

WORK BASED LEARNING PROGRAMMES IN LATVIA

Liene Golca¹, Mg.soc.sc; Feliciana Rajevska², Dr.pol.sc.

^{1,2} Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, HESPI

Abstract. Work based learning (WBL) is referred to as a high-level education and employment policy priority in the European Union (EU), including Latvia. In the context of Latvia, WBL means that a student of a vocational school during the programme of WBL acquires theory and practice of vocational content of education programme in an education institution and in a company according to the individual plan of the appropriate education programme. WBL as an educational approach in vocational education in Latvia was launched in 2013 in the form of pilot projects, in 2015 it was included in the regulations as a form of education acquisition, and in summer 2016 it was adopted by the regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers. The goal of the article is to investigate the complicated road to the introduction of WBL in Latvia. Therefore, the tasks include a detailed analysis of the experience of stakeholders in WBL implementation process, mainly focusing on awareness-raising and communication experience of WBL implementers. The article is based on the analysis of legislative acts, reports from the ministries and interviews with stakeholders (10 interviews were conducted). Results show that in WBL pilot stage there has been a quite varied school awareness and interpretation of what WBL is and how to implement it within the existing legislative framework- this has contributed to the emergence of different experiences. Furthermore, the lack of experience in the implementation of the WBL approach and the school competition are some of the reasons influencing the communication among schools.

Key words: work based learning, vocational education, policy implementation.

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Introduction

"To create one of the best education systems in the EU and to become one of the leaders in adult education in terms of access and use", such objective has been defined in the sustainable development strategy "Latvia 2030", which is hierarchically the highest long-term development planning document in Latvia (Saeima, 2010). Also current government's priorities include an ambitious goal: "The system of education in Latvia should provide school-leavers with modern skills and competencies in high added value national economy and a successful life in a knowledge-based society" (Declaration of the Intended..., 2016). According to the decision of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) in 2013, six vocational educational institutions in Latvia (Ventspils Technical College, Riga State Technical School, Valmiera Vocational School, Ogres Technical College, Jelgava Technical College, Jelgava Crafts Secondary School) started pilot projects of work based learning (MES, 2014). The aim of these pilot projects was to define how WBL might look in Latvia (Liepina, 2013.). The MES sets a long-term objective to implement WBL approach at a system level (as

one of the approaches), in parallel promoting the change of thinking (paradigms) for the stakeholders involved in the implementation of vocational education, including the public administration level (MES,2014). Although the first WBL pilot projects were implemented in 2013, the Cabinet Regulation on how to implement WBL was adopted only in 2016.

The implementation process of WBL in Latvia is followed also by EU institutions, which provide recommendations regarding the WBL implementation process and each year analyse how the Member State has implemented the specific recommendations. Concerning WBL, its development since 2014 has been assessed as having some progress, which means that the Member State has announced or adopted measures to address the country specific recommendation. These measures are promising, but not all of them have been implemented yet and the implementation is not certain in all cases. The reports indicated that while implementing WBL in Latvia, there was a limited number of large enterprises, and finding ways of involving them in WBL provision was needed (European Commission 2014). The quality of WBL and apprenticeship type schemes, especially in

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

technology and engineering remains a challenge. It will also need to finalise the secondary legislation on work based learning and formalised involvement of sectorial councils. Motivating companies to provide quality WBL placements remains problematic (European Commission, 2015). A clear and consistent legislative framework is not in place. The main characteristics of work based learning are not specified, and further uncertainties remain, especially in relation to the pay and status of the student as well as organisational aspects. Motivating companies to provide quality WBL and practical training placements is problematic. The government has analysed the possible options (lower minimum wages for apprentices, tax reliefs, stipends) to provide financial support for employers taking on an apprentice or a trainee, but decisions have not been made yet (European Commission, 2016).

It can be concluded that WBL policy implementation is still in its initial stage. Thus, monitoring and assessment is important in order to follow the policy development and to summarize the experience on its quality. Thereby, the goal of the article is to investigate the complicated road to the introduction of work based learning in Latvia. The tasks include a detailed analysis of steps towards introduction of WBL realized by stakeholders. It should be noted that the article novelty lies in the fact that it mainly reveals the policy implementers' thoughts and experiences.

The article is based on the analysis of legislative acts, reports from the ministries and interviews with the representatives of vocational schools, representatives of the companies and organizations which were involved in WBL policy planning and implementation. During the research, there were vocational education institutions and companies who were ready to share their experience and information, but did not want their name to be mentioned in the research. Therefore, all the organizations

interviewed were coded, for example, "School A" or "Company A" etc.

Work based learning – the term and its content

European Training Foundation (ETF) has made an in-depth examination of the literature on WBL. During the literature studies, they have found that there is no single definition of what WBL entails. Besides that, the term WBL cannot be clearly distinguished from other terms used to refer to practice-based learning in a work context; several close (and interchangeable) synonyms are found in the literature, including employment-based learning, on-the-job training, enterprise-based learning and, in some contexts, workplace learning. The boundaries between these different forms of learning are often blurred and the level of regulation and the extent to which they include a theoretical component varies.

ETF concluded in their study that there are narrow and broad definitions of WBL. Some definitions say that WBL is learning that takes place in a real working environment through participation in the work process, irrespective of whether the learners are young people, students, unemployed people or employees, or whether they are paid or unpaid. Some definitions go further and also encompass some forms of classroom-based learning (WBL learning: benefits and obstacles simulations, virtual firms) or see WBL as a component of a broader learning programme that also includes theoretical lessons and classroom learning (ETF, 2013). The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) defines WBL as "acquisition of knowledge and skills through carrying out – and reflecting on – tasks in a vocational context, either at the workplace (such as alterance training) or in a VET (vocational educational training) institution" (CEDEFOP, 2014).

In addition, the European Commission has made a great source called „WBL in Europe –

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

Practices and Policy Pointers". This document is like a policy guidelines illustrated by particular practices from the Member States, which can be used by policymakers and practitioners to introduce or reinforce work based learning elements in vocational education and training. According to this document, WBL is a fundamental aspect of vocational training – it is directly linked to the mission of VET to help learners acquire knowledge, skills and competences which are essential in working life. This document identifies three main models of WBL.

1) Alternance schemes or apprenticeships are typically known in Austria and Germany as the "dual system". This model is based on the integration of companies as providers of training together with VET schools. In parallel, or in "alternating" periods, students acquire general and occupation-related knowledge and often complementary practical skills and key competences in VET schools. Alternance and apprenticeship are characterised by high intensity or frequency of work integration or real-life work situations. Countries with strong apprenticeship systems report very good results in terms of young people's transition to employment (European Commission, 2013), and this is one of the reasons why many other countries want to transfer this kind of WBL model or some elements of it to their educational systems. For example, Germany, in the context of Development Cooperation, has transferred the dual model to other countries for decades, while Austria has only recently started to support the transfer of the dual system as a part of its development cooperation strategy (Langthaler, 2015). Also in the case of Latvia, Declaration of Intent on Latvian and German Cooperation in Vocational Training was signed between the Minister of Education and Science Dombrovskis and the German Ambassador in Latvia A. Quiz in July 2013. It was pointed out that the Declaration

provides a variety of Latvian-German cooperation in the field of vocational training, including counsellors in German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce in Riga who should support the dual education pilot project for three years (Joint Declaration of Intent, 2013).

Professor D. Euler in his research "Germany's dual vocational training system: a model for other countries?" writes that any country wishing to import a foreign system of vocational training must take the existing framework conditions into consideration and implement the dual vocational training in line with the country's own educational, social and economic objectives. Thus, the objective should be to prudently import adapted elements of another country's system, but not an exact copy of it. After analysing the literature and the relevant legal sources, he identified and discussed eleven essential elements of the dual system and made discussion of their potential benefits for other countries and possible approaches to exporting a modified version of the system (Euler, 2013). There is also a research on the transfer of the Austrian dual system of vocational education to transition and developing countries.

This research examines the status quo of the transfer trend as well as key players, funding possibilities, approaches, lessons of experience and challenges. The paper concludes that while current transfer activities respond well to several criteria set out by the Austrian Development Cooperation, a number of open questions remain as to sustainability, systemic effect and economic bias, among others (Langthaler, 2015).

2) Going back to the European Commission models of WBL, next or the second WBL model is school-based vocational educational training, which includes on-the-job training periods in companies. On-the-job training periods typically cover internships, work placements or traineeships that are incorporated as a compulsory or optional

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

element of VET programmes leading to formal qualifications. They can be of varying duration, but typically represent less than 50 % of the training programme duration (European Commission, 2013).

- 3) The third WBL model is integrated in a school-based programme, through on-site labs, workshops, kitchens, restaurants, junior or practice firms, simulations or real business/industry project assignments.

Many countries in Europe combine these three general models of WBL. Terminology and definitions vary, and even a single term such as "apprenticeship" may have different connotations and underlying concepts. Clear statistical data on WBL is therefore not easy to locate (European Commission, 2013).

Work based learning- the situation in Latvia- description and analysis

To find out the experience of Latvia in WBL implementation, 10 interviews with stakeholders were conducted. As already mentioned, WBL started in Latvia with the help of pilot projects. According to the literature, pilot projects are mainly used to introduce or test new approaches, ideas or technologies. They are used in the context of policies and management to apply and adopt innovation in a real environment, and often they are put in place to ensure policy agenda with knowledge on the concept to be tested. This makes pilot projects as policy tools a perfect platform for many ideas and policies (Vreugdenhil, Frantzeskaki, Taljaard, Rault, Slinger, 2009:1). Pilot projects give knowledge that can be used for improvement of technology or concept, and provide evidence for a specific policy, thus legitimizing the further implementation of this policy (Vreugdenhil, Slinger, 2008:1). In the video published by the MES in 2013, "Implementation of WBL in Latvia's vocational education" the MES State Secretary S. Liepina stated that "the aim of MES is to define how WBL could look like in Latvia" (Liepina, 2013). According to this statement, the pilot

projects introducing work based learning were undertaken not to test a previously developed WBL approach, but to define how it should look like in the Latvian context. Namely, this learning approach and the respective policy was only developing during the implementation of the pilot projects, contrary to what was indicated in the sources that the pilot projects are mainly used "to test a new approach which implemented in the context of pilot projects reveal the improvements needed" (Vreugdenhil, Slinger, 2008:1).

During the interviews, it was essential to find out how the approach practitioners developed an understanding of this teaching approach in order to implement something it first requires to get an understanding of it. According to the School B, "It was in the context of seminars. MES employees, officials had visits abroad, organized a seminar, invited directors, told about this experience; so let's make a pilot project, we should also try to adopt this." (Golca, 2016).

The State Secretary at the MES Liepina indicates that the pilot project will be defined within the framework of this training approach and the resulting policy. However, schools and companies starting the pilot projects were expecting some minimum criteria and principles to implement in these pilot projects and the way to implement them. In the public space, there are no documents – in the form of guidelines, recommendations or other documents – for the process of pilot projects on how this new learning should be carried out in addition to the current regulatory framework. There was no separate legal regulation at that moment regarding the implementation of WBL. When asked whether the MES had set any criteria or standards to be implemented as a minimum requirement within the pilot projects that describe the WBL approach, the representative of the School A pointed out "No, at that time nobody had understanding on how to better implement the dual education, we progressed according to our

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

own understanding." (Golca, 2016); "I already told you I did not know, but I swam with the stream, I said let's do it, I did not know how to implement it." (School D in Golca, 2016). Most part of the schools had to figure out themselves how to implement this, "they tossed us a bone, and schools had to solve this, and the schools tried to implement it according to their competence and possibilities." (School B in Golca, 2016). In interviews, the representatives of the educational institutions pointed out that there was a lack of advice: "No advice comes from them (MES) on how to do it better, how to implement it, there was and there is no conceptual approach to how we should work." (School A in Golca, 2016). In interviews, a reference was made to the lack of clarity in the implementation of the pilot projects: "There is no clear definition, there is no understanding about all this ... no policy perspective where I shall not get involved, I think that there is also a lack of the experience, understanding of what is necessary and required." (Organization A, in Golca, 2016).

In 2015, Ltd. "Survey Centre" published a study WBL for the development of vocational education in Latvia" on the basis of self-assessment questionnaires of educational institutions. One of the conclusions was that" some educational institutions do not separate WBL from the practical internship of students (..) there is a need for a precise definition of WBL process, and on the other hand, interpretative work with both educational institutions and the employers on the essence, conditions and legal aspects of WBL process is necessary. (Survey Centre, 2015:7).

Moreover, during the interviews, the participants pointed to the situation described in the study that there is a diverse understanding among schools, everybody implements it as they understand, one school implements within 1.5 year programme, another in 4 year programme, one uses European Social Fund projects for the

realisation of the pilot project, another uses state funding programme (Golca, 2016), it can also be seen that some schools involved in the pilot projects consider internships to be WBL implementation (School C, A and D in Golca, 2016).

Already in 2012, the representative of Latvian Employers' Confederation (LEC) after her visit to Germany said that she had "heard that the German dual vocational training system is something good and successful and that it should be introduced in Latvia, then all the problems associated with the education of skilled labour would be solved. It is important to understand, so we do not follow a name or a brand, not fully understanding what it is exactly we want to introduce / adopt / upgrade." (Lice, 13.04.2012). In the study of the researchers Hogwood and Gunn, we can read that in order to successfully implement a policy, a full understanding of it among the persons involved is important, as well as the agreement and clear objectives (Hogwood, Gunn, 1984:204). Of the situation described it follows that the understanding on how to implement this learning approach has been problematic, mainly schools themselves have shaped their understanding and respectively their interpretation of the ways to implement this learning within the pilot projects. The development of the understanding was promoted also by exchange visits, which were additionally organized by individual schools with the financial support from companies.

In order to perfectly introduce a policy, one of the aspects is the existence of perfect communication and coordination (Hogwood, Gunn, 1984). During the interviews, the schools were asked a question: "How much do you as schools communicate and consult with each other?" School A describes the existing experience: "We do not consult each other directly, mostly we meet at seminars, conferences where we share our experiences on all of this what happens in Latvia, and we take

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

over some new ideas from colleagues, if you are interested in the idea in a conference, then you approach the presenter and ask him or her." (Golca, 2016). The representative of the school B agrees mentioning the possible cause for the lack of communication – the unhealthy competition among schools that promotes isolation and reduces communication, including on WBL: "A problem that is topical and will be even more crucial is the unhealthy competition among schools, the survival of the school, taking into account that the money follows a student it is a matter of survival, then we keep distance, we are on our own, this is it, we would need to cooperate since we do the same job, but this travelling of young people, the number of students has created such a situation and at that moment we consult the MES." (Golca, 2016). The previous lack of experience is also mentioned as the reason for low communication among schools: "Since we were the ones who began, mostly we consulted with the MES, there was nobody to call, there was simply no such experience." (School B in Golca, 2016). Some interview participants stressed the feeling that educational institutions have been left alone with the policy-making and implementation (School A and B): "This is a problem, yes, a communication problem, because I had an impression at one moment that the school is on its own, if you can make it, you do it." (School B in Golca, 2016).

During the interviews, a question on the communication between educational institutions and companies was also asked. This communication can be evaluated in each case individually, it manifested itself in a different way in each case, there are examples where the communication between the school and the company has been assessed as positive (School A and C). There are cases where the company indicates some problems: "The direct communication with the school is pretty bad, they are confusing the dates, they feel that it does not matter that they have promised

students will be there in the first week, but they come in the second, or they communicate that students will have three days of practice for six months, then they tell us, sorry, we made a mistake - they will have two days for the next six months, if it was not for German- Baltic Chamber of Commerce between us it would be pretty hard to communicate directly with the school." (Company C in Golca, 2016).

It has to be mentioned that there is a large number of stakeholders involved in the implementation process of WBL - most ministries, vocational education institutions, companies, employers' associations etc., a full list of the involved institutions can be found in the MES report (MES, 2014). During the study, it was concluded that the massive number of organizations, as well as their positions impacted (in this case hindered) the adoption of laws and regulations. On 28 January 2016, during the State Secretaries' meeting draft regulations "Procedure for organization and implementation of work based learning" were presented. The State Secretaries' Meeting decided that "MES draft regulations and annotation should be approved by the Ministries of Justice, Finance, Economics, Welfare, Health, Environment and Regional Development, Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, the State Chancellery, Latvian Association of Local Governments, Latvian Free Trade Union Confederation, the Latvian Employers' Confederation, and the agreed project to be submitted to the State Chancellery (Minutes of State Secretaries', 2016). The project of the Cabinet Regulations was approved almost six months later, or on 15 July 2016, following its submission to the State Secretaries' meeting (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016).

According to the literature (Hogwood, Gunn, 1984), any reform or activity to be successfully implemented requires resources – financial, human, knowledge etc. resources. From the interviews it can be concluded that the schools did not receive additional funding in the form of

¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728

pilot projects, not even to cover administrative costs (School A and B in Golca, 2016). According to currently available information, in the framework of the specific supported objective (SSO 8.5.1.) "Increasing the number of qualified vocational education institution students after their participation in WBL or an internship in a company" WBL programme will be supported. Total financing for SAM activities by 2023 is nearly 22 million EUR (of which 18,646,580 euros from the European Social Fund) (Latvian Employers' Confederation 2016). There was a diversity of views in the interviews in relation to this specific funding in the framework of the specific support objective, of which the biggest part of the funds are allocated from the European Social Fund. Entrepreneurs involved in WBL programme implementation assess it positively, because within this SSO entrepreneurs will be able to receive compensation for the participation in WBL. A more cautious view on these financial resources is expressed by the organization involved in WBL policy development and implementation as well as representatives of school A, pointing out that sustainability has to be considered, since this financial support is provided only until 2023 (Golca, 2016).

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1) In WBL pilot stage, there has been a quite varied school interpretation of what work based learning is and how to implement it

within the existing legislative framework; this has contributed to the emergence of different experiences.

- 2) The lack of experience in the implementation of the WBL approach and the school competition are some of the reasons influencing the communication among schools. In order for schools to have a more active daily sharing of experience and jointly find new ideas for the implementation of WBL, the Ministry of Education and Science should be more active in organizing all stakeholders' experience exploration, exchange and further promotion to the general public.
- 3) Although the initial stages of WBL development in Latvia seemed stagnant, in 2016 a lot has been done - implementing rules have been approved, funding is available. The responsible institutions already now should come up with proposals and / or vision on how WBL could be developed after the end of funding available within the specific support objective in 2023.
- 4) There are concerns regarding WBL sustainability. For many stakeholders to be able to agree on the future development of WBL, an interest and opinion agreement mechanism should be developed, as well as greater support for policy development directly from the political level (ministers) is required, not leaving the policy in the hands of public officials

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¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

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¹ Corresponding author. E-mail address: liene.golca@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 28319532

² Corresponding author. E-mail address: Feliciana.Rajevska@va.lv Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences HESPI, Tel.: + 317 29177728