IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING THE TRAINERS IN WORK-BASED LEARNING - THE BALTIC CONTEXT

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Abstract. Work-Based Learning (WBL) is increasingly becoming part of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems across Europe. A crucial element for successful implementation of WBL approaches is the existence of competent WBL trainers in VET institutions and companies. This is still a challenge requiring also focused research to support policy developments.

The aim of the paper here is two-folded; it aims to analyse the background of wider socio-economic and educational-employment aspects behind the challenges of WBL, and secondly, to present research challenges within an ongoing European Union Erasmus+ KA 3 programme project called "TTT4WBL". This project is focusing on development of training of WBL trainers through an innovative 'tandem training' methodology piloted in the Baltic context and considered as a potentially contributing factor to increase competitiveness of the developed labour force. The purpose of the experimentation implemented in TTT4WVBL project within 2017-2020 is to develop and test a professional development model in which tutors from VET schools and enterprises are trained together.

The research related to the experimentation is investigating how the WBL tutors participating in joint training develop their competences related to WBL. The research is still in progress. In this paper, we present the pilot phase results, focusing on how WBL tutors assessed their expertise related to WBL prior to their training. The results are being seen as relevant for subsequent studies in later stages of the project implementation.

The conclusions from the research have a theoretical value regarding the development of joint methodological approaches against varied national VET policy contexts. The practical value of the study refers to the recommendations for education policy makers to improve the quality of training of trainers for work-based learning.

Key words: *work-based learning, training of trainers, competitive labour force*

JEL code: I25; I28; O15; L38

Introduction

Work-Based Learning (WBL) is increasingly promoted in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems across Europe and as a part of European youth and employment policies (EC 2013). This is due to seeing work itself as changing but also recognising workplaces as learning environments besides VET institutions and which together can provide the learner diverse opportunities for learning (Mikkonen et al 2017). WBL is nowadays perceived not only as benefitting individual students' learning but also improving more widely the employability of young people through national VET systems and furthermore, as a precondition for developing competitive labour force (Cedefop 2016). This can be interpreted from the many reports describing implementation of WBL in different countries (e.g. EC 2013, 2015). Despite the widely shared willingness to promote WBL in VET, Mikkonen et al (2017) found out in their recent international literature review that there is quite much empirical research done in WBL as such. However, very little of the research done focuses on the question of guiding VET students at workplaces, e.g. what kind of practices are used in

guidance of WBL and who provides the guidance. Consequently, this is followed by a question regarding the competence of trainers and their training also requiring research to support the European level policy developments on WBL in VET.

The research described here aims to study training of trainers for work-based learning through an experimentation in an ongoing European Union Erasmus+ Key Action 3 project "TTT4WBL. It reaches to develop a joint WBL training model to be used in all three Baltic countries. Based on country specific and joint experiences of the Baltic Countries, there is hypothesis with underlying assumptions that a joint training of VET and workplace tutors, called WBL tutors, has many benefits in comparison to separate trainings for VET and workplace tutors. The proposed tandem training approach represents new type of curriculum for professional development of WBL tutors and is aiming at improving pedagogical skills of tutors. The experimentation in TTT4 WBL project will cover all the Baltic countries - Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania but through reflecting against the background of wider socio-economic and educational-employment aspects, it is hoped to contribute further to the European level discussions on WBL developments.

The research is in line with the ideas of the TTT4WBL project designers to promote development of WBL processes and practices. It tries to ensure that the views of 'actors' within their systems are placed at the forefront of discussions. The attached figure 1 displays the research purpose and the process through which the impact of the joint WBL tutor trainings is investigated.

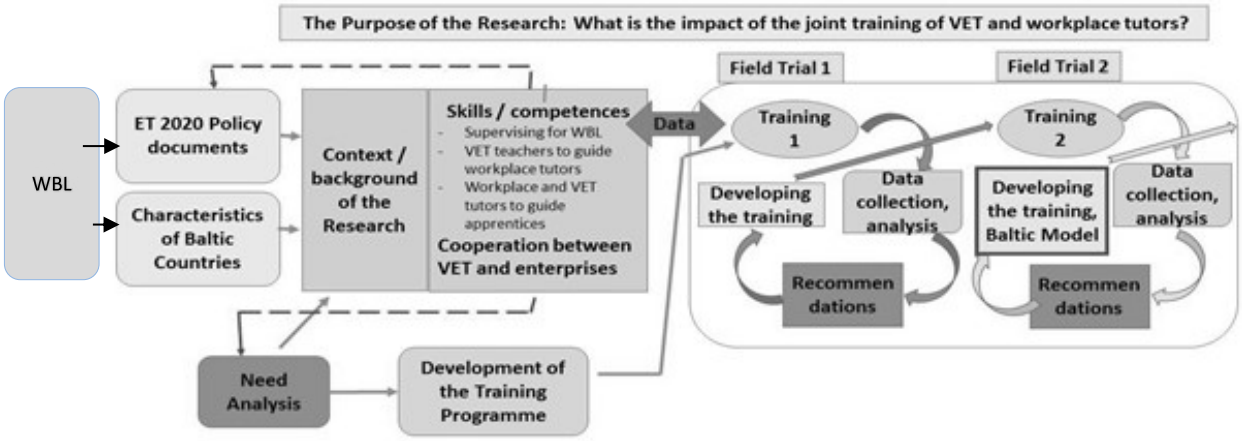

Figure 1: The Research Approach (Kaikkonen, L. Maunonen-Eskelinen, I, & Pakkala, A., 2017)

The starting point taken from the project designers (the hypotheses) would easily have led to consider the classic research design with test and control groups. However, the project was only planned to include the joint trainings instead of having both joint trainings for some WBL tutors as test groups and separate trainings for some other tutors as control group.

For this reason, the research design was formulated as so-called panel design. Like the classic design, the panel design provides repeated observations on a set of variables but it does not demand the set of a control group. A panel study is defined as a study that collects information on the same individuals or sample of persons (a panel) at different points in time aiming to study change over time. So being, the first data collection is implemented before the intervention. The following data collection(s) is done after the intervention, which is further followed with an analysis of how big a change happened in the variable in question. (http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0108.xml;http://methods.sagepub.com/methods-map/panel-studies; http://www.fsd.uta.fi/menetelmaopetus/tutkimus/asetelma.html. Retrieved19.09.2017.)

The challenge with panel design is that because there are not any control groups, the researcher cannot, however, be sure whether the change happened because of the intervention, or due to some other factor. Most panel studies are designed for quantitative analysis and use structured survey data. However, panel studies may also use qualitative methods for the data collection and analysis.

The main research methods used in the pilot phase of the study described here are desk research and quantitative and qualitative analysis of the empirical data of the surveys from the three Baltic countries' stakeholders. The data is collected from VET school tutors and workplace tutors, i.e. the WBL tutors, with online questionnaires at the beginning of their WBL tutor training. A second data collection will take place in six months after their training. All in all the number of WBL tutors in the entire research will be 800 but in the pilot phase described in this paper, the amount of them was 180 of which 164 responded to the questionnaire. Data was also collected from the 15 WBL trainers through group interviews. Later on, in the second phase of the experimentation and the research, data besides WBL tutors will also be collected from VET students, VET school and company managers through questionnaires in order to get other point of views on WBL development and the work of WBL tutors.

Theoretical background

In their current review of apprenticeship in Germany, England and Finland, Rintala et al (2017) perceive that besides willingness to increase WBL within European employment policies there also seems to be a willingness to standardise the approaches in WBL. They state however, that it is almost impossible to transfer the good practices from a country to another because the education systems in different countries follow such diverse national and cultural logics based on different historical developments in national sociopolitical, economic and educational contexts. In their review, they bring forth that comparison of VET systems – and e.g. WBL as part of it – demands to see relations, responsibilities and societal structures between the state, labour market and economy. Furthermore, it is important to recognise how the roles of educational organisations, enterprises, interest groups and social partners are seen in responding to demand and supply of qualifications in the educational markets. (Rintala, Nokelainen & Pylväs, 2017.)

Consequently, in the developments of WBL there are also diverse ways of seeing it in regards to organising WBL and to responsibilities of its arrangements. On the one hand, WBL is considered as a way to engage young people into their learning in enterprises where they can learn what is relevant, and the arrangements of it is considered to be as the responsibility and control of enterprises. On the other hand, it is considered that young people should learn the skills needed in working-life firstly in educational institutions in order to be professionally competent when entering to working-life. In practice, there occurs diverse approaches mixing differently these two lines. Work-based learning can be seen as a powerful driver for workplace skills and productivity engaging both the learner and the companies (Kis 2016).

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) defines Work-Based Learning as an intended and structured learning or training that has direct relevance to the current or future tasks of the learner. Moreover, WBL is considered as a training taking place in a work-based context like in the workplace, in settings simulating the workplace or outside the workplace, but with specific learning tasks that must be directly applied in the workplace and reflected upon afterwards (Cedefop, 2015 b). When talking about 'apprenticeship' within the approach of WBL, it applies to training programmes, in which learners have the status of employees and are paid for their work and which normally feature a contractual relationship between the learner with the training enterprise (Cedefop, 2016).

Having in mind this broad definition it is important to recognise that VET student learning takes place in two different learning environments, that of the workplace and educational organisation, and is challenging them both. This sets

demands on how learning at workplaces is pedagogically lead. According to Mikkonen et al (2017) in workplaces pedagogical practices are various and the concepts when discussed in relation to them are even incoherent. Furthermore, on workplaces the actual guidance is quite often disturbed by weakly defined responsibilities and time resources available for guidance. (Mikkonen et al 2017.) Irjala (2017) continues saying that in different countries the role and competence of WBL tutors overall is seen and organised differently. It is also emphasised that instead of seeing WBL as a process of the learner it could be constituted as learning process of the entire work community, if so enabled through good leadership and management in the company (Irjala 2017; Kis 2016; Mikkonen et al, 2017; Norontaus 2016).

Yet, irrespective the emphasis on who benefits from WBL, there seems to be a commonly shared agreement that young learners need competent guidance in their professional learning. At the European level, this agreement was raised in 2015 as the medium term policy document on VET - the Riga Conclusions (2015) which emphasises promotion of WBL in all its forms and furthermore, promotes the introduction of systemic approaches for training of VET teachers and trainers both in school and work-based settings. ET2020 Working group on VET linked these objectives with guiding principles on i) attractiveness of apprenticeships by raising the quality of VET teacher, ii) support the continuous professional development of in-company trainers, iii) systematic cooperation between VET schools and companies and, iv) support for SMEs. (EC 2015) The issue of competent trainers and their training remains a challenge requiring also focused research to support the European level policy developments

Research results and discussion

The research within the TTT4WBL project is only just started with the pilot phase trials. The WBL-tutors will be requested to assess again in six months after their training their skills as WBL tutors. So only then, it will be possible to see if they experience to have developed themselves. Accordingly, at this point it is not yet possibly to say anything but describe the initial data from the start of the pilot phase of the research and these initial results do not yet allow to draw any conclusions about the feasibility of the proposed 'tandem training'. However, the analysis of the data obtained so far will create a basis for further studies when data from the next piloting phase will be acquired.

The conclusions from the research are expected to have a theoretical value regarding the development of joint methodological approaches against varied national VET policy contexts. The practical value of the study refers to the recommendations for education policy makers to improve the quality of training of trainers for work-based learning.

The present study yields also a wealth of material for further broader research – regarding the development and sharing the Latvian and Baltic (EU regional) approach and experience to policy innovation regarding introduction and implementation of WBL in countries with historically school-based systems. It also provides an example of good practice how resources can be integrated to implement coherent and sustainable policy in compliance with national and EU education and specifically VET priorities.

The characteristics of the target group studied

The empirical data in the pilot phase was received from 164 WBL tutors. Slightly more of them were women (~60%) than men. They represented age groups from 20 to 60 years. Mean age group in Latvia and Lithuania was the group 30-40 years and in Estonia over 50 years.

Table 1

Gender of the respondents

Country / Gender	Lithuania		Latvia		Estonia	
	N	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**
Male	20	38%	30	47%	19	39%
Female	32	62%	34	53%	30	61%

Table 2

Age of the respondents in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia

country / Age in years	Lithuania		Latvia		Estonia	
	N	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**
20 – 30	3	6%	15	23%	7	14%
30 – 40	15	30%	19	30%	11	23%
40 – 50	17	33%	13	20%	10	20%
> 50	16	31%	17	27%	21	43%

The distribution of VET and workplace tutors was not even across the three Baltic countries, but the overall numbers of the involved VET and workplace tutors was fairly even, 81 workplace tutors and 83 VET tutors. In Latvia and Lithuania, the amount of workplace tutors was approximately 40% and VET tutors 60%. In Estonia the distribution was the other way around, and there were more workplace tutors (70%) in relation to the amount of 30% of VET tutors. The WBL tutors represented several different professional fields.

Table 3

Distribution of VET and workplace tutors per each Baltic country (N =164)

Country / Tutors' workplace	Lithuania		Latvia		Estonia		All
	N	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**	**Total**
VET tutors	29	58%	39	60%	15	31%	83
Workplace tutors	21	42%	26	40%	34	69%	81
N altogether /country	50		65		49		164

The expertise in various aspects of students' guidance in WBL

The WBL-tutors were asked to assess their own expertise in four diverse aspects of work-based learning, that of their expertise in planning, guiding and assessing of WBL besides in developing WBL in cooperation with VET school or workplace. Of these four entities sums of variables were produced. The results are described in figure 2.

Differences between countries and between workplace and VET tutors in one country were surprisingly small in regard to these four diverse aspects related to WBL. In average the respondents assessed their expertise to be good.

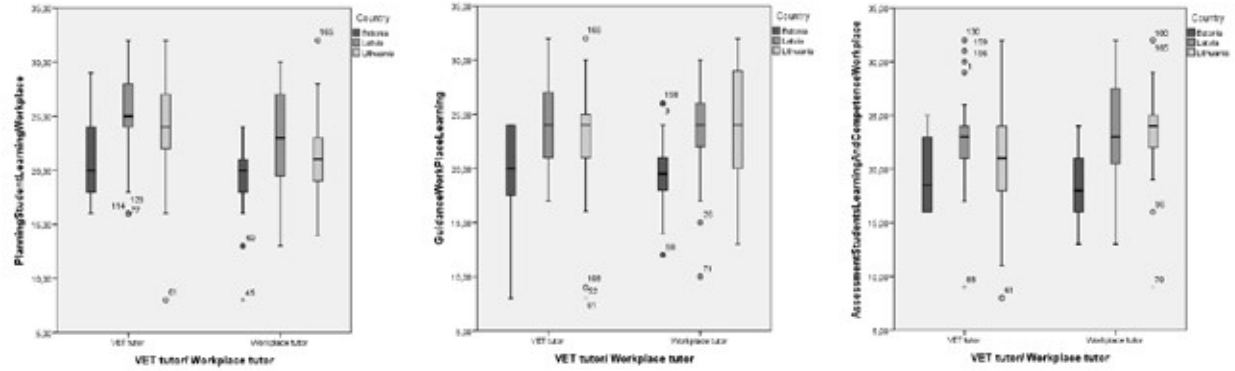

Figure 2. Baltic WBL tutors' self-assessment of their skills in planning, guiding and assessing WBL

Concerning their skills in developing cooperation between VET schools and workplaces the WBL tutors considered their expertise to be only satisfactory (see figure 3). However, the differences were not significant.

All in all, it can be said that Estonians assessed themselves to be weaker in all elements than the other country representatives. E.g concerning the expertise in Developing cooperation between VET schools and enterprises ¾ of the WBL tutors among Estonian best tutors considered them to be at the same level than the weakest ¼ fourth in Latvia. The tendency was similar in all assessment areas. However, none of the background factors explained this.

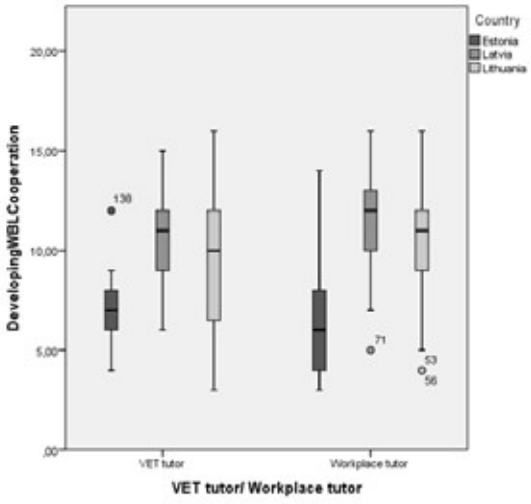

Figure 3: Baltic WBL tutors assessment of their own expertise in Developing WBL Cooperation between schools and enterprises

Experiences of having workplace and VET school tutors in the same group

Within the questionnaire provided the WBL tutors also gave some open feedback about the tandem training. They were saying that it was good to have workplace and VET school tutors in the same group as it gave them the possibility to build connections, to discuss and share experiences and see the topics from another point of view. Also the lead trainers in each Baltic country were fairly assured on this. They also considered tandem groups to be good but on the other hand self-assessed that they still need to develop the training approach to get the real best out of the joint group.

The topics considered important varied slightly from country to country. Estonian WBL tutors, most of them from workplaces, were interested in how to give feedback to students during their WBL learning periods but for this they told to be lacking information on the professional qualification standards. According to Lithuanian trainers their WBL tutors wanted to focus on administrative issues in order to understand the framework of WBL.

Both in Latvia and Estonia there have been, or are other projects going on related to the WBL or development of overall VET. Trainers felt that schools are under pressure. There is a lot going on in VET, and major changes in the VET system are pushed forward. Consequently, VET school staff have to perform in parallel in many challenging areas. In Estonia, this is one of the reasons why they have involved more workplace tutors, as VET schools have already received some trainings in previous or in other ongoing projects.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

The empirical data collection and analysis was based on prior desk research to ensure a sound theoretical background for the study. The desk research performed indicates that:

1. developing profession skills in vocational education during practical placements is in the focus of academic research (Pang, 2015)
2. This refers also to informal learning in workplace (Eraut, 2004).
3. The interrelation between the learning culture and learning performance is being stressed (Claeys, 2015).
4. In this regards the role of legislators, public administrators, educators and employers for developing successful collaborative teaching and learning in the workplace should not be underestimated (Tanggaard, 2005).
5. Moving from co-operation to networking in work-based learning is seen as an advantage and a step forward in addressing the societal demands (Eicker & Hartmann, 2002).
6. Problem based learning is considered as an advantage for better preparation of students for life and business (Hatisaru & Kücüktura, 2009).
7. The advantages of collaborative work in various learning settings is being analysed (Smith et al, 2010).
8. Work-based learning is being seen as bringing new pedagogical principles to the fore (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2008).
9. Pedagogical beliefs and experience in work-based learning including implications for teachers' belief orientations are stressed by British researchers (Abukari, 2014).
10. Supervision of work–based learning is of major importance (Collin and Valleala, 2005).
11. Entrepreneurship oriented education is presented as a challenge to be addressed by teachers and learners (Ostenk, 2003).

12. A major question is: learning to work and learning to learn (McCormack, et al, 2010). Issues on organization of practical placements, including requirements for teachers in different countries vary (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005).
13. Guidance by others, situations, and artefacts are central to learning through work, whereas the quality of learning through these planes of activities and guidance is ultimately premised on the workplace's participatory practices (Billet, 2002).

The research within the TTT4WBL project is only just started with the pilot phase trials. Accordingly, at this point it is not yet possibly to say anything but describe the initial data from the start of the pilot phase of the research, and these initial results do not yet allow to draw any conclusions about the feasibility of the benefits of the proposed 'tandem training' in the future. However, the results of the first piloting phase will serve as a basis for subsequent analysis when the results of the second stage of the research will be obtained. This will enable the research team to observe and analyse the dynamics of the opinions of the involved stakeholders in timeline – as proposed by the panel design of the research described above.

The conclusions from the overall research are however, expected to have a theoretical value regarding the development of joint methodological approaches against varied national VET policy contexts. The practical value of the study refers to the recommendations for education policy makers to improve the quality of training of trainers for work-based learning. Further research perspective involves obtaining and analysing the data from subsequent pahses in the TTT4WBL project lifecycle among the involved stakeholders in all the three Baltic countries. Based on the analysis a common Baltic competence profile of the tutors in work-based learning might be developed.

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