DIGITAL BALANCE
BALANCING DIGITAL COMPETENCIES AND WELLBEING

ANALYSIS REPORT

The Level of Technostress
Experienced by VET Teachers and

VET Managers / Heads of work

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ACEEU
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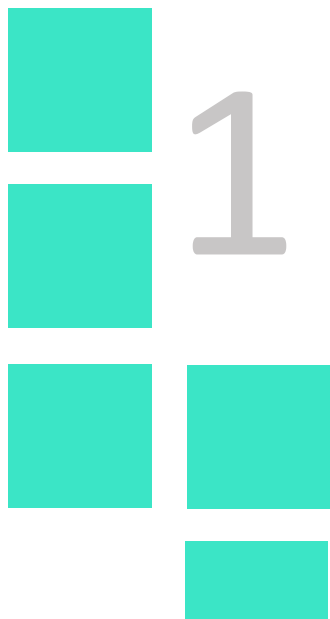
1 INTRODUCTION

The Digital Balance Project

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The Digital Balance Project

The Digital Balance project is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Program co-funded by the European Commission. The project brings together 6 experienced partners (Education Mobility Grid, the Institute of Vocational Training AKMI, Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities, Momentum Marketing Services Ltd, European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training and European E-Learning Institute) from 5 European countries (Germany, Greece, Denmark, Ireland and Belgium) to design, develop, and implement a new approach to train Vocational Education and Training (VET) teachers, leaders, and managers in digital wellbeing.

Putting the focus on two target groups, VET teachers and VET managers or heads of departments, the Digital Balance project is committed to create project results that are impactful and meaningful to improve VET educators' own digital competences and boost the capacity of VET institutions to manage the digital transition in a way that marries high quality teaching with the wellbeing of those involved.

The three main results of the project include:

1 **Digital Balance Analysis Report** which introduces and investigates the challenges to digital wellbeing as experienced by VET teachers and managers as part of the wider current digital transition.

2 **Digital Wellbeing Resource Pack,** a series of open resources in the form of case studies, guides and template documents which will enable the VET managers and department heads to better understand the options open to them and to develop concrete plans, policy and practice suitable to boost their own organization's digital wellbeing performance

3 **Digital Balance Empowerment Program,** an online training course that provides teachers with the knowledge and skills to be proactive in safeguarding their own digital wellbeing in order to maintain high quality teaching performance over time.

Through the creation and implementation of the project results, the Digital Balance project will create a significant contribution to the substantial change in European wide VET systems and at the same time will ensure that VET is not left behind by other sectors which are more digitally competent. VET teachers, heads of management and departments will be equipped with professional development for digital wellbeing and new practical skills to help them comply with expectations and maximize active digital engagement without risking their health and wellbeing.

2 THE ANALYSIS REPORT

2 THE ANALYSIS REPORT

Objective

The main project objective of this report is to produce new resources that enable the integration of policy and practice to support teachers' digital wellbeing and encourage proactive behavior at a personal level.

As a part of the above resources, the present Digital Balance Analysis Report is a research, analysis and publication that presents and analyzes the digital wellbeing challenges experienced by VET teachers and VET managers/ heads of department as part of the current broader digital transition.

Therefore, the objective of the report is to raise awareness about the importance of achieving a balance betweendigital-first teaching and the wellbeing of teachers who have been rapidly exposed to risks to their physical and psychological health that they have not had to deal with in the past.

> The resource is aimed at VET managers and heads of departments, many of whom are often active teachers themselves. It will also be shared with stakeholders, especially policymakers in adult education. The goal is to update their knowledge regarding achieving a digital balance in the VET workplace and why it must be acted upon.

The report responds to the following needs of our target group:

- Low level of awareness about digital wellbeing in general and as a component of digital competencies

- High level of interest but low level of preparedness to assist teachers in safeguarding a digital balance in their working lives.

For these reasons, the Digital Balance Analysis Report will be an engaging introduction to the meaning, scope, and application of digital wellbeing in education in general, and specifically in VET (Digital Balance EU, 2021).

Relevance

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a demand for change towards digitalization. Growing scientific evidence from workers in digital environments has shown that unconstrained use of devices can have strong negative consequences. Multitasking and constant notifications are associated with lower levels of creativity and concentration, the difficulty of effective interpersonal communication causes higher stress, while heavy screen use is linked to eyesight problems and headaches (EfVET, 2021). Collectively called "technostress" these issues are caused both by the technology and by organizational expectations, and lead to deterioration in productivity/performance and in employees' mental and physical health (EfVET, 2021).

In the recent times the VET schools suffer shortage of staff and increase in staff's absence due to digitally induced stress. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology in the field of VET and has brought numerous benefits but also new challenges to both the students and the teachers. Teachers in particular face a higher risk of digital overload or burnout than ever before (Vargas, N. & Oros, L., 2021).

In this context, the phenomenon of digital stress within the education sector has drawn a lot of attention but so far, most of the studies in this regard have been focused on its effects on students and not on the teachers (Digital Balance Europe, 2021).That is why the Digital balance project will boost the capacity of VET institutions to manage the digital transition in a way that marries high quality teaching with the wellbeing and long-term productivity of those involved.
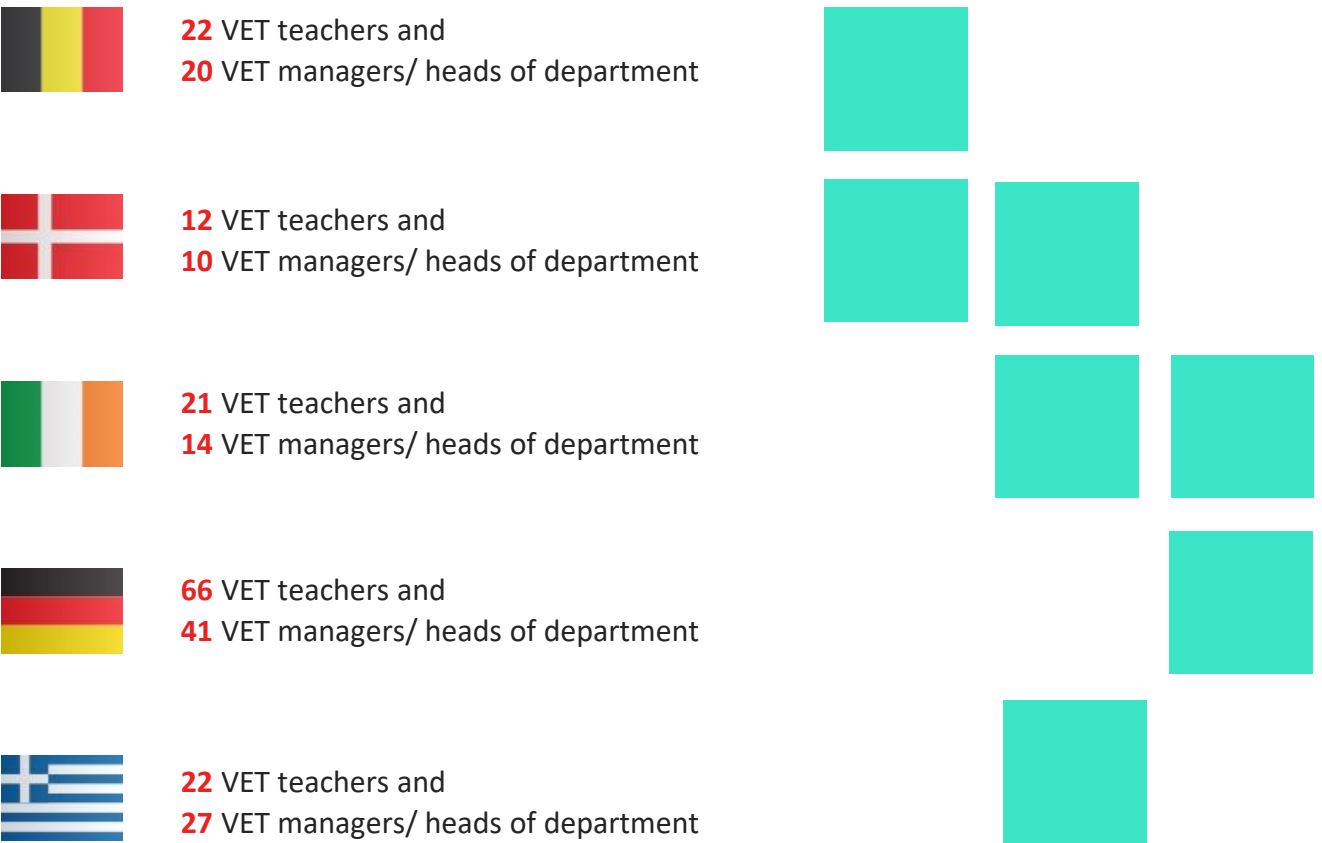
Study Design

The term 'digital stress' became popular in recent years due to technological advancement. This form of stress is related to stress provoked by the use of computers and technology (Fisher, T., Reuter, M. & Riedl, R., 2021). The fear of missing out, the need to be always up to date with the newest technologies and the expectation of being online 24/7 are some of the factors that have proved to affect the level of stress experienced byVET teachers and managers (EfVET, 2021).

This is one of the first studies that examines the effects of digital stress on VET teachers. The study focuses on the effects of digital stress on VET teachers in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, and Greece. The data used for the study was obtained through 263 survey responses (115 VET managers and 143 VET teachers) and 30 interviews. The VET Teachers were asked to answer 15 questions via an online survey and 12 interview questions while the VET managers were asked to answer 13 questions via an online survey and 8 interview questions. The study was conducted over a period of two months, between September and November 2021.

ACEEU, the quality assurance partner of the project, was responsible for developing the interview guide and distributing an online survey through Typeform, an online form building and online survey software. The interview and survey questions were linked to digital wellbeing issues in VET. Each partner contributed to the contact database for participant validation and coordinated their own team members to conduct the research with participants in their own country. In total, there were 30 in-depth interviews (5 per each project partner) and 263 survey responses have been completed.

The numbers of participants for each target group of the study can be found as follows:

22 VET teachers and
20 VET managers/ heads of department

12 VET teachers and
10 VET managers/ heads of department

21 VET teachers and
14 VET managers/ heads of department

66 VET teachers and
41 VET managers/ heads of department

22 VET teachers and
27 VET managers/ heads of department

The interviews were conducted in English and other languages, recorded, transcribed by each partner and sent to ACEEU for analysis. The online survey was available in all partner languages, using surveysoftware with a completion time of between 10 and 12 minutes, given the availability of the target group. However, it is important to note that each partner conducted their own interviews, thus helping with language needs and their knowledge of the context and facilitating the interpretation of the results. Once the survey was completed, all data were cleaned and prepared for analysis. The analysis was performed using specialized software and Excel analysis and was complemented with a content analysis to identify common and emerging themes.

The interviews were conducted in English and other languages, recorded, transcribed by each partner and sent to ACEEU for analysis. The online survey was available in all partner languages, using surveysoftware with a completion time of between 10 and 12 minutes, given the availability of the target group. However, it is important to note that each partner conducted their own interviews, thus helping with language needs and their knowledge of the context and facilitating the interpretation of the results. Once the survey was completed, all data were cleaned and prepared for analysis. The analysis was performed using specialized software and Excel analysis and was complemented with a content analysis to identify common and emerging themes.

The goal of **explorative in-depth interviews** of VET teachers and managers was to gain insights on the concept and perceptions of digital stress. Furthermore, the interviews were scripted to allow researchersto open a conversation based on the interview questions in order to find out more about the level of digital stress experienced by both groups mentioned above.

The purpose of the **survey research** was twofold. Firstly, it was to determine the extent to which VET teachers and managers experience digital stress and second to obtain possible solutions to overcome digital stress and other relevant issues.

> " *The analysis was performed using specialized software and Excel analysis and was complemented with a content analysis to identify common and emerging themes.* "
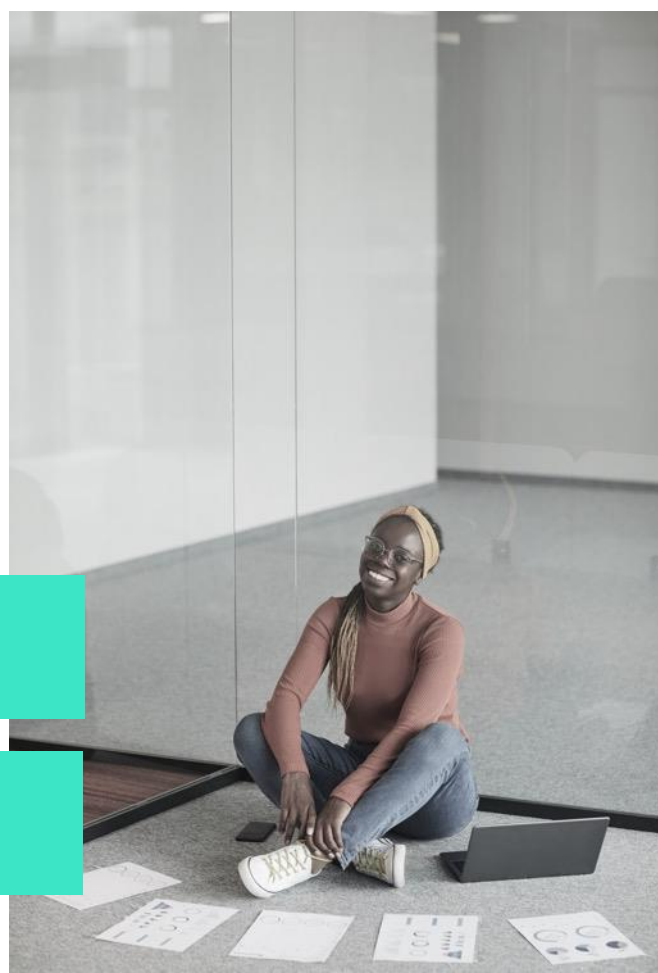
Results

A   The Results of the VET Teacher Surveys

The VET teacher surveys were designed to gain insights on which elements or aspects of online teaching most teachers find stressful. The results revealed that most teachers find the following as the biggest challenges and factors of stress from online teaching:

- Maintaining the student engagement
- Learning how to help students to overcome their online challenges
- Grouping the students
- Dealing with connectivity/ internet issues
- Keeping the balance time between discussion, interaction and teaching
- Jumping from one meeting to another
- The long-term attention that attendees should maintain
- As students are often shy, they usually hesitate to interact and ask questions
- Absence of face-to-face communication
- The boundaries of work life with private life have become blurred. There is a pressure to be available to be reached online outside of normal working hours
- Performance monitoring
- The limitations to provide direct help to students due to the distance

Furthermore, when asked about how their institutions can support teachers in dealing with technostress, the teachers proposed the following solutions:

- Offering group sessions to deal with the challenges raised
- Arranging face to face sessions to build a strong relationship with the students
- Providing a suitable work office environment/ equipment
- Providing E-learning classes supporting teachers that are new to digital tools
- Scheduling more breaks during the sessions
- Providing a set of software which can help to engage the students
- Providing students and teachers with courses to deal with technostress
- Offering free yoga and meditation classes
- Having an acceptance of a clear border between work and private live, acceptance of time slots for preparation by the colleagues
- Ensuring a stable and up to date internet connection and supplying state of the art digital devices
- Encouraging trainings on software and the usage of specialized digital devices

It should be noted that so far some participants stated that their institution has not taken initiatives to support them in the technostress. And only two participants stated that they have not experienced technostress during the pandemic.

B   The Results of VET Managers and Heads of Departments Surveys
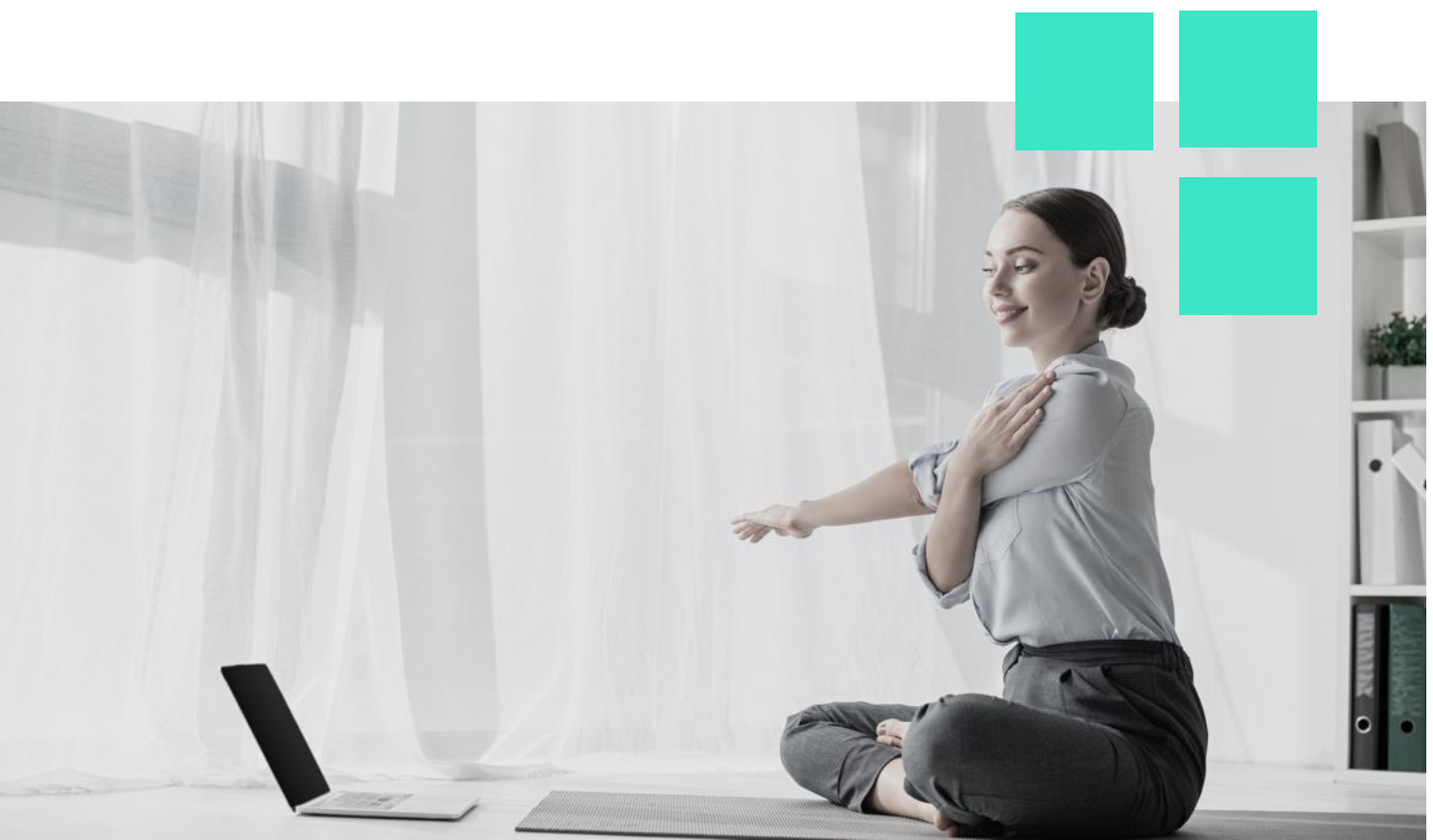
Through the surveys, the VET managers and heads of department identified several major ways to improve the digital wellbeing of teachers. These include activities and strategies such as:

- Conducting online team meetings in which discussions are carried out depending on the issues affecting the teachers (and other related team activities)
- Allowing teachers to have more breaks
- Providing teachers with digital coaching and trainings
- Conducting 1to1 meetings with VET teachers to check on their current state
- Promoting mindfulness practices, starting the day with meditation
- Making very "fast" meetings (speed-meetings)

Furthermore, an important part of the respondents agreed that no specific measures have been taken to combat the phenomenon of digital stress.

When asked whether their institutions should do more to support the digital wellbeing of teachers and how they should do it, VET managers and heads of department proposed the following solutions:

- Providing some guidelines on how to balance the online sessions and their life
- Adapting the programs in the new era of digital transformation
- Creating spaces with the other VET teachers to be engaged
- Creating a strong network in which teachers can communicate and discuss their issues
- Continuing and increasing all measures for technical and mental support
- Implementing measures like, once or twice a week, voluntary meetings in virtual conferences or in present
- Fostering mentoring for IT, but also mentoring to take breaks from PC
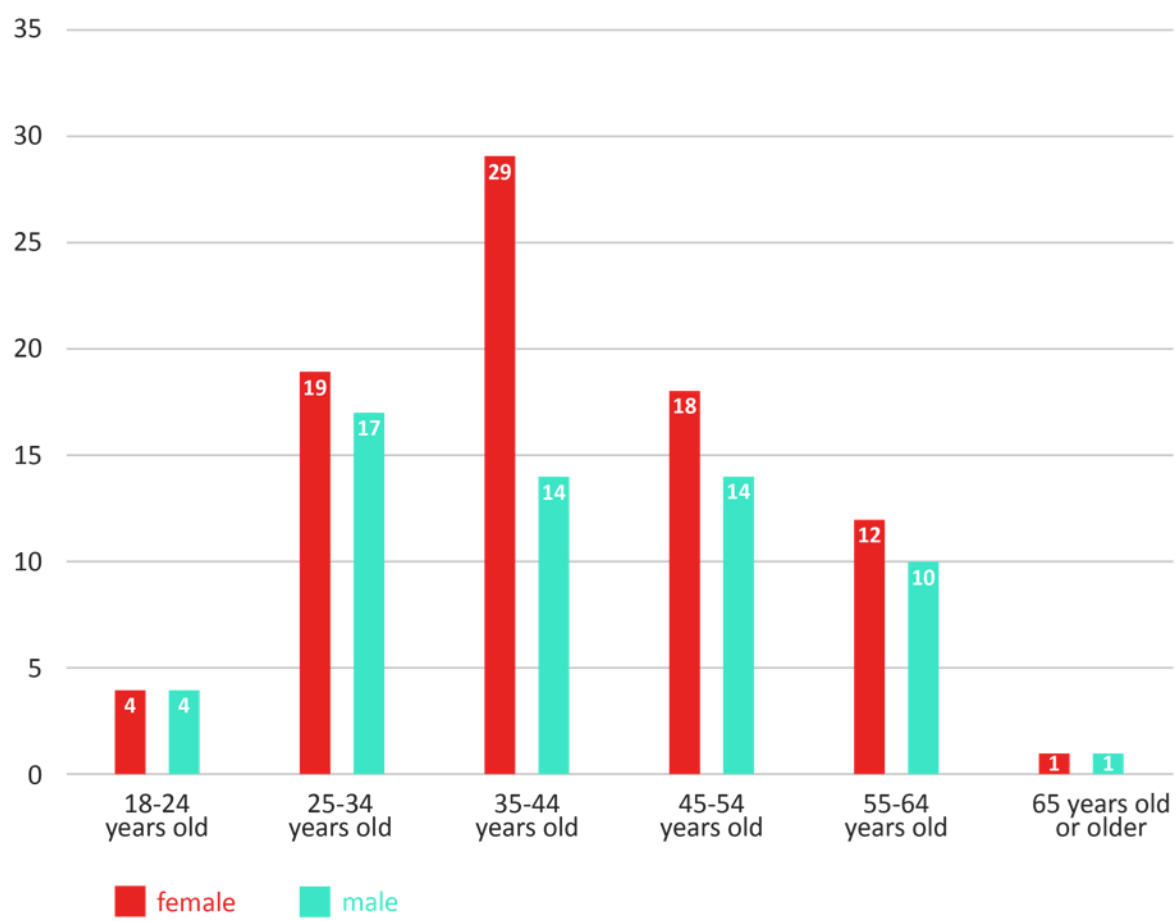- Providing hardware and software with suitable training offers for teachers

Graphic Analysis

This section offers the visuals of the results gained through both surveys, VET managers and heads of departments and VET Teachers.

## A   **The Results of the VET Teacher Surveys**

Gender Vs. Age – VET teachers

Thanks to this graph it is possible to highlight that the majority of female teachers are in the age range of 35 to 44 years old, while the majority of male teachers are in the age range of 25 to 34 years old, and only a minority of teachers are over 65 years old. It is pertinent to highlight the issue of age and gender, to understand and identify if it interferes in the conception of technostress and digital skills, as we will see in the analysis of the following charts.

Rate digital skills – VET teachers

Given the 1-5 Likert Scale, the majority of VET teachers rated their digital skills between 3 to 5, i.e. between neither poor to very good, where the majority rated them as good, in total 63 participants. 31 participants stated that their digital skills were very good, and 41 that they were neutral, with only a small percentage stating that they were poor. In this case, age did not seem to be a factor in the qualification of digital skills, but regarding gender, male teachers showed more confidence in digital skills than female teachers.
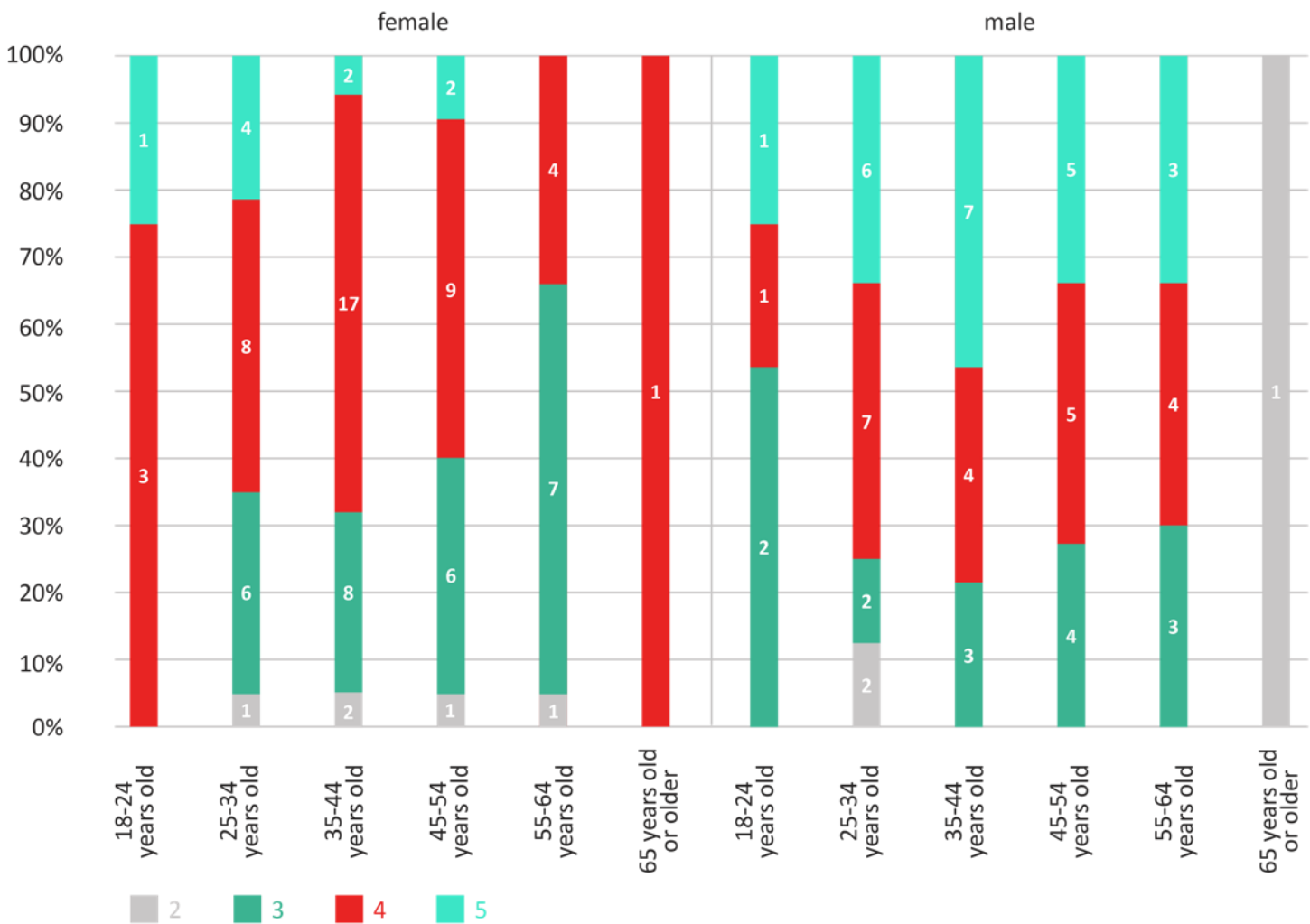
Institutions support to develop digital teaching skills

Most participants, regardless of gender, agreed that their institutions have supported teachers to develop their digital teaching skills. However, a large number of participants affirmed that the support hasbeen moderate or almost non-existent. This makes us understand that it is important to make a callto action to the VET institutions to provide not only support to their academic staff, but also to implement strategies to improve their digital skills.
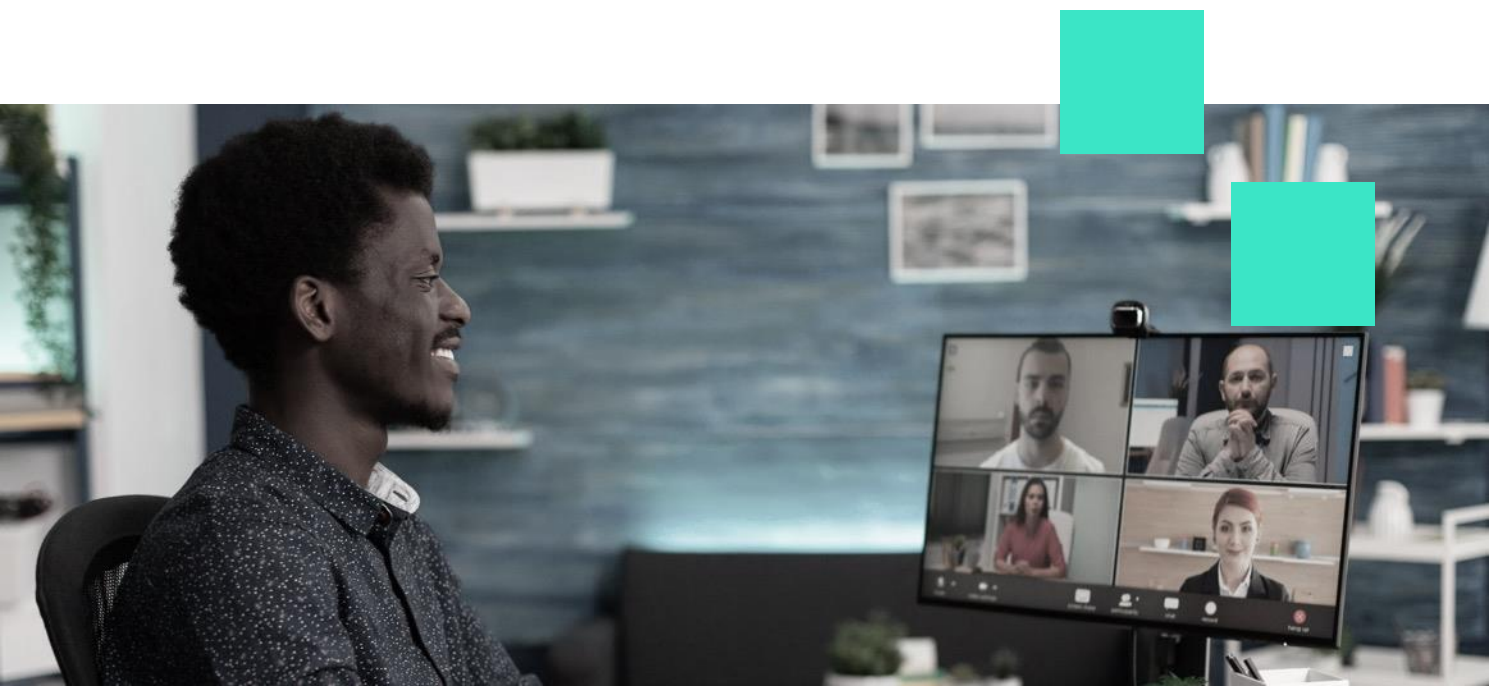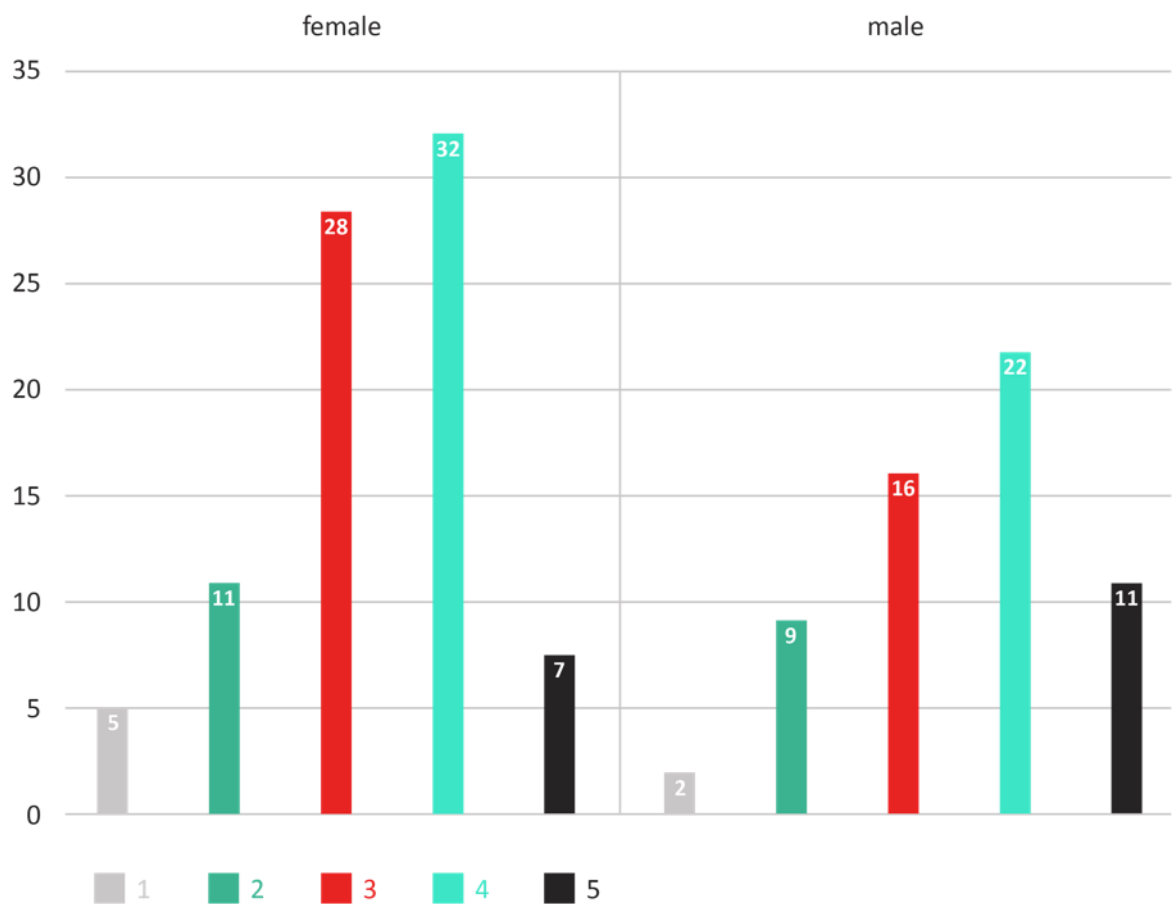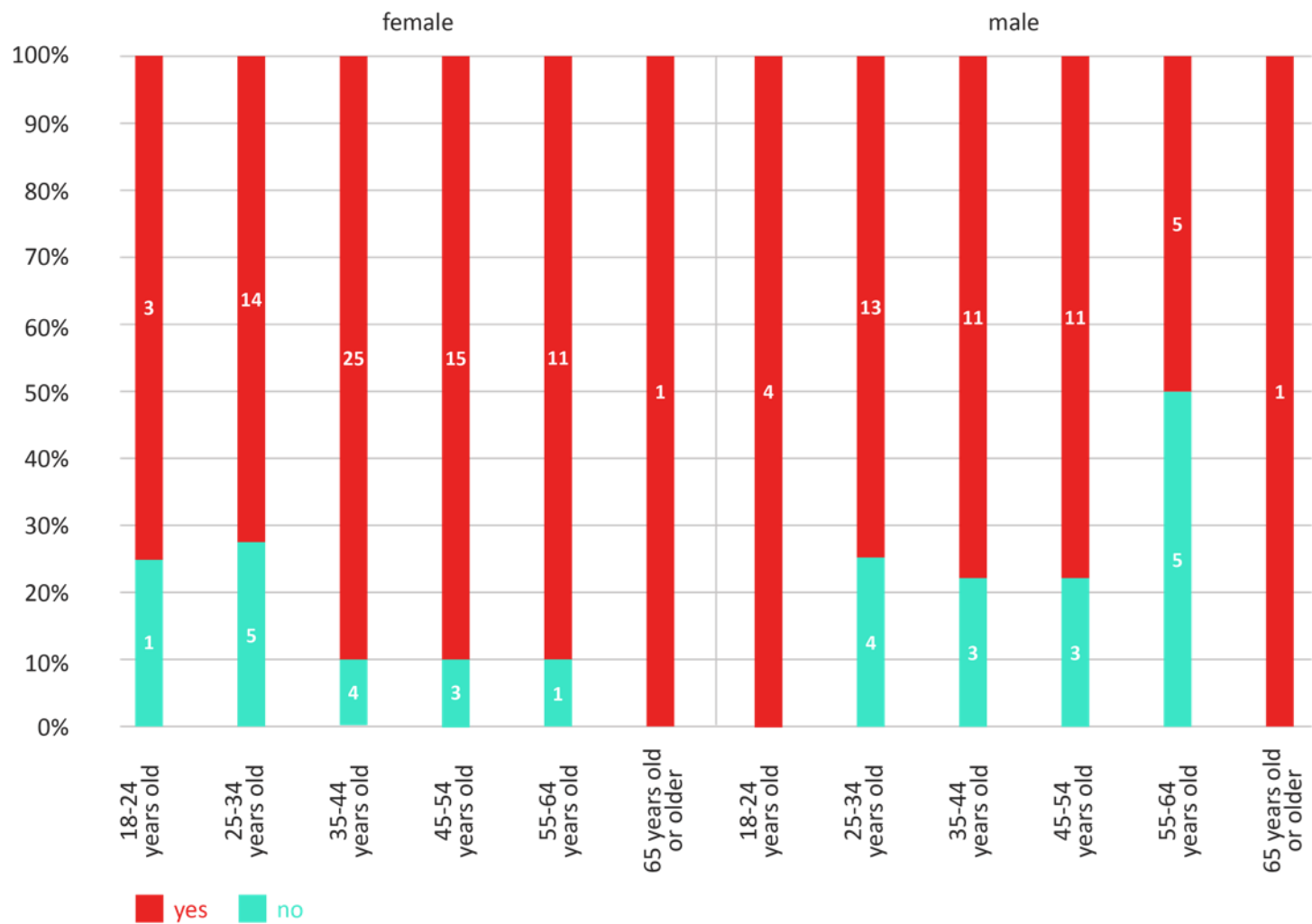
Use of digital tools in lessons before the COVID-19 pandemic

The vast majority of VET teachers agreed that they had used some digital tool in their classrooms before the pandemic, and it is possible to highlight that age has some impact on the results, with older people claiming not to have used digital tools in their classrooms before the pandemic.

Increase of level of technostress at work due the COVID-19 pandemic

The results revealed that most participants indicated an increase of technostress in the workplace due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Only very few participants stated that their technostress levels did not increase after the pandemic.

	female						male					
	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	35-44 years old	45-54 years old	55-64 years old	65 years old or older	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	35-44 years old	45-54 years old	55-64 years old	65 years old or older
yes	3	14	25	15	11	1	4	13	11	11	5	1
no	1	5	4	3	1			4	3	3	5	

Legend: yes (red), no (teal)

Institution recognition of technostress as an issue that teachers face

The results revealed that only a minority of the participants stated that their institutes have given to technostress the attention it deserves. In this case, the majority chose to emphasize that their institution has given moderate attention to technostress as an issue that teachers face.
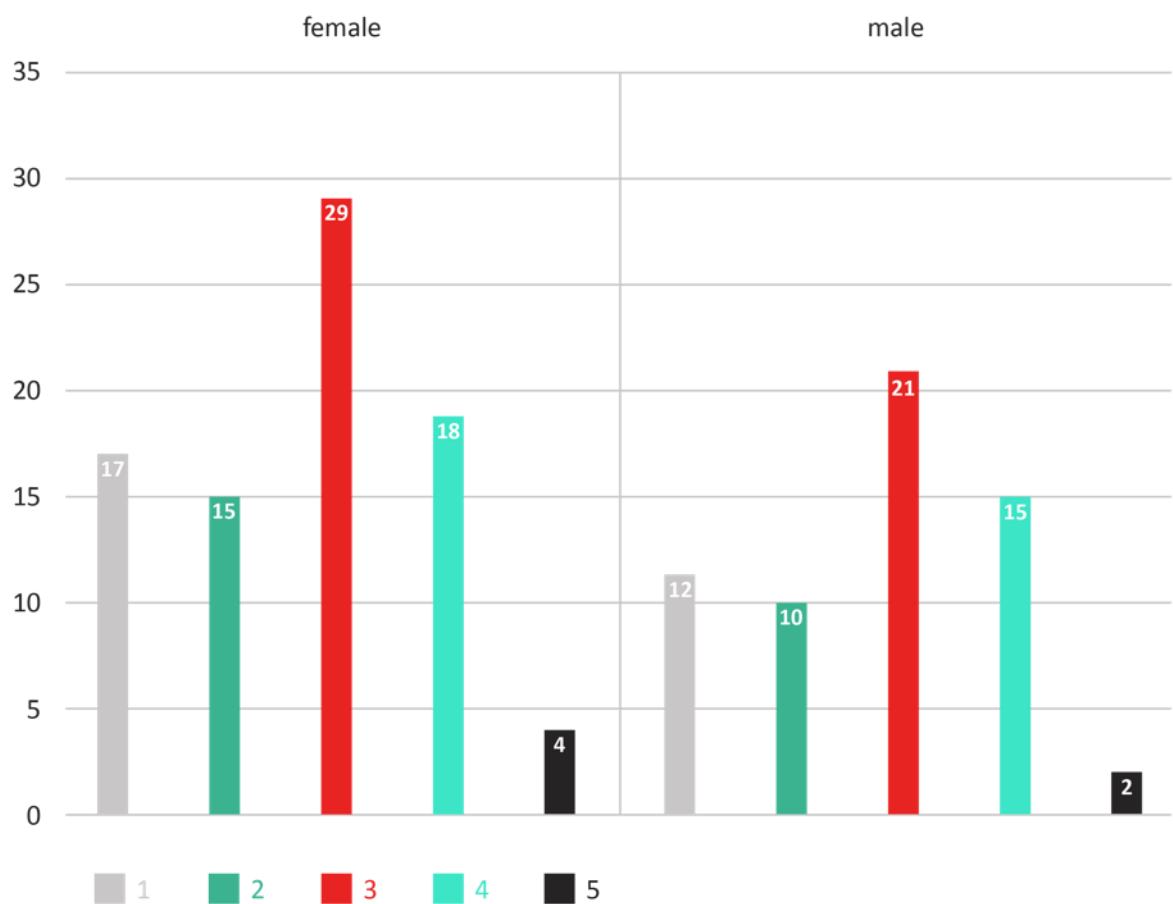
Teachers' level of stress from remote teaching

Where 1 means not stressful at all and 5 very stressful, most participants, regardless of age or gender, were inclined to say that it has been between very stressful and stressful as in person teaching. Only few felt that teaching remotely was not stressful at all.
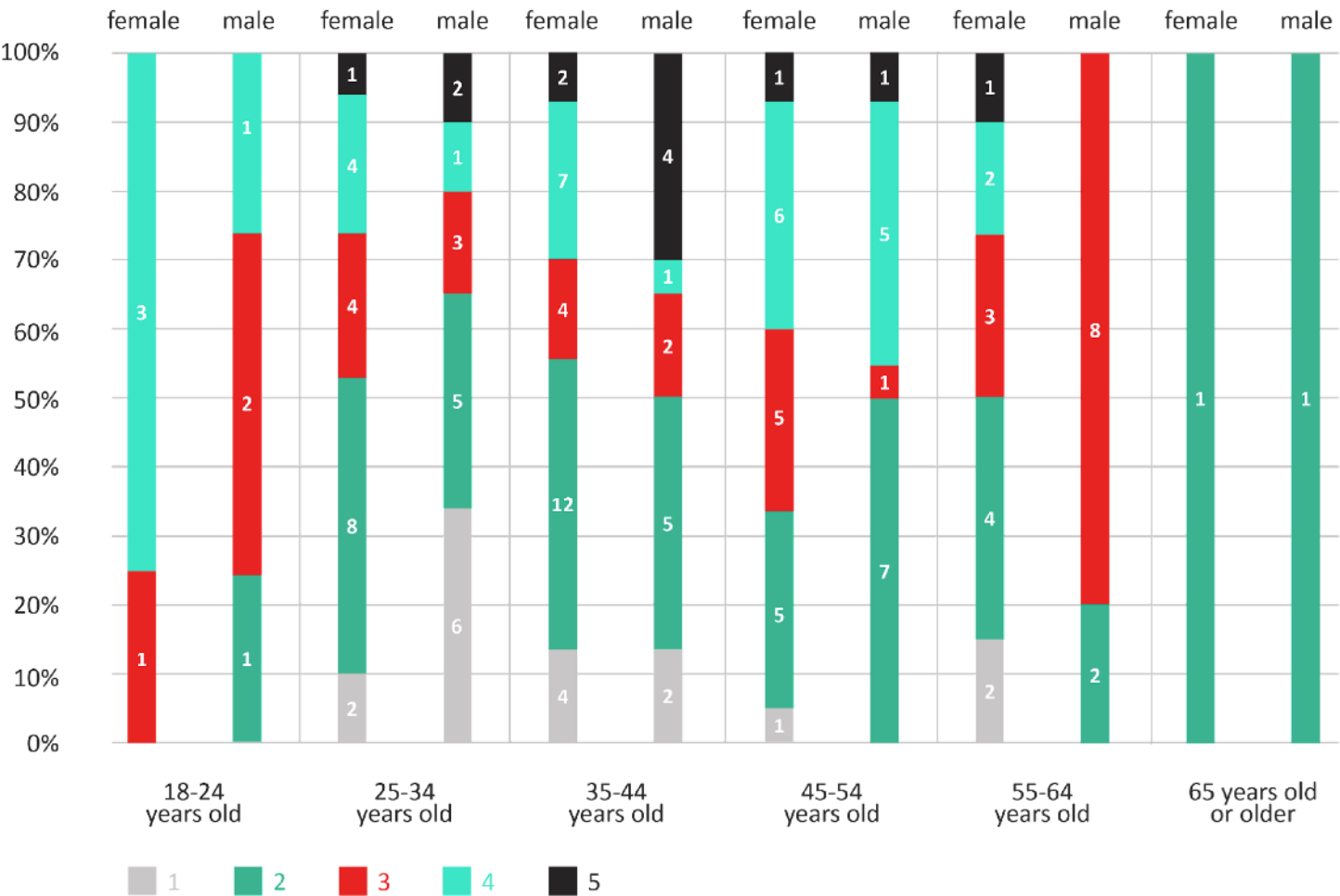
Satisfaction with the technology, software, and general support of the institution for online teaching

To the question to what extent are you satisfied with the technology, software and general support that your institution provides for online teaching, the majority, both women and men, took a neutral position, although it is worth noting that a high percentage is satisfied with the institution's general support with technology and software. Only a minority reported to be very unsatisfied.
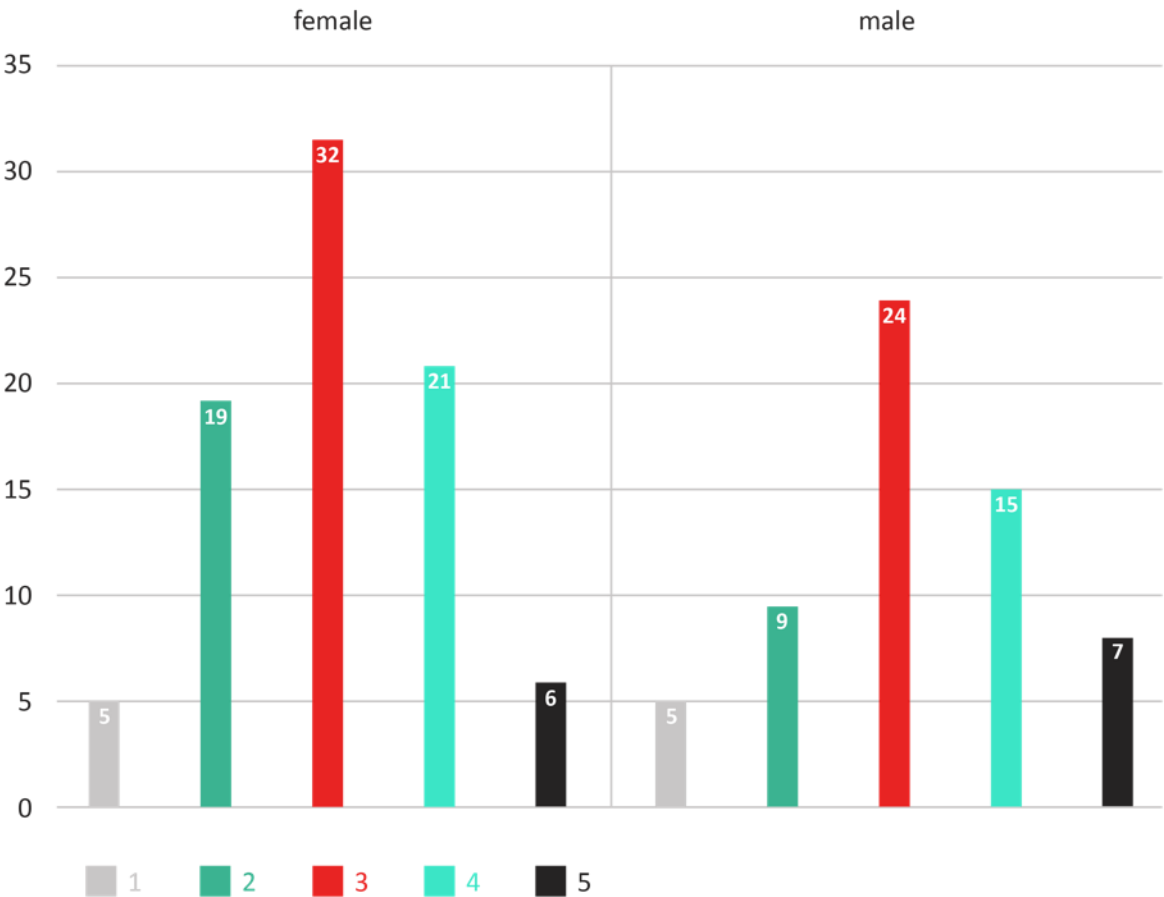
Institution engagement with teachers' wellbeing

According to the participants, most institutions are somewhat engaged with the wellbeing of their teachers. Only very few institutions, according to the perspective of both male and female participants, are very engaged.
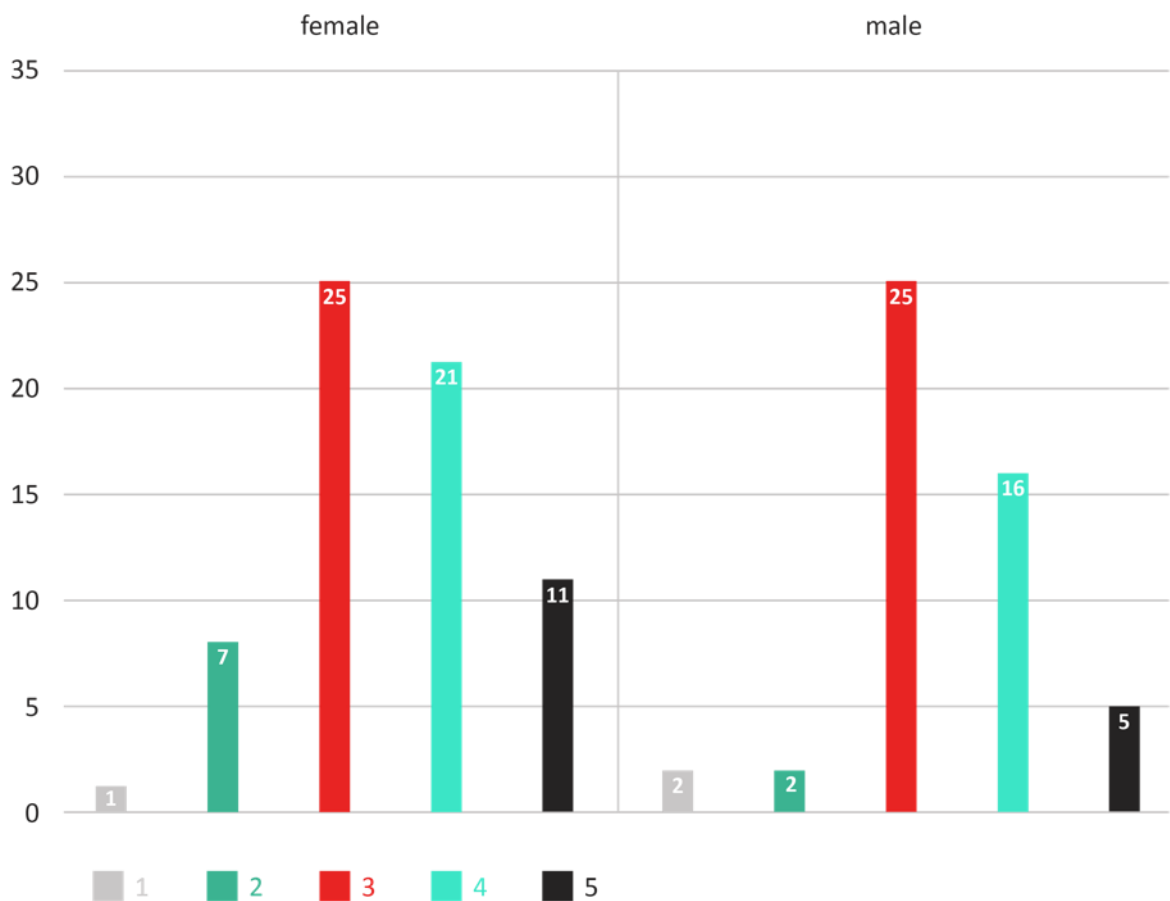
The Results of VET Managers and Heads of Departments Surveys
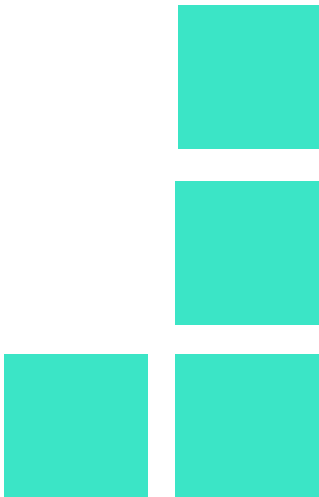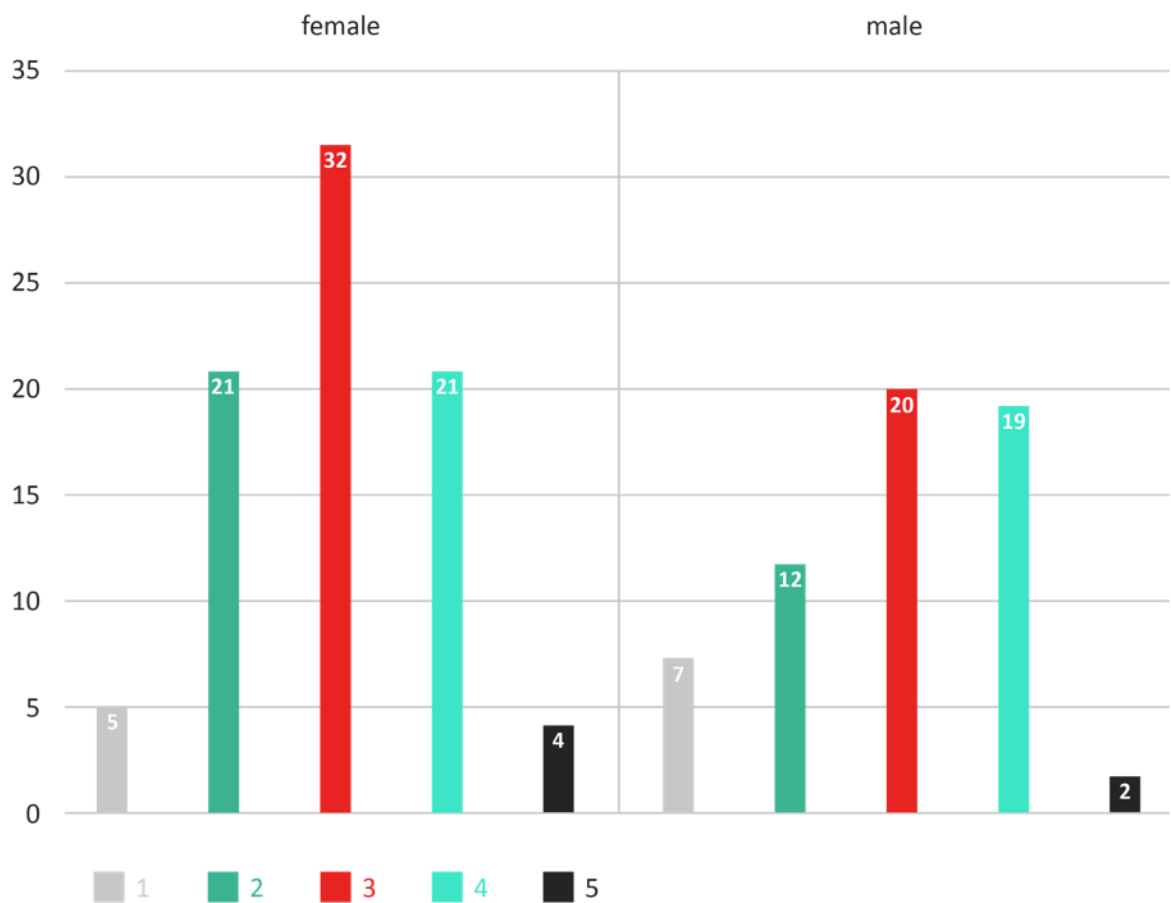
Representation of Gender and Age

Most of the population interviewed in the Manager/Head of Department roles is concentrated between the ages of 35 to 44 for women, and 45 to 54 for men. A large minority is found at the extremes of both 18 to 24 years of age and over 65 years of age.
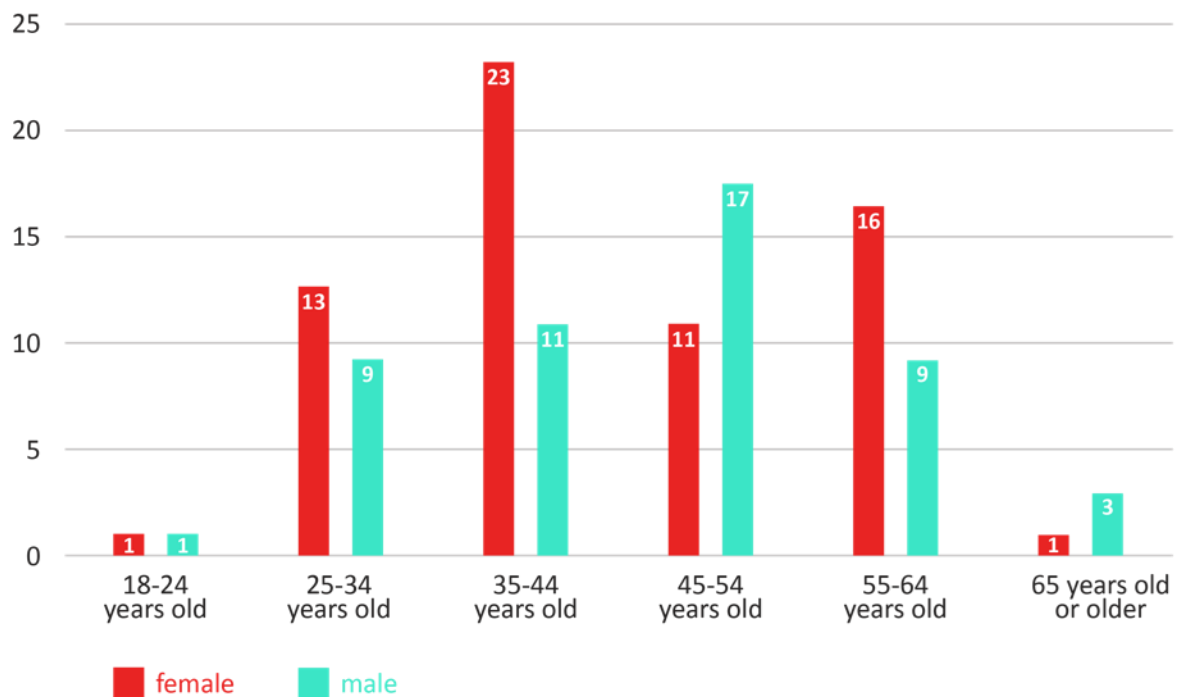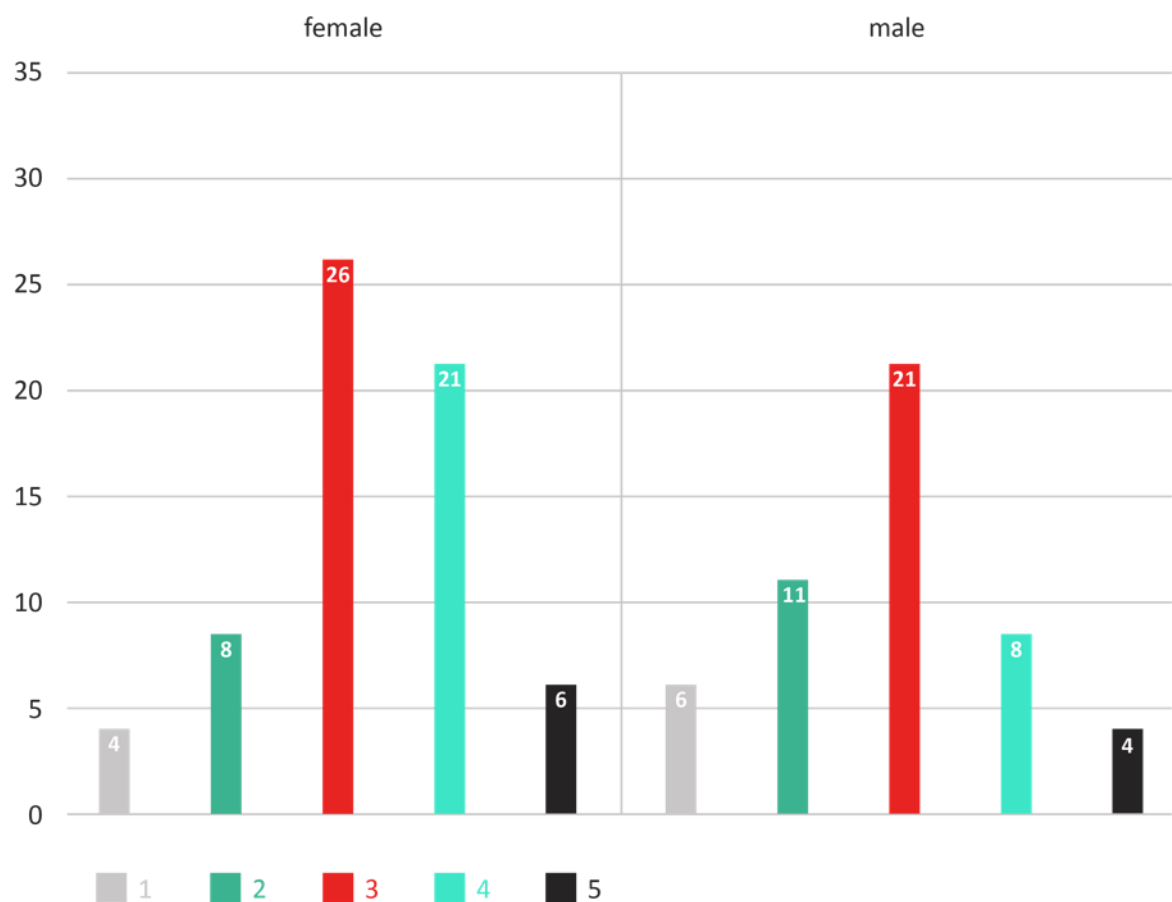
Support and help of institution to teachers in any way to develop their digital teaching skills

Analyzing the results obtained, and in comparison, with the previous responses of teachers, it is possible to highlight a similarity as both the majority of managers/heads of departments and teachersagreed that the institutions have provided moderate help and support to the development of digital skills of teachers. Only a minority stated that their institutions have not provided help or support.

Institution recognition of technostress as an issue that teachers face

It is useful to understand, analyze and compare the responses of VET managers/heads of department with VET teachers. Thus, we note that like the teachers, most of the managers/heads of department surveyed also took a neutral position, stating that the institutions have given moderate recognition to technostress.

Satisfaction with the technology, software, and general support of institution providing to teachers for online teaching

Analyzing the results obtained, and in comparison, with the previous responses of teachers, it is possible to highlight a similarity as both the majority of managers/heads of departments and teachersagreed that the institutions have provided moderate help and support to the development of digital skills of teachers. Only a minority stated that their institutions have not provided help or support.
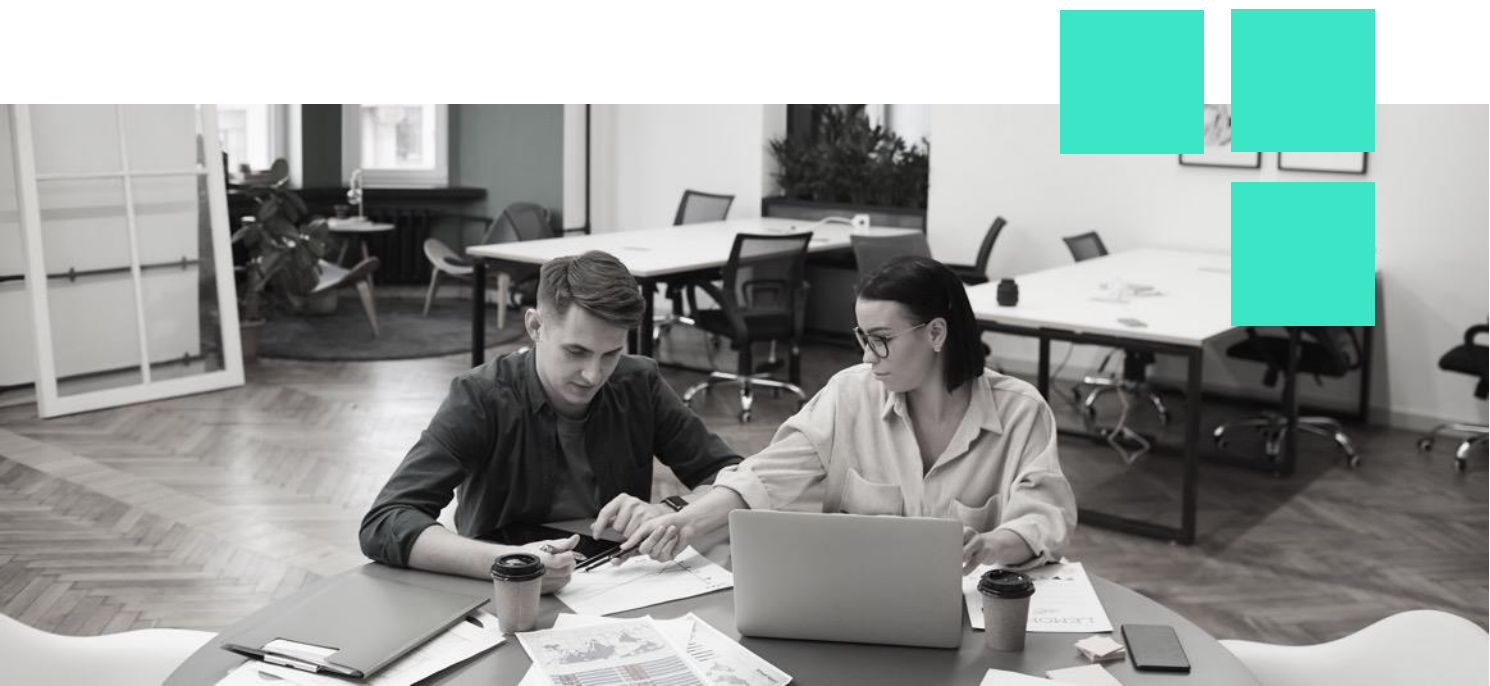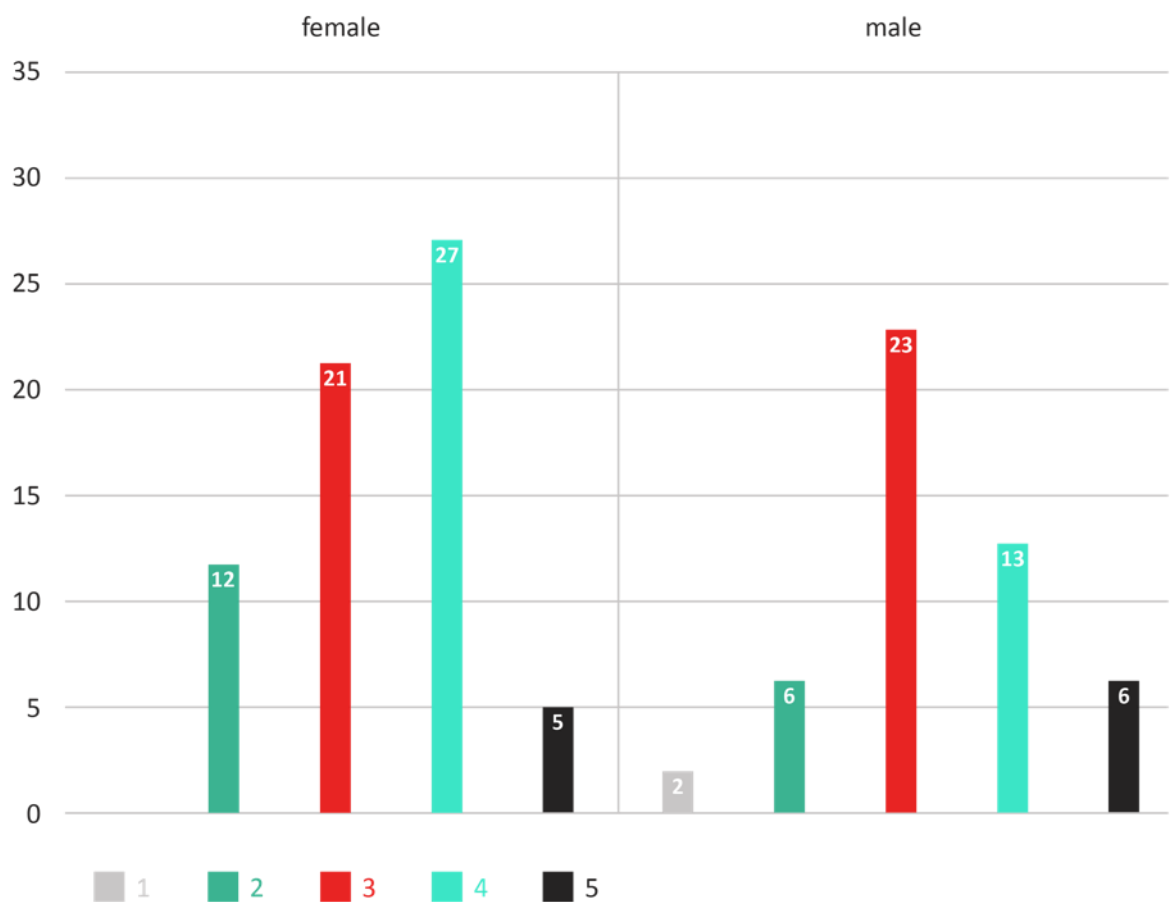
Institution engagement with its teachers and managers/heads of departments about their wellbeing

Where 1 represents never engaged and 5 always engaged, the results showed that women's perception of their institution's engagement in wellbeing is positive, despite a significant number of female managers considered the engagement of their institutions neutral or disengaged. On the other hand, the majority of male managers and heads of departments agreed that their institutions have a neutral engagement with its teachers and managers/ heads ofdepartments in terms of wellbeing.

In comparison to the teacher's perception of their institution's engagement, we can affirm that managers and heads of departments are a more positive than teachers' perception.
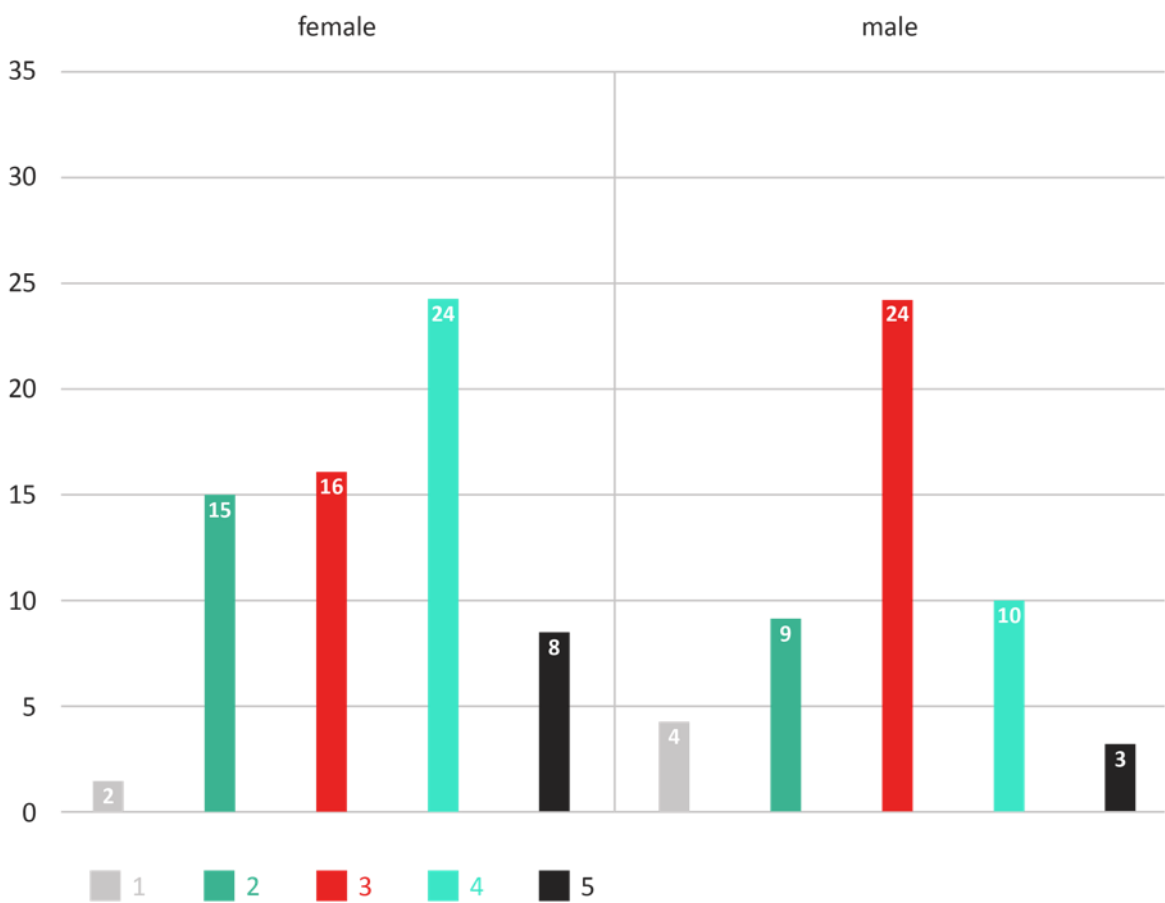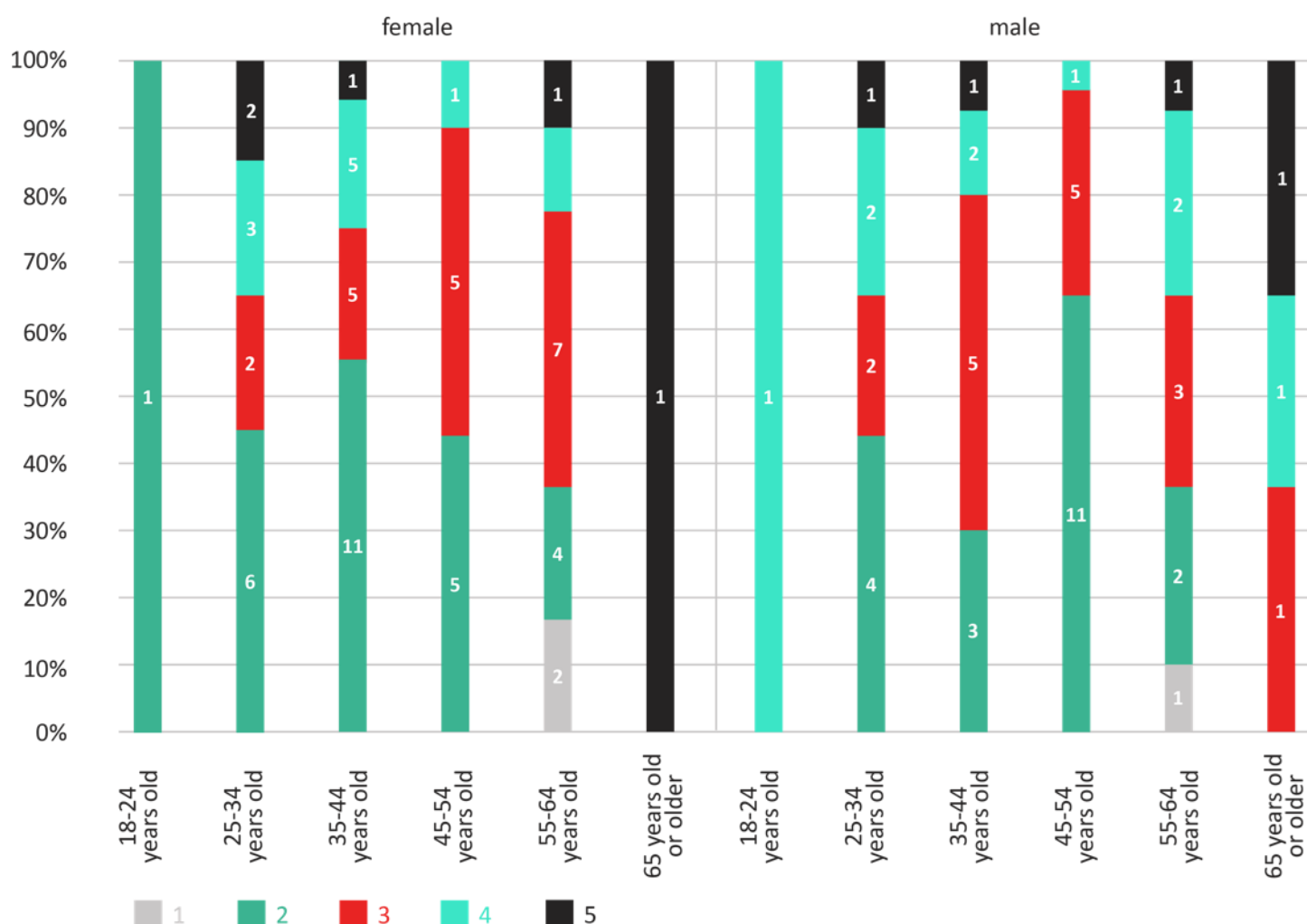
VET managers/ heads of department's frequency of stress from remote management

Where 1 represents never and 5 very often. According to the graph, it can be highlighted that the majority of managers and department heads have felt stressed by remote management often or sometime. Only 2 managers/department heads consider that remote management is always stressful. On the other hand, only 4 managers/department heads and 4 directors/department heads have never considered remote management stressful.
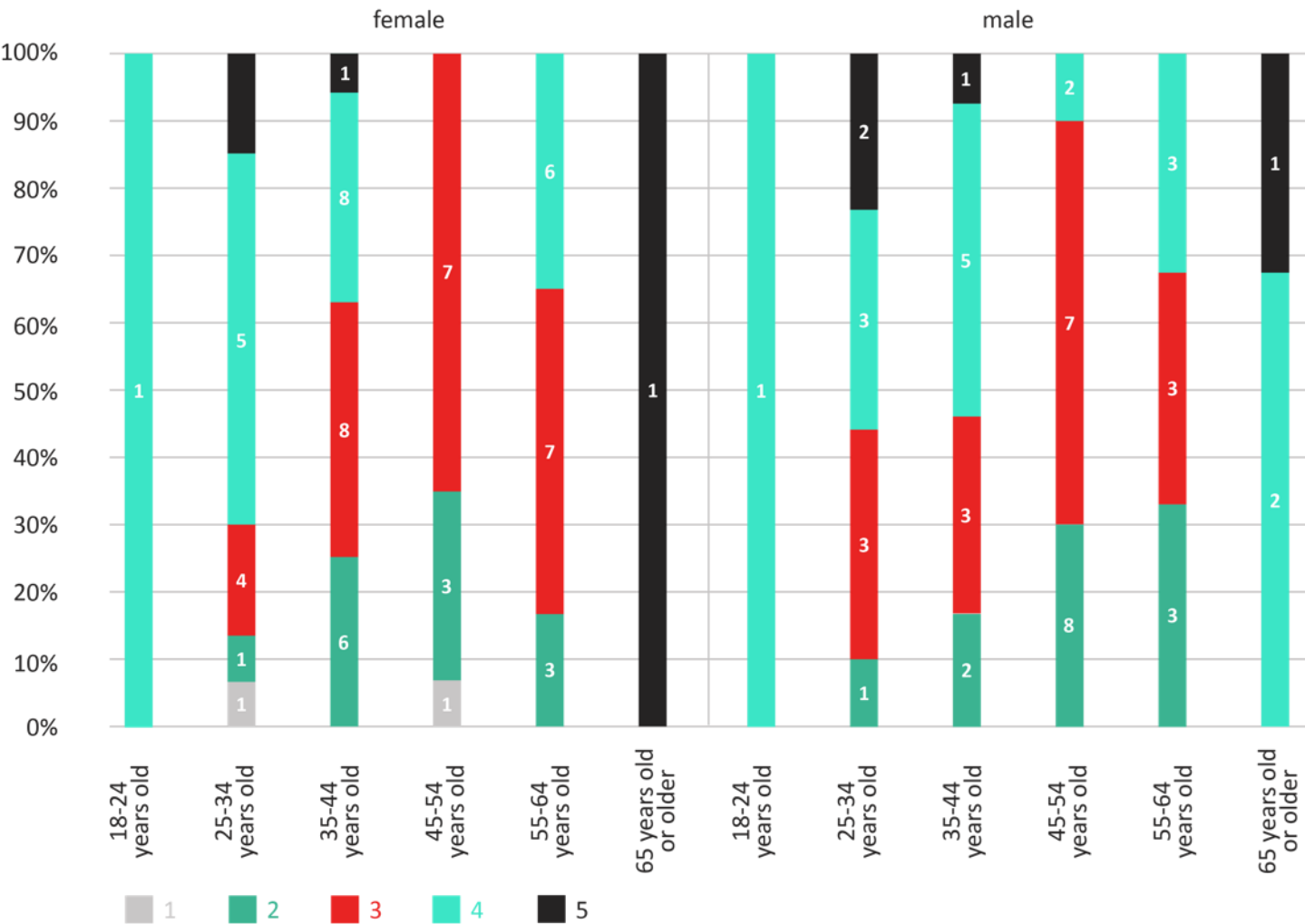
Frequency of suffering from technostress

Where 1 represents never and 5 very frequently. According to the graphic, is possible highlight that most of both male and female managers/heads of departments have frequently suffered from technostress. Only 4 of the participants have experienced very frequently technostress, and 9 of participantsaffirmed that they never have suffer from technostress.

Interview Results

As mentioned, along with the surveys, the study conducted 30 in-depth interviews with VET teachers andVET managers/ heads of department in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Germany and Greece. The questions asked were geared to gain insights on common/ typical challenges found in online/ virtual learnings, the strategies to overcome them.

VET Teachers

The first target group was asked to provide answers to the following matters:

1) Digital teaching experience before the COVID-19 pandemic
2) Challenges due to online classes
3) Resources provided by the institution to carry out the distance learning program

Digital teaching experience before the COVID-19 pandemic

> " *No, everything was in person classrooms.*
>
> **Teacher, 40 years old, female** "

> " *No this was my first time teaching and delivering a program virtually which a very rewarding experience*
>
> **Teacher, 27 years old, female** "

> " *Digital teaching was used rarely. Classroom teachings were the norm.*
>
> **Teacher, 30 years old, male** "

> " *Yes, we were already very much digital at our school, every student has had their own laptop since 2004. We have extensive experience with learning management systems, digital learning paths, movie supported learning, machine training with qr codes guiding to teaching videos.* "

Based on the answers given, most participants found that before the outbreak of the pandemic, the normal teaching activities were performed in person in the classrooms, with no use of digital learning material.

The same pool of participants also found that at least one school was used to perform digital teaching before the pandemic, providing digital learning tools and teaching activities supported by a strong learning management system.
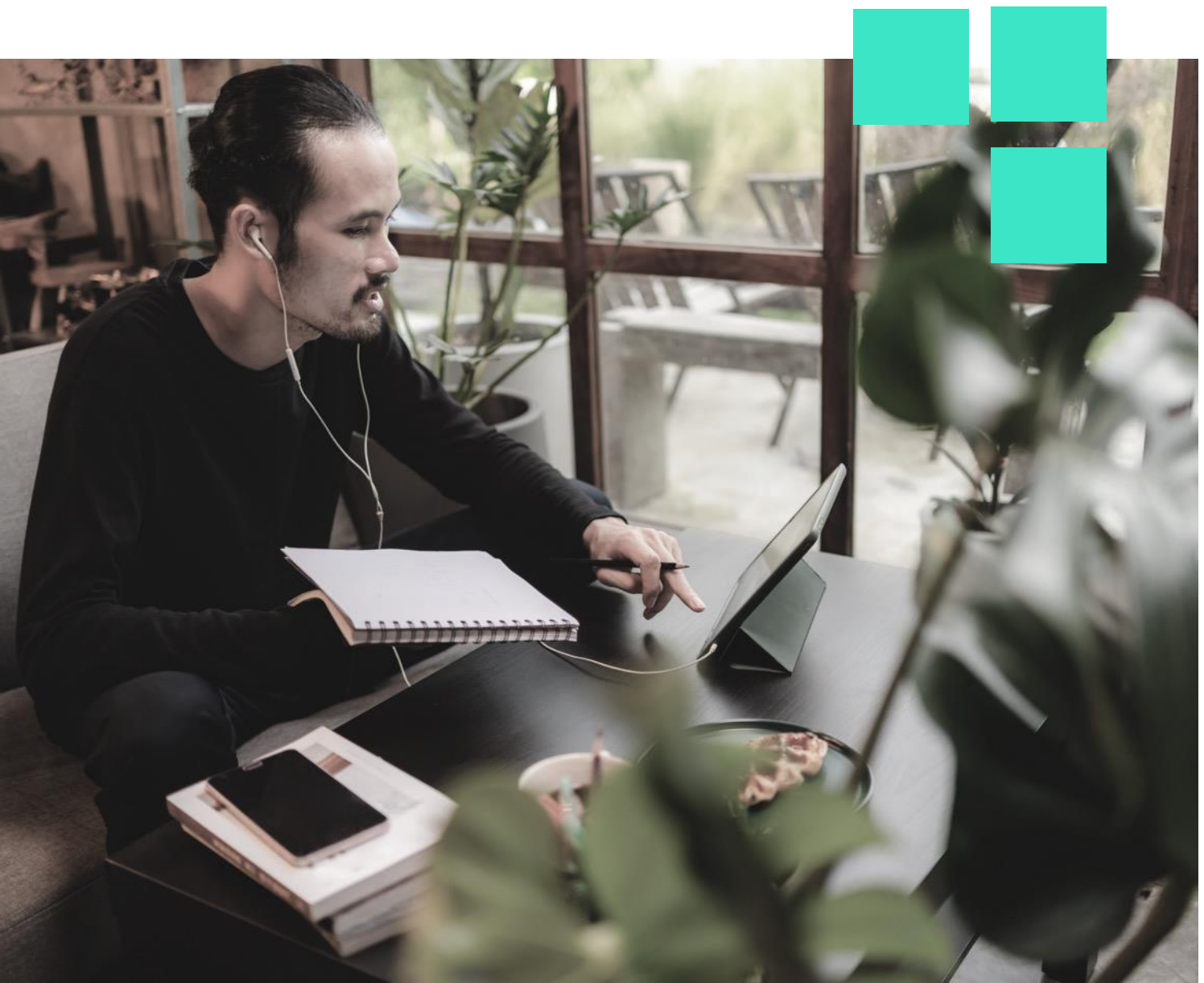
Challenges due to online classes

> " *Keep participants engagement. This is due to not being able to have open discussions as a group as only one person can talk at a time, whereas in normal times with a group sitting in front of you there can be multiple discussions.*
>
> **Teacher, 30 years old, male** "

> "
> - *For certain courses, the commitment was not so high because the employees were working from home.*
> - *Lacks the human touch. Every person needs a personalized approach.*
> - *Human interactions, digital distraction, teamwork*
>
> **Teacher, 45 years old, male** "

> ❝
>
> *It can be difficult to read to gauge body language from participants being online and knowing when the appropriate time is to take a coffee break or what tasks and workshops worked well and others that could have been improved*
>
> **Teacher, 27 years old, female** ❞

> ❝
>
> *The main point was the contact with the students and their concentration on the class. A problem we had before Covid. This problem got worse as there was now no attendance and many technical problems existed on both sides (many students followed the class on smartphones)*
>
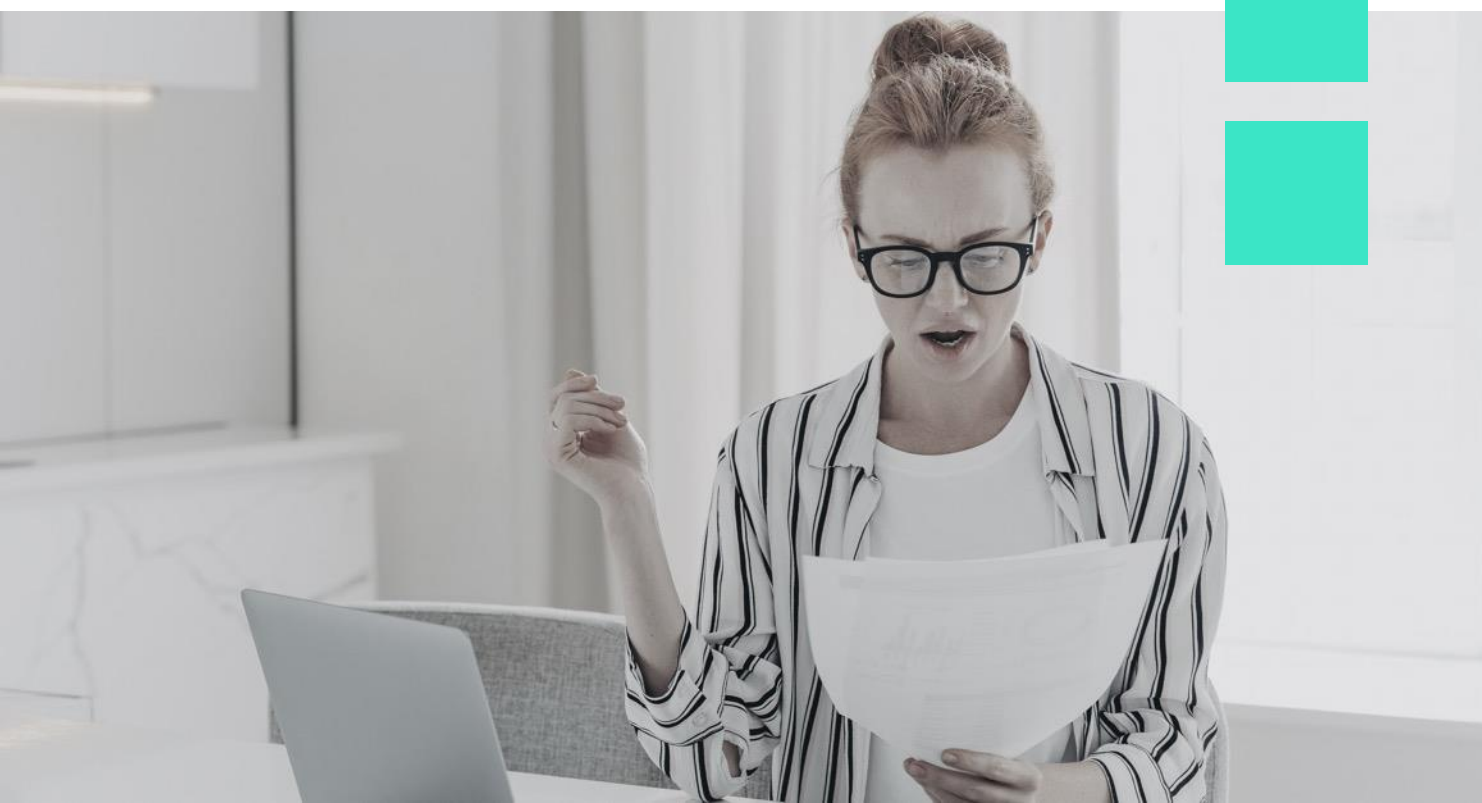> **Teacher, 64 years old, male** ❞

Most participants found that lack of human interaction and the difficulty to keep engagement were among the main challenges they had to face during online classes. The nature of digital tools along with technical problems limited the complete engagement and participation of students in workshops and classes, worsening issues such as concentration. In addition, the lack of "human touch" and direct contact with students made more difficult to retrieve their feedbacks and needs (e.g. whether a workshop was well executed or whether a break was needed during the class).

Resources provided by the institution to carry out the distance learning program

> " *Yes absolutely, we were equipped with a laptop with a built in camera and microphone which was connected to my home WIFI and set up with the Company's VPN.*
>
> **Teacher, 27 years old, female**

> " *Yes, advanced cameras, and unlimited data traffic on mobile devices*
>
> **Teacher, 53 years old, male**

> " *Almost nothing.*
>
> **Teacher, 45 years old, female**

Based on the interviews conducted, most participants found that their institutions provided tools such as laptops and data traffic to benefit the transition towards digital teaching. It was found that the quality of the devices often varied from being "very reliable" to being of "medium quality". Particular attention was brought however to the lack of digital training for the teaching staff, which had to teach themselves how to use digital tools.
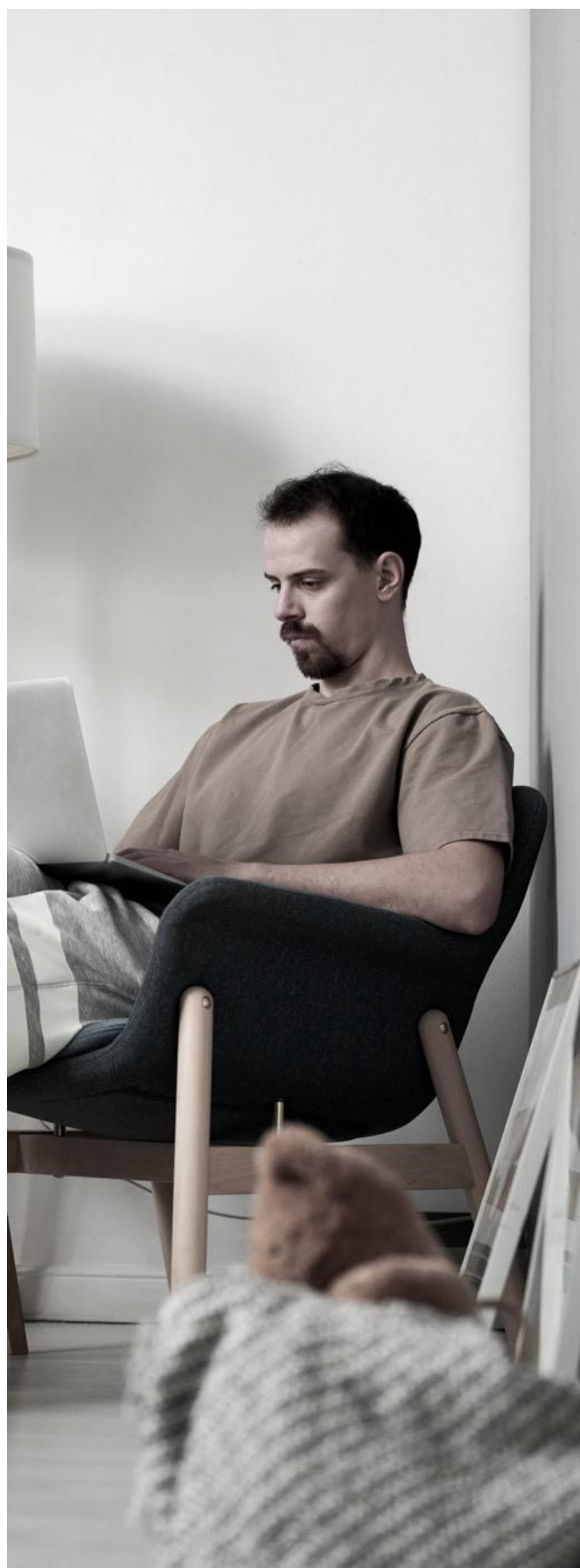
VET Managers and Heads Departments

The second target group of the project was asked to provide answers to the following matters:

1 Digital tools to teach students before the COVID-19 pandemic

2 Challenges due to online classes

3 Institution's strategies to ensure its teachers are prepared for digital teaching

4 Institution's strategy to address the digital wellbeing of teachers

> " *We got what was paid by the state. The sets for the PC were of medium quality, and the internet line was very often overloaded. iPads were the best help when a teacher could use them for his lessons. The devices were very reliable and very well equipped with teaching tools. However, there was no training here either, we had to teach ourselves everything.*
>
> *Teacher, 64 years old, male* "

Digital tools to teach students before the COVID-19 pandemic

> " *We taught face to face in big majority of the time*
> **Deputy head, 59 years old, female** "

> " *We had courses in using Teams, One note, Sway and Forms. In the beginning we aimed at using them between teachers for sharing information, but shortly after being confident with Office 365 we began using it in our daily teaching life.* "
>
> **Head of Department, 56 years old, male**

During the interviews, most participants confirmed that most the of the institutions had already provided some sort of digital tools (e.g. learning platforms) or courses to improve the digital literacy of teachers before the outbreak of the pandemic.

> "
> *The digital tools were mainly for lesson and document storage, lectures would upload their class presentations and sometimes assignments. Students would upload coursework.*
> "
>
> **Head of Department, 49 years old, male**

> "
> *Before the pandemic our institution used the digital learning platform; its learning. Our strategy made sure that our teachers collaborated on this platform, which prepared us when the pandemic hit.*
> "
>
> **Head of Department, 53 years old, female**

Challenges due to online classes

> " Difficulties with students, difficulties with parents, challenges working teachers to teach in a completely different way, challenges getting work placements and apprenticeships. "
>
> **Deputy Head, 59 years old, female**

> " Resistance from some teachers to teaching online. Lack of knowledge about how to effectively teach online. "
>
> **Head of Department, 49 years old, male**

Based on the answers given, most participants agreed that teachers had to face several challenges in the transition process towards online teaching. These include accepting and familiarising with e-tools, lacking knowledge on how effectively teaching online and digital stress.
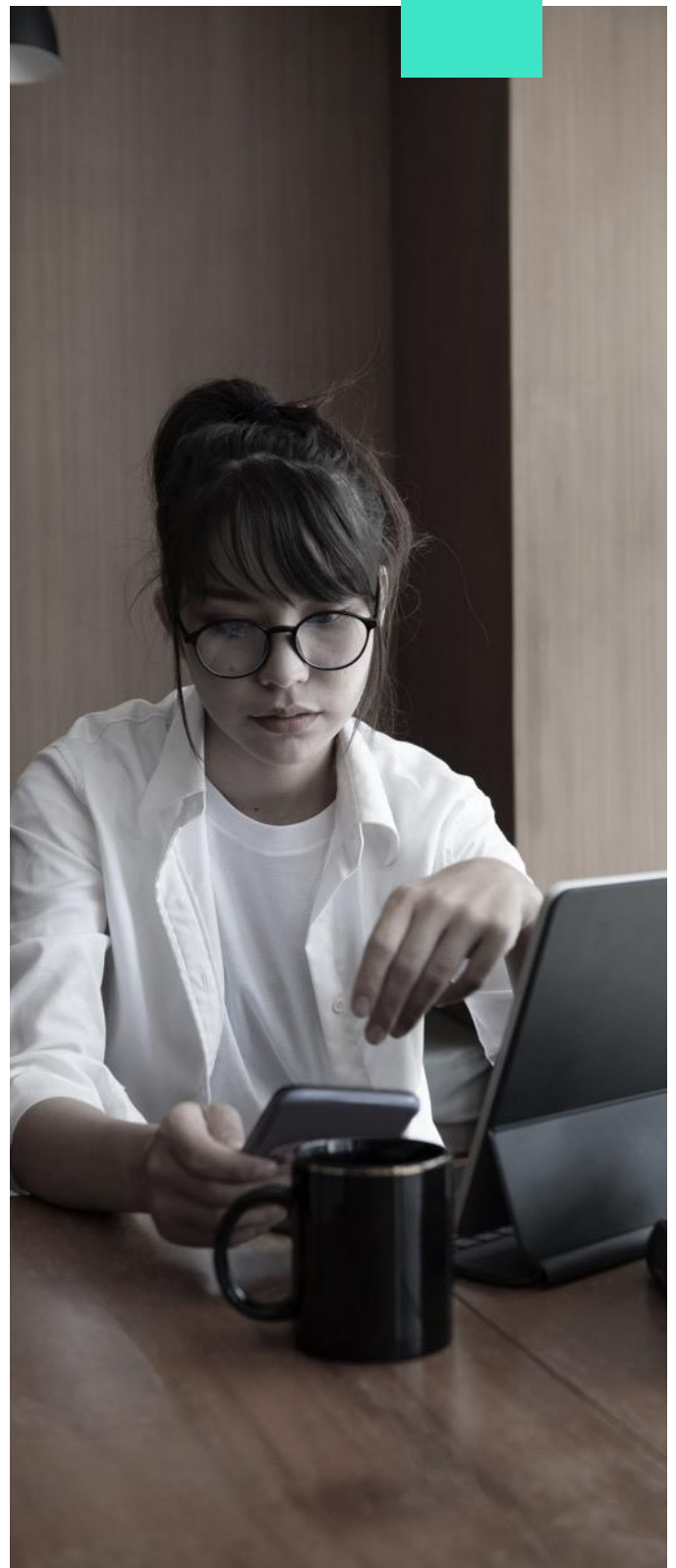
> **"**
>
> Teachers had to become familiar with e-tools overnight.
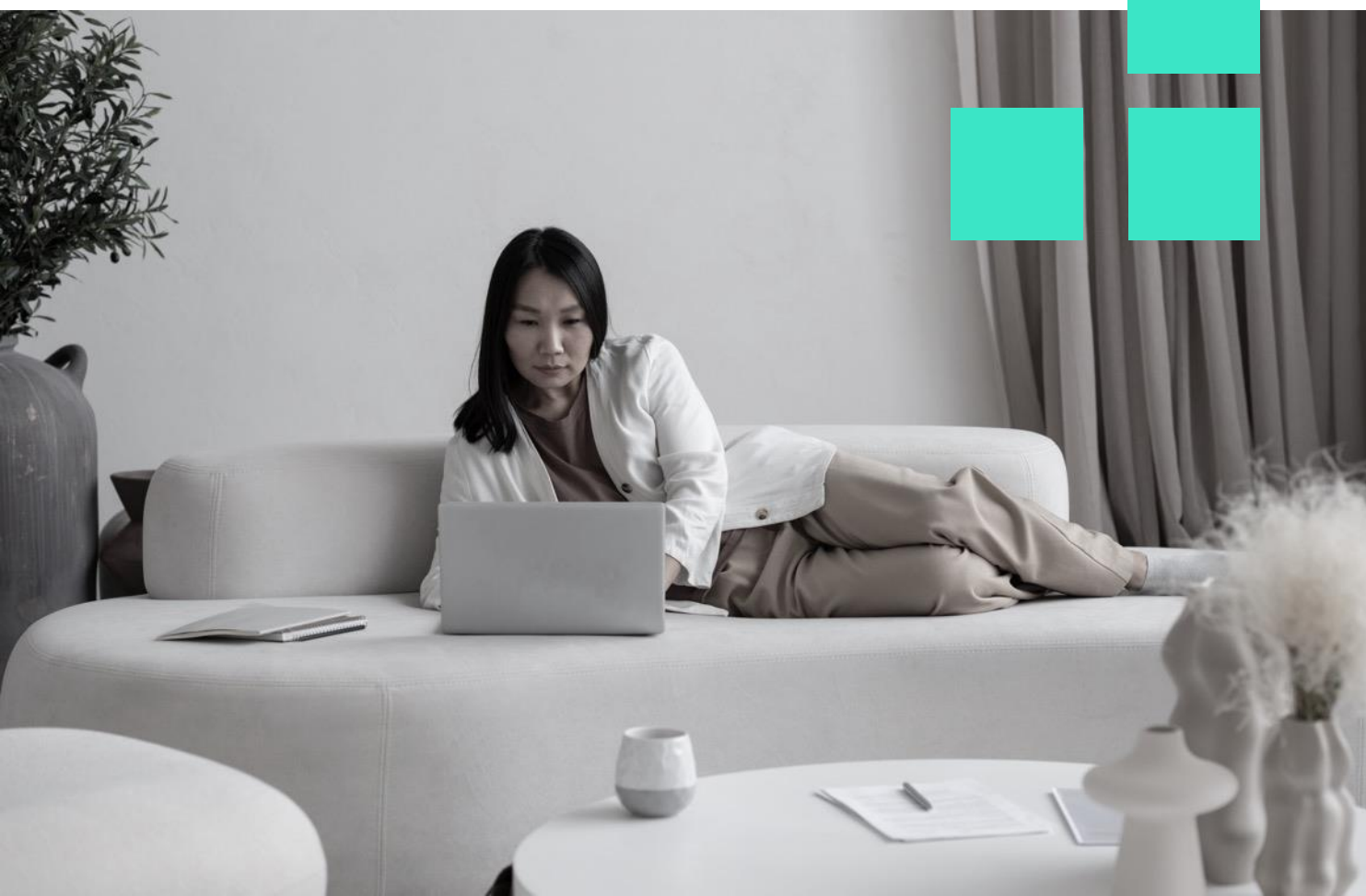> **"**
>
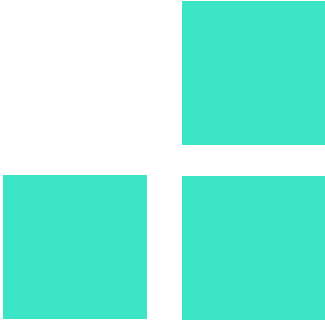> *Manager, 52 years old, female*

> **"**
>
> Sitting in front of a camera/pc for 6-8 hours is exhausting, and assessing the motivation levels of the students is impossible
> **"**
>
> *Founder and manager, 45 years old, female*

Institution's strategies to ensure its teachers are prepared for digital teaching

> "
>
> *Nothing specific as such.*
>
> **Head of training, 54 years old, female**
>
> "

> "
>
> *We provided laptops where needed. We organized some courses on teaching online. We tried to support teachers as best as possible*
>
> **Head of Department, 49 years old, male**
>
> "

> "
>
> *Heads of Departments worked with their teachers to try to find the best solutions possible*
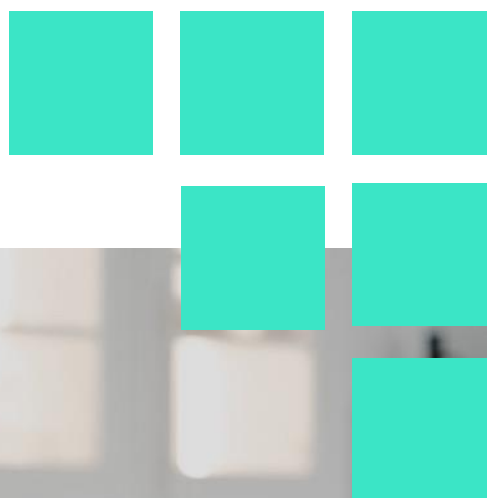>
> **Deputy Head, 59 years old, female**
>
> "

Based on the given answers, most institutions provided the teaching staff with digital tools and courses on online teaching, by supporting and working closely with teachers to find the best solutions. Nonetheless, some difficulties also arose during trainers/teachers' trainings.

Institution's strategy to address the digital wellbeing of teachers

> *Most of the interviewees stated that their institutions do not yet have a clear strategy.*

> *Our institution encourages teachers to take a break a move around regularly. We also hired an eLearning mentor to help teachers with questions regarding technical challenges.*

Further Educaiton College Head of Department, 49 years old, male

> *We have a strategy for the general wellbeing of teachers and all staff and here is digital wellbeing included on equal terms.*

Head of international department, 59 years old, female

> • *Self-evaluation checklist*
> • *Provide more feedback for Teachers who function well when being more organized*
> • *Being more supportive to the teachers for doing things. Don't punish yourself for what you did not do today, but credit yourself for what you did today.*
>
> *Leadership training institute founder/manager, 50 years old, female*

Based on the answers given, most participants stated that their institutions do not have a clear strategy yet. Nonetheless, those institutions that aims to support digital wellbeing of teachers have adopted several solutions.

3 | RECOMMEN-DATIONS AND FURTHER STEPS

3 RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER STEPS

The project Digital Balance aims to provide VET teachers and managers with effective tools and competences to face the challenges emerging from the quick transition to digital teaching and learning provoked by the COVID-19 emergency. VET teachers were particularly affected by the new way of working which caused on several occasions effects of digital stress.

Based on the evidence and purposes of this project, it is therefore essential to provide them with new knowledge of the physical and psychological effects of digital overload and to prepare them with new skills that will be helpful to manage risks to their wellbeing and to adopt a balanced work-life, while complying with expectations.

> Overall, this will increase their professional digital competences, making them more likely to continue to provide effective online teaching and remote work over a long period of time. Improved digital literacy will also help them stay ahead of peers and improve their employment prospects. In addition, they will have direct benefits on their personal health and wellbeing.

On top of this, the project also aims to prepare the VET managers and heads of departments to raise their awareness of the role of digital wellbeing and professional digital competences for teachers and trainers. VET managers and heads of departments are called to support the development of teaching staff digital skillsets. They will have to provide them with new knowledge about the effect of the digitalization of education on the wellbeing and work-life balance of teaching staff and will have to train them with the practical strategies and examples of how to improve digital wellbeing culture and practice. In this way, VET managers and heads of departments will have the capacity to develop plans, policy and practice that are tailored for the specific digital wellbeing needs of their own department or institution.

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2 REFERENCES

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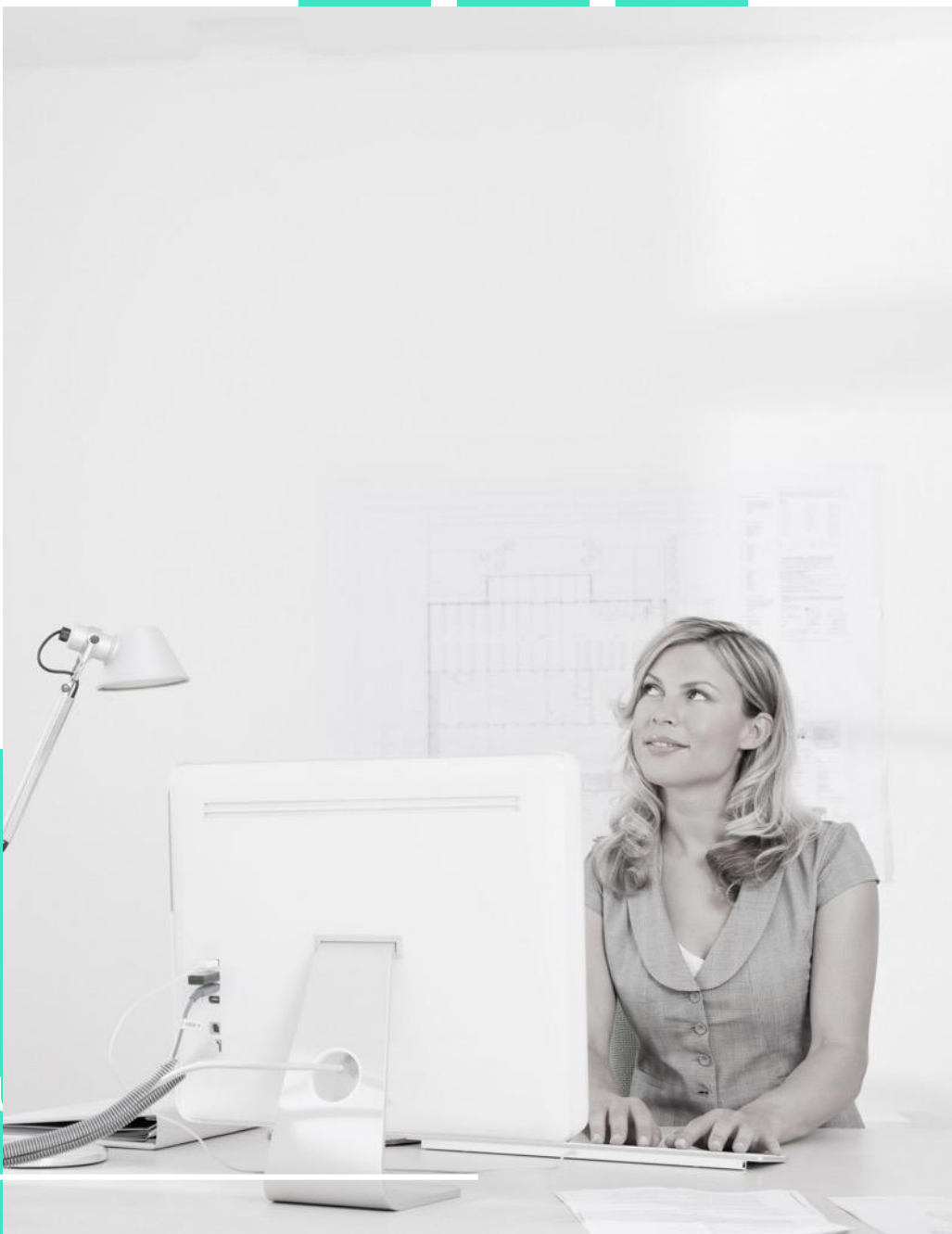
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