

## GOVERNANCE, WORK-BASED LEARNING AND SOCIAL PARTNERS' COOPERATION IN ALBANIA, MONTENEGRO AND SERBIA

ETF Study 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

The systems of education, training and labour markets in the Western Balkan countries face an increasing number of challenges posed by global development, such as the drastic demographic, economic, climatic, and technological changes. An additional challenge and the most important political priority for all of the Western Balkan countries is the EU accession process, which requires the setting up of an efficient system of political and economic management, highest rule of law standards, freedom of the media, and the civil society values. All Western Balkan countries have signed stabilisation and association agreements with the EU, which serve as the general framework for the regulation of mutual relations and the region's harmonisation with the EU standards. Within this framework, the EU also provides strong political and financial support to the countries of this region in fostering good neighbourly relations and building a common prosperity through regional integration (The Berlin Process).

The aforementioned global and European challenges may be seen as an invitation to the Western Balkan countries to undertake a deep and well-guided social and economic transformation. The most efficient mechanism for the management of these processes are the reforms in the domain of human capital and investment in skills. In other words, the creation of opportunities for the development and improvement of skills, competences and qualifications is the most productive path towards a prosperous, innovative, and inclusive society.

Considering that most socioeconomic and technological changes impact the supply and demand of medium and high-level skills, "vocational education and training (VET) is the cornerstone of the social and economic transformation" (ETF, 2019). That is why the development of a flexible VET system which would be able to respond to the changing socioeconomic needs has become one of the basic priorities in the EU education and employment policies, starting with the Copenhagen Declaration and the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010), and the Riga Conclusions (European Commission, 2015). As part of the Riga Process, work-based learning (WBL) has been promoted as the fundamental aspect of vocational education.

The EU member countries, candidate countries, European social partners and the European Commission agreed on the new collection of medium-term deliverables (MTDs) for the period 2015–2020. The first result of five pertains to work-based learning (WBL) in VET: "Promote work-based learning in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships, by involving social partners, companies, chambers and VET providers, as well as by stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship" (European Commission, 2015, pp. 4). All candidate countries selected WBL as a priority in VET reform, and some of them started the implementation process after just two years (ETF, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).

In order to assist Western Balkan countries in answering the challenges in the implementation of the concept and policy of WBL, ETF supported the development of national reports for Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia. These three national reports served as the basis for the development of this collective report which aims to provide a concise overview of the state of play in learning through work in the three countries, to summarise the lessons learned, and give recommendations for further development. Based on the experiences of Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia in the implementation of WBL, the report should contribute to a better understanding

of the ways in which different national configurations attempt to achieve the same objectives, i.e. how different countries can have different approaches to the same efforts.

## 1. STATE OF PLAY IN WORK-BASED LEARNING

The national WBL reports drafted for this composite report, along with other studies and analyses, made it possible to identify the general characteristics of WBL and the main tendencies and challenges in the following areas: 1) management and decision making, 2) connecting schools, employers, and students, 3) programme development, 4) programme implementation, 5) monitoring, evaluation and assessment of achievements, and 6) quality assurance.

### 1.1. General characteristics of work-based learning

Following the Riga Summit, all countries quickly and simultaneously took decisive action to implement WBL. The regulatory framework for the establishing of WBL is either the Law on Vocational Education (Montenegro, Albania) or a special Law on Dual Education (Serbia). In all three cases, the laws were adopted in 2017. The adoption of the laws was soon followed by many bylaws which closely define certain issues concerning the WBL implementation, which all suggest that WBL implementation, at least in its initial introductory stages, was considered a political priority.

WBL is included in the vocational education programmes (NQF 2, 3 and 4 / EQF 2, 3 and 4). For each vocational qualification, an education programme is developed, consisting of theoretical and practical parts. The programme may be implemented entirely in the school (school-based learning), including the practical part, or by combining school-based learning with learning at the employer (work-based learning). The practical part is integrated in the organisational and business schemes of employers during the academic year.

As part of secondary vocational education, WBL is implemented as apprenticeship or dual education (Montenegro, Serbia) or as internship (Albania<sup>1</sup>). In the first case, the law defines the student rotation between school and learning at the employer (between 1 and 3 days a week), whereas in the other case the periodical learning at the employer is regulated within the education programme. The WBL share in the total number of lessons in Serbia ranges between 20 and 80%, in Montenegro 45-50%, and in Albania 45-50% for two-year, 50% for three-year, and 20% for four-year programmes.

The programmes with a strong WBL component, whether in the form of dual education or internship, are not mandatory for school students. The students can choose between programmes which are only school-based and programmes that follow the dual model or programmes that have an internship component. The schools implement WBL programmes if there are enough interested students and interested employers. Even though they do not have

<sup>1</sup> As part of the Skills for Job -S4J Project (2016–2023) the apprenticeship model was piloted in ten VET schools with 1,422 students of secondary vocational schools (44% of the student population). After the end of the project the model was not implemented.

the status of employees, students receive fees for their work which are provided by the employers or the employers and the government together.

The new legislative framework allowed students to be reimbursed for their work by the employers. The employers also pay for social contributions and health insurance costs, with the exception of Montenegro, where the fees for the first two years of learning are paid by the Ministry of Education.

## 1.2. Management and decision making

In the broadest sense, management may be defined as a way to bring vocational education, including WBL, and the labour market closer together. The general (EU) strategy for the development and implementation of WBL is to transfer responsibility from the relevant ministries to different partner organisations, i.e. the key stakeholders.

The national reports show that there are no major differences between countries in the arrangements for the management of vocational education and WBL. The relevant institutional structures are in place (VET council, qualifications councils, sector councils) and enable communication between social partners and the government authorities and ensure the participation of partners in policy development and the policy implementation on the national level. It is through these structures (bodies) that the social partners influence the decision making, but they do not have the final say in the adoption of decisions, as this is in the hands of the competent ministry.

The right and opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes is just one side of efficient management. The capacity for efficient participation in the decision-making procedures is equally important, and some countries have difficulties ensuring this. In 2015, in Albania the National VET Council was formed, which includes representatives of business associations and trade unions. Seeing that the Council was not functioning well, the Integrated Policy Management Group was formed, which took over some of the Council's functions. On the other hand, the Chamber of Commerce is fragmented according to specific sectors and does not have the mandate to represent all employers or the full capacity to participate in the decision-making processes.

In addition to participation in the joint decision-making procedures, the role of social partners in policy development and WBL implementation is additionally strengthened in some countries through the mechanism for the delegation of certain responsibilities in the WBL implementation.

According to the Law on Dual Education, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia is the key partner in the implementation of dual education and is responsible for the accreditation of employers and training and licensing of practical education instructors.

In order to ensure the quality of decision making and implement the adopted decisions, different independent agencies were formed which have different titles in different national contexts (VET Centre, Qualifications Agency, Quality Assurance Agency, Centre for Educational Services, etc.). These agencies are not part of the organisational scheme of the ministry competent for education, even though they closely cooperate with the ministry, and have no say in the

decision-making process. Their function is to support decision makers, primarily by giving opinions and developing appropriate proposals for the most important aspects of VET (national qualifications framework, occupational standards, qualification standards and education programmes, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation of achievements, etc.).

The institutionalisation of partnership and the development of a relevant regulatory framework may be treated as an indicator of the general consensus that partnership is a necessary precondition for the development of a relevant framework for a proactive and labour market-based VET policy. It is clear that this is no simple feat. Considering that partnership and transfer of responsibility are significant innovations in education management, the national rapporteurs point at the existence of a not-so-small gap between that which was planned, considered necessary, or even stipulated by the law, and the actual state of affairs.

### 1.3. Connecting schools, employers, and students

The connecting of schools, employers, and students is the crucial issue in the WBL implementation and in this sense, there is a largely harmonised practice in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The school is the main initiator and organiser of cooperation with employers. In Montenegro and Serbia there is a relatively standardised procedure for the selection of employers, i.e. for the connecting of schools with employers, which entails the accreditation of employers for participation in the realisation of education programmes that follow the dual model. In Albania, the selection of companies is entirely in the hands of schools or the individual providers, which means that there are no standardised methods of cooperation or procedures for the accreditation of employers. However, in all countries the employers define the number of students they can admit for work and practical learning, thus decisively impacting the general scope of WBL.

The schools also play a key role in the selection and placement of students at the employers. In all cases, specific mechanisms were developed for the placement of students in practical education at the employer.

In Montenegro, the coordinator of practical education and the teacher of practical lessons are responsible for contacts with employers and the placement of students at the employer.

In Albania, each provider forms a special Development Unit which is responsible for the connections with the employer and the placement of students at the employer. The coordinator for business relations must identify and contact employers and place students in companies.

In Serbia, each school has a career guidance and counselling team which is responsible for the placement of students at the employer. After the enrolment of students in schools, the school team organises meetings of students with employers in which the employers introduce themselves to students and vice versa. After that the students and employers make their preference lists. The school team aligns the choices of employers and students and makes the final placement of students at the employer.

The mutual relationship between the school and the employers is regulated by contracts which are rather generic. The school has the opportunity to conclude a contract with several employers, whereas the student normally concludes a contract with just one employer. The complexity of the qualification standards and/or education programmes in some education fields resulted in the practice of student exchange between several employers.

#### 1.4. Development of education programmes

Starting from the moment of development and establishing of national qualifications frameworks, the qualification standards have served as the basis for the development of VET programmes. The national qualification frameworks accepted the definition of qualifications from the European Qualifications Framework<sup>2</sup>, which describes the qualifications in learning outcomes as competences, knowledge, skills, and responsibilities.

The proposal for qualification standards, based on the information from the labour market, is developed by specialised agencies<sup>3</sup> in cooperation with the labour market representatives, usually sector councils<sup>4</sup>, chambers of commerce or branch associations, such as the Hotel and Restaurants Association in Albania, or individual employers.

These agencies have a broad network of external associates in every country, which participate in the development of the framework programme (mostly experienced teachers) based on the qualification standard. The programmes are revised after 2-3 years (Albania) or after 5 years (Montenegro and Serbia). The programmes have a WBL component with the defined duration, method of learning and assessment.

The framework programmes are structurally almost identical and normally include: (1) goals and outcomes of the programme (2) enrolment requirements, (3) teaching plan (table of subjects and modules and hours per week and per year), (4) instructions on the teaching process, (5) instructions on assessment and examinations, (6) data on the certificate issued at the end of the programme, and (8) lists of mandatory and elective subjects/modules. The method for the development of programmes has almost been unified in terms of procedure. The framework programme is adopted by the minister competent for education, at the proposal of the national advisory body.

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<sup>2</sup> Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

<sup>3</sup> In Albania - National Agency of Vocational Education and Training and Qualifications, in Montenegro – VET Centre, in Serbia – Qualifications Agency.

<sup>4</sup> In all three countries, sector councils have a responsibility to identify the sector needs for qualifications, propose new and revise the existing qualifications and cooperate with specialised agencies in the development of proposals for occupational standards and qualification standards.

## 1.5. Programme implementation

The key instrument for the implementation of practical learning at the employer is the plan (calendar) of learning at the employer. These plans are prepared by teachers of practical lessons from the school and the instructors/mentors of practical education from companies. The national reports still show a low level of engagement of instructors/mentors in this process.

The direct implementation is adapted to the specifics of each sector (the seasonal character of some sectors such as tourism and construction, for example) and the technological and organisational schemes of individual employers. Learning is organised as the continuous rotation of learning in school or at the employer, or through blocks of lessons. For example, in the final year of education, teaching is organised according to the following scheme: 9 weeks of learning in school, 7 weeks of practical learning/working at the employer, two weeks of preparation for the final assessment.

The qualification-based teaching plans and programmes contain a broad range of outcomes and learning areas, which presents the employers, especially the smaller ones, with a challenge in their realisation. Experience shows that even in the most developed economies, one company cannot cover more than 60% of learning outcomes from the programme. The “solution” which is often applied is for the students to return to school in order to acquire the missing outcomes. A more productive solution that some countries apply (Serbia) is to establish an alliance of companies or regional training centres which are able to fully realise programmes from certain areas which makes possible the acquiring of those outcomes that individual employers cannot realise on their own.

The preparation of students for learning at the employer is a special challenge for all countries. The regulatory framework does not envisage the preparation of students for work at the employer, even though most schools find this necessary. The schools insist on preparing students for work at the employer in schools and to only gradually introduce practical work.

The basic obstacle identified for the implementation is the lack of pedagogical skills of the instructors/mentors and the lack of minimum standards for the organisation of learning at the employer.

## 1.6. Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation of the VET system and therefore the WBL system on the national level, in addition to the ministry competent for education, is implemented by different authorities and organisations, such as the Coordination Body for the Monitoring of Dual Education in Serbia and Montenegro or the National Agency for VET and Qualifications in Albania. No mechanisms have been introduced to monitor the efficiency and effects of WBL by the representatives of the labour market. The basic methods of monitoring and evaluation are occasional questionnaires, qualitative surveys and analyses. The national rapporteurs have noticed that the occasional surveys are the most useful tool to perceive different aspects of VET and the effects of WBL. The dominant orientation in the monitoring and evaluation in Serbia and Montenegro is the evaluation of individual implementation parameters (number of schools and employers, number of teachers and students, number of signed contracts, manner of placement of students at the employer, student achievements, application of occupational health and safety measures,

student or employer dropout, etc.). In Albania, there is a system in place for the monitoring of graduates, with special focus on the identification of their movement towards the labour market or further education.

The monitoring and evaluation of student achievements is done jointly by the school and employer, and/or the company instructor/mentor. For the school representatives, the monitoring boils down to occasional visits to companies and interviews with instructors/mentors about the organisation of practical learning and the achievements and behaviour of students. In order to improve the efficiency of monitoring, standardised forms were developed for instructors to be able to record the student attendance at practical learning as well as forms for the monitoring of the execution of work assignments. The most efficient instrument to monitor student achievement, according to the national reports, is the practice journal kept by the student, along with their personal portfolio. The national rapporteurs have also noticed that the usage of these instruments is not common practice. They see monitoring as a “bureaucratic process” and are not inclined to apply it.

The instructors/mentors participate in the periodical and final assessments of student achievements. Their role is to provide information and the opinion on the achievements of individual students. Seeing that there are no criteria or standards for the assessment of practical achievements, the participation of instructors in assessment is informal. One exception are the larger employers with significant experience in the implementation of WBL who develop their own criteria and the relevant assessment forms which are adapted to their scope of work and learning outcomes they are supposed to achieve.

## 1.7. Quality assurance

In the broadest sense, quality assurance regards the defining of the framework conditions for the performance of all stakeholders in the field of education. Therefore, quality assurance is a cross-sectional task whose manifestations are monitored on the level of the system (legislative framework, partnership establishing schemes, qualification standards, competent bodies, national curriculum and monitoring, certification) and on the level of schools or providers (teachers, procedures and criteria for assessment, counselling and guidance, assessment of achievement, final examination, local partnership, etc). The basic instrument of quality assurance is the relevant regulatory framework. In all three countries, the laws on VET or dual education set forth a general framework for quality assurance whereas the bylaws specify the procedures for implementation. In addition to the regulatory framework, the basic quality assurance mechanisms include provider accreditation, their external evaluation and self-evaluation, and inspection oversight.

In the field of WBL, quality assurance has two key manifestations:

- standards (criteria) for employer participation in practical learning and
- standards (criteria) for instructors/mentors of practical learning at the employer.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia has established a robust accreditation system for employers participating in dual education, as well as the system of licencing practical education instructors, which includes pedagogical skills training. In Serbia and Montenegro there is a rather “soft” system for the accreditation of employers participating in the realisation of dual education, but there are no standards for instructors, except for the training in basic

pedagogical skills. The national report for Montenegro indicates a lack of transparency in the requirements for the participation of employers in dual education. In Albania there are no clearly determined standards for companies and mentors who realise internship programmes, and the learning takes place rather informally and without a clear structure.

## 2. CONCLUSIONS

In following the European guidelines (Riga Conclusions), Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia have promoted WBL as their political priority and started its implementation through VET programmes.

The overview of general characteristics shows that there are many similarities between countries but that the general goals and joint (EU) policy in VET and WBL are implemented in line with the national contexts, existing education systems, and the current capacities of each country.

A comprehensive regulatory framework was adopted and it defines the guiding principles and structure of VET and WBL's place therein, as well as the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. The necessary institutional structures have been formed for the inclusion of social partners in the processes of management and implementation.

The regulatory framework has established two channels for the influence of the labour market representatives on the policy and implementation of WBL. Through membership in the national collective advisory bodies, they have the opportunity to influence the most important elements of the education system (qualification standards, occupational standards, curricula, conceptualisation of counselling and guidance, and final exams). The other channel, used much more rarely, is the taking of direct responsibility for certain aspects of the WBL implementation, such as employer accreditation and licensing of instructors.

The new regulatory framework changed the responsibility roles of the traditional stakeholders, but their full functionality in the newly created management framework has not yet been ensured. The basic reason for this gap and inconsistency is twofold: a) insufficient capacity of employer associations to take full responsibility for the planning and development of education, and b) strong influence of the government i.e. the ministry competent for education on the creation of the overall WBL management framework and its implementation, and on all processes and decision-making outcomes.

In the domain of direct implementation, schools and employers have received a new range of responsibilities which entail the patterns of intensive cooperation so as to ensure efficient and high-quality learning. For most employers, the organisation of systemic learning is a new and unknown function, and the initiative for its organisation mostly comes from schools.

The employer's ability to realise all programme learning outcomes is limited by the character of their activities and the established technological and organisational schemes. The dominant strategy for the acquiring of learning outcomes that the employer cannot provide is the "return of students to school". However, this is just a formal, and not a real or efficient solution. It is not realistic to expect that a school may do that which the employer cannot. The idea about the alliance of companies and regional training centres is a productive, though more complicated

solution, because it requires a high level of coordination between companies and schools and has significant implementation costs.

The placement of students at the employer and the relationship between the school and the employer and between the student and the employer is regulated by contracts that set forth the mutual obligations and responsibilities, in particular the issue of safety and security of students at work.

There is an obvious lack of the minimum standards for the realisation of learning at the employer, monitoring and evaluation of student achievements, establishing of quality, especially standards for instructors.

The basic consequences of the lack of standards are significant variations in the WBL implementation, which leads to significant variations in the quality (unevenness) of the acquired competences on the national level.

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the overview of the national reports and their synthesis, the following general recommendations were made for the development and improvement of WBL in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia:

- ensure through the legislative and strategic frameworks that the systemic cooperation of all key stakeholders becomes the basic principle for the development and improvement of VET, especially WBL, and that the representative bodies and individual actors on the labour market become equal partners in the management and implementation of VET;
- transform the traditional management model with the leading role of the government and the ministry competent for education into a model of equal management opportunities;
- improve partnership with the representative associations of employers, based on the taking of specific responsibilities and tasks in the WBL implementation (accreditation of employers and licensing of instructors, participation in the assessment of final student achievements), which includes the building of capacities for performance;
- establish systemic monitoring and evaluation of the practical education at the employer, especially the monitoring and evaluation of employment, which would be implemented by the employer associations;
- establish national quality standards for the implementation, monitoring, evaluation and assessment focusing on the standards for the accreditation of employers and instructors in companies, in order to overcome the existing unevenness in the implementation of WBL (which implies an unevenness in the acquired qualifications); these are minimum standards which should not demotivate employers from taking full participation in the WBL implementation;
- create a system of financial and non-financial incentives for the building of capacities of schools and other providers for the implementation of WBL, including specific training for instructors and teachers;
- increase the share of practical education in those four-year education programmes which are perceived by both the employers and students as essentially general

education programme, which do not aim to generate efficient and productive labour force for the labour market, but to allow a path towards higher education;

- establish sector funds for financial support to schools and employers which participate in the WBL implementation, particularly for those schools and employers which have the opportunity to develop and implement innovative education programmes;
- increase school autonomy in the establishing of public-private partnerships and business relationships with employers in order to reduce the financial dependence of schools on public funds and create closeness with market players and a certain framework for the WBL realisation;
- improve the existing VET reform model which was implemented through development projects supported by the EU or individual EU countries, by encouraging relevant stakeholders to participate in international initiatives such as the European Alliance for Apprenticeship or programmes such as ERASMUS+ or by exchanging experiences with countries that face the same challenges.

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