Education - employment partnership for VET in the fashion sector

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Abstract. The paper presents the objectives, the innovative aspects, the planned outputs and the current results of the project entitled “Education - Employment Partnership for VET in the fashion sector”. The project is co-financed by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 - Strategic Partnerships in the Field of Education, Training, Youth and Sport. The project aims mainly the at developing a European teaching and training Toolkit for supporting the implementation of Work-Based Learning (WBL) in all stages of vocational education and training (VET) in the fashion sector. Moreover, the project will support the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms for WBL in VET in the fashion sector with a specific focus on feedback loops between iVET and eVET systems. The project consortium is composed by nine partners from four countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Netherlands) representing two iVET providers, a university a Chamber of Commerce, a Federation of SMEs connected with fashion industries, one research institution, one company in clothing and fashion sector, two consulting companies with experience in education and training policies. The actual research results presented in the paper are based on the survey oriented to the training needs and the impact and benefits of WBL implementation. The data were collected from educational organizations. Also, examples of good practices showing the different challenges and benefits of WBL implementation, were identified.

1. Context of the project
The European labour market is actually undergoing major changes and it is not certain that the skills and qualifications provided by the European educational system are able to satisfy the current and emerging needs, which means that there is a possibility of further imbalances and gaps in the supply and demand for skills.

The European Commission (EC) launched the “New skills for new jobs” initiative to provide a general framework for the implementation of policy actions in the European Union. Building on this initiative, the EC stressed the need to reinforce the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET). Also, Member States and social partners committed themselves in the Bruges Communique for 2011 – 2020 to the objective of including work-based learning (WBL) in all initial VET courses. Creating opportunities for high-quality WBL lies at the heart of current European education and training policies. It was also confirmed by the European Council that the highest priority should be given to promoting youth employment and invited the Commission to establish a “European Alliance for Apprenticeships” and it also announced the creation of a dedicated Youth Employment Initiative, open to regions with high youth unemployment rates.
A lack of workplace experience and the related skills and competences is one of the factors contributing to the "skills gap" in the EU today. WBL has gained increased attention at EU and national levels as one of the remedies for boosting employment and growth in Europe and reducing skills gaps and mismatches. The main actors with the key role in ensuring high quality WBL are the iVET teachers and in-company trainers [2]. In this context, the “E&E Fashion” project aims at developing a European teaching and training Toolkit for supporting the iVET providers, enterprises and learners by providing the practical and ready-to-use tools and instruments for implementing WBL in their iVET activities and the quality assurance mechanisms for WBL in VET in the fashion sector [3].

The needs and gaps analysis conducted by the partners for preparing the project proposal led to identifying the main problems in the field:

- The supply of apprenticeship and traineeship places in the EU continues to be under-developed and varies greatly by country and continuing efforts are needed to invest in expanding the offer of apprenticeships and traineeships in countries where opportunities for this type of learning remain very limited;
- A lack of workplace experience and the related skills and competences is one of the factors contributing to the “skills gap” in the EU today. Part of the solution can be found in high quality VET systems, in which the active participation of employers and a strong element of WBL facilitate young people’s transition to work by providing the knowledge, skills and competences which they need for a successful first step into the labour market [1].

2. Project aims and objectives

The project aims at developing a European teaching and training Toolkit for supporting the implementation of WBL in all stages of VET. Moreover, the project will support the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms for WBL in VET in the fashion sector with a specific focus on feedback loops between iVET and cVET systems.

The project addresses two priorities established for Erasmus+ programme, KA2 (Cooperation and Innovation for Good Practices), considered as the most relevant:

- Promoting WBL in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships-type training;
- Transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning, employability and labour mobility.

The specific objectives of the project, listed below, are correlated with the two selected priorities:

- Providing a WBL Toolkit for supporting the concrete implementation of WBL programmes in iVET during the key stages: planning, organization, implementation and assessment;
- Define the quality assurance guidelines and tools for iVET for supporting the application of EQAVET at VET provider level;
- Defining and testing the role of iVET teachers and in-company trainers and the related training curriculum for their professionalization in the field of WBL;
- Promoting and supporting the WBL application in iVET programmes for enhancing their quality and for making them more relevant for the labour market and thus, for reducing the skills gaps between the competencies developed through existing iVET offer and the need of the business sector.

In addition, the application of WBL principles at VET provider level will facilitate the development of VET programmes (both iVET and cVET) that will guarantee the recognition of skills qualifications, and thus will enhance employability, lifelong learning behaviours and mobility for learning and working within the sector.

3. Innovative aspects

The innovative character of the project in the field of education in training is based on the followings:
It combines a top-down approach to criteria, descriptors and indicators EQAVET with a bottom-up sector (fashion) and provider needs approach. The result will be a set of quality assurance guidelines and tools for iVET providers;

- It creates convergence among quality assurance in iVET, work based learning methodology and training of teachers and in-company trainers for supporting WBL;
- It capitalise the results of former projects and initiatives concerning WBL and QA;

By developing the WBL Toolkit and Quality Assurance guidelines and tools for iVET, the project will lead to the following innovative elements:

- Disseminate the culture of WBL and QA as integrated elements for enhancing the quality and labor market relevance in iVET in the fashion sector;
- iVET providers will have at their disposal practical tools and guidelines for implementing quality WBL;
- The project will support transparency and enhance mobility within the sector, at EU level;
- Using sector specific toolkit and guidelines for WBL and QA, more space for cooperation and trust between iVET providers at national and European levels will be created.

4. Expected results

The expected results of the project can be found in its intellectual outputs (IOs) and their indicators. The most representative are presented in the following subsections.

4.1. IO 1: Report on the implementation of WBL and QA in VET in the fashion sector

Based on the needs and gaps analysis conducted by the partners and considering data collected at the beginning of the project, this report will include information regarding the needs and gaps in the field of WBL implementation in VET programmes, examples of good practices in the field and the stakeholders to be involved and training needs to be addressed.

4.2. IO 2: WBL Toolkit for supporting the concrete implementation of WBL programmes in iVET

The objective of this output is to develop and provide iVET providers, enterprises and learners practical and ready-to-use tools and instruments for implementing WBL in their iVET activities and the guidelines for supporting the implementation of the toolkit.

4.3. IO 3: Quality Assurance guidelines and tools for iVET

The output will provide practical indications for improving quality of iVET in the line with EQAVET criteria and indicators. They are represented by the tools and guidelines for supporting iVET providers in integration WBL in their QMS accompanied by the methodologies for improving the feedback loops between iVET and eVet.

4.4. IO 4: Learning programme for iVET teachers and in-company trainers (in the field of WBL)

Within this output the partners will define the roles of the teachers and in-company teachers tutors, mentors, coachers) in the WBL activities. Also, learning modules for teachers and in-company trainers for supporting the implementation of the WBL Toolkit and QA Guidelines and tools will be designed and produced.

The expected impact of the project on the participants and target groups (iVET providers, Higher Education Institution of tertiary level and business sector) can be summarized as follows:

- Increase the awareness of providers and business sector concerning WBL characteristics, benefits, challenges and existing good practices;
- Will put WBL and QA on the agenda of providers and companies in the sector;
- Enable providers with practical guidelines, tools and instruments in the field of WBL implementation in the fashion sector;
- Integrate the results of the previous projects into sector specific toolkit for WBL;
- Support a more systemic approach to quality within sectoral iVET;
• Represent a quality objective and criteria for iVET providers;
• Provide a benchmark for training of teachers and in-company trainers in the field of WBL and QA in the fashion sector;
• Represent a professional opportunity for teachers and in-company trainers;
• Allow formal and public recognition of the teachers and in-company trainers competencies in the field of WBL and QA for iVET in the fashion sector.

5. Research methodology
The first intellectual output of the project (IO 1) is focused on the needs and gaps analysis and is based on the data collected in the planned field research.

In the following sections, the paper presents the methodology and the results of the survey applied in educational organizations (technological high schools, technical colleges) that activate in the fashion sector. The questionnaire was designed to gather data about the most relevant training needs in the field of WBL and QA implementation. Also, other relevant aspects related to the good practices in the field of WBL and the benefits of WBL instead of ‘traditional’ education systems were included in the questionnaire.

The field research is based on survey questionnaires that were designed according to a standard research methodology. For the purpose of the project, the questionnaires were applied in all the partners’ countries, to the staff working in the educational organizations (schools) that operate in the fashion sector, as one of the main target groups of the project. The paper includes only the results of the Romanian survey. To this perspective, the selected respondents were relevant stakeholders from European higher education organizations belonging to the fashion sector: persons in managerial positions and teachers (currently working).

The questionnaires were divided in four main sections:
  - SECTION 1: General information (profile of respondents),
  - SECTION 2: Training needs;
  - SECTION 3: Good practices;
  - SECTION 4: Impact and benefits in the field.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. Profile of respondents
A total number of 25 representatives from 9 VET schools, located in Neamț and Focșani counties, providing education in the fashion field responded to the questionnaire. All respondents are women. The majority (64%) are of age between 36 and 50 and the rest (32%) are aged 50+ years. Most of the respondents are teachers that have graduate BSc. Almost all of them (86%) teach technical subjects, 7% (2) – Design, 4% (1) – technical science and 3% (1) - ICT.

6.2. Training needs
The two diagrams below show the results of the analysis of the implementation of WBL and QA in VET in the Fashion sector collected after the submission of questionnaires.

The diagram from figure 1, shows on what topics school staff should acquire further specific vocational training. Generally, one can observe that schools should acquire further specific vocational training in almost all the suggested topics. From all, Communication/information channels has the priority. Also, one can observe that school staff should acquire further specific vocational training with focus on WBL terminology, tools and instruments underlining the need to understand and to become familiar with related tools and instruments.

On the kind of delivery method considered to be more appropriate, more than half of respondents (63%) indicated as their most preferred way to deliver further specific vocational training the blended course, as can be seen in the diagram from figure 2. Blended course includes both classroom as e-learning sessions, and is probably the most appropriate delivery method that could better suit the needs
of the schools staff while working. It could also facilitate the participation of a wider target audience. In addition to this, it also means to give to participants the flexibility to choose the duration (when it is time to start, stop or continue) of the training session.

6.3. Good practices

The activity of collecting the different good practices that the respondents selected as example to be followed helps to demonstrate that quality in WBL is possible and although the concept is unique, the methods and tools through which it can be implemented can differ, and still lead to similar results.

Question 1. How is your school integrating WBL in the education policies?

The responses to this question are included in the diagram from figure 3. Respondents indicated “There is a clear vision on the role of WBL in education” and “There is a school policy on WBL (long-term)” as preferred answers. Few less declared that “There is a specific person responsible to manage WBL activities”. Is also clear that schools need to involve non-educational organisations for planning and assessing WBL programmes and that they collaborate with them.

Question 2. How is WBL organized in your school?

The answers to the second question indicate the following results: 17% of the total options state that WBL plan is “in line with the general educational policy”, thanks to the “teachers” who are adequately trained, 16% of the interviewees say that teachers act as internal “tutors/ mentors
preparing, monitoring and assessing students within WBL”. The other relevant answer chosen by the respondents is that “WBL programmes are periodically monitored and improved based on the results achieved” (14%), on par with “There are specific quality criteria for evaluating WBL programmes”. 10% of the respondents believe that the WBL update must be based on the “employer’s feedback and requirements” because in schools “there are specific procedures for collecting feedback from students/parents and employers”. Only 2% of the interviewees are saying that “WBL is adequately resourced” and none of them selected the last question “There is a specific procedure for assessing LOs achieved during WBL”.

**Question 3. How are WBL programmes prepared in your school?**

By the third question, schools’ respondents were required to indicate “How are WBL programmes prepared in their schools” and the results are included in the diagram from figure 4. As one can see, 39% of the respondents state that “Students and parents are informed about the benefits and about students’ obligations” and 24% of them think that “Students are informed about the role of WBL programmes for their career development”. A small percentage of the interviewees (13%) state that “Students are informed about the WBL objectives, in terms of LOs to be acquired”. Almost the same percentage of the respondents (12%) think that “Students are informed about the assessment procedures” and about “how WBL programmes are defined and based on students’ needs and career objectives”.

![Figure 4. How are WBL programmes prepared in schools?](image)

**Question 4. Which of these WBL models listed below are implemented by your school?**

The responses to this question are represented in figure 5. Most of the respondents involved in the survey (43%), claimed that the model they follow to implement WBL is “Integrated in school based programme (site labs, workshops, simulations)” and “On the job training company” (40%). 13% of the respondents said that they implement WBL by “Integrating in a school-based programme outside school (on site labs, workshops in a non-educational context, simulation)”. Very few respondents (4%) indicated that they will implement WBL by “Apprenticeship”.

**Question 5. How do you assess the competences and skills acquired through WBL?**

Among the suggested options on how schools assess the competences and skills acquired through WBL, Observations is the most highly recommended (27%). “Evaluation meetings with students” immediately follows (26%) and “Questionnaire” (21%) while “Report on WBL activities” and “Examination test” collected an equivalent, lower, share.

**Question 6. How is your school involving other external stakeholders, in particular employers?**

The selected answers indicate that all the schools involve external stakeholders (in particular employers) thanks to clear agreements between school-student-employers establishing the roles and responsibilities (47%). A lower score is for the following suggested practices for involving external
stakeholders: “Students entry-level and expected LOs to be achieved are agreed with the employers before the WBL programme starts” (6%), “There are specific procedures in place for analysing the labour market trend and requirements” (9%) and “There is a specific monitoring and evaluation procedure, which involves also the employer, for assessing WBL programme” (6%).

From these results, one can notice the contradiction between the fact that it seems that some schools design WBL programmes based on labour market needs but, at the same time, it is evident that there are few specific procedures in place for analysing the labour market trend and requirements. Some concrete actions need to be taken.

6.4. Impact and benefits

The activity to compare and promote the benefits of WBL respect to 'traditional' education systems is also based on the need to demonstrate the benefits of implementing WBL for all stakeholders so that to motivate them to apply it at larger scale. Based on the analysis conducted, on their own experiences and other examples identified during this phase, the research revealed the benefits of WBL implementation, as one can observe from figure 6.

![Figure 5. WBL models implemented in schools](image1)

![Figure 6. WBL benefits and impact](image2)

It is interesting to notice that “Increase the quality of training offer for students” and that “Enhanced employability for students” scored the highest (24%). Students could clearly benefit from WBL implementation, considering overall their future employability. As a consequence, schools need to increase the quality of the training offer to be able to put on the labour market well-trained and well-equipped students. Furthermore, respondents said that the second benefit of WBL is that they “Prevent early school leaving” (21%) and lead to an “Increase of the teachers quality of training” (11%). Only 8% of the respondents said that the WBL can “Increase the number of students per year”.

7. Conclusions

Based on the research findings, we have come to the following conclusions and related recommendations:

- School staff need to be further trained on WBL terminology, tools and instruments as well as on communication/information channels and business approach in education;
- School staff need much more guidance and provision of specific tools (ICT tools);
- Schools are aware on the importance of implementing WBL activities, though not in all countries they have already a clear vision on the exact role of WBL in education;
- Schools appointed a specific person responsible to manage WBL activities and there are teachers who act as internal tutors/mentors;
- A school policy on WBL exists;
- Schools integrate WBL programmes within their general educational policy according to the requirements of the companies they collaborate with;
- Schools need to increase the quality of the training offer to be able to put on the labour market well-trained and well-equipped students.

Also, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:
- Schools need to involve much more non-educational organisations for planning and assessing WBL programmes;
- Schools and companies need to establish a more in-depth continuous collaboration;
- Students and parents need to be informed on how WBL activities will be conducted;

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