

Development of Strategic Partnerships for Work-Based Learning



Ilze Buligina and Biruta Sloka

Abstract Competitiveness of companies on local and international markets greatly depends on skilled labor force. There is an increased need for well-trained medium level specialists prepared by the vocational education and training (VET) systems. For countries with school-based VET systems tailor made approaches for work-based learning need to be implemented. This requires also new strategic partnerships. In Latvia in 2016 legal regulation on work-based learning was adopted. However, there is little research on the pre-conditions enabling the public administration to implement innovative VET approaches. The purpose of the study is to investigate the opinions of relevant public stakeholders from the education, employment and economic sectors regarding innovation in VET and the feasibility of strategic partnerships in this regard. The methods used: public administrators' survey results analysis in scale of 1–10. For data processing of survey results indicators of descriptive statistics (means and indicators of variability) as well as cross tabulations and multivariate analysis—factor analysis were applied. For countries with school-based systems work-based learning as an innovative form of VET requires partnerships by public stakeholders from various branches. Strategic partnerships beyond the national level might be beneficial, especially among countries with historically similar educational and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords Work-based learning · Innovation · Vocational education and training · Partnerships · Competitive labor force

1 Introduction

Competitiveness of companies on local and international markets greatly depends on skilled labor force. Research indicates that work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes in VET in European countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Austria,

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Denmark greatly contributes to the labor force quality. For countries with school-based systems like Latvia work-based learning is an innovation and specific tailor made approaches for its introduction need to be implemented. This requires also new strategic partnerships involving stakeholders from the education, employment and business environment. In Latvia research on work-based learning has been carried out before 2016 prior to the adoption of legal regulation on systemic approaches at national level. However, there is little research on the pre-conditions that have enabled the Latvian public administration to successfully implement VET reforms concerning work-based learning. As in public policy opinions of various stakeholders are to be taken into consideration when innovative approaches are being introduced at systemic level, these opinions can be viewed as enabling or hindering factors for the success of the reform. Therefore, the present research apart from studying the opinions of public administrators from various sectors as enabling preconditions for the introduction of work-based learning has also broader implications regarding innovation in VET as such. The topicality of research is determined by international trends in vocational education and training. Today the need for the training of a competitive labor force at all levels is a high European Union education and training policy priority. There is a growing focus on VET and work-based learning developments in Europe. In the context of employment and employability new challenges emerge for bringing closer the world of education with the world of work. Due to this there is also an increasing amount of academic research and European Union policy discourse dedicated to innovative approaches in VET. As a result of this initiation, development, testing and implementation new systemic solutions by public administrations require also new forms of governance and formation of new strategic partnerships at local, regional, national, as well as international level to promote employability of the workforce.

The purpose of the study is investigate the opinions of public administrators regarding innovation in VET as a pre-condition for the implementation of work-based learning in Latvia. Tasks for the research: are: (1) Investigation of scientific findings reflected in scientific publications on work-based learning experience in Europe; (2) Analysis of results of public administrators' survey performed by the authors of the paper—regarding the opinions of public administrators on innovation in VET; (3) Drawing conclusions on the relevance of strategic partnerships by various public stakeholders for the implementation of work-based learning as an innovative VET approach for countries with school-based VET systems; (4) Linking national experiences with broader cross-border contexts in relation to strategic partnerships by public administrations.

The principal method used in this study is analysis of public administrators' survey results. In the public administrators' survey various aspects of VET innovation were analyzed in scale of 1–10. For data processing of survey results indicators of descriptive statistics (means and indicators of variability) as well as cross tabulations and multivariate analysis—factor analysis were applied.

2 Theoretical Findings from Research on Work-Based Learning

The organization of vocational education and training in the form of work-based learning is on research agenda for researchers world-wide and various aspects of the process is under profound analysis including team building for practical placement organizations (Brewer et al. 2017). A range of criteria for the analysis of various aspects of work organization and forms of employee learning in different national systems (by comparing 17 countries) of education and training yield valuable information for further developments (Lorenz et al. 2016). Curricula and learning arrangements for work-based training have close attention by several stakeholders, since competitive and internationally recognized education has to be carefully planned (Zitter et al. 2016) and competences in vocational education and training have to be clearly formulated (Biemans et al. 2009). Aspects on [crossing strict boundaries between school and work during apprenticeships](#) are also in the center of attention by academic researchers (Akkerman and Bakker 2012). Studies on [crossing strict boundaries and still maintaining differences between school and industry regarding different forms of boundary-work in Swedish vocational education](#) has been performed and discussed in academic and professional environment (Berner 2010). New approaches in vocational education and training have new tasks and teaching approaches also for educators (De Bruijn and Leeman 2011). Industry—school partnerships are important in various aspects that need attention (Pillay et al. 2014). Various branches of industry have their experience and their specific requirements for work-based training organization and realization (Jee et al. 2017). All involved stakeholders are important with their views regarding the work-based learning organization aspects including views of students (Statham and Scullion 2017). OECD countries pay close attention to the quality of labor and perform academic analysis on different aspects including cultural, political and economic roots of the labor market institutional framework in the OECD and post-socialist countries (Pilc 2017). Aspects of self-selection and learning-by-exporting hypotheses: micro-level evidence are analyzed in detail (Rehman 2017). Analysis of stakeholders' conceptions and discussion in academic and professional environment on connecting learning at different sites in two national VET systems yield important data for further studies—where learning through active participation and engagement in education and workplace settings is found as a prerequisite for effective professional competence development through vocational education and training; equally import has been the finding that learning from multiple sites and sources needs to be purposefully connected and integrated to construct meaningful knowledge and understanding—the quality of connectivity and learning outcomes is influenced by conceptions of the different actors (Sappa et al. 2016). Various branches of industry, especially fast developing industries like high-tech sector search for special sources of knowledge used by entrepreneurial firms in the European high-tech sector (Amoroso et al. 2018). Several new approaches in teaching methods, like gamification, is increasingly used also in work-based learning

(Sánchez-Martín et al. 2017). Innovations, labor force quality and creative entrepreneurs are of great importance in knowledge based economy (Śledzik 2013; Kultti et al. 2015). Economic policy and policy decisions are critically relevant (Demir and Gozgor 2018; Demir and Ersan 2017). R&D spillovers and information exchange by a case study has underlined important aspects of qualified employees (Kultti et al. 2015). Factors influencing the entrepreneurial engagement of opportunity and necessity—including “pull” and “push” aspects of motivation are also on research agenda for academic researchers (Van der Zwan et al. 2016). For the application of gamification teaching methods academic research has been performed also on the motivation of students (Buckley and Doyle 2014). Different countries use different research methods for the investigation of work-based training organizations activities and their achieved results (Van Praag et al. 2017). In depth analysis has been carried out on the priority issues in research in other countries regarding innovation as the driving force for competitiveness, the issue of skills and competences and the need for innovation to address skills’ mismatch, the importance of employers and social partners to increase the compliance of training with the actual labor market needs, the institutional mechanisms and co-operation models between public administrations, training organizations and employers, the increasing role of practical training and apprenticeship/work-based learning approaches.

EU tools are seen as part of internationalization of VET: An increased attention is being paid to learning outcomes based qualification frameworks for an improved European Qualifications Framework (EQF) implementation (European Parliament 2008)—revised in 2017. The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)—as an instrument to facilitate the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes (LO)—under revision currently. The European Commission (EC) and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) have carried out a range of studies and developed policy documents to promote VET developments and the training of competitive labor market participants (EC 2012; Cedefop 2010, 2011, 2012a, b, c). In addition, in 2015 Cedefop has performed extensive study based on survey on skills, qualifications and jobs in the EU with attention of the best match (Cedefop 2015).

3 Empirical Research Results for VET Innovation and Work-Based Learning in Latvia

Parallel to the public administrators’ survey analysis the following factors and data were taken into account:

- Studies of the practice from countries with traditional apprenticeship or dual systems—e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland; Bi-lateral agreements of Latvia with Germany and Switzerland; Multilateral agreements—Memorandum on co-operation in VET in Europe (Berlin, December 2012);

- EU VET policy approaches—Riga Conclusions, endorsed in Riga June 22, 2015 during the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union;
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) 2013; Baltic Alliance for Apprenticeships (BAfA) 2015;
- EU supported initiatives for policy innovation—e.g. implemented and ongoing projects on VET reforms and work-based learning within Erasmus+ calls for proposals with the participation of public administrations (ministries) as project partners—with wider implication for a cluster of countries with similar historical, cultural and educational background (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia): project “National Authorities for Apprenticeships: Implementing Work Based Learning in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia (WBL Balt)” (hereinafter—WBL Balt project), finished February 2017 and a new joint Baltic initiative started February 2017—Erasmus+ project “Testing New Approaches to Training VET and Workplace Tutors for Work Based Learning (TTT4WBL)” (hereinafter—TTT4WBL project)—with the participation of a Finnish research institute apart from the ministries of the three Baltic states.

A survey among the public administrators was carried out by Buligina, 2015—including high and medium level managers and experts from the ministries of education, economy and employment (welfare), as well as experts of agencies under the supervision of the above mentioned ministries: sample reached 130 respondents, the response rate was 87%, respondents were selected and approached as they all are experts in the development or monitoring of the introduction of work-based learning and making proposals for the implementation of work-based learning in Latvia. The need to involve in the study managers and experts from various ministries was determined by the fact that innovative approaches in education can be introduced only in strategic partnership with relevant public actors, namely, the involved branch ministries (Buligina and Sloka 2016). A prior analysis of the opinions of all the relevant stakeholders is being viewed in the research as an indicator of the feasibility of the planned reforms. A high evaluation was allocated by public administrators and experts regarding the need for innovation competent VET specialists in enterprises—see Fig. 1.

The results of the survey confirm the public administrators’ awareness on the need of innovation competent vocational education and training specialists in enterprises; this corresponds to the research findings in other countries as well as to the data in scientific publications as part of the study (Fig. 2).

Since the implementation of innovative approaches by public administrations (e.g. as in the case of introducing work-based learning in countries with school-based systems) requires also the formation of new strategic partnerships, the survey had a particular focus on the opinions of public administrators regarding the relevance of stakeholders’ co-operation and involvement. Main statistical indicators of descriptive statistics on evaluations of public administrators’ opinions on the importance of stakeholder’s involvement in work-based learning implementation in Latvia are included in Table 1.

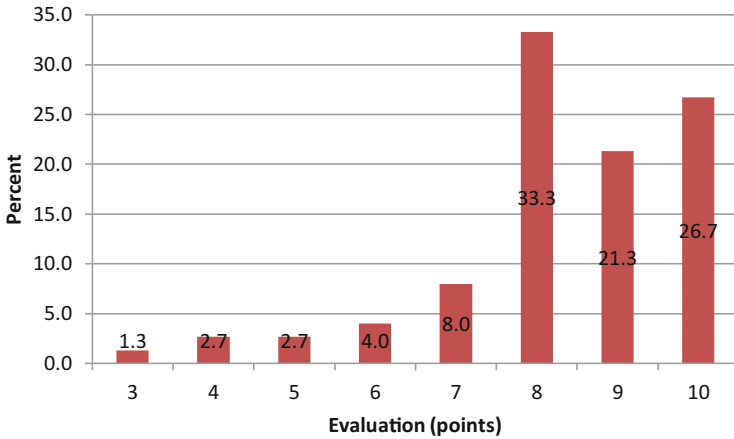


Fig. 1 Evaluations of public administrators on the need for innovation competent VET specialists in enterprises (Evaluation scale 1–10, where 1—not important; 10—very important). Source: Authors’ own study or based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015)

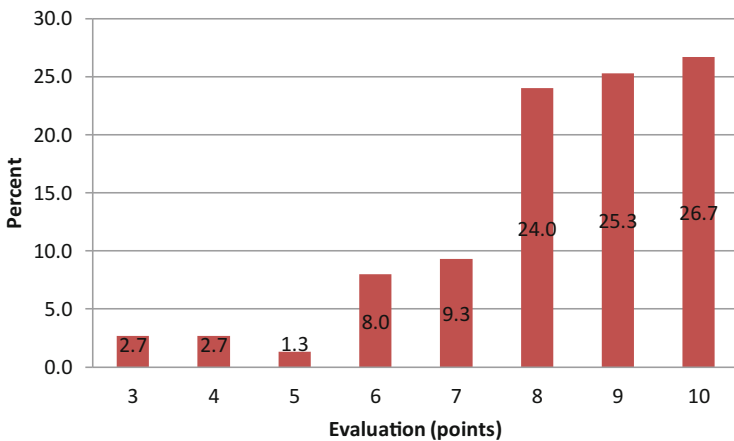


Fig. 2 Evaluations of public administrators on the need to strengthen VET regarding innovation (Evaluation scale 1–10, where 1—not important; 10—very important). Source: Authors’ own study or based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015)

Results of the survey indicate that the views of public administrators are highly different, as almost all the range of the evaluation scale is covered for most of the evaluations; the highest evaluations were allocated for “Professional organizations/ associations should more get involved in VET governance” with arithmetic mean of the evaluations 8.06 with the most frequent evaluation 10 (characterized by mode); half of the respondents allocated evaluation 8 or less and half of the respondents allocated evaluation 8 or more (characterized by median). The lowest evaluations were allocated for “Ministries sufficiently coordinate their activities for jointly

Table 1 Main statistical indicators of descriptive statistics on evaluations of public administrators on the importance of stakeholder's involvement in work-based learning implementation in Latvia

		Ministries sufficiently coordinate their activities for jointly addressing education and employment issues	Sectoral associations are sufficiently involved in the training of a competitive labor force	The local governments have a significant role in promoting the compliance of VET with the local labor market demands	The planning regions should more get involved in VET	Professional organizations/ associations should more get involved in VET governance
N	Valid	116	112	111	112	112
	Missing	6	10	11	10	10
Mean		5.11	6.28	6.10	7.85	8.06
Std. error of mean		0.184	0.170	0.242	0.195	0.173
Median		5	6	6	8	8
Mode		5	7	8	10	10
Std. deviation		1.986	1.797	2.551	2.063	1.832
Variance		3.944	3.229	6.508	4.256	3.356
Range		8	8	9	9	9
Minimum		1	2	1	1	1
Maximum		9	10	10	10	10

Source: Authors' own study or based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015), evaluation scale 1–10, where 1—not important; 10—very important

Table 2 Correlations on public administrators' evaluations to the question “Do you support further introduction of work-based learning in Latvia when the learner spends a much greater proportion of time in practical training at an enterprise”

	Your experience in the indicated field of competence	Gender
Pearson correlation	−0.236*	0.110
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.014	0.261
N	107	107

Source: Authors' own study or based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

addressing education and employment issues” with arithmetic mean of evaluations 5.11 and mode 5, median 5; for this statement no respondents allocated the highest evaluation.

The evaluations of public administrators were lower for public administrators with more experience in public administration but had no difference by gender—see correlation coefficients included in Table 2.

For more detailed insights on public administrators' evaluations on the aspect “What centralized activities do you consider as relevant for a successful introduction

Table 3 Complex factors (by Rotated Component Matrix) on Public Administrators Evaluations on the aspects “What centralized activities do you consider as relevant for a successful introduction of work-based learning in Latvia?”

	Component		
	1	2	3
Support to the enterprise during the organization of the work placement	0.718	0.240	0.179
Possibility to be flexible in the provision of the theoretical studies according to the employers needs	0.738	0.290	0.125
Individual consultations for the employers	0.101	0.125	0.881
Information campaigns in mass media	0.142	0.461	0.748
Material support by the state to the mentors working with trainees at an enterprise	0.611	0.603	0.012
Tax reduction for enterprises involved in WBL	0.236	0.841	0.129
Improved legal framework	0.173	0.822	0.332
Pedagogical/methodological support to mentors working with trainees at an enterprise	0.657	-0.167	0.586
Compensation to employer’s for covering trainees expenditure on transport fees, specialized clothing etc.	0.629	0.542	-0.005
Coordinated activities by public administration institutions in addressing training and employment issues	0.765	0.144	0.119

Source: Authors’ own study or based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015), evaluation scale 1–10, where 1—not important; 10—very important

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in seven iterations

of work-based learning in Latvia?” resulting from multivariate analysis approach realized by factor analysis is included in Table 3.

As a result of one of multivariate statistics analysis methods—factor analysis on public administrators evaluations presented in Table 3 on the analyzed aspect “What centralized activities do you consider as relevant for a successful introduction of work based learning in Latvia?” with *varimax* rotation in seven iterations—three complex factors had been calculated with the following titles:

Complex Factor I—Organizational;

Complex Factor II—Legislation support;

Complex Factor III—Informational.

As result of factor analysis on public administrators’ evaluations presented in Table 4 on the aspect “In your opinion, what could raise the vocational education and training (VET) prestige” with *varimax* rotation in seven iterations three complex factors were identified—with the following titles:

Complex Factor I—Material and Recognition Support;

Complex Factor II—Information Support;

Complex Factor III—Learning Environment and Learning Content Improvement.

Table 4 Complex factors (by Rotated Component Matrix) on Public Administrators Evaluations on the Aspect “In your opinion, what could raise the Vocational Education and Training (VET) prestige”

	Component		
	1	2	3
Higher salaries for medium level specialists	0.770	−0.034	0.075
WBL where the employers pays a salary or grant to the trainee	0.776	0.120	0.319
Information campaigns in mass media promoting and praising professional specialists	0.671	0.074	0.387
Modern learning environment	0.223	0.105	0.873
Modern and innovation oriented VET content	0.041	0.193	0.835
A dialogue with children and their parents in pre-school and primary education on the advantages of the choice of a suitable profession	0.058	0.750	0.118
Promoting a higher social status for VET learners	0.707	0.561	−0.190
Promoting a higher social status for middle level specialists	0.773	0.507	−0.194
Awards and prizes by enterprises and sectors for medium level specialists	0.239	0.774	0.125
More job opportunities at technology oriented enterprises	−0.001	0.550	0.376

Source: Authors' own study based on Ilze Buligina conducted survey (2015), evaluation scale 1–10, where 1—not important; 10—very important

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in seven iterations

The research findings are being seen as useful in further development of information campaigns for various stakeholders and partnerships involved in VET reforms (especially in relation to the introduction of work-based learning) in Europe.

Apart from the survey conducted by Ilze Buligina in 2015 (Buligina and Sloka 2016) on the opinions of public administrators regarding the need of innovation of VET, another survey on similar issues was performed by Ilze Buligina already in 2012 (Buligina and Sloka 2014). Thus, it was possible to compare the results and the dynamics of opinions in 2012 and 2015: In 2012 more traditional opinions were prevailing among the public administrators regarding the relevance of VET in the labor force innovation processes—innovation was not seen as relevant in VET developments. In 2012 survey results little role was assigned to the need for co-operation among the policy makers and administrators in HE and VET and in research and VET. In 2015 survey there is a much more uniform evaluation regarding the relevance of training by HE and VET institutions in the labor market and innovation processes. There is an increasing opinion that specialists with VET education need to be innovation competent.

Regarding transnational partnerships in promoting VET reforms and work-based learning developments, Buligina and Sloka (2014, 2016) indicate an increase in Baltic co-operation in relation to the European Union Erasmus+ projects WBL Balt and TTT4WBL to promote policy innovation and reforms. As agreed upon during the international Baltic seminar 24 January, 2017 as part of the European Union Erasmus+ WBL-Balt project—countries with similar historical, cultural and

educational backgrounds should form transnational strategic partnerships to promote innovation in VET, including work-based learning. It has been proposed to develop continued cooperation at different levels with more emphasis on VET institutions' associations and business sector associations' involvement—apart from the already existing co-operation and strategic partnerships among the public administrations in education (ministries). A particular emphasis has been put on the following issues: (1) potential developments of joint VET programs and qualifications; (2) enhanced cooperation among Baltic employers on the implementation of work-based learning.

4 Conclusion

Work-based learning as an innovative form of VET for countries with school-based systems needs to be implemented in compliance with specific national contexts. Joint approaches by the involved public stakeholders from various branches are relevant for the success of the VET reform. Strategic partnerships beyond the national level could be beneficial, especially among countries with historically similar educational and cultural backgrounds. Strategic partnerships at national and at cross-border level can also be a source for identifying new challenges to be address for a successful implementation of work-based learning for the training of a competitive labor force in broader global contexts. Increasing attention is paid to different aspects of work-based training organization world-wide including research on organization of work-based learning and investigation of views of all involved groups of stakeholders. The Latvian public administrations are becoming increasingly aware on the need for the promotion of new approaches in VET for the training of a competitive labor force at all levels. Concrete measures have been taken for improved linkage of VET to the actual work environment through the implementation of work-based learning approaches. New tendencies can be observed regarding the change of thinking paradigms on the need for co-operation among public administrators in VET, higher education and research, against the more traditional approaches, much more prominent in 2012. The public administrations in Latvia are open to the initiation and implementation of new forms of strategic partnerships and governance. There are favorable preconditions for increasing co-operation on VET and WBL on the Baltic level itself and to promote the Baltic level as a competitive space for VET at a broader European level. Work-based learning needs to be implemented in compliance with specific national contexts. The success of the stakeholder co-operation in introducing work-based learning in Latvia can serve as a model for other countries with school based VET systems aiming at introducing work-based learning or apprenticeship-type schemes.

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