PATHFINDING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR VOCATIONAL TEACHERS THROUGH VIRTUAL NETWORKING

(DRAFT)

COUNTRY: ALBANIA

EXISTING STATE OF PLAY AND PROPOSED PATHFINDING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR VOCATIONAL TEACHERS AND TRAINERS THROUGH VIRTUAL NETWORKING

Gerda Sula, PhD

ABBREVIATIONS

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MoSWY	Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
NAVETQ	National Agency for Vocational Education Training and Qualifications
IDE	Institute of Educational Development
ETF	European Training Foundation
VET	Vocational Education Training
OER	Open Education Resources
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

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AIMS

The aim of this research is to map out the existing state of play with respect to the use of virtual networks at national, sectorial and local levels that serve the professional development of vocational teachers or trainers in Albania. Relevant actors and pathways for future development in 2017 and beyond have been identified. The work also aims to raise awareness and understanding of virtual networks for professional development, champion their use and engage potential participants. Related work has been carried out at the same time in Serbia and Turkey.

Scope

Virtual networks are understood as on-line social networks, whether they make use of social media (such as Facebook) or a custom-built virtual platform. In this research there is a particular focus virtual networks that facilitate blended approaches: that is the integration of online with face-to-face networking or professional development activities. Blended networks may offer a range of functionalities: from sharing of news to finding partners and collaborative knowledge making. This work is intended to support the development of blended networks that will be used in a planned and pedagogically effective manner for the purpose of improving teacher knowledge, skills and practices, with the ultimate purpose of improving student outcomes.

Figure 1 below offers a conceptualisation of virtual, social and blended networks and of the different functionalities that these networks may or may not offer.

Figure 1: Concept image of the functionality of Networks for CPD of teachers
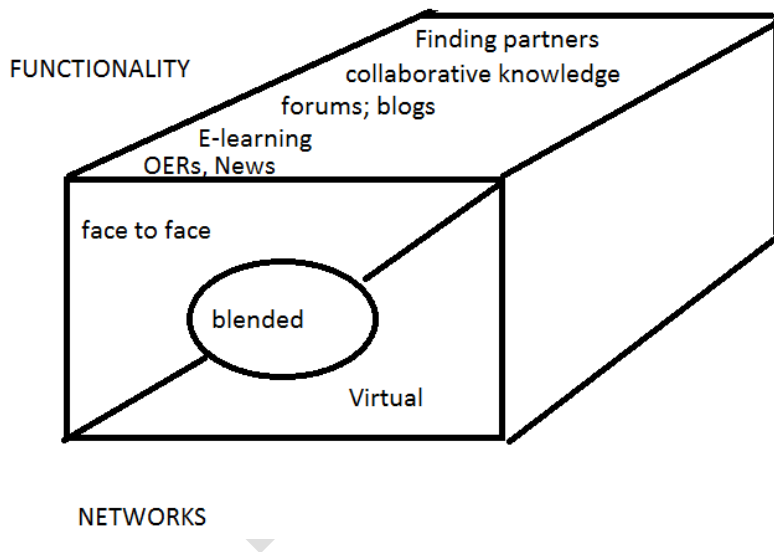
Policy Context

The Albanian National Strategy on Employment and Increasing Skills 2014-2020, speaks of (page 52): "Designing of portals/databases which are interactive and searchable by internet related to the qualifications, curricula and providing vocational learning by the Professional Vocational and Education (AFP) providers." Improved professional development for teachers is a policy commitment in Albania.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews of key informants and focus groups with teachers were conducted between November 21-26 in 2016 and thematically analysed. Themes, patterns and nodes were identified through codification.

Participants

- A list of key informants was developed, which was revisited in consultation with ETF project leader. We identified 20 potential interviewees, and 10 were able to participate. They were stakeholders in national institutions responsible on CPD of teachers, providers of CPD, third sector providers of web-based CPD and professional associations, faculties and businesses
- A focus group with teachers from VET school Tregetare Vlore was conducted.

Table 1: Outline of participants

Type	Workplace	Themes	Tools	Number
Policy maker	National institution	Importance of problem; existing incentives, future goals	Key informant interview	1
Technician	National institution	Perception of problem; overview of OERs with emphasis on VET teachers, cross-sectoral collaboration	In depth interview	4
Manager	Foreign support organization	Perception of problem; existing solutions, future goals	In depth interview	2
Technician	Web solution organizations	Existing OERs, lesson learned, opportunities for the future	In depth interview	3
Teacher	VET school	Importance of CPD, professional networking, expectations, incentives, intentions	Focus group	6

FINDINGS

Table 2: Thematic analysis of results

Themes	Major categories	Minor categories
Teacher collaboration	CPD	Face to face
		online
	Networking	Face to face
		distance
		blended
Incentives	Job retention	Compulsory training days
		Compulsory participation
	Career scale	Compulsory training days
		Teacher portfolio
	Professional improvement	Resource development
		Methodological improvement
Barriers	Personal	Language
		IT skills
	Professional	Reluctance to participate
		Busy teacher
		Burnout
	Institutional	Teacher retention
		Maintenance strategy

Networks of teachers – past and current practice

- Face to face networks have been used by several donor-driven projects which were very beneficial to teachers and professions, as it allowed for teachers of the same profession nationally to get together systematically in order to fulfil the structural curricula. The main drive for teachers was that they did not have resource materials, and sharing responsibilities for developing the materials was seen as very incentivizing. Such networks continue to exist informally. Teachers are reported to keep in touch with each other about materials and documentations, and email is used for individual connections.
- The virtual platforms for networking have been opened were project specific. Once the donor finished the project, the platform did not remain active. As such, it is worth mentioning the platform set up by AlBiz Project, funded by KulturKontakt, which used Moodle platform (now passive). More than 150 teachers were occasional users. However, even when the project was active, teachers were reluctant to participate in a virtual environment. The reasons for such situation were several:
    - unfamiliarity with computer platform;
    - lack of confidence vis-à-vis the other teachers 'What do I have to share that the other teachers don't know' (VET teacher);
    - Language barrier: most teachers have difficulties to access materials other than in Albanian, diminishing noticeably the opportunities for consulting materials in other languages.
    - Lack of time to dedicate learning new resources

- State-funded platforms are used for sharing information and are static. Content-related issues and policy or legislative issues are uploaded by the administrator and used by the schools. Number of ad-hoc users: 500

- Other websites:

    - http://www.akafp.gov.al/dokumente-kurrikulare/skelet-kurrikula-te-arsimit-te-mesem-profesional/ - page of the NAVETQ. Provides information regarding professional qualifications (legislation, instructions), curricula (structure of curricula, programs, supporting educational materials, instructions, archived documentation); assessment (modes of evaluation, instructions, sample of tests)

    - http://www.izha.edu.al – page of IDE. The information provided is for teachers of general culture. Instructions on how to apply the new curricula are uploaded in video and written form. Information on teacher professional qualification (structure, tests from previous years) are updated. Bibliography is updated.

- There are several attempts by local NGOs and private universities to set up platforms for CPD. However, none is actually active: they are either passive or in limbo, due to the moratorium of accredited CPD offerings by third parties from the part of MoES. The main platform used is Moodle or Blackboard. The following websites offer blended learning for VET teachers and for general education teachers:

    - British Council (with a specific aim at vocational education and learning English for vocational purposes. The platform does not yet support teacher networking: http://www.britishcouncil.al/programmes/education/vocational

    - Irisoft, an NGO established in 1999 in order to improve professional knowledge and skills in various fields of work, has prepared a platform for IT teachers of VET schools with the support of ETF.

- o SchoolMe: an e-platform that has developed all the curricula for basic education of the Albanian and Kosovar schooling. For each lesson, there is a forum in which students and teachers ask questions, teachers can keep notes on line and plan their teaching, which can be used as e-portfolio. It also has a section for professional networking of teachers but this is not yet available. : http://www.schoolme.education/school/
  - o Step by Step Centre, an NGO involved in professional development of preschool teachers for child centred learning, has set up an e-learning platform for preschool teachers: http://www.hph-edu.al
- Most platforms, whether state funded or private, use Facebook as a medium for maintaining contact and constantly encouraging teacher involvement in addition to the information shared on the platform.
- Technical capacity to design such platform exists in Albania. As an example, Communication Progress is an Albanian ICT company which offers e-learning services, for example, designing e-learning platform from scratch or customized based on the demands, such as: e-learning platforms, web learning , interactive whiteboards in partnership with Promethean World; distance learning (in partnership with Vidyo): http://www.commprog.com/en/e-learning/. Communication Progress has designed the School management system platform for the project Skills4Jobs of SwissContact. One of the pillars of this project is to support teachers of four VET schools to revisit the teaching methodologies in order to ensure student involvement and preparation for profession.

Other Relevant Developments in Albania

There has been extensive investment in infrastructure, equipment and IT training for teachers in Albania.[1]

The IDE continues to provide some CPD for general (academic subjects) teachers in all kinds of schools with a focus on the introduction of new curricula. However, teachers of general culture in VET schools have not systemically attended these trainings, due to lack of clarity in the arrangements for supporting general education teachers in VET schools, and due to teachers' lack of understanding whether such trainings were of use for them. Compulsory teacher CPD, as demanded by pre-university law No 69/2012 has stalled due to the moratorium of liberalized training provision by the MoE based on order no. 421 date 04.11.2015, Prot. No. 8981 of the Minister, with the aim of improving quality assurance of any accredited CPD for teachers.

MoES has planned to invest a percentage of the budget for supporting the CPD of teachers with 3 training days per year in 2017. For this, a project has been designed with ANA (Academic Network of

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[1] Ndriçim Mehmeti (2016) Digital skill competence and digital and online learning in IVET and CVET in Albania

Albania) http://www.rash.al, an Albanian public institution active in higher education and research networking, founded in 2009 based on an Intergovernmental agreement of Italy and Albania. They are the Albanian counterpart of the European ICT infrastructure project, GEANT 4, part of the GEANT 2020 framework partnership agreement (FPA), cofounded by National Research and Education Network (NREN) and Horizon 2020. Their role is to serve as a network infrastructure and datacentre, telematics academic network, and datacentre. They have undertaken to develop the CPD mapping for the pre-university teachers, which includes the general culture teachers in VET schools. The first step has been undertaken by IDE during 2016, with the identification of professional development needs through a national testing of teachers. These data will be used to develop an online portal by ANA in which the accredited organizations will present when and where the CPD will be held (either online or face-to-face). The calendar will be public and responsible parties from MoES will check the quality. Online evaluation of beneficiaries will be included as well. The platform will have the capacity for teacher e-portfolio and for online learning as well.

EPALE is the European network for adult educators. NAVETQ is the agency in Albania with responsibility to support use of this network. There are about 600 registered users from Albania.

There was an institutional effort from the part of NAVETQ to develop and maintain a portal: http://www.vet.al/about/doc_portal - which has not succeeded. There was no systemic evaluation on why it did not succeed, but the developers and the designers consider that the lack of buy-in from the end-users, lack of incentives for teachers to participate, and lack of skills (language skills and IT skills) made it inoperable.

Table 3: Synthetic presentation of the platforms for VET teachers

Country: Albania

Name	Owner(s)	Register ed Users	Other Users	Character of Users: • Intra/Extra-Organisational; • Elementary/Seconda ry/Vocational/Univer sity; • Teacher/Student/ Trainer/Company-based trainer/Instructor	Functionality: (see concept image)	Funding	Face to Face Networking	Focus, e.g. subject,	Technolog y, e.g. Moodle, Facebook, etc.	Facilitation and Moderation
AlBiz	KulturKontakt	50	0	Inter-organizational (all VET schools with a business profile)	Blended e-learning; repository of materials; forum	Kultur kontakt	Yes	Business and IT teachers	Moodle	Passive now
Irisoft Education	Esmeralda Tasho	5 (VET schools)	49 (other VET schools)	Teachers of VET and students	Blended; repository of materials	NEPC	Yes	Professional fields (mechanics, mechatronic, electrics, tourism and hotels, economics and accounts)	Portal	Active without users
Trajnime per mesuesit		25,000		Individuals (teachers of elementary, secondary, vocational, university, future teachers, parents, etc.)	Online; Collaborative knowledge; news; finding partners; OERs; forum; messaging	No funding	Non	CPD opportunities, legislative information	Facebook	Vilson Shehu (admin)

SchoolMe	SchoolMe education	9000 (of which 800 teachers)		Teachers, students and parents of basic education in Albania and Kosovo	Online; repository of materials; e-portfolio; forum; messaging	Self-funded	No	General culture subjects	Moodle	Active
HpH Education	Step by Step Centre	400 teachers		Individual Preschool teachers	Online; e-learning; forum; quizzes; repository of materials	OSI	No	Preschool	Moodle	Active

STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Strategies

In order to understand and forecast successful and sustainable ways to build, maintain and encourage professional CPD for VET teachers, the following strategies, their advantages and disadvantages are proposed:

This research suggests that we can distinguish three broad strategic approaches to developing professional virtual networks for vocational teachers in Albania.

1. Bottom-Up Approach:

    Identifying a small group of enthusiastic teachers who are willing and capable of initiating a virtual network that would serve an identified group of teachers. Such a network could be focused on a profile or/and upon a group of schools. The teachers would need to use their own social networks to recruit membership to the network and they would need to have the ambition and technical and communication skills to sustain and extend the network. Such a network might in the first place focus more on communication (e.g. blogging, chatting, messaging, forums) and sharing of practice than on generating a repository of materials, however, over time it could also accumulate teaching and learning materials and links to resources. ETF could provide financial and other support for the piloting phase of the project. Such a network could work in partnership with national agencies, donors, industry and universities to encourage communication, share materials and share expertise and knowledge.

    a. Advantages: Such a network would be horizontal, peer-to-peer and it would allow teachers to learn from each other and to tackle in a democratic way needs of teachers regarding the teaching practice. The teachers would have the opportunity to share their own teaching and assessment materials, and to discuss challenges in the everyday work. Such a network will be owned by enthusiastic and ambitious teachers who will model the capacity to take responsibility for their own professional development. The network will be able to respond to the real needs of its participants – which should motivate participation.
    b. Disadvantages: Being informal, the sustainability of such a network would be jeopardized once the funds are ended. Willingness of teachers to participate by sharing didactic materials is uncertain and needs to be incentivised. It is necessary to identify teachers who are ready and capable to lead a bottom-up network – the mapping work did not identify potential teacher-networkers.

2. CPD Provider Approach:

    Institutions and organisations that have a responsibility to provide professional development to vocational teachers in Albania could be supported to develop a virtual network so that they are able to provide blended professional development. This approach could complement the plan to carry out pedagogical training for all vocational teachers in Albania from 2017, implementing the pilot that was completed in 2016.
    a. Advantages: providers of professional development are likely to already possess many of the human, technological and infrastructural resources necessary for virtual networking. Where necessary, the ETF could supplement these resources. The virtual network could add value to the planned training by adding continuity between face-to-face events and encouraging peer-to-peer learning. The face-to-face events would help to generate interest in the virtual network and help to encourage active participation. Financial aspects could be regulated based on the law for pre-university education, which specifies that trainings could be offered face-to-face, online or blended and expenses can be covered by individual teachers,

organizations or state funds. Being regulated, these institutions should have the opportunity to apply for state funds.

    b. Disadvantages: the teachers might not be interested in participating in a virtual network that was associated with a compulsory training. Additional work would be required to design the blended learning.

3. National Approach.

The national agency with responsibility for vocational education, NAVETQ, could add a virtual networking service for CPD of teachers. NAVETQ already owns and manages the website which provides the frame curricula and guidance for teachers. This website could be extended to include a repository of teaching, assessment and learning materials that support the delivery of the profiles. The focus of the network could be, in the first place, to share knowledge about how to develop programmes from the frame curricula. The website could provide links and publicity for professional virtual networks, for example, using Facebook, that encouraged discussion and sharing related to particular profiles. Alternatively, a national approach might be possible through the renewal of NAVETQ's portal: http://www.vet.al/about/doc_portal

    a. Advantages: NAVETQ is the national body responsible for VET education and its quality. NVETQ's curriculum and guidance website is respected and well used. Adding more content and functionality would add value to the website. Existing users of the website provide a natural audience for the services offered by the network. The social networking can support the goals of NVETQ, in particular, the successful implementation of curriculum and guidance.

    b. Disadvantages: the national status and profile of NVETQ's website may discourage teachers from contributing: there is currently no expectation that content for a national website is provided by teachers. The national status of the site might lead to confusion about the status of materials: for example, they might be seen as nationally endorsed or mandatory, rather than as materials that could be adapted or learnt from. It may be difficult or demanding to build in blended learning and extend the functionality of the NAVETQ website. The status and future of NAVETQ's VET portal are not clear.

All of these strategies must overcome some general challenges:

1. How can teachers be motivated to participate actively – both to communicate and to share materials?
2. How can the virtual network be designed so that its costs and work load are sustainable (and shared)?

Opportunities and Suggestions

This research has also identified other opportunities and suggestions which could support any future development of virtual networks in Albania.

1. A baseline study for understanding the capacities and the openness of teachers to be involved in blended CPD would help to focus on needs and permit measurement of progress. Tracking and employability incentives for teachers involved in CPD, in which teachers use produced materials and involvement in their professional portfolio as part of the responsibilities of professional development foreseen by the pre-university law, should be included.

2. It may be possible, in the future, that the CPD of VET teachers could also be included, within the database that is being developed by ANA (Academic Network of Albania). [2] The platform is mainly aimed at universities but it is planned that it will include a portal for accredited providers of professional development for pre-university teachers. Such a move would have economies of scale but would require cooperation between educational institutions working to two ministries. The ANA network may, in future, support not only formal CPD but also on-line communication and professional development.

3. Introduction of blended learning to Albanian teacher should be gradual, for example, a pilot could target 200 teachers and could include IT teachers with greater IT skills.

4. The draft law for VET foresees the development of a **School Development Unit**. Such a unit could benefit from and support a virtual network for vocational teachers. In the first place, School Development Units could be supported through the network and secondly they could use the network as a tool to support the professional development in their schools. The School Development Unit can serve as a linking unit between the school and the national network. Such a responsibility should be included in their job description. Teachers have to have a buy-in on the benefits of blended learning (flexibility of time, no need to travel, less expensive). Teachers are not very familiar with online platforms, even though many have received IT training. Onsite support for teachers is necessary for blended learning to succeed.

5. A virtual network is likely to be successful if it can build upon familiar experiences and also exploit other software or applications ('plug ins'). In Albania, Google classroom can be used with little effort in order to secure long term cloud storage of resources. www.eduongo.com is a virtual platform designed to offer OERs who is run by an Albanian developer, Mr. Ridvan Aliu. Eduongo has developed an OER in Albanian: http://almooc.com which can be used to develop MOOCs in Albanian. Facebook is most followed platform among Albanian teachers. Any network, either face-to-face or online needs to open a Facebook page, with the purpose of information sharing, PR, networking, etcetera. The technology should be user-friendly, in Albanian and with encrypted access, to ensure a user-friendly learning environment, in which it is acceptable to make mistakes for learning, and to consider mistakes as a basis for continuous growth.

6. The concepts shared should be such that they can be implemented right away in the teachers' pedagogical practice. This means that the information shared should not be theoretical but grounded in practice, with links that explain where this practice is based for the ones interested to learn more in depth.

7. The pilot program should forecast a multiyear budget, keeping in mind that adults learn slowly and change happens even more slowly.

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[2] http://www.rash.al,

APPENDICES

Platform of semi-structured interview and focus group

Past

- Is there a record of networks of Professional Development (PD) for VET teachers?
- How did it look like?
- What technologies did it use?
- Who were the target groups?
- Why did it end?
- Was there a lesson to learn from it?

Present

- What is the existing provision of PD for VET teachers
- What works? What doesn't work?
- How can it be fixed?
- Is there an opportunity to showcase a network among schools?
- Can the new VET law be used for encouraging the networks of PD for VET teachers
- Is there a draft on job description of the School Development Unit
- Can the school development unit be used on the function of PD
- Is there a larger platform for building on to synergize the opportunities
- Can the Ministry's demand for training all technical teachers be used for such a network?
- Can the new curricula PD be used for such a network?
- Other opportunities?
- Is there an opportunity for nested solution?

Future

- What could such a network look like?
- Who might it serve?
- Who might run it?
- With what technology
- What could be the incentives of teachers for participating in such a network
- What are the skills (or lack of skills thereof) of teachers for blended learning
- What could be the incentives for the schools to be involved in such a network
- How can it be sustainable?

- Identify and engage partners, contributors institutions and authorities in the use of virtual networks (VN) for PD of VET teachers
- Identify OER and practice that can be included and shared on VN or platform
- Determine scope and focus of pilot VN