

THE ROLE OF CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN WORK- BASED LEARNING

Initial findings from a study based on practices
from six ETF partner countries

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INTRODUCTION

The European Training Foundation (ETF) has created a network of vocational schools and centres that aim for excellence: the ETF Network for Excellence (ENE). Its members are vocational education providers that wish to learn from each other, collaborate, improve their practice, introduce innovation, establish partnerships and provide support to other vocational education providers. Some members of the network have been selected to take an active part in a sub-initiative of the network, entitled 'The role of centres of vocational excellence in work-based learning'. The sub-initiative focuses on how centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs) can support work-based learning (WBL) in companies. The six countries involved are Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova and North Macedonia.

Work-based learning is a key aspect of education-business collaboration, which is one of ENE's eight priority themes. Cooperation and coordination between schools and employers are key to the success of WBL. 'Work-based learning refers to learning that occurs when people do real work. This work can be paid or unpaid, but it must be real work that leads to the production of real goods and services¹.'

In November 2020, the Latvian Vocational Education Association (PIB) and the ETF carried out a study of WBL implementation in seven CoVEs in the six countries mentioned above (two centres were involved in Kazakhstan). WBL is offered in all six countries, but its implementation differs from country to country. The study aimed to map current WBL practices in the seven CoVEs and identify strengths, challenges and opportunities for cooperation and development.

The study has been supplemented by a number of coaching sessions. Coaching and peer-to-peer learning activities are offered to the participants in the initiative by other CoVEs located in the European Union (EU), specifically Latvia and other Baltic countries, through PIB. These activities have been provided for the CoVEs involved in the initiative by using multiple contacts within public authorities, business associations, chambers, employers, schools, etc. in the Baltic countries. The seven centres also have access to proven tools and methodologies.

The CoVEs involved in this project represent a variety of training sectors, namely:

- Hospitality and Tourism School of Tirana, Albania
- Vayots Dzor Regional State College, Armenia
- College of Modern Technologies in Mechanical Engineering and Car Servicing, affiliated to the Republican Institute for Vocational Education, Belarus
- APEC PetroTechnic Higher College LLP, Kazakhstan
- Nur-Sultan Polytechnic College, IT Competence Centre, Kazakhstan
- Kiro Burnaz secondary vocational school in Kumanovo, North Macedonia
- Centre of Excellence in Construction, Moldova.

¹ Source: [Work-based learning: A handbook for policy makers and social partners in ETF partner countries](#) (ETF, 2018).

WORK-BASED LEARNING AND THE SEVEN CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

In order to receive a professional qualification in the CoVEs that participated in this initiative, students who have completed primary education study for between two and four years, while those who have completed secondary education study for between ten months and four years.

TABLE 1. SHARE OF WBL COMPONENT IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES UNDERTAKEN AFTER PRIMARY EDUCATION

Percentage	Number of CoVEs
10 or less	2
15	1
40	1
60	2
n/a	1

In most cases, the share of the theory component is between 20% and 70% of the time spent studying, with the split in most CoVEs being 40% theory and 60% WBL.

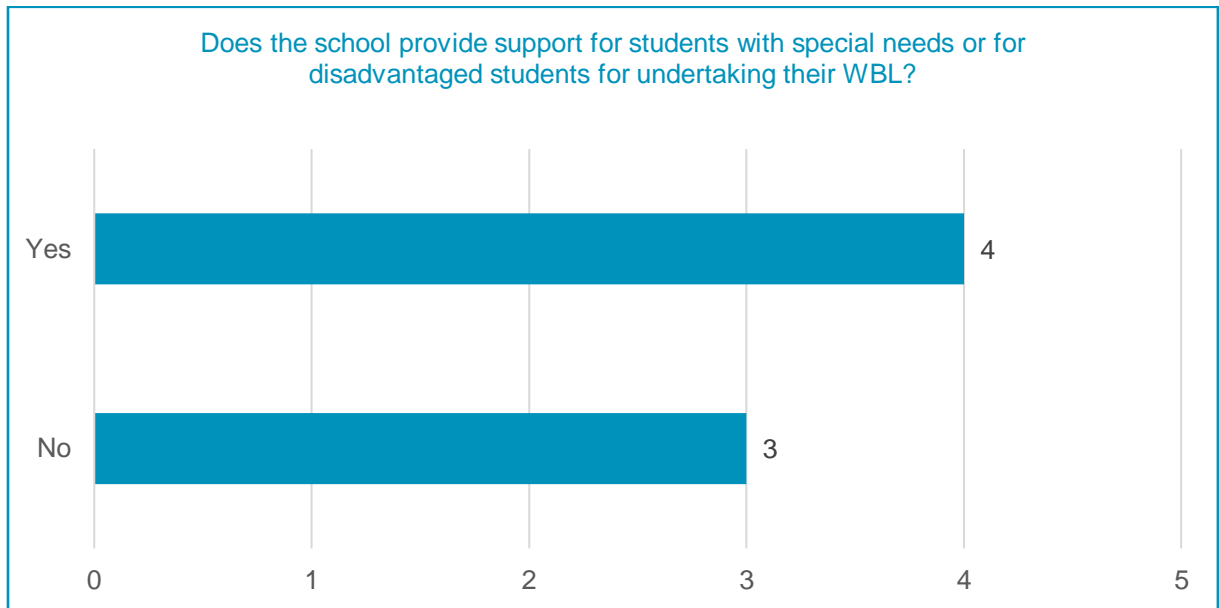
All CoVEs have, or have access to, a database of companies that provide WBL opportunities.

In five of the seven CoVEs, the WBL programme/training plan – including the results to be achieved (learning outcomes) – are developed together with the company involved, and all CoVEs consult with/involve the company when developing the (time) schedule for WBL at the company.

Four of the seven centres stated that they provide support for students with special needs or for disadvantaged students in undertaking their WBL. This support takes various forms, including:

- provision of food, clothes and accommodation for students on a low income;
- placements in workplaces close to students' places of residence, prioritisation of well-paid jobs, taking the needs of the student into account;
- provision of educational assistants by the school and local community for every student with special needs, as well as an individual educational programme for every student, based on their needs and abilities;
- an individual approach to providing each required form of support.

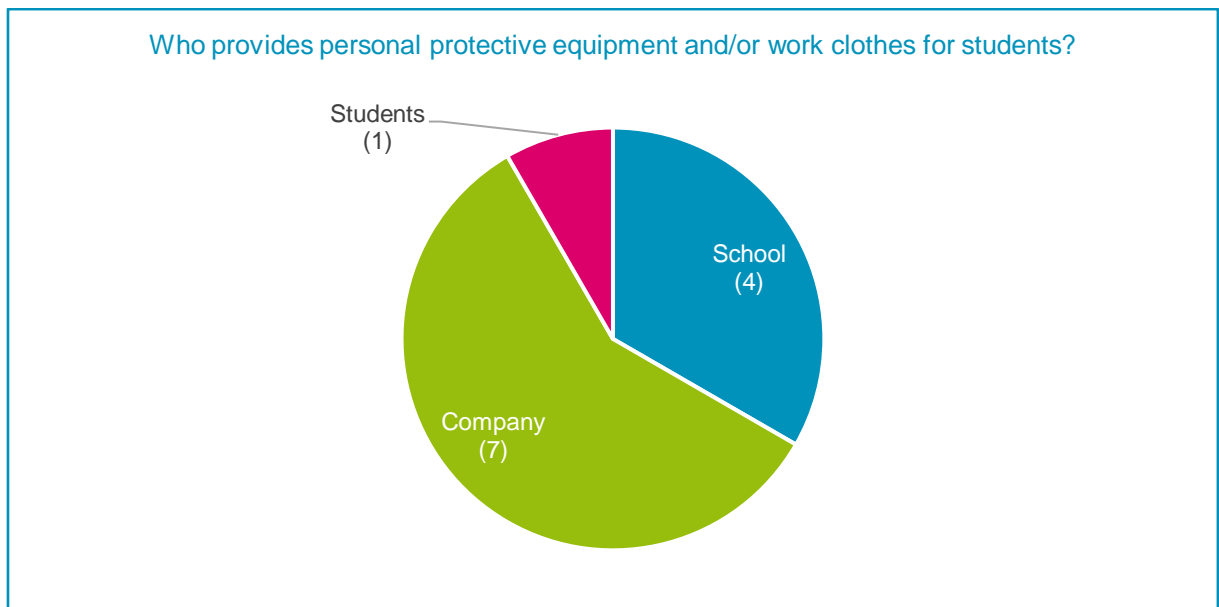
FIGURE 1. SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



In all cases, instruction in work safety issues is ensured by the CoVE and the company.

In the case of three of the CoVEs, personal protective equipment and/or work clothes for the students are provided by the company, while, in another three, these are provided by the school and the company. In one centre, they are provided by the school, the company and the student (see [Figure 2](#)).

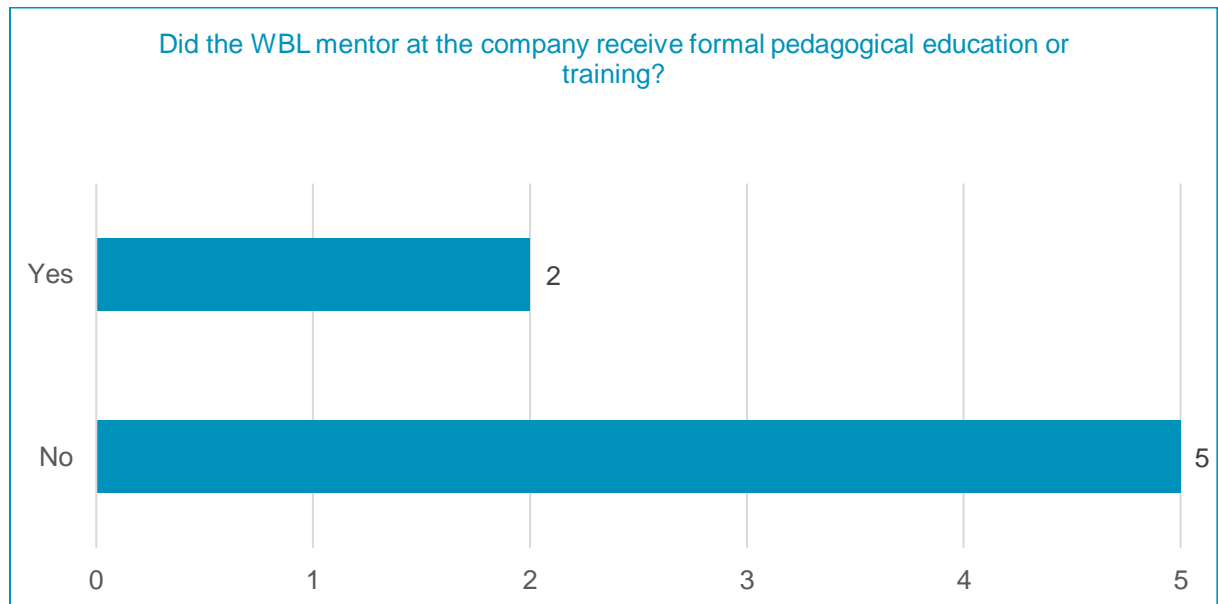
FIGURE 2. PROVISION OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT



In most cases (four out of seven), students receive some kind of remuneration (salary, scholarship, etc.) during WBL.

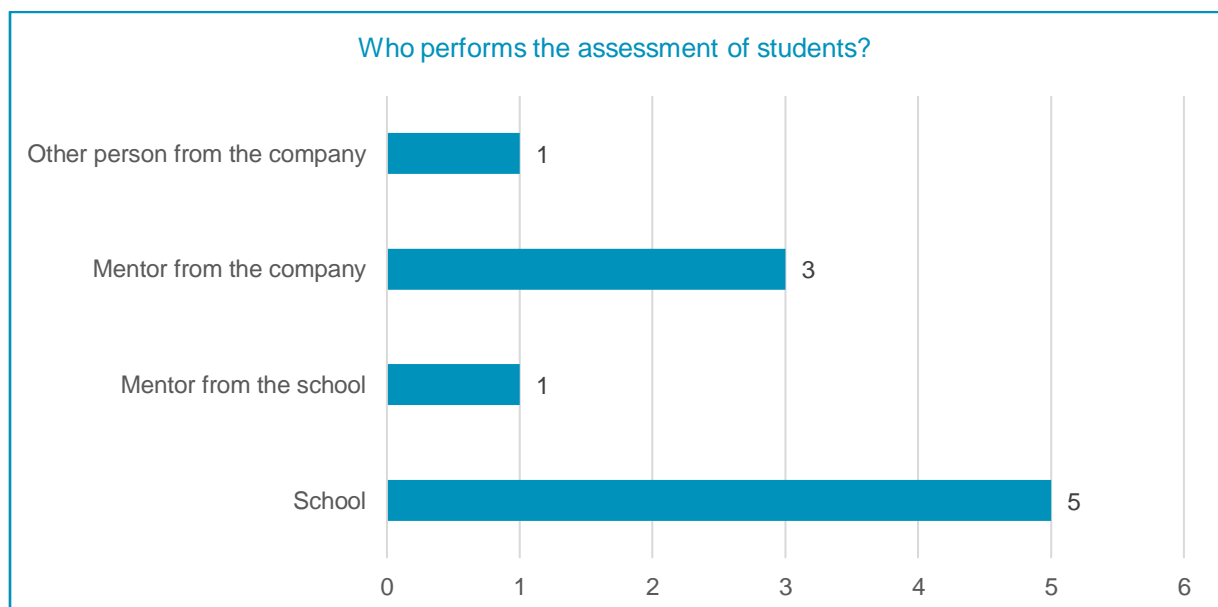
Six of the seven CoVEs reported that the companies they cooperate with have appointed a mentor for WBL for each student or group of students. The company mentors supervise and monitor the student at the workplace. Five CoVEs reported that the WBL mentor at the company has not received any formal pedagogical education or training. In one case, students' learning in the workplace is supervised not by company mentors but by a teacher from the CoVE.

FIGURE 3. TRAINING OF THE COMPANY MENTOR



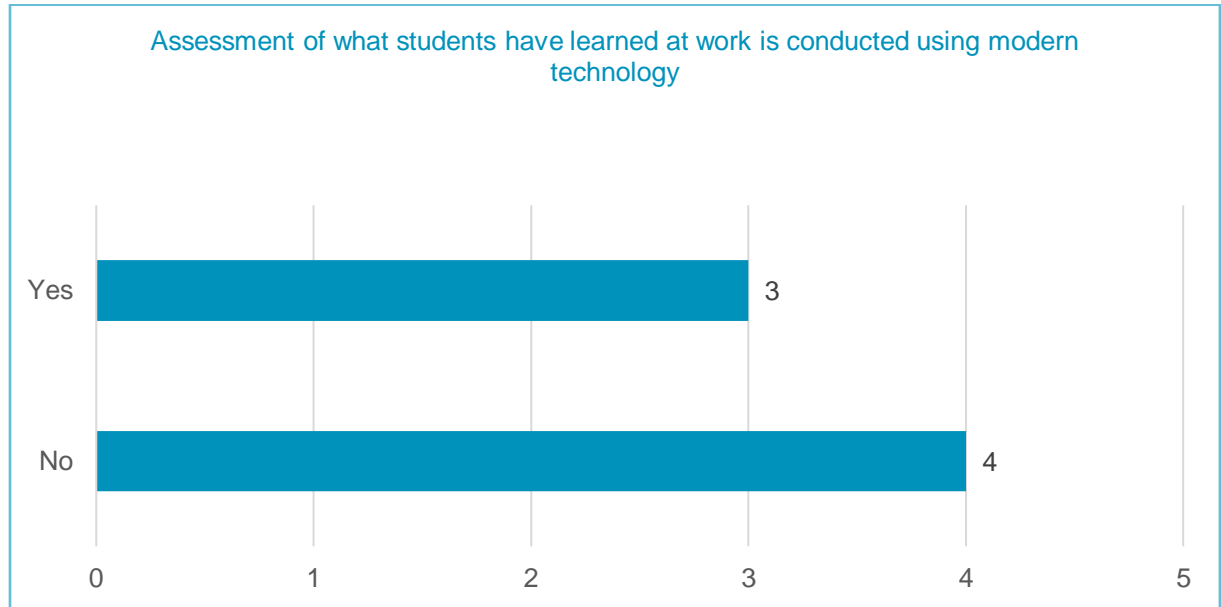
All seven CoVEs indicated that WBL learning outcomes are assessed. The assessment is performed by either the centre, the company or both (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. PERFORMANCE OF ASSESSMENTS



In all cases, after completing the WBL component, students prepare a report or presentation about their experience at the company. In six of the CoVEs, the student assesses the company and their experience at the company. Three of the seven CoVEs said they use modern technology (for example, digital logbooks) when assessing what the students have learned at work.

FIGURE 5. USE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY TO PERFORM ASSESSMENTS



THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE ARE INVOLVED IN ORGANISING WORK-BASED LEARNING

The next block of the survey concerned the degree of involvement by the CoVEs in implementing various aspects of WBL. This revealed many similarities among the CoVEs interviewed. For example, all CoVEs indicated that they are involved, to a large extent, in checking whether the companies meet occupational health and safety requirements. Five CoVEs are already involved to a very large extent in checking the company’s general capabilities, willingness and resources to train students. In addition, all CoVEs have developed some kind of criteria for assessing students during and/or after WBL. All CoVEs stated that they are involved in organising informational visits to the CoVE or to companies, while one said it has a leading role in this matter.

FIGURE 6. COVE INVOLVEMENT PRE-WBL

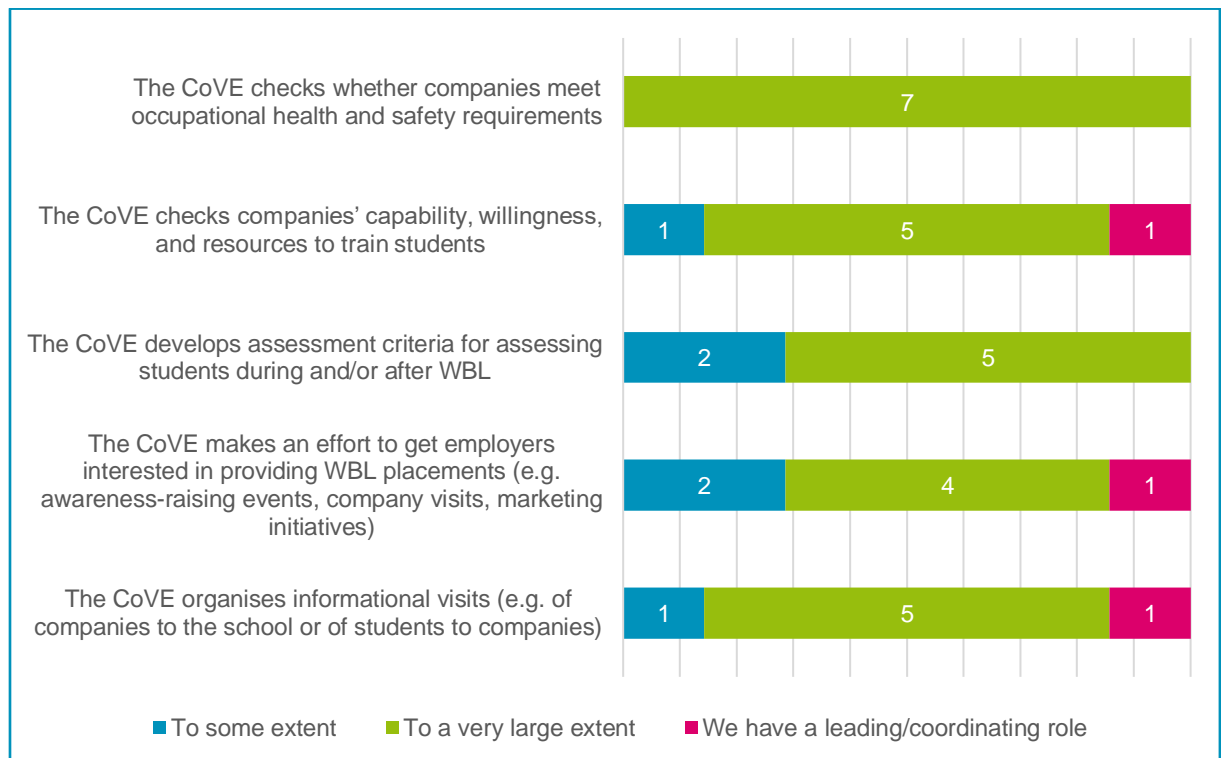
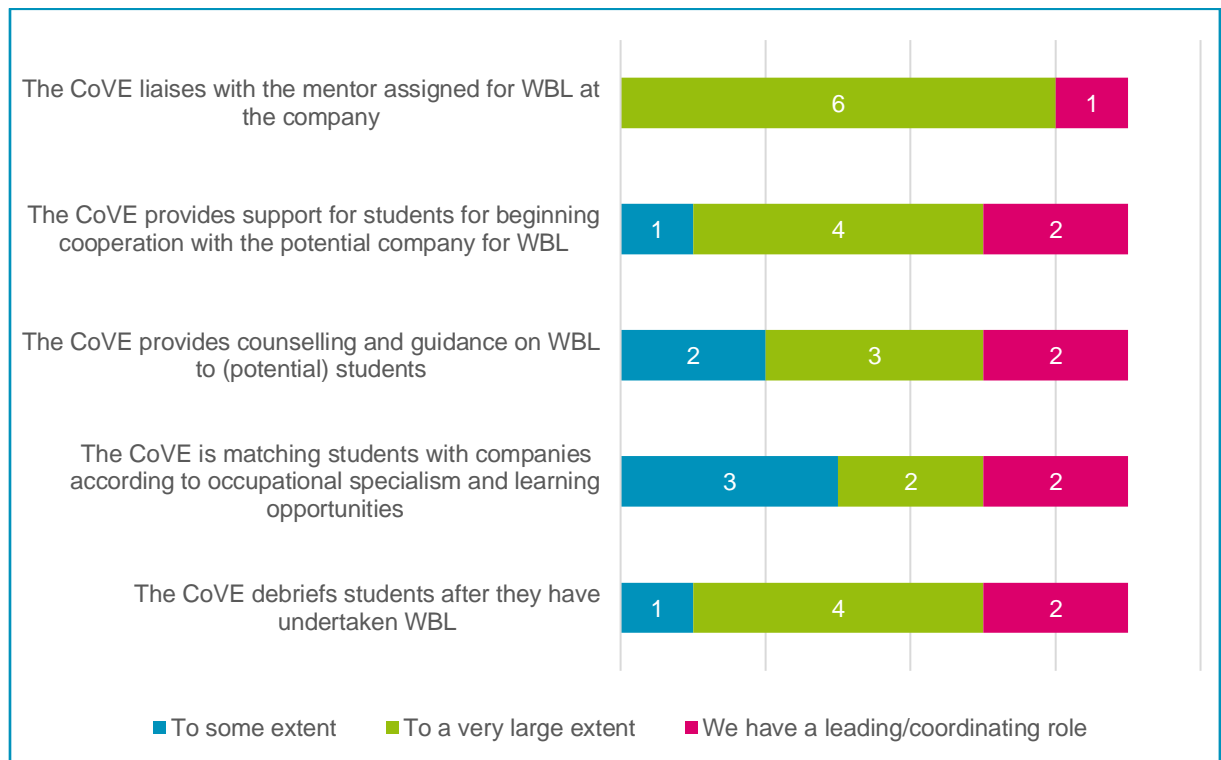


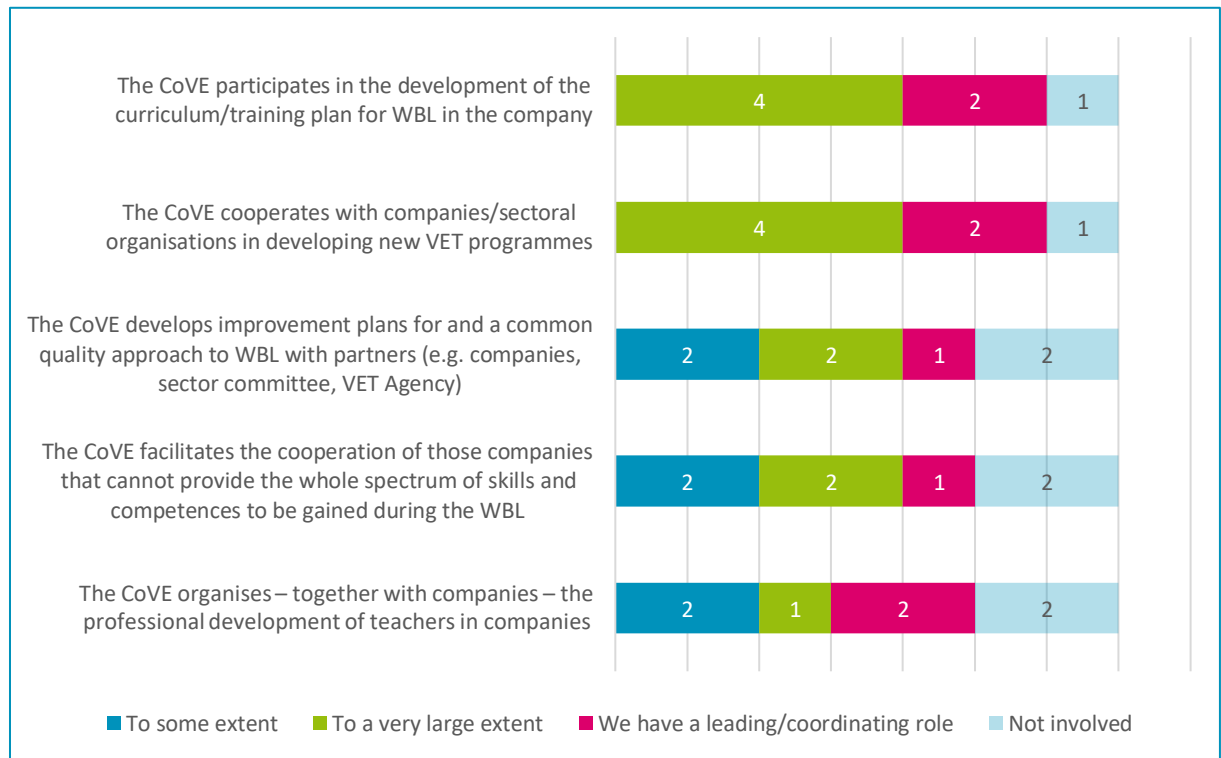
FIGURE 7. COVE INVOLVEMENT DURING WBL



Similarly, all CoVEs included in the survey provide support for students in terms of initiating cooperation with a company, with a view to organising a WBL placement. Two CoVEs indicate that they have a leading role in providing counselling and guidance related to WBL, while two others have only some experience in this field. Three CoVEs are involved to a large extent. This opens up opportunities for exchange not only between CoVEs in the Baltic countries but among all seven CoVEs. Liaison with companies is high on the agenda of all participating CoVEs. Matching students with companies according to learning opportunities and occupational specialisms is a challenge in many countries, as it requires in-depth information about students and companies. All seven CoVEs are involved to at least some extent in matching activities, and two CoVEs even have a leading or coordinating role in this. Other organisations or institutions, such as chambers of commerce or employment offices, which have a role in matching in some countries, are not involved. All CoVEs debrief students after they complete their WBL; this is an important factor of cooperation and quality monitoring.

With regard to participating in developing a training plan/curriculum for in-company WBL and cooperating with companies/sectoral organisations in developing new programmes, six of the seven CoVEs said they do so – four of them to a large extent and two as leaders/coordinators of the process. The one centre that is not involved in either of these processes indicated that this is due to not having the appropriate resources.

FIGURE 8. COVE INVOLVEMENT IN DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF WBL



Five of the seven CoVEs are involved to varying degrees in developing improvement plans for a common quality approach to WBL. The other two said they are not involved in this either because other organisations do this for them or because they lack the resources. Five CoVEs are involved in facilitating the cooperation of companies. Where a company is not able to provide the whole spectrum of skills and competences required, five CoVEs are involved in facilitating their cooperation. Of the two that are not involved in this, one cited its lack of skills and capacity, while the other has decided not to get involved. Five of the CoVEs organise professional development for teachers in companies (to varying degrees). Of the two that do not, one is planning to get involved in this within the next two years, but the other lacks the resources to do so.

PRACTICES FROM THE SEVEN CENTRES OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



Hospitality and Tourism School of Tirana, Albania

According to the specifics of its educational programmes, the school cooperates with a large number of small companies that provide WBL opportunities. Up to 70% of the students, especially those who undertook WBL, go on to work as employees in the company where they did their WBL after graduating. The school has set up a department for WBL, in which there are specific members of staff responsible for marketing, career education, curricula development and concluding contracts with companies.



Vayots Dzor Regional State College, Armenia

The college has extensive experience in implementing WBL in one particular professional qualification: wine-making. It has its own winery, where students can undertake their WBL. It now aims to develop WBL in all the professional qualifications it offers: in agriculture and forestry; business and administration; humanities and the arts; information and communication technologies; hair and beauty services; hospitality and catering; tourism; and transport services, transport, logistics and maritime.

College of Modern Technologies in Mechanical Engineering and Car Servicing, affiliated to the Republican Institute for Vocational Education, Belarus

The college has excellent equipment and technological resources, which are used in the practical training of students from other regions of Belarus (some 200–300 per year). The high quality of education provided is evidenced by the college's achievements in the EuroSkills and WorldSkills competitions. The college is certified according to the ISO 9001:2009 standard.



Nur-Sultan Polytechnic College, IT Competence Centre, Kazakhstan

The college has been providing WBL opportunities for students since 2013 in one field: construction. The curriculum consists of modules, and each module ends with an exam. The exams are administered by the members of the qualification exam panel, which is made up of representatives from the Chamber of Entrepreneurs and teachers of vocational subjects. Students also have the opportunity to volunteer in a construction company during the summer, so that they can get an idea of the various construction professions, as well as gaining first-hand experience. At the end of the internship, students are recruited on a contractual basis at the lowest level of qualification. They can subsequently prove themselves and obtain higher qualifications in the course of their work.



APEC PetroTechnic Higher College LLP, Kazakhstan

The college cooperates extensively with companies – mainly large ones that can, in practice, accept from 10 up to 25 students at a time, across several professional qualifications. Around 90% of graduates get a job in the company in which they interned. A career and production practice centre has been established at the college, and it also has an industrial council with a technical committee to coordinate new programmes.

APEC PetroTechnic
H I G H E R C O L L E G E



Centre of Excellence in Construction, Moldova

The centre has 20 large partner companies in its database, as well as a number of small companies that offer internships for one or two students at a time. The centre has engaged two experts who monitor WBL at the companies, participate in WBL, study the relevant legislation and are responsible for WBL in general. The strategic goal is to develop a WBL training system.



Kiro Burnaz secondary vocational school in Kumanovo, North Macedonia

The school is in the early stages of implementing WBL, but its team is enthusiastic and committed. The school is planning to set up a department in the school to run WBL. Owing to the specifics of the educational programmes it offers, the school cooperates with a large number of small businesses in implementing WBL.

CONCLUSIONS

- All seven CoVEs that participated in the survey are strong vocational education providers with modern and up-to-date technological resources. The CoVEs are focused on development and continuous improvement, and conduct their learning processes in close cooperation with industry. In this context, they develop vocational education programmes that are necessary for and relevant to the labour market; respond to the needs of the labour market; use and implement the latest technological advances in the learning process; and participate in implementing adult education.
- Each CoVE has examples of good practice that can be used to improve the quality of vocational education overall. This is important, as sharing experience and best practice is a quick way to assess what might work in a particular circumstance and how to adapt the practice to suit specific requirements.
- All participating CoVEs consider WBL to be a condition of the training of students in vocational education if they are to meet the requirements of employers. WBL is a sign of progress in the development of vocational education. The student goes through all the stages of the production process during WBL, so that they fully understand that process. After graduating, students can immediately start to work, set up their own business, as well as continue in education at a higher level.
- All acknowledge that the key to the success of WBL is the partner companies. Only if they agree to participate in the WBL process can WBL happen and be successful.
- All are of the opinion that implementing WBL:
 - strengthens cooperation between the vocational education institution and the company;
 - leads to stricter quality control of vocational education and training;
 - helps ensure vocational education meets the requirements of employers;
 - gives employers equal responsibility for implementing the training process;
 - increases the prestige of vocational education.
- All the participating CoVEs adapt the learning process to the needs of companies when implementing WBL. All implement WBL on the basis of a contract, although the contracting parties vary, depending on the country.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

CoVEs have drawn attention to a number of WBL-related issues that can only be addressed at the central/national level, such as remuneration, insurance, national curriculum, all of which are outside the scope of this initiative. However, there are also several issues that *can* be addressed by the CoVEs themselves. These priorities, seen as key for promoting WBL even further, are addressed below.

- **How to bring employers on board?** As the company's primary concern is the production process, this leaves limited time to focus on training, so it is vital to find the right balance between getting the employers interested in becoming involved and not disrupting the company's operations. All CoVEs surveyed consider that, although they do have extensive experience in informing companies about WBL, they still need to make further efforts to publicise WBL in cooperation with sectoral associations and companies – for example, by participating in industry and education-related exhibitions, and national and international skills competitions, like EuroSkills and WorldSkills.
- **How to arrange optimum cooperation between CoVE and company?** It is very important to allocate tasks and responsibilities appropriately between all parties involved in WBL. In many countries, three-party agreements are concluded, involving the CoVE, the student and the company. Simple agreements decrease the bureaucratic burden on all parties involved, which is a beneficial aspect of cooperation.
- **How to provide career guidance and counselling?** Professional orientation may start as early as the pre-school stage, and involve companies and vocational schools visiting children to tell them about various professions. This may be continued all through the school system, up to and including vocational education institutions, in which all students continue to receive career guidance. Another important aspect here is the close cooperation with sectoral associations that vocational education institutions aim to achieve.
- **How to develop curricula and learning plans jointly with employers?** One way of succeeding at this (getting employers involved/interested in this kind of activity) is to increase the amount of practical training and WBL undertaken in-company. In Latvia, WBL is implemented from the first year of studies, with the duration of the period the student spends at the company increasing each time from a few days to a month. In the fourth year of study, when the student undergoes qualification practice, they are, in effect, a real worker for that company.
- **How to increase the involvement of private entrepreneurs in WBL and create awareness of the benefits of WBL?** One of the most important aspects here is the considerable amount of work the vocational institution must do to explain WBL to companies, so that they fully understand the benefit to them of getting involved in it. The experiences of the people involved are also shared widely; in fact, good publicity can be very important for companies in raising their profile and that of their products/services.
- **How to strike a balance between general secondary education and vocational training?** Obtaining a vocational secondary education qualification hinges on finding a balance between general education and vocational subjects. The first step in implementing WBL is to modify the curricula and then, together with professional sectoral organisations, determine the share of the curricula to be devoted to theory and to practice.

It is clear that the CoVEs surveyed by PIB and the ETF are advanced and experienced in WBL; but further cooperation and sharing of experiences and good practice will increase the quality of WBL implemented in all six countries.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CoVE	Centre of vocational excellence
ENE	ETF Network for Excellence
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
PIB	Profesionālās Izglītības Biedrība (Vocational Education Association) – Latvia
VET	Vocational education and training
WBL	Work-based learning

Where to find out more

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