; it also notes continued increases in VET participation and growth in dual-education enrolment and employer participation.[10] A new Law on the National Qualifications Framework and a Law on Adult Education were also adopted (December 2024), with the Adult Education Strategy (2025–2030) adopted in March 2025.[11] In parallel, European Training Foundation[4] monitoring highlights that the operationalisation of these new laws enables implementation of measures in the national implementation plan for EU VET priorities, including strengthened stakeholder engagement, reforms to the vocational matura, and expanded career guidance functions in schools.[12] [5]

Governance involves multiple bodies: the Ministry of Education and Science, the Centre for the Development of Vocational Education (CDVE; renamed in 2025), and stakeholder structures supporting qualifications and VET steering.[13] The ETF explicitly recommends: (i) flexible recruitment pathways into teaching for practitioners from the world of work, (ii) reassessing employer involvement conditions in VET/WBL and investing in system-level capacity, and (iii) prioritising the NQF as a connector between education and the world of work.[14] [6]

Gap diagnosis (what prevents VET from reliably delivering labour-market relevance):

Policy signals are strongly oriented toward scaling WBL/dual VET, but three “quality gaps” remain.

First, **WBL quality is not yet uniformly secured by enforceable criteria and employer capability checks**. Even where tripartite arrangements exist, quality depends on workplace mentoring, assessment practice, and company readiness—areas that require system infrastructure and trained mentors to avoid WBL degenerating into ad hoc observation or low-skill tasks.[15] In a quality-aligned WBL model, written agreements,



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learning outcomes and assessment criteria, pedagogical support, social protection, and clear cost-sharing arrangements are core elements.[16] [7]

Second, **skills intelligence and feedback loops are still developing**. A first national tracer study was produced, but early implementation faced low response rates, and there is a need to embed graduate tracking and labour-market feedback into routine institutional responsibilities and planning cycles.[17] Employer involvement in the design and revision of qualification standards is mandated (including periodic revision requirements), but the system requires stable processes and capacity to translate labour-market information into curricula, equipment planning, and teacher competence development.[18] [8]

Third, **teaching workforce constraints and workplace-mentor capacity limit scaling**. The ETF's recommendation to open flexible pathways for practitioners into teaching reflects a common bottleneck in dual/WBL systems: scaling quality requires both competent teachers and competent in-company trainers/mentors, with incentives and certification requirements that are feasible for SMEs.[19] [9]

EU/region good practice comparators (transferable features):
Two relatively “transferable” models stand out.

1) **Germany's dual system (training contract + chamber role + company suitability checks)**. A written training contract is a precondition, and chambers act as responsible bodies that assess whether companies are suitable to train apprentices—functioning as a quality gatekeeper that does not require a heavy new bureaucracy if chambers are empowered and resourced.[20] [10]

2) **Croatia's structured stakeholder involvement (sector skills councils + VET council + dedicated VET agency functions)**. Croatia's VET governance includes a specialised agency for curricula, teacher CPD, and quality assurance, and involves stakeholders through sector skills councils and a VET council—offering a governance template for formalising employer voice beyond ad hoc consultation.[21] [11]

A third, complementary practice relevant for 2024–2026 is the **EU micro-credentials approach** (June 2022 Council Recommendation) as a tool to build modular, stackable learning that supports upskilling/reskilling for adults and workers—useful for North Macedonia's adult education and VET continuum, provided quality assurance is clarified.[22] [12]



Policy gap-to-recommendation table

Policy gap in North Macedonia	EU/region good practice feature	Recommendation (adapted to national admin capacity)	Lead institution(s)	Example indicator
WBL expansion outpaces enforceable quality assurance	Quality criteria for apprenticeships/traineeships (EU frameworks) + company suitability checks (Germany)	Introduce a light accreditation/registration of “WBL-ready” companies and certified workplace mentors, linked to incentives	MoES + CDVE + chambers/employers’ orgs	% dual/WBL placements in “WBL-ready” companies
Employer engagement is present but uneven and not systematically tied to standards	Sector skills councils and VET council (Croatia)	Strengthen/standardise sectoral employer governance roles in standards revision and programme approval cycles	MoES + NQF/VET councils + sector committees	Share of standards revised with employer sign-off
Teacher and mentor pipeline limits quality scaling	Flexible entry pathways for practitioners + mentor training	Implement fast-track pedagogical certification for industry practitioners; create mentor training and certification	MoES + CDVE	# certified workplace mentors; teacher vacancy rate

[13]

Draft Policy Proposal box

Draft Policy Proposal (VET): “Quality-Assured Apprenticeship & WBL System 2026–2029”

Objective: Ensure that expansion of dual education/WBL translates into measurable employment outcomes by applying enforceable quality criteria, strengthening employer co-ownership, and professionalising workplace mentoring.[23] [14]



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Target groups: Upper-secondary VET learners (especially in sectors with labour shortages), SMEs participating in WBL, VET teachers, workplace mentors, and vulnerable learners requiring workplace support (including Roma learners and learners with disabilities).

Core measures (3–6):

- **WBL quality standard package:** Mandate a single national WBL minimum standard aligned to EU apprenticeship/traineeship quality criteria (written agreement; learning outcomes; assessment; mentor; health & safety; insurance; grievance channel).
- **“WBL-ready company” registration:** Introduce a light-touch approval process for employers hosting WBL, including basic mentor capacity and safe workplace checks; renew every 3 years.
- **Workplace mentor certification:** Standard curriculum (e.g., 16–24 hours) delivered via CDVE/chambers; certification required for hosting learners beyond an initial transition period.
- **Employer co-governance:** Formalise sector-level employer panels (or strengthen existing sector committees) to co-sign qualification updates and WBL placement targets; require quarterly labour-demand signals.
- **Teacher/practitioner pathways:** Fast-track pedagogy certification for experienced practitioners to enter VET teaching, combined with supervised induction.
- **Graduate tracking integration:** Embed tracer study administration in school roles and link results to programme review and funding incentives.

Implementation steps (who does what):

- **MoES:** Issue by-laws/rulebooks operationalising WBL quality standards and company registration; integrate into school inspection and funding rules.
- **CDVE:** Develop mentor-training curriculum, assessment tools, and WBL audit checklists; support schools to implement EQAVET indicators.
- **Employer organisations/chambers:** Coordinate company registration support; maintain a roster of certified mentors; mediate placement matching.
- **Municipalities/Regional VET Centres:** Use local labour-market analysis to set enrolment quotas and WBL placement needs, ensuring regional balance.

Funding logic (national + EU instruments):

- National education budget line for WBL quality assurance + mentor training.
- EU support via IPA programming for human capital and skills reforms; targeted support for regional VET centres' equipment and teacher/mentor training ecosystems.[24] [15]

Risks & mitigations:

- *Risk:* Employer fatigue / low SME participation if requirements are too heavy.
Mitigation: phased introduction; digital registration; mentor training delivered locally; tie incentives to compliance.



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- *Risk:* Token WBL placements with low learning value. *Mitigation:* audits + learner feedback + standardised assessment and mentor certification.
- *Risk:* Teacher shortages. *Mitigation:* practitioner pathways and targeted incentives for priority sectors.

Monitoring indicators (5–8):

- Share of WBL placements covered by signed agreements specifying learning outcomes
- # certified workplace mentors (total; by sector; by region)
- % of WBL companies meeting “WBL-ready” criteria
- Dual/WBL learner completion rate and exam pass rate (including vocational matura readiness)
- Graduate employment rate 6 and 12 months after graduation (by programme)
- Employer satisfaction with learner preparedness (annual survey)
- Participation of Roma learners and learners with disabilities in WBL placements
- Share of VET programmes updated with employer sign-off within 5-year review cycle

Self-employment policies

Research insight

Binding constraint / opportunity: North Macedonia’s self-employment support is positioned as a major ALMP instrument under annual Operational Plans and aligned strategic documents, but policy effectiveness is constrained by **a design bias toward entry (start-up creation) rather than survival and income growth**, combined with administrative and informality-related frictions and limited aftercare/market linkage—especially for youth, women, and long-term unemployed persons.[25] [16]

Current policy direction and governance context:

North Macedonia’s National Employment Strategy 2021–2027 sets three strategic objectives: improve education and training outcomes, enhance enterprise development policies for decent jobs, and strengthen inclusiveness of labour market policies.[26] Annual Operational Plans define ALMP measures and labour market services; the 2024 Operational Plan was publicly promoted with a reported envelope of around 2 billion denars and around 15,000 beneficiaries.[27] The ETF notes that self-employment support is among ESARNM measures with high participation, and that 2025 introduced new self-employment measures with a sharp increase in participant counts compared to 2024 (as of mid-August 2025).[28] [17]

At the same time, the European Commission explicitly highlights a capacity constraint: the Employment Service Agency’s capacity needs strengthening to improve delivery of ALMP measures and the Youth Guarantee; policy adoption for the 2025–2027 Employment Action Plan is pending.[29] [18]



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Mapping the typical policy toolbox (Operational Plan logic):

The current toolbox (as evidenced through official reporting and programme descriptions) includes:

- **Start-up grants / “support for self-employment”** for unemployed persons (core instrument).[30]
- **Training and entrepreneurship education** (including business planning and skills training, including digital skills).[31]
- **Internships / practical work experience** schemes and training with known employers.[32]
- **Wage subsidies and new job creation support** for employers.[33]
- **Youth Guarantee** as an activation and pathway architecture for young people (15–29), linking counselling, profiling, training, employment offers, and measures for vulnerable groups including Roma.[34] [19]

Bottlenecks (what prevents higher uptake and survival):

At least three bottlenecks stand out based on recent assessments and official reporting.

1) **Delivery capacity and service intensity constraints (PES capacity).** The Commission’s call to strengthen ESA capacity is consistent with a system in which counselling, profiling, and follow-through must scale in proportion to spending on measures.[35] Without adequate case management and performance management, self-employment programmes tend to prioritize turnover (more beneficiaries) over sustainability (longer-term outcomes). [20]

2) **Weak mentoring/aftercare and market linkage.** International evidence on self-employment assistance repeatedly emphasizes that start-up grants need to be combined with coaching, mentoring, and follow-up to improve survival and mitigate displacement risks.[36] North Macedonia’s Operational Plan architecture includes training, but systematic aftercare (e.g., milestone-based mentoring) is not yet anchored as a hard condition for funding tranches. [21]

3) **Informality and administrative burden create a “low-trust” environment.** The Commission notes underexploited potential for simplification and digitalisation of public procedures as a way to reduce administrative burden and informality (including business registration and work permits).[37] These frictions discourage formalisation and early compliance—particularly for micro-entrepreneurs—reducing survival and limiting growth into employing firms. [22]

A governance-related operational bottleneck is also visible in audit findings: the State Audit Office identified issues related to efficiency and fair allocation of resources and highlighted that principles such as balanced regional development were not adhered to in distribution of funds as defined in operational guidance.[38] [23]

Key 2024–2026 design parameters (illustrative):
For 2025, a state-aid decision indicates that self-employment support includes a grant



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amount (with parts considered non-state-aid) and a small registration-cost component, providing a concrete anchor for unit-costing logic.[39] For 2024, a publicly reported allocation for self-employment (youth-focused summary) indicates a large budget envelope and planned participants, suggesting the measure is central but must now shift toward “quality and survival” outcomes.[40] [24]

EU/region good practice comparators:

1) **Staged income-bridge support (Finland start-up grant).** Finland’s start-up grant is time-limited (typically 6 months with possible extension to 12) and functions as a livelihood bridge during early entrepreneurship; crucially, it requires contacting employment authorities and applying before starting full-time operations—supporting structured screening and early guidance.[41] [25]

2) **PES partnership models and “joined-up” delivery.** EU practice highlights the value of partnerships between public employment services and external actors (business advisors, chambers, municipalities, NGOs) for more sustainable outcomes—particularly where self-employment requires advisory intensity beyond standard PES capacity.[42] [26]

3) **Quality frameworks for traineeships/work-based learning as part of activation packages.** While not self-employment-specific, the logic is transferable: making quality criteria explicit (written agreement, clarity on compensation and insurance, learning outcomes) reduces precarity and improves transitions—relevant for entrepreneurship internships/placements and start-up incubation components.[43] [27]

Policy gap-to-recommendation table

Policy gap in North Macedonia	EU/region practice feature	good	Recommendation	Lead institution(s)	Example indicator
Start-up creation incentivised more than survival/growth	Staged/time-limited support extensions monitoring (Finland)	with and	Introduce staged financing with survival milestones at 6/12/24 months	Ministry of Economy Labour + ESA	12-month & survival rate of supported start-ups
Limited aftercare and market linkage	PES with advisory ecosystem	partnerships with business ecosystem	Contract external mentors/incubators via results-based agreements	ESA chambers/incubators	+ Share of beneficiaries receiving 12 months mentoring
Administrative burden & informality	Simplification/digitalisation to reduce burden	to reduce	One-stop digital “formalisation +	Gov digital units + tax/admin bodies	% supported start-ups

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Policy gap in North Macedonia	EU/region practice feature	good	Recommendation	Lead institution(s)	Example indicator
disincentives			compliance starter pack”		remaining formal at 24 months

[28]

Draft Policy Proposal box

Draft Policy Proposal (Self-employment): “Start-to-Survive Package 2026–2029”

Objective: Increase survival, formalisation, and income growth of supported microbusinesses (especially among youth, women, long-term unemployed) by redesigning self-employment support into a staged pathway combining finance, mentoring, and aftercare.[44] [29]

Target

groups:

- Youth (15–29) registered through Youth Guarantee; women returnees to the labour market; long-term unemployed; beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance; Roma jobseekers; persons with disabilities able to work with accommodations. [30]

Redesigned self-employment package (eligibility, support mix, timeline):

- **Eligibility:** Registered unemployed or inactive entering through activation pathways; minimum readiness screening (business idea + basic financial plan); priority scoring for vulnerable groups and high-demand/green sectors.

- Timeline and support mix:

- **Phase 0 (2–4 weeks):** Mandatory entrepreneurship orientation + counselling; business plan clinic; formalisation coaching.

- **Phase 1 (0–6 months): Grant tranche A** for essential start-up costs + mandatory mentoring (monthly) + basic bookkeeping/tax compliance support.

- **Phase 2 (6–12 months): Grant tranche B** conditional on (i) tax/registration compliance, (ii) evidence of sales/contracts, and (iii) mentoring participation; optional micro-loan/guarantee pathway for working capital.

- **Phase 3 (12–24 months):** Growth support (small wage subsidy for first employee, or productivity investment top-up) conditional on formal job creation and verified revenues.

Simple cost logic (unit costs / tiers):

- **Tier 1 (standard micro-start):** Align to existing grant envelope practice (e.g., ~430,500 denars + minimal registration-cost support as a reference point), disbursed in two tranches (70/30).[45] [31]

- **Tier 2 (women/youth + childcare constraint mitigation):** Same grant ceiling + voucher for childcare during training/mentoring months (capped).



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- **Tier 3 (“green/circular” start-ups):** Standard ceiling + **green top-up** for energy-efficient or circular-economy equipment (conditional on a simple green action plan and proof of purchase).

Delivery model (PES + chambers + incubators):

- **ESA case managers:** screening, referral, milestone tracking, sanctions/appeals.

- **Chambers/employers’ organisations:** mentor roster + market linkage (supplier matchmaking, fairs, B2B).

- **Incubators/CSOs/business advisory providers:** contracted mentoring and clinics, paid partly on outcomes (survival and formalisation indicators).

Risks & mitigations:

- *Risk:* Excluding vulnerable groups through overly strict screening. *Mitigation:* readiness-building Phase 0 and coaching; tailored pathways and accessibility accommodations.

- *Risk:* Fraud/misuse of grants. *Mitigation:* tranche model + digital receipts + random audits.

- *Risk:* Displacement of existing microbusinesses. *Mitigation:* local market checks and sector caps where oversupply exists.

M&E indicators (minimum set):

- 6/12/24-month survival rate of supported start-ups

- Share of supported businesses remaining formally registered and tax-compliant at 12/24 months

- Median net income of beneficiaries at 12/24 months (proxy bands acceptable)

- Share of beneficiaries who are women / youth / Roma / persons with disabilities

- Jobs created (at least 1 employee) at 24 months

- Share of businesses operating in green/circular sectors or adopting green measures

- Beneficiary satisfaction with mentoring/aftercare

- Regional distribution equity (participants per planning region)

Social entrepreneurship policies

Research insight

Binding constraint / opportunity: North Macedonia has a formal National Strategy for Development of Social Enterprises (2021–2027) with an accompanying action plan, but the ecosystem’s binding constraint is the **incomplete enabling environment for scale**—notably absence of an operational legal recognition/registry, underuse of reserved procurement due to capacity constraints, and lack of a feasible impact measurement methodology for small entities.[46] [32]

Existing framework and what remains incomplete:

The National Strategy (2021–2027) was adopted in September 2021, with governance anchored through stakeholder consultation structures.[47] The strategy explicitly

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foresees: legal definition and criteria for social enterprises through a dedicated law, opening a registry of legally recognised social enterprises, and aligning broader legislation to remove barriers.[48] It also recognises procurement as a market opportunity and notes that opportunities in the public procurement law have remained largely unused due to lack of capacity in public institutions to implement reserved contracts and limited capacity/experience among social enterprises to participate.[49] [33]

On impact measurement, the strategy states that there is no national methodology for measuring and reporting social enterprise impact and that the concept is largely unfamiliar in public policies and support organisations, while also planning development of such methodology.[50] [34]

EU/region good practice (fit to administrative capacity):

1) **Legal recognition via status/criteria rather than creating an entirely new legal form (Slovenia model).** Slovenia introduced social enterprise status via legislative criteria; organisations adopt an existing legal form and then obtain “social enterprise status” by meeting criteria, enabling gradual implementation and clearer registry logic.[51] [35]

2) **Public procurement reserved contracts and social clauses (EU framework).** EU public procurement rules provide mechanisms to reserve contracts for operators integrating people with disabilities/disadvantaged persons and to use reserved contracts for certain services; social considerations can be integrated across procurement stages.[52] [36]

3) **EU-level social economy frameworks for enabling conditions.** The EU Social Economy Action Plan (2021) and the 2023 Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions offer a policy blueprint for recognition, market access, finance, and measurement—useful as alignment reference points even for candidate countries.[53] [37]

Policy gap-to-recommendation table

Policy gap in North Macedonia	EU/region good practice feature	Recommendation	Lead institution(s)	Example indicator
Legal recognition/registry not operationalised for scale	“Status model” (Slovenia)	Adopt a status-based recognition + registry with clear criteria and light reporting	Ministry of Youth/Demography/Social Policy + Central Registry	# registered social enterprises (annual)



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Policy gap in North Macedonia	EU/region good practice feature	Recommendation	Lead institution(s)	Example indicator
Reserved procurement underused due to capacity limits	EU reserved contracts + practical guidance	Pilot reserved contracts in 3–5 service categories; train procurers + SEs	Ministry of Finance + procurement bureau + municipalities	Value/number of reserved contracts awarded
No workable national impact measurement	Minimum viable frameworks; proportional reporting	Introduce “minimum viable impact reporting” with 3–5 core metrics	Line ministry + SE centre	% SEs submitting annual impact statement

[38]

Draft Policy Proposal box

Draft Policy Proposal (Social entrepreneurship): “Social Enterprise Recognition & Market Access Framework 2026–2030”

Objective: Enable scaling of social enterprises as local service providers and labour-market inclusion actors by operationalising legal recognition, procurement access, and a proportional impact measurement model.[54] [39]

Legal/recognition model options (2 options + recommendation):

- **Option A (recommended): Status model + registry.** Social enterprises remain incorporated under existing legal forms (association, cooperative, company, etc.) but apply for **social enterprise status** if they meet criteria (mission lock + governance + profit distribution limits + transparency). Registry maintained by Central Registry with line-ministry oversight.

- **Option B: New dedicated legal form.** Create a new “social enterprise” legal form with its own incorporation pathway.

Recommendation: Option A is lower-burden, faster to implement, and consistent with regional practice; Option B can be reconsidered after 3 years of registry operation and market development.[55] [40]

Financing pathway (seed + growth + outcomes):

- **Seed (0–12 months):** Small grants for service prototyping and compliance (registry, basic impact reporting).

- **Growth (12–36 months):** Blended finance combining a grant top-up with concessional loans/guarantees through existing SME and employment support



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channels (risk-sharing).

- **Outcomes (36+ months):** Pilot outcome-based commissioning for selected services (e.g., community-based care, employment inclusion), conditional on impact reporting and verified service delivery.

Public procurement entry points:

- Pilot **reserved contracts** and/or social clauses in procurement for service categories already identified as relevant (waste management, green space maintenance, hospitality/catering services with inclusion objectives, disability-inclusive services).

- Establish an annual procurement plan guidance note for municipalities and central bodies, including model tender clauses and qualification requirements.

[41]

Impact measurement “minimum viable” approach:

- Require an annual 2–3 page **impact statement** with: (i) target group served; (ii) jobs created for disadvantaged groups; (iii) service outputs; (iv) basic financial transparency; (v) environmental co-benefits where relevant.

- Provide templates and a short training module; apply proportionality (lighter requirements for micro entities). [42]

Institutional responsibilities:

- Line ministry: legal drafting, registry governance, accreditation rules, and reporting.

- Central Registry: technical registry operation and verification of formal criteria.

- Ministry of Finance / procurement bureau: reserved contract guidance + training.

- Social enterprise support centre/network: capacity-building, advisory, and pipeline development. [43]

Indicators:

- Social enterprise law adopted and registry operational (yes/no; date)
- # social enterprises registered (total; by region; by sector)
- % registered SEs employing disadvantaged persons (and share of workforce)
- # and value of reserved procurement contracts awarded to SEs
- Amount of blended finance mobilised for SEs (public + private)
- % SEs submitting minimum impact statement annually
- Service delivery outputs in pilot categories (e.g., households served, care hours delivered)

Cross-cutting themes

Gender equality

North Macedonia’s labour market shows a persistent gender gap, with the European Commission reporting substantially lower employment rates for women than men.[56] Programmes that rely on long or rigid attendance requirements can disproportionately



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exclude women due to caregiving responsibilities; this is also reflected in ETF analysis of barriers to adult participation in learning and activation.[57] [44]

A “quality bar” approach across the three policy areas should introduce: (i) gender-sensitive eligibility and scoring (priority points for women entrepreneurs and women in non-traditional sectors), (ii) childcare supports during training/mentoring windows, and (iii) gender-responsive budgeting lines that track spending benefiting women and outcomes by sex.[58] [45]

Inclusion of marginalized groups

The EU report notes continued focus on inclusive education measures (including educational assistants) and Roma mediators, and highlights Roma inclusion measures in education and employment services (including Youth Guarantee support for Roma individuals and employment offers within four months).[59] Self-employment and VET reforms should integrate accessibility and anti-discrimination safeguards, including accessible training delivery, targeted outreach, and adapted mentoring for persons with disabilities and Roma communities.[60] [46]

Practically, this implies:

- **VET:** ensure WBL placements are accessible and safe; require company registration criteria to include anti-discrimination and reasonable accommodation commitments.
- **Self-employment:** dedicated pathway for beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance with integrated social services and employment support; use staged grants to reduce financial risk.
- **Social enterprises:** prioritise work-integration social enterprise models and reserved procurement for services that employ disadvantaged groups. [47]

Environmental sustainability

Recent VET reforms and updates explicitly incorporate green skills and new qualifications aligned with green and digital skills, including modules and handbooks developed across vocational sectors and development of new qualifications intended for Regional VET Centres.[61] The National Development Strategy 2024–2044 frames long-term development as inclusive and sustainable and positions green transition as a strategic consideration in national development planning.[62] [48]

A practical, low-burden sustainability integration package would include:

- **VET:** require each dual/WBL programme to include a minimum green-skills component relevant to the sector (energy efficiency, safe materials handling, waste minimisation).
- **Self-employment:** apply one “green conditionality” option—either a green top-up for qualified purchases or a required simple green action plan for grant eligibility.
- **Social enterprises:** prioritise circular economy and green service delivery (waste management, repair/reuse, green space maintenance) in reserved procurement pilots. [49]



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Conclusion

North Macedonia's 2024–2026 reform window presents a clear path to raise the “quality bar” of labour-market-relevant skills and inclusive entrepreneurship. The key strategic shift across VET, self-employment, and social entrepreneurship is to move from framework adoption and measure expansion toward **quality assurance, predictable implementation, and measurable outcomes**. The evidence base—from the European Commission progress reporting and ETF monitoring—points to concrete leverage points: operationalise the new VET legal framework through enforceable WBL quality criteria and mentor systems; strengthen self-employment support by staging finance and making mentoring/aftercare mandatory; and complete the social enterprise enabling environment by adopting a workable recognition/registry model, improving procurement capacity for reserved contracts, and introducing proportional impact measurement.[63] [50]

Five actionable next steps (policy-ready):

- 1) **Issue implementing acts for WBL quality** (standards, company registration, mentor certification) and pilot audits in priority sectors within one academic year. [51]
- 2) **Adopt a staged self-employment package** with tranche-based financing and mandatory mentoring/aftercare, using existing unit-cost anchors and integrating formalisation support. [52]
- 3) **Advance social enterprise legal recognition using a status + registry model**, with proportional reporting and clear criteria, and publish a simple registry governance rulebook. [53]
- 4) **Launch reserved procurement pilots** in 3–5 service categories (including green and care services), paired with capacity building for procurers and social enterprises. [41]
- 5) **Embed cross-cutting targets and tracking** (gender, Roma inclusion, disability inclusion, green skills/green entrepreneurship) in programme M&E dashboards and annual reporting cycles. [54]

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