

## FLASH REPORT

### Event name

**4<sup>TH</sup> EAFA REGIONAL EVENT “ ENGAGEMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN WORK-BASED LEARNING”**

### Main objective/s

The purpose of the seminar was to discuss the latest policy developments in apprenticeships and work-based learning (WBL) in EU Candidate Countries and to share experiences between them and European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) members.

### Background

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) is a platform managed by the European Commission in close cooperation with EU social partners that brings together governments with other key stakeholders, for instance business associations, individual companies, social partners, chambers, vocational education and training (VET) providers, regions, youth representatives or think tanks. The common goal is to strengthen the quality, supply, image and mobility of apprenticeships in Europe.

The EAfA has so far mobilised 36 countries, including 27 EU Member States, and 294 stakeholders to engage in quality apprenticeships. All five Candidate Countries - Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey - joined the Alliance. The Alliance has facilitated networking, cooperation and sharing of good practices and Cedefop and the ETF have provided strategic expert support. The Alliance has equally contributed to raising awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships.

The event in Skopje was the 4<sup>th</sup> in a series of regional events hosted by the Candidate Countries (after Albania, Montenegro and Turkey).

### SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

Around 90 participants attended the event, amongst them representatives of the European Apprentices Network (EAN) and young apprentices from North Macedonia. The thematic focus of this edition of the regional event was the improvement of SMEs engagement in VET in particular in WBL. (SMEs represent in Europe over 90% of companies and two thirds of the employment force, whilst in Western Balkans and Turkey they make up 99% of enterprises)

The event was opened by the Minister of Education and Science of North Macedonia, Arber Ademi. He referred to the recent media campaign for promotion of vocational careers and vocational education (initiative part of Education for employment project), stating that most of the vacancies currently open are for VET graduates. He focused on the need to ensure a better matching between educational curricula and labour market needs, which are the purpose of the ongoing education reform. The Minister underlined that VET is a priority of the Government of North Macedonia, with focus on improving its quality and attractiveness. Three new regional VET Centers were created in addition to the one in the capital city Skopje.

Virve Vimpari, Head of Operations 2 of the EU Delegation to North Macedonia underlined that the only sustainable way to support VET learners to acquire practical skills is work based learning and in particular apprenticeships. The EU has been emphasizing the importance of vocational education and has been heavily supporting it in North Macedonia, the total amount of funds allocated was 8 million Euros through IPA II and Erasmus Plus.

The Chamber of Economy representative of North Macedonia, Ms Elena Milevska Strbevaska, PhD, stated that 80 per cent of unemployed are long term unemployed, therefore reskilling is very important. Young graduates are lacking practical experience and it is crucial for training providers to deliver relevant skills and facilitate transition from school to work.

The representative of Finnish Agency for Education, Sara Turunen-Zwinger, has given a brief outline of the priorities of the ongoing Finish Presidency and updates on the Finish VET system.

Stakeholders of the 5 candidate countries from education and business highlighted the needs of strong and permanent communication between VET institutions and companies in order to improve the commitment of industries in Work Based Learning. Main obstacles to the commitment of SMEs to WBL are that these companies do not have a developed staffing service and have a small number of employees. They should be technically supported for hosting learners. In this perspective good practices exist (e.g.in-company trainer training program, administrative support).

Three site visits were included in the programme : one to a local auto repair VET school, one to EVN, the local electricity company and their training center and one to the Marriott hotel as host for apprentices from a VET hospitality and catering school. Feedback was presented the following day.

During the second day, a break out groups session was organised around 8 cases identified from EU member states who presented their experience. Key suggestions were identified as to how to encourage companies and especially SMEs to open apprenticeships vacancies. Among others: changing the mindset of VET approach, improving the identification of needs, setting training alliances between SMEs and large companies, designing flexible training, raising awareness of companies, engaging all stakeholders and setting realistic expectations.

Two new members were welcomed to the EAfA (one training institution from Turkey and the Economic Chamber in North Macedonia).

The 5 Candidate countries gave brief outlines on the recent developments and short term upcoming actions for 2020 for WBL and apprenticeships.

#### KEY OUTCOMES/CONCLUSIONS

VET is a priority of the education in N. Macedonia, as for the other Candidate Countries in the region. Secondary education is mandatory in the country and 60 percent of learners go into VET. Recently the efforts to reform the education sector have led to the creation of 3 new regional VET centers and introduction of the dual education in N. Macedonia.

Representatives of business mentioned their wish to be involved in VET and to support WBL as a win-win approach. Companies are ready to support WBL since they can measure the potential return on investment.

Experience is exchanged within the region, also amongst the WB6IF, network of the Chambers of Commerce. Erasmus plus negotiations budget will increase intl dimension of mobility in VET and represent additional opportunities for VET students in the region.

The next meeting of the EAfA with Candidate countries was planned for September 2020 in Serbia.

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