

WORK-BASED LEARNING IN NORTH MACEDONIA – AN ASSESSMENT PER EU QUALITY STANDARDS

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PREFACE

The study 'Work-based learning in North Macedonia – an assessment per EU quality standards' has been produced by the European Training Foundation (ETF). The study was carried out between March 2024 and December 2024 by Antonie Onosimoski, who also drafted this report. The report was quality checked by QA Expert Patrick Werquin and Project Director Michal Kowal (GREATVISORY).

The study project was coordinated by Lisa Rustico (ETF). Technical input and ongoing support were provided by Lisa Rustico, Stefan Thomas and Cristina Mereuta (ETF).

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¹ In accordance with the new 2025 Law on VET, the VET Centre has been renamed the Centre for Development of Education and Training (Центар за развој на стручно образование).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The country's labour market shares key characteristics with other Western Balkan economies, such as low labour market participation rates among women and young people, high structural unemployment especially among young people, and a high share of long-term unemployment. The downward trend of youth unemployment (aged 15-29) continues, from 30.5% of young people being unemployed in 2019 to 24.9% in 2023; this is still, however, more than double the EU average (11.2% in 2023). The rate of those not in employment, education and training (NEET) for the 15-29 age group fell significantly from 29.8% in 2018 to 22.8% in 2022 (ETF KIESE), increasing again to 24.1% in 2023. This is still much higher than the EU average, which stood at 11.2% in 2023.

The Youth Guarantee (Council of the European Union, 2013 and 2020) was rolled out in North Macedonia for the first time in a non-EU country. A key mechanism for ensuring a good quality offer of apprenticeships and traineeships for young people aged 15-29, it also directly underlines the importance of work-based learning (WBL). The opportunities offered under the reinforced Youth Guarantee (2020) should adhere to the minimum standards laid out in two EU quality frameworks: the Quality Framework for Traineeships (Council of the European Union, 2014), and the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (Council of the European Union, 2018). Both are at the basis of the analytical framework of this exercise.

This report offers an overview and analysis of WBL in North Macedonia, providing insights into various aspects of its design and implementation. The key messages highlight the importance of aligning the country's WBL practices with the European quality criteria, emphasising the progress made in recent years, while identifying areas for further improvement. The findings cover WBL in initial vocational education and training (IVET), WBL in continuing vocational education and training (CVET), and WBL in active labour market policies (ALMPs), corresponding to the three main chapters in the report.

In these chapters, based on the quality criteria from the two EU frameworks, the report addresses the key elements of WBL, specifically: types of programmes with a WBL component, contractual agreements, definitions of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, provision of pedagogical support to participants, social protection measures for learners, health and safety regulations in work-based settings, funding sources and cost-sharing arrangements for WBL initiatives, quality assurance, and learner tracking. The most important strengths and gaps/challenges are summarised at the end of each chapter.

In addition, the report includes a brief clarification of the most important concepts used, an outline of the methodology applied, an overview of the country employment profile, as well as a short description of the strategic, legal and governance framework of VET. Moreover, details of interviewees, a list of acronyms and references, and the quality criteria from the two EU frameworks are included at the end of the report.

The report was conceived to inform policymakers, educators, employers and relevant stakeholders about the current state of WBL in North Macedonia and to contribute to the debate on WBL in the national and international sphere.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The 2016 concept paper on the modernisation of secondary VET (MES, 2016) (*Концепција за модернизација за техничко образование*) includes the term ‘practical education and training’ (*практично образование и обука*) and states that it can be carried out as: a) ‘practical teaching’ (*практична настава*), and b) work-based learning, i.e. WBL (*учење преку работа*):

- ‘Practical teaching’ is defined as an organised form of learning that allows learners ‘to acquire knowledge, skills and habits that are needed to perform work under the qualification’. Practical teaching can be implemented as ‘teaching in school facilities (workshops, laboratories, school companies², etc.) and teaching in real work processes, i.e. at appropriate employers’. Basically, all practical teaching is conducted at schools, hence is school-based. On some occasions, learners are taken by teachers to real work environments (e.g. a factory, laboratory, etc.) for a demonstration of the work processes, but they usually do not perform real work. Therefore, practical teaching is not the focus of this report.
- ‘WBL’ is defined as learning that occurs when people learn while doing real work, paid or unpaid, leading to the production of real goods and services. However, the concept paper emphasises that WBL can also be implemented in actual/real companies which are part of some of the VET institutions in North Macedonia. WBL is organised in combination with school-based learning during the school year, or after the end of the school year in the form of ‘ferial practice’ (*феријална практика*). Ferial practice indicates a WBL period (between 10 and 20 days), organised in one block at the end of the school year, which is mandatory for all upper secondary school learners to spend in the companies with which their VET institutions cooperate.

The new 2025 Law on VET (MES, 2025) adopted in January 2025³ defines ‘practical education and training’ (*практично образование*; literally, practical education) as a set of activities for acquiring knowledge, skills and competences, which is organised as WBL, ferial practice and training at VET institutions⁴.

The Law on VET and WBL Guidelines (MES, 2022) defines ‘dual education and training’ (*дуално образование*; literally, dual education) as a model of (initial and continuing) vocational education and training where educational and training processes are necessarily carried out in two places: in a VET institution and at an employer. The law emphasises that the partnership relation between VET institutions and employers is formalised before the annual announcement of the competition for enrolling learners in public secondary VET institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia. The 2022 WBL Guidelines further state that ‘dual education and training’ is a joint action of two legally separate providers of education and training, which share the responsibility for preparing competent staff for the labour market. The WBL Guidelines introduce the term ‘WBL at an employer’ as a component of the curricula of VET qualifications in the Macedonian Qualifications Framework (MQF) at level 4. All qualifications across all occupations have the ‘WBL at an employer’ component, which gives learners the opportunity to experience how classroom learning relates to the world of work and future career opportunities. In other words, ‘WBL at an employer’ is the on-the-job training part of ‘dual education and training’ in IVET and CVET, and it is the primary focus of this report.

The Law on Craft (Ministry of Economy – ME, 2015) uses the term ‘apprenticeship’⁵ to refer to work-based training in crafts (or artisanal) workshops. There is no alternation between WBL and school-based training and the apprenticeship lasts for a maximum 12 months (minimum duration not defined).

² Actual/real companies are integral parts of some VET schools and they may produce real goods and services.

³ Published in Official Gazette No 3 of 3.1.2025.

⁴ A ‘VET institution’ is an institution whose main activity is vocational education and training, including VET schools and Regional VET Centres (RVC). The latter are VET schools that ‘are expected to become regional centres of excellence that will optimise resources and provide more training opportunities for young people and adults relevant to the regional labour markets’ (ETF, 2024). There were five RVCs in 2024.

⁵ This is different from what is considered an apprenticeship as per the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (2018), not least because under that framework an apprenticeship envisages alternation and leads to formal qualifications, and the apprentice is usually an employed person. The EU term for this WBL programme would be traineeship.

Beneficiaries are unemployed people of at least five years of age, with no upper age limit (typically, learners are young people). The purpose is to learn and acquire skills using machines, tools and devices, where the work process is not automated, and eventually to get into employment. The final certification is not associated with an NQF qualification. This programme will not be analysed in this report.

The Law on Internships (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy⁶ – MLSP, 2019) (*Закон за практикантство*) defines an internship as a work activity that includes a component of WBL, as an option for young professionals or people at the beginning of their career (maximum 34 years old) who want to gain practical experience during a period of up to six months, in order to improve employability and help the transition towards regular employment. Internships can be implemented by the mediation of the ESARNM, as an ALMP defined in the Operational Plan for Active Programmes and Measures for Employment and Services (OP) in accordance with the Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment (MLSP, 2012) or on the free market in accordance with the Law on Internships.

⁶ During the preparation of this report, in accordance with the amendments to the Law on Organisation and Work of State Administration Bodies of June 2024, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy became the Ministry of Social Policy, while the labour part of that Ministry was integrated into the Ministry of Economy, which became the Ministry of Economy and Labour (MEL).

3. METHODOLOGY

Data collection was conducted through desk-based research and field work: 16 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out between March and September 2024. The persons interviewed were selected based on their job positions and their role in relation to the subject of this report. Annex 2 provides details of the interviewees.

The mapping of WBL in IVET and CVET was guided by the criteria of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships. The chapter on IVET applies the EFQEA criteria to 'WBL at an employer', i.e. the WBL component of the four-year IVET programmes. Ferial practice (a period of WBL carried out at the end of the school year) is also covered in the IVET chapter.

The mapping of WBL in ALMPs was guided by the criteria of the EU Quality Framework for Traineeships, although in North Macedonia terms other than 'traineeship' are used for the WBL component of ALMPs.

This report provides information only on programmes with a minimum WBL share of 25%.

4. COUNTRY OVERVIEW

North Macedonia's resident population in 2021 was about 1.8 million people, which represents a decline of nearly 200 000 people compared to the previous census in 2002. Of the total resident population, 5.7% is aged 15–19, while about 18% is aged 15–29⁷ (SSO, 2022). The working age population grew by about 50 000 people from 2022 to 2023, with employment and unemployment rates decreasing (SSO, 2024),

Table 1: Working age population and their activity, employment and unemployment rates in 2022-2023

Year	Total working age population	Labour force			Activity rate (%)	Employment rate (%)	Unemployment rate (%)
		Total	Employed	Unemployed			
2022	1 464 493	808 078	692 034	116 045	55.2	47.3	14.4
2023	1 515 107	791 647	688 296	103 351	52.3	45.4	13.1

Source: SSO, State Statistics Office

In 2023, out of the 15–29 age group, who are considered young people (MES, 2020), 33.6% were employed – with significant gender differences (39.3% male and 27.6% female) – and 11.1% were unemployed. The remaining population (about 55%) in this age group were not in the labour force, mainly due to being in the education and training system.

Table 2: Population aged 15-29 by categories of labour market activity in 2023

Age groups and gender	Type of data	Total working age population	Labour force	Employed	Unemployed	Population not in the labour force
Total population aged 15-29	Number	321 898	144 080	108 206	35 873	177 819
	%	100	44.8%	33.6%	11.1%	55.2%
Total men aged 15-29	Number	165 032	87 427	64 896	22 531	77 605
	%	100	53.0%	39.3%	13.7%	47.0%
Total women aged 15-29	Number	156 866	56 653	43 310	13 343	100 213
	%	100	36.1%	27.6%	8.5%	63.9%

Source: SSO, State Statistics Office

The rate of young people (15-29) not in education, employment or training (NEET) in 2020 was 26.2%, which is almost double the EU average of 13.9% (Eurostat).

However, the percentage of learners at upper-secondary level participating in VET has been steadily rising, from 61% in 2019 to 62.1% in 2020, and to 64% in 2021. In the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 school years, enrolment in secondary VET stood at 67% and 69% respectively (ETF, 2023a).

According to the PISA results, learners in North Macedonia scored less than the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science. Compared to the average across OECD countries, North Macedonia records a smaller proportion of learners who achieved a minimum level of proficiency in all three subjects and a smaller proportion of top-performing learners in at least one subject. Compared to 2018, the average 2022 PISA scores went down in mathematics, reading and science (OECD, 2022).

⁷ This age group is the typical target of the ESARNM's ALMPs.

5. THE FRAMEWORK FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

5.1 Vocational education and training strategies

The Education Strategy 2018-2025 (MES, 2018a) defines four VET priorities, two of which are relevant to WBL: 1) harmonisation of VET with the labour market needs, nationally and regionally, through an effective learning process; 2) improving the learning environment and quality, by developing cooperation between education and business and introducing a mechanism for effective WBL. The strategy emphasises the need to improve school-based and in-company-based training for all types of learners, particularly via the introduction of appropriate programmes.

In 2020, the National Centre for the development of VET⁸ prepared the Concept for WBL. This document describes the place of WBL in the VET system, management structures, training content and learning outcomes, cooperation between institutions, participation and support of employers, support for teachers and in-company mentors, funding mechanisms and cost-sharing, quality assurance, and working and learning conditions.

Employment policies in North Macedonia are defined by the annual Government Programme, the Multiannual Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme and the Law on Social Protection. Donors contribute to shaping the policy framework: for example, relevant documents are the ILO Global Jobs Pact, the Youth Guarantee Plan 2023-2026, and the IPA Budget Funding Programme⁹. North Macedonia was the first country in the Western Balkan region that implemented the Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme. In 2018, under the auspices of the ESARNM, the piloting of the YG was carried out at three employment centres, while in 2019 the YG was rolled out throughout the whole country.

5.2 Policy dialogue and the role of actors at national level

The VET Council was established by the Government, and its members are representatives of four ministries¹⁰, the Bureau for the Development of Education (BDE), the ESARNM, the State Examination Centre (SEC), the Independent Trade Union for Education, Science and Culture (SONK), two Chambers of Commerce¹¹ and the Association of Units of Local Self-Government (ZELS). The VET Council gives opinions on the strategy for developing VET, submits proposals to the MES regarding amendments to the standards of occupations¹² and national qualifications, and makes proposals for the developing the network of VET institutions.

The VET Centre is the main institution that manages VET planning and implementation, while the MES's mandate regarding dual education and training includes approving curricula, promoting dual education and training and partnerships between education and employers, modernising educational facilities¹³, etc.

The VET Centre submits proposals for actions and documents to the VET Council, whose positive opinion is needed before the approval of the MES. The VET Centre is responsible for providing support for the development and continuous innovation of the VET system, in coordination with the VET Council. It participates in labour market analyses and in the verification and accreditation of VET providers, develops standards for occupations and qualifications, designs VET programmes and

⁸ Hereinafter, the VET Centre.

⁹ See ETF, 2023b and ETF, 2024 for more information about IPA projects.

¹⁰ MES, MLSP/MEL, MF, ME

¹¹ Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, Chamber of Crafts.

¹² The MEL grants the final approval.

¹³ The modernisation of educational facilities is mainly an obligation of municipalities.

assessment programmes (with the SEC)¹⁴ for vocational subjects in VET, etc. Regarding WBL-related tasks, the VET Centre¹⁵ defines the requirements for in-company mentors, develops a mandatory training programme for all in-company mentors, and participates in the provision of such training. It also designs standards for equipment and spatial conditions for implementing WBL.

In relation to WBL, the National Board for the NQF, whose members are representatives of the Chambers¹⁶ and SONK (WG for WBL, 2019), recommends activities to better connect the education and training system with labour market needs. The Law on the NQF requires each group of qualifications (i.e. the profession/sector) to have a sectoral committee¹⁷ to perform analyses and evaluations of existing qualifications, identify labour market needs and propose priorities for the development of new qualifications, provide opinions about the compliance of occupational and qualification standards with examination programmes, and promote employment opportunities (MES, 2020a).

The Council of 13 members established by the Government of North Macedonia oversees CVET, and thus WBL in CVET, including the development of the Adult Education Strategy and action plans, the proposal of qualifications and standards of occupations and other issues. (MES, 2018b).

The national public employment service agency, the ESARNM, is the largest provider of non-formal education and training, including programmes with a WBL component, and is responsible for collecting and disseminating information on the labour market, employment counselling and career guidance, and finding/helping to find jobs for active jobseekers. It also manages the implementation of the YG scheme, in which WBL has a relevant role to play in terms of quality offers.

The Adult Education Centre (AEC) develops occupational standards for adult education and training, verifies adult education and training programmes with a WBL component, and issues a catalogue of verified adult education and training institutions.

The Chambers¹⁸ submit proposals for adopting new curricula and programmes or innovating existing ones, draft new occupational standards, participate in final VET examinations, and connect VET institutions and employers. They also submit annual reports to the MES on verified¹⁹ employers (among those they represent) for the implementation of the in-company part of dual VET (MES, 2020a).

SONK may submit proposals to the VET Centre for VET qualifications to be revised, and for occupational standards to be revised and developed. It also has a mandate to submit proposals for improving WBL conditions for learners (MES, 2019).

Occupational standards for VET qualifications may be proposed and drafted by multiple stakeholders, and the proposal must include a brief analysis of the relevant labour market sector and needs. Proposals are sent to the VET Centre, which hires experts from employers to prepare the proposal, which is then discussed and harmonised with the MES, the initiator of the proposal and the chambers. After the finalisation of this process, VET Centre sends the draft proposal to the VET Council. The VET Council consults with the organisations that nominated the VET Council members (chambers, employers, trade unions, etc.) and other institutions (such as the MES, MLSP, MF and BDE) to provide an opinion to the VET Centre. After any revisions, the proposal is sent to the MLSP for final approval and publication²⁰.

¹⁴ The State Examination Centre is an institution in North Macedonia that is responsible for organising and conducting national and international examinations.

¹⁵ The VET Centre has developed the 'Guidelines for work-based learning programming and planning' (see section 6.5).

¹⁶ Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, Union of Chambers Macedonia, Chamber of Crafts of North Macedonia, Chamber of Commerce of North-West Macedonia.

¹⁷ There are a total of 16 sectors and all of them should have a committee and a sub-committee. So far, 15 committees have been formed (ETF, 2023c).

¹⁸ Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, Union of Chambers of Macedonia, Chamber of Crafts of North Macedonia, Chamber of Commerce of North-West Macedonia.

¹⁹ The process of verifying employers is described in the section on quality assurance (6.14).

²⁰ The MES typically makes a final decision regarding the VET Council's scope of work (participation in the development of a strategic and legal framework for VET, a network of VET institutions, and other activities defined in their annual work programme), except in rare situations such as the approval of occupational standards.

5.3 Legal framework

Both VET laws – the refined 2019 Law on VET, and new 2025 Law on VET – governing IVET and CVET in North Macedonia define the term ‘employer’ as a private company, an institution or a practitioner of a craft activity where WBL is carried out, where WBL does not represent their predominant activity.

The new Law on VET (MES, 2025) aims to increase the share of practical education and training, especially ‘WBL at an employer’, and introduces and regulates ‘dual education and training’ (Chapter 3), outlining principles, organisation, model curricula (overall structure for alternation, where the learning time for school-based and work-based learning are defined), specifications about who can submit an initiative for the realisation of a qualification for dual education and training, enrolment of learners in dual education and training, etc. Learner compensation, which is currently optional, will become mandatory.

The time that learners spend at the employer for the purpose of WBL under dual education and training, i.e. ‘WBL at an employer’, is considered regular work. The MLSP defines and supervises the regulations for learners’ protection during the ‘WBL at an employer’ implementation (MLSP, 2016), while the relevant trade union submits proposals for improving the conditions for ‘WBL at an employer’ (MES, 2019).

The WBL Guidelines (MES, 2022) bring together in one place all the necessary information for employers and VET institutions to prepare for the implementation of the ‘WBL at an employer’ curriculum.

6. WORK-BASED LEARNING IN INITIAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

6.1 Typology of programmes with embedded work-based learning elements

In North Macedonia, there are three types of VET programmes with a duration of two years (MQF level 2) (these are offered but the number of learners is negligible), three years (MQF level 3) and four years (MQF level 4). WBL is part of all of these, in different shares. All envisage at least a period of 'ferial practice'.

Table 3: Types of IVET programmes and qualifications

Final qualification	EQF/ MQF	Duration (years)	Provider	From age
Certificate / 'Uverenie' ²¹	2	2	VET institutions	15
Diploma	3	3	VET institutions	15
Diploma	4	4	VET institutions	15

The report focuses on the four-year VET programmes, which enrol 93% of all VET learners (ETF, 2023a), and particularly on 'dual VET programmes', which are one of the two types of four-year VET programmes:

Reformed VET programmes, piloted in 2017, were implemented in 2019 in all secondary VET schools and RVCs, with learners from the first year. The 'WBL at an employer' component was to take place in the third and fourth year of all VET programmes, as was the ferial practice at the end of the school year.

Dual VET programmes: in 2021, the four-year reformed VET programmes were adapted to include a higher share of WBL, both the 'WBL at an employer' component and the ferial practice. They were based on the 'dual education and training' concept and were named 'Curricula with a higher number of hours for practical education'. The changes since 2021 are:

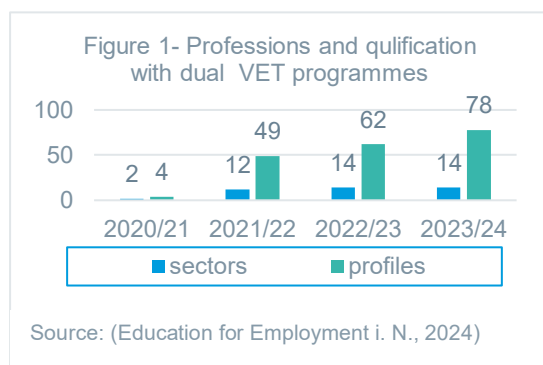
- the 'WBL at an employer' component starts in the second year of four-year VET programmes (previously it started in the third year) for four hours per week, increasing to eight hours per week in the third year, and 10 hours per week in the fourth year. The curriculum can be tailored to the employer's needs;
- the number of hours for ferial practice was increased to: a minimum of 60-80 hours (10 days) after the first year, a minimum of 90-120 hours (15 days) after the second year, and a minimum of 120-160 hours (20 days) after the third year of four-year VET programmes²².

Most VET schools and RVCs offer both reformed VET programmes and dual VET programmes. VET institutions and verified employers (i.e. companies that meet certain quality conditions; [see section 6.14](#)) should sign a memorandum of understanding and additional documents guaranteeing the fulfilment of the necessary conditions for organising WBL. This is required before announcing yearly enrolment calls.

²¹ 'Uverenie' and 'Certificate' are different concepts under the Law on the NQF, although the English translation is the same: 'certificate'.

²² In the programme, the total allocated time for classes during the year is expressed in working days. The learner spends six to eight working hours per day at an employer, depending on the employer's business hours.

The growth of occupations and qualifications with dual education and training in the last four years is shown in Figure 1 (Education for Employment project, 2024).



The analysis²³ of seven four-year dual education and training programmes from seven randomly selected qualifications shows that WBL (including ferial practice) in the first year accounts for about 8% of the total training duration during that year; for the second year it is about 21-25% for most programmes; for the third year it is about 38%; and in the fourth year, WBL accounts for about 36% of the programme duration ('WBL at employer' only). The ratio of the number of hours for WBL in all years against the total number of hours in all years shows that WBL ranges from 26% to 28%²⁴.

Three-year VET programmes have the following percentage of WBL: in the first year, it is about 20-25%; in the second year it is about 35-45%; and in the third year about 50%. However, these programmes will not be analysed because the number of learners is very small and is decreasing every year.

In the 2023/2024 school year, out of the total of approximately 17 000 learners enrolled at upper-secondary level, 67% are in VET programmes. The total number of VET learners in dual education and training is around 3 900 (otherwise said, 34% of the total number of VET learners enrolled at upper secondary level, or 23% of all learners in upper secondary education). 93% of learners in dual VET programmes are enrolled in four-year programmes, 7% in three-year programmes²⁵. The Education for Employment project data for the end of the 2021/22 – 2023/24 school years shows the growth of learners in dual education and training over the years – see Figure 2.

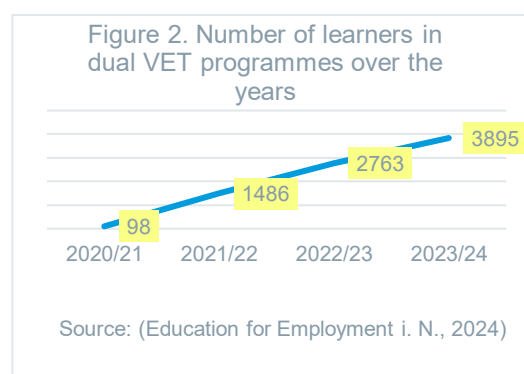


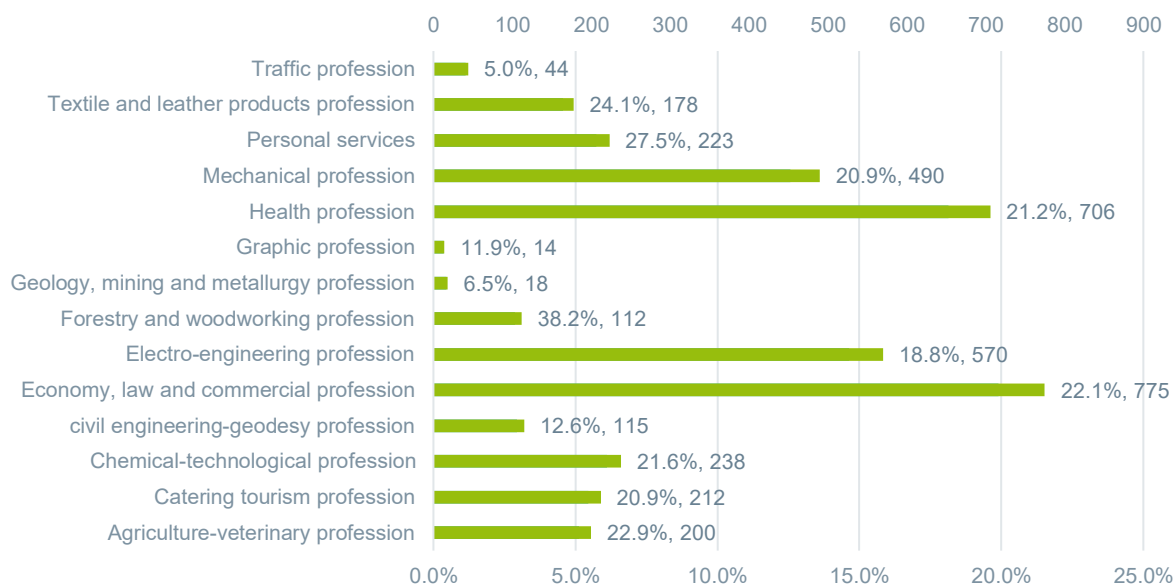
Figure 3 shows the number and percentage share of learners in dual education and training by occupation. 65% (or 2 541 learners) of all learners in dual VET programmes are enrolled in the following four occupations: health, electrical engineering, economics (law and trade), and mechanical occupations.

²³ WBL share calculations were based on class duration, not the number of teaching hours; as per the Law on Secondary Education, a class is 45 minutes, and a WBL session lasts 60 minutes.

²⁴ These calculations exclude 'Content programmed by the school' as the 'Concept of modernisation of technical education' stipulates that this is not mandatory for learners. The percentages of WBL time, out of total time spent in school and on the job (ferial practice and WBL at an employer) for seven qualifications from seven professions are presented in Annex 1.

²⁵ Calculation based on the Excel tables provided by the VET Centre on 22 March 2024, which were sent by the MES.

Figure 3. Number of learners in dual VET programmes by profession in the 2023/24 school year, and percentage of the total number of students in dual VET programmes compared to the total number of students in the profession



Source: Maurer and Spasovski, 2024

The quality criteria (paragraphs 6.2 to 6.14) apply to four-year dual education and training programmes including 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice.

6.2 Written agreement (Criterion 1)

To implement WBL in dual VET, a written tripartite contract is signed between the employer, the VET institution and the learner or parent/guardian (if the learner is not yet 18 years old) before the learner starts WBL, usually in the second year. This is referred to as the 'Contract for the realisation of practical education of a learner at an employer' (*Договор за реализација на практично образование на ученикот кај работодавец*) (MES, 2022). The learner usually signs one contract with one employer over the three-year period (as there is no WBL in the first year). Until the start of the 2024/2025 school year, the contracts were recorded in the Register of Signed Contracts for WBL, which was maintained by the respective Chambers²⁶, and shared every three months in the form of a report with the MES and the VET Centre (MES, 2022). The requisite of recording contracts in the Register of Signed Contracts for WBL of the respective chambers is no longer necessary (Interviewee 12, 2024). Currently VET institutions keep the contracts and inform the MES and the VET Centre about them. The draft contract template, defined in the WBL Guidelines, sets a maximum of eight hours of training per working day. It also defines the start and end dates for both 'WBL at an employer' and the ferial practice. The relevant WBL curriculum ([see section 6.3](#)) defines the weekly (not daily) number of hours. Some employers prepare contracts that are different from the recommended type. The State Education Inspectorate (SEI) has the authority to inspect those documents. Some employers also prepare annexes to the contract, with provisions for learners' financial compensation.

The WBL Guidelines recommend that the contract requires learners to attend WBL, to follow instructions, to take care of property and to maintain confidentiality. Parents/guardians of learners are liable to compensate for any intentionally caused damage. Employers participate in the planning and implementation of a work plan, provide appropriate conditions for the learner, appoint an in-company mentor and attend meetings with the learner, the parent/guardian and the teacher.

²⁶ The Chamber of Craft for contracts with craftspeople, and the Economic Chamber for contracts with companies.

The new VET law states that 'ferial' practice can be organised by the employer on the basis of a contract signed with the VET institution in which the employer guarantees that it fulfils the verification standard obligations.

The contract can be terminated by any party, due to the learner's absence, or the employer's non-compliance with the regulations or failure to fulfil the learning, working and safety conditions.

6.3 Learning outcomes (Criterion 2)

The WBL curriculum is prepared by the VET Centre for each year of the four-year VET programmes. It defines modular units, learning outcomes and teaching activities for 'WBL at an employer' for two (out of three or more, [see section 6.5](#)) modular units. These are quite general, and they are the same for all occupations, although they may be adapted if needed (if a certain module is not relevant for a specific employer it may be shortened or substituted with a more relevant one). The third module, and additional ones if applicable, must be prepared by the VET institution and the in-company mentor. They are called 'Specific-occupational modular unit/s' and should be developed for each employer. Accordingly, learning outcomes are defined by the employer (in cooperation with the VET institution) and reflect the employer's activity – hence they are generally different for each employer. However, they should be aligned with the qualifications and the respective qualification standards. The third module, and additional modules if applicable, are presented and discussed at a teachers' meeting at each VET institution, then endorsed/signed by the director of the institution. A copy is then sent to the VET Centre.

A committee made up of relevant teachers established at the VET institution develops a 'short curriculum' for ferial practice each year and for each dual education and training qualification. It contains some of the learning content of the corresponding qualification and usually has two or three modular units and respective learning outcomes. These are developed taking into consideration the duration of the ferial practice and the capacities of the company regarding available equipment, activities, and learning and working conditions. The curricula are discussed at the VET institution's teachers' meetings and then approved by the director of the institution.

6.4 Pedagogical support (Criterion 3)

The employer undertakes to appoint an in-company mentor to work with the learner (to share experience, knowledge and skills and supervise the learner) and provide conditions for achieving the goals and learning outcomes set in the WBL curriculum, for both 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice.

The VET Centre defined the requirements for in-company mentors in the 'Standard for professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers' (VET Centre, 2014). The in-company mentor must have at least three years of relevant work experience, be an employer or an employee of the employer where the learners carry out WBL, and have completed training (certified, see below) for in-company mentors organised by the respective Chambers²⁷. The VET Centre also prepared the 'Manual for the training of professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers' (VET Centre, 2015), and corresponding curricula, and participates in the implementation of the training.

At the request of employers, the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia organises training for in-company mentors to develop competences for working with learners who carry out 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice, including learners with disabilities. The Skopje Chamber of Crafts conducts training for in-company craft activity mentors to work with learners who carry out 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice. Experienced craftspeople who have passed the Master Craftsperson

²⁷ In accordance with the new Law on VET, RVCs and Chambers are responsible for organising training for in-company mentors. A Ministerial decision has been adopted on the accreditation of in-company mentor training organisations, based on an opinion on the fulfilment of standards.

examination²⁸ or possess alternative certificates²⁹ are exempt from training (VET centre, 2014). The three-day training programme for in-company mentors organised by both Chambers includes communication, WBL planning, monitoring and evaluating the progress of learners, etc. The Chambers issue personal certificates that have no expiry date and are signed by the VET Centre and the respective Chamber. The employer pays the Chamber for in-company mentors to attend the training.

The WBL coordinator is a new key position at VET institutions who liaises between VET teachers and employers. In some schools it is a part-time job, while in others it is full time. On at least two occasions, WBL coordinators have taken a 15-day training course – supported by KulturKontakt (2017-2021) and the Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD) (2021-2024) – for which participants received a certificate signed by the VET Centre and by representatives of the OeAD. WBL coordinators have also participated in training by the OeAD to build skills relating to management, mentoring, standards and quality indicators, networking, etc. The VET Centre is the institution responsible for the coordination and training of WBL coordinators. However, it still relies on various projects to finance this training.

Representatives of the SEI also attended some of the training courses, especially those related to quality indicators.

WBL teachers are VET institution teachers of a given qualification, whose role is to cooperate with in-company mentors on a daily basis, monitor implementation of the curriculum and learners' progress, enter grades, etc. Due to a shortage of certain types of VET teachers, such as engineers, WBL teachers are also general education teachers. WBL teachers take part in the 'Programming and planning of WBL at an employer for classes with a higher number of hours of practical education' training run by the VET Centre before the start of every school year.

6.5 Workplace component (Criterion 4)

The 2022 'Guidelines for work-based learning programming and planning' developed by the VET Centre, updated in August 2024 (VET Centre, 2024), state that the 'Curricula with a higher number of hours for practical education' provide flexibility and relevance, aligning learning content and learning objectives to be achieved, and enabling the implementation of WBL in accordance with the needs of employers.

The WBL curriculum for the **second year** of four-year VET programmes is common to all qualifications and consists of three modular units: i) Preparation for WBL at an employer; ii) Health and safety at the workplace; and iii) Specific occupational modular units. For the **third year**, the curriculum is the same for all qualifications and has three modular units: i) Preparation for WBL at an employer; ii) Behaviour at the workplace; and iii) Specific occupational modular units. The **fourth-year** WBL curriculum, developed in summer 2024 and presented during the training for WBL teachers and in-company mentors held before the start of the 2024/25 school year, follows the same pattern and has two general modules: i) Preparation for WBL at an employer; and ii) Preparation for employment; and also iii) Specific occupational modular units. The specific modules, created by the WBL teacher and the in-company mentor, define the units depending on the specific needs of the employer. Sometimes several employers have the same modules, and sometimes each company has a specific module.

Despite the requirement for WBL to be fully implemented at an employer, there are cases when the first month takes place at a school (for the first two modules) and then at an employer (third module and possibly others).

²⁸ The Master Craftsperson examination is post-secondary education and training that verifies candidates' ability to perform high-quality, independent professional work in organising and running an independent craft activity and WBL for learners.

²⁹ As an alternative to the current MasterCraft examination, people can be exempted from the relevant training if they present: a) The diploma obtained for the Master examination from 2008-2010 (issued within the framework of the Koblenz Chamber of Crafts Project); b) a certificate for mentors within the framework of the 'Support of modernisation of the system of education and training' twinning project, IPA IV Component (MK/2007/IB/SO/03); c) a professional certificate or evidence of implementing practical training at employers within the USAID YES Network project.

The curriculum for ferial practice is entirely work-based.

6.6 Pay and/or compensation (Criterion 5)

During the preparation of the report, the refined 2019 Law on VET (MES, 2019) was in force, which stated that the employer had the obligation to provide compensation for the learner's work in accordance with the conditions stipulated by the contract. The proposed draft contract, which is an integral part of the WBL Guidelines, talks about compensation for the learner's work if the employer and the learner/parent/guardian agree that compensation should be applied. The WBL Guidelines refer to another, separate contract only for the purpose of compensation for the learner's work. This is between the parent and the employer, with the VET institution being excluded, and the contract provides that any compensation should be paid in accordance with the current Law on VET. This means that the 2019 legislation did not provide for mandatory compensation; the reality is that some employers have been paying learners and some have not. This applies to both 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice. When compensation is paid, it is treated as payment of a part-time worker's salary, that is, with personal income tax deducted, and there is no exemption from taxes for minors.

The new 2025 Law on VET elaborates on mandatory learner compensation and establishes a minimum payment of at least 10-20%³⁰ of the minimum net salary. Social partners, who were involved in the law on the development of working groups, can influence the amount of mandatory learner compensation.

In order to increase the attractiveness of dual education and training, since 2021 the MES has announced competitions for 1 500 scholarships every year; learners can apply for a monthly amount of MKD 3 500 (approximately EUR 57) for nine months of the year³¹.

6.7 Social protection and work, health and safety condition (Criteria 6 and 7)

The employer is responsible for protecting the learner from any kind of abuse. The VET institution provides collective insurance for learners, which is usually valid for 24 hours/day, which also covers when they are at the employer's premises. It covers medical expenses, permanent disability or death as a result of an accident. Learners do not receive pension insurance.

Before starting the 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice, the learner must complete a mandatory basic school-based training course on health and safety at work, and receive the relevant certificate. The in-company mentor is also obliged to familiarise learners with the specific regulations and measures for safety and protection at work, which learners are obliged to respect. The employer should have protection in place at work, the type of which depends on the qualification and the workplace.

The MLSP supervises workplace protection during the implementation of WBL, and the employer must pay a fine if they fail to comply. The State Labour Inspectorate has the right to prohibit work in a workplace following an inspection (MLSP, 2015). The Law on Labour (MLSP, 2016) provides special protection for workers under 18 years of age regarding working time and breaks, rest, paid holidays, leave of absence from work, or incapacity for work due to illness.

³⁰ 10% in the second year, 15% in the third year, and 20% in the fourth year.

³¹ MES website: <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=6097>

6.8 Regulatory framework (Criterion 8)

Employers can offer WBL if their companies meet the required standards in terms of space, equipment and staff. The standards are set by the VET Centre, approved by the MES, and adopted by the national Chambers (the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, the Union of Chambers of Macedonia, and the Chamber of Craft) for their respective sectors (VET Centre, 2014). Chambers verify employers' fulfilment of these standards.

The 2020 Concept for WBL (MES, 2020a) (*Концепт. Учење преку работа во Република Северна Македонија*): i) contains general information about VET in the context of WBL; ii) defines key VET stakeholders and WBL benefits, roles and responsibilities; and 3) explains the key areas/elements of WBL.

The 2019 refined Law on VET and the new 2025 Law on VET provide for fines if, following an inspection, it is found that the employer: carries out WBL before the relevant Chamber's adoption of a decision on the fulfilment of conditions in terms of space, equipment and adequate staff; does not provide protection at work; has not signed a contract with the VET institutions and with the learner for the implementation of WBL; does not compensate the learner for WBL.

6.9 Involvement of social partners (Criterion 9)

The Chambers play a key role in dual education and training, as they, in cooperation with the VET Centre, deliver training for in-company mentors, verify employers for the implementation of WBL, and submit an annual report to the MES. They support employers in connecting with VET institutions and maintain a list of employers willing to engage learners for 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice.

Employers' willingness to accept learners for 'WBL at an employer' is growing year by year. In the 2021/2022 school year, 211 companies were involved, while in 2023-2024 there were 259 dual classes with 3 895 learners in 560 companies.

Table 4: Number of learners, classes, schools and companies involved in dual education and training in 2020-2024

Academic year	Learners	Classes	Schools	Companies
2020/21	98	11	8	16
2021/22	1486	97	46	210
2022/23	2763	225	61	450
2023/24	3895	259	61	560

Source: <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=6097>

In the enrolment call for the 2024/2025 school year, 650 companies expressed interest in dual education and training (Education for Employment project, 2024b). However, the Economic Chamber's 'Praksa' Portal³², which aims to improve cooperation between all key stakeholders on dual education and training has a list of only 187 verified employers for WBL (Economic Chamber, 2024).

The 2019 Law on VET provides that the representative trade union, SONK, has the right to propose improvements for WBL conditions and is responsible for protecting learners from exploitation. Usually, SONK focuses on its members (teachers) and not on learners, as they are not SONK members. The 2025 Law on VET suggests that SONK should approach the VET Centre and the Chambers with a view to improving WBL conditions.

³² Portal Praksa is a platform that facilitates the process of connecting employers with VET institutions. The platform enables employers to register and publish advertisements for WBL, VET institutions offering dual VET to register, and provides an overview of the relevant documentation, etc.

6.10 Support for companies (Criterion 10)

The 2019 refined Law on VET and the new 2025 Law on VET entitle employers to financial, customs and tax incentives. These are not being utilised, due to the need to operationalise them through new or adapted by-laws and rulebooks at several institutions, and because there is a lack of information campaigns about such incentives. For those reasons, the Government has urged the Economic and Social Council to make specific proposals for incentivising employers involved in dual education and training³³.

6.11 Flexible pathways and mobility (Criterion 11)

The modular units of the curriculum are defined by the MES. In addition to occupational competencies, some transferable and soft skills applicable in different contexts and environments are developed. With this, career development paths become wider. The WBL curriculum is worth 19-26 ECVET credits, out of a total of 240 ECVET credits, which is about 10% of the total number of ECVET credits for four-year qualifications.

In some cases, the two general modules are carried out at the VET institutions for a period of about one month, which means that one of the nine months of WBL is not carried out at an employer.

Usually, the modular units are not assessed separately, although this can also be done by the in-company mentor and the responsible VET teacher. The assessment process is usually done on a quarterly basis.

Changes in the WBL workplace are not regulated, although there are cases where learners change employer, either at the request of the learner or of the employer. In this case, the learning continues at the new employer in accordance with the specific modular units developed for the new employer.

Regarding mobility and when enrolling or moving from one level of education to the next or to different programmes at the same level, including 'WBL at an employer', differential examinations must be taken. If the learner has not attended the 'WBL at the employer', she/he will have to sign a contract and follow the same procedure as all learners, with the timing agreed upon between the learner and the employer. The 2025 Law on VET includes validation of non-formal and informal learning, delivered by the RVCs, while the 2025 Adult Education and NQF Laws establish the basis for this, allowing up to a year for institutional adaptation.

Learners on dual programmes have access to higher education if they choose to take the State Matura – monitored and assessed by a national assessment institution – instead of the final examination – generally managed by the VET institutions – giving access to the labour market.

6.12 Career guidance and awareness raising (Criterion 12)

Primary education in North Macedonia lasts for nine years, after which learners enrol in 'gymnasiums' or VET institutions. Information on employers linked with VET institutions, provided by MES public calls (explained in 6.13) and VET institution campaigns, helps learners make their career choices. After choosing the qualification and the school, the vast majority of learners stick to their choice.

There is no evidence that VET institutions provide career guidance services to help select companies for 'WBL at an employer'. Learners apply to VET institutions, which usually decide where the learners will conduct WBL, often in cooperation with learners and employers. How this is implemented in practice differs from school to school.

³³ MES website: <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=6097>

6.13 Transparency (Criterion 13)

The Economic Chamber's 'Praksa' Portal aims to improve cooperation between all key stakeholders and encourage rapid communication and transparency. The portal provides VET institutions with an overview of certified in-company mentors and verified employers. Employers can find an overview of VET institutions and the qualifications they offer, available WBL coordinators' contact details and the necessary documents.

Usually in March, the MES announces the enrolment of learners in public VET institutions for the school year starting in September. As a separate annex to the public call, there is a document that explains further which qualifications a VET institution offers and, for those qualifications, which employers it cooperates with. In addition to this, VET institutions often run information campaigns on local media and in primary schools, presenting employers who often accompany representatives of VET institutions.

Learners cannot apply directly to employers. Learners from cities that are not where the VET institution is located often conduct WBL in their cities of residence.

6.14 Quality assurance and tracking of apprentices (Criterion 14)

Quality assurance is implemented at several levels. At system level, quality assurance is carried out through the accreditation of VET institutions and qualifications implemented under the NQF. A proposal for the development of occupational standards for VET qualifications starts with a brief analysis of the relevant labour market sector and needs. Sectoral committees perform evaluations of existing qualifications and propose priorities for developing new qualifications.

At the intermediary level, the VET Centre and Chambers are the main responsible organisations. The VET Centre has defined the requirements for in-company mentors in the 'Standard for professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers', has developed the 'Manual for the training of professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers', develops the training programme and participates in the training. The VET Centre also designs standards for equipment and spatial conditions for WBL for employers. The Chambers are responsible for verifying fulfilment of the standards in terms of space, equipment and adequate staff at employers, verifying employers' implementation of WBL, keeping a register of verified employers, and organising training for in-company mentors for companies/crafts affiliated with the relevant Chamber. The Chambers also take part in the committees for final VET exams.

During the inspection, the SEI has the right to check WBL learners' portfolios ('Contract for the realisation of practical education of a learner at an employer' and learners' diaries).

At provider level (i.e. VET institutions and employers), VET institutions conduct an annual self-evaluation, checked by the SEI. It contains all elements of the schoolwork, grouped by areas where WBL is represented. The 2025 Law on VET introduces a new area in the self-evaluation framework – 'Cooperation with the labour market'. The requirements for WBL teachers' qualifications are defined in the WBL curriculum, although in practice it seems that there are deviations due to the lack of adequate staff.

At the level of WBL implementation, the WBL Guidelines talk about quality assurance by the employer and the VET institution at two levels. These are the assessment of the learner's achievements by the employer and the evaluation of the entire WBL process by VET institutions and employers.

The learner keeps a diary of completed tasks (for both 'WBL at an employer' and ferial practice) which the in-company mentor checks and approves (or not). Those responsible at the schools also check and approve it (or not), with their signature if applicable. The responsible person from the schools for 'WBL at an employer' is a respective WBL teacher, while for the ferial practice it is the class teacher. The diary and the contract are integral parts of the learner's portfolio. The in-company mentor for 'WBL at an employer' assesses, on a quarterly basis, soft and technical skills, knowledge and attitudes, according to a given form/questionnaire, and corrective measures are introduced if needed.

The grade of learners for 'WBL at an employer' is determined by the teacher based on that form or on the suggestions of the in-company mentor. The WBL process is evaluated by the in-company mentor and those responsible from the VET institution (WBL teacher and WBL coordinator) who answer eight groups of questions. In this context, training plans' ad hoc specifications, if any, can be explained. The in-company mentor does not assess the learners for ferial practice but only confirms that the learner attended that practice.

In terms of graduate tracking, there is no systematic approach in place to monitoring and evaluation concerning WBL provision, including in terms of outcomes and graduate tracking (e.g. company surveys).

6.15 Conclusions

Strengths

- For dual education, there is a written tripartite contract between the employer, the learner and the VET institution, covering the rights and obligations of the parties and defining the start/end dates and the duration of learning at the employer. A contract between the employer and the VET institution is needed to organise the 'ferial' practice. (Criterion 1)
- There is a system in place that requires the employer and the VET institution to agree in advance the learning outcomes to be achieved by the group of learners. (Criterion 2)
- Employers assign a qualified in-company mentor to train and supervise the learners. The quality and qualification criteria for in-company mentors, including certified training, are defined by the VET Centre³⁴. Mechanisms for cooperation and exchange between in-company mentors and WBL teachers in VET institution are in place. The newly introduced position, WBL Coordinator, ensures coordination between WBL teachers and employer. WBL teachers also support this function on a daily basis by monitoring implementation of the WBL curriculum. (Criterion 3)
- There are general guidelines for the coordination of work-based and school-based learning, and training plans are in place that ensure that WBL covers the comprehensive set of practical skills and competencies required for a qualification. (Criterion 4)
- The new 2005 Law on VET includes mandatory compensation for learners at a minimum 10-20% of the minimum national net salary. Since 2021, the MES has held annual competitions where learners enrolled in dual education and training can apply to receive a scholarship of MKD 3 500 (approximately EUR 57) per month for nine months of the year (decided centrally). (Criterion 5)
- VET institutions provide collective insurance for learners, covering medical expenses, and permanent disability or death as a result of an accident. (Criterion 6)
- Learners are informed and trained to apply the regulations on health and safety in the workplace correctly. (Criterion 7)
- Chambers are one of the key partners and are systematically involved in the design and implementation of WBL. The willingness of employers to accept learners for WBL in 'dual education' grew from 211 companies in 2021/2022 to 650 companies in 2024/2025. (Criterion 9)
- Public calls and information on employers associated with VET institutions are provided by the MES and VET institutions in their campaigns in primary schools and on their websites. (Criterion 12)
- Information about WBL opportunities and workplaces is relatively easily accessible for potential learners (and their parents) at the MES's enrolment calls and VET institutions. (Criterion 13)

³⁴ 'Standard for professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers', 'Manual for the training of professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers'.

- VET institutions and employers carry out yearly self-assessments, and the new 2025 Law on VET introduces a new area for self-evaluation: 'Cooperation with the labour market'. VET institutions are subject to periodic inspections carried out by the SEI. (Criterion 14)

Challenges / gaps

- There are no specific measures to support in-company mentors in micro-enterprises or SMEs, and they do not engage in continuous professional development activities. Professional development for staff at VET institutions does not include job-specific/technical competences. VET teachers and WBL coordinators bear a considerable burden in the design and organisation of their learners' WBL placements at different employers. Because of the lack of certain VET teacher profiles, WBL teachers increasingly do not have adequate qualifications and often lack the appropriate competences and training to carry out their functions. There is no organised and systematic provision of services to match learners' skills and abilities with the nature of companies/employers' activities (Criterion 3)
- Learners are not covered by any specific social protection (e.g. pension contributions). (Criterion 6)
- The regulatory framework for dual education and training is stratified, with multiple sources, including different definitions and provisions. The legal basis for 'dual education and training' should be operationalised, as the relevant Law on VET was adopted in January 2025. (Criterion 8)
- Existing conditions and mechanisms for social dialogue do not focus on WBL issues between all social partners. For example, employers' representative organisations and employees' representatives are marginally involved in the overall design and implementation of WBL. There has been no verification of craft practitioners so far. SONK did not exercise the right to bargain for improving working conditions for WBL learners. (Criterion 9)
- WBL is not supported financially by public authorities, thus preventing from putting in place cost-effective mechanisms for companies (although prescribed by law, new/adapted by-laws and rulebooks are needed for operationalisation). Funding for training WBL coordinators and VET teachers is not yet sustainable. (Criterion 10)
- At the time of this research, there were no mechanisms available that were ready to use systematically to validate learners' prior non-formal and informal learning. (Criterion 11)
- Good-quality and transparent information on WBL characteristics and opportunities does not seem to be systematically provided to all potential learners for awareness raising purposes. Career guidance by qualified professionals is not sufficiently developed under WBL schemes. (Criterion 12)
- Employers are not subject to periodic external quality assurance inspections on their WBL provision. There is no national quality assurance framework for WBL. No systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation concerning WBL provision, including outcomes and graduate tracking, is in place (e.g. company surveys). (Criterion 14)

7. WORK-BASED LEARNING IN CONTINUING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

7.1 Types of programmes with a work-based learning component

This chapter provides information on the following programmes, institutions and learners:

1. formal CVET programmes offered by VET institutions for learners who have completed IVET, entered working life, and want to move to the same IVET level but one leading to a different qualification; or they want to move to a higher level of education at levels III, IV or V of the NQF; and
2. non-formal adult education programmes offered by institutions/training providers verified by the AEC.

Participants in formal CVET programmes are part-time learners, often pursuing these programmes on their own initiative to improve their position in their companies. Learners may be either employed or unemployed. Teaching takes place in a consultative manner³⁵, except for the WBL curriculum where the learner's work experience (if they have any) may be partially or fully recognised ([see section 7.11](#)). Learners who enrol in CVET programmes at levels III and IV of the NQF follow the same rules as the full-time IVET learners described in the previous chapters. This applies to the whole spectrum of the IVET offer, including the 'WBL at an employer' share, and the nature of its implementation (VET Centre, 2023).

Post-secondary education and training at level V of the NQF is carried out as CVET. The NQF distinguishes two level Vs. These are V-A level – short professional study programmes in higher education, which are not the focus of this report – and V-B level, which are:

- specialist education and training;
- master craftsman examination.

'Specialist education and training' is organised by VET institutions, and the 'master craftsman examination' is organised by the Chamber of Crafts. Both last from six months to two years and can lead to the acquisition of 60-120 ECVET. The 2010 'Concept for post-secondary education' (MES, VET Centre, 2010) explains that the curricula for obtaining a full qualification contain four programme areas with the following classes and distribution among them: General education (10-15%), Vocational-theoretical (20-25%), Special-vocational (30-40%), and Specialist practice (which is considered on-the-job training) (30-40%).

Post-secondary education and training curricula are modularly designed. The teaching process for 'specialist education and training' is carried out mostly in a consultative manner³⁶. For the 'master craftsman examination', which consists of six newly developed programmes (one in the final stage of development), the Chamber of Crafts organises regular teaching and training. The programmes consist of four parts: practical, professional-theoretical, management-legal/economic, and pedagogical. The practical part, which is carried out as WBL, amounts to at least 25% of the total programme (Interviewee 7, 2024).

The Chamber of Crafts runs the 'master craftsman examination' for around 40 learners per year, while the number of learners for the 'specialist education and training' is on average around 350 per year in about 20 VET institutions (Interviewee 15, 2024).

Regarding non-formal adult education programmes (point II above), learners attempt to acquire occupational skills for employment and to fulfil their ambitions, or it may be an initiative of their

³⁵ The learner and the responsible teacher go through a series of meetings where the learner receives instructions on study materials and what to pay special attention to.

³⁶ Unless there are at least five candidates at the same time, in which case a school must organise preparatory teaching and training.

companies, if they are employed. The verification process by the AEC and MES ensures the quality of programmes (AEC, 2016). The AEC verifies the programmes with a WBL component for: i) a full qualification or part of a qualification; and ii) acquisition of skills and competences not referenced to the NQF. The MES is in charge of verifying training providers in addition to verifying the programmes. The share of the WBL component in verified non-formal adult education programmes is about 60–70%. The length of the verified programmes ranges from one month to one year, although the vast majority of programmes are about three months long³⁷.

In 2023, 3 457 adults were involved in a total of 380 training courses for a full qualification or part of a qualification. 55% of participants were male and 45% female. In the same year, there were 174 participants in 15 training courses for the acquisition of skills and competences (Interviewee 11, 2024). Not much is known about non-verified programmes.

Private training institutions also organise various types of CVET training with a large share of WBL, often in the IT field, but this training is not linked to the NQF, and is not covered by this report.

7.2 Written agreement (Criterion 1)

In accordance with the VET Centre Guidelines (VET centre, 2023) from December 2023 and the new 2025 Law on VET, the educational institution is required to sign a contract with the enrolled part-time learner. The contract stipulates the rights and obligations of the parties and defines any previous education/qualifications and experience acquired, and what programme should be attended. Learners should also sign a contract (the same as for IVET) with the company if they are to perform WBL.

The training providers verified by the AEC are also obliged to enter into a contract with learners for participation in non-formal adult education programmes. This contract, which is prepared by the training provider in accordance with the instruction prescribed by the AEC, stipulates the conditions for participation, such as place of training, duration of training, compensation, etc. (MES, 2018b).

7.3 Learning outcomes (Criterion 2)

VET institutions' programmes, and consequently the in-company part of dual education and training for CVET learners at levels III and IV of the NQF, are the same as for regular learners; everything specified for IVET applies also to CVET learners.

In the 'master craftsman examinations', learners participate in a training programme that includes both a theoretical and a practical component. External teachers are engaged mostly for the theoretical parts. Then, a committee is formed consisting of a representative of the VET Centre, a teacher from the appropriate field, and a master. The examination has a theoretical part and a practical part, and after candidates have passed these, the Chamber of Crafts issues a diploma.

Learning outcomes for post-secondary education and training in programmes of V-B level are clearly defined. Upon completion of the programme, the learners receive a diploma for post-secondary education and training. Learning outcomes are also defined for each of the non-formal adult education programmes verified by the AEC, which is one of the requirements for these programmes to be verified.

³⁷ Examples of the programmes include: hairdresser, masseur, makeup artists, confectioner, cook, façade maker, tile installer, installer of solar panels, etc. The verification is valid for three years, after which a new one is required. In the period 2012–2023, 870 programmes were verified, including those that were verified several times.

7.4 Pedagogical support (Criterion 3)

CVET programmes at VET institutions are implemented by the same teachers that are responsible for IVET. Consequently, all the information given relating to WBL teachers and in-company mentors ([section 6.4](#)) also applies here, including to ‘specialist education and training’ in formal CVET.

The non-formal adult education programmes are mainly implemented by WBL teachers. WBL teachers should acquire special training for working with adults, which is organised by the AEC and other appropriate institutions.

7.5 Workplace component (Criterion 4)

CVET programmes at levels III, and IV of the NQF have the same workplace component as IVET. Taking into account that the weekly number of hours for ‘WBL at employer’ in the third year of level IV is eight hours, and that the school year has 36 weeks, the total time for ‘WBL at employer’ will be 288 hours, i.e. 36 days. The time for ‘WBL at employer’ during the fourth year is 360 hours, which is 45 days. Taking into account that there are on average 20-22 working days in a month, the duration of WBL may be around two months as long as it takes place daily.

Specialist practice for level V-B ‘specialist education and training’ programmes, which is carried out as on-the-job training (WBL), represents about 30-40% of programmes, according to the ‘Concept for post-secondary education’ (MES, VET Centre, 2010).

Regarding the workplace component of non-formal AEC-verified programmes, the verification committee recommends that training providers include 60–70% of WBL in their programmes, although this is not a statutory requirement. The training provider should sign a contract with a company if they do not have the appropriate facilities for WBL. Some public VET institutions conduct on-the-job training in schools, when there is a company integrated within the school (Interviewee 9, 2024).

7.6 Pay and/or compensation (Criterion 5)

Learners on CVET programmes at VET institutions at levels III, IV and V-B of the NQF do not receive a wage or compensation when performing WBL at the companies where they are employed. However, the company where they work and usually carry out the WBL may cover the fees that learners need to pay to enrol in VET institutions.

In the case of non-formal AEC-verified programmes, learners pay to participate in the training. In many cases, verified training providers are contracted by State institutions (which is quite often the case, as State institutions are required by law to hire verified training providers), who pay the costs.

7.7 Social protection and work, health and safety conditions (Criteria 6 and 7)

If learners enrolled on CVET programme at VET institutions at levels III, IV or V-B of the NQF are employed, they benefit from the same social protection and health and safety at work measures as all regular workers.

The provisions of the Law on Labour Inspection are applied to inspection supervision at the workplace, for example, the inspector has the right to enter and inspect all work premises and workplaces and inspect all parts of the technical-technological labour process, means of work, protective measures and equipment, working conditions, business books, documents, contracts and other documents and acts of the employer. In order to eliminate any potential irregularities, the State Labour Inspectorate has the right: 1) to point out the irregularities and to determine a deadline for removal; 2) to order appropriate measures and activities within a certain deadline; c) to prohibit work in a workplace (MLSP, 2015).

7.8 Regulatory framework (Criterion 8)

The Law on Adult Education regulates various aspects of adult education and training, but WBL is not the focus of the refined 2018 Law on Adult Education or of the new 2025 Law on Adult Education.

The refined 2019 Law on VET regulates post-secondary education and training and defines its objective as in-depth training for work which requires specific competencies, knowledge and skills relating to technology and the management of operations in production and services. It is carried out according to modular curricula. The new 2025 Law on VET devotes an entire chapter to post-secondary education and training, but there are no references to dual VET in that chapter.

The Law on Craft regulates the conditions and rules for performing craft activities and organising craft chambers. It stipulates that the 'master craftsman examinations' are organised by the craft chambers and are mandatory for craftspeople who want to obtain a master qualification.

7.9 Involvement of social partners (Criterion 9)

The Law on VET defines the chambers as the main partners who submit proposals to the VET Centre for new and innovative curricula and new occupational standards, participate in the committees for the final VET examinations, and organise training for in-company mentors. The Law on Adult Education also identifies the chambers as the main social partners with a very similar role as they submit proposals for new and innovative curricula and new occupational standards to the AEC. In both cases, SONK is responsible for ensuring WBL conditions for learners, but there is no evidence that this provision is exercised. The new 2025 Law on VET mentions that SONK submits proposals to the VET Centre and chambers for improving the WBL conditions of students at employers.

The Economic Chamber of North Macedonia submits proposals to the VET Centre to develop examination programmes³⁸ for level V programmes, which are adopted by the MES. The Chamber of Craftsmen of Macedonia adopts the examination programmes for the 'master craftsman examination' with prior approval by the MES (MES, 2019).

7.10 Support for companies (Criterion 10)

No cost-sharing arrangements have been identified. After the enrolment fee is paid by the learner or by the company where he/she works (if employed), employers usually bear the costs associated with the placement and work-based training provision of learners.

7.11 Flexible pathways and mobility (Criterion 11)

CVET programme learners at levels III-IV of the NQF take examinations according to the curricula for regular learners. In WBL, if the learner has adequate work experience supported by a certificate with a description of their work tasks, the WBL teacher and the coordinator compare the tasks performed with the WBL curricula, and if there is a match of 70%, then prior learning is fully recognised. If the match is lower, then what needs to be taught is determined by the VET institution, and the learner is referred to an employer to conduct WBL, it being stressed that the organisation and timing of WBL should be agreed between the learner and employer.

When enrolling from one level of education to the next (such as from level III to IV), content that was not studied earlier, and which is an entry requirement, is determined, and the corresponding examinations must be taken in order for the learner to enrol at the next level.

Learners from NQF III, IV and V-B levels can enrol in post-secondary education and training, but they should provide a document of relevant work experience of three to five years. For example, learners who have completed NQF level III and have at least three years of relevant experience can join post-

³⁸ Examination programmes are programmes that determine the extent and type of knowledge, skills and competences that a candidate must have in order to pass an examination (matriculation, qualification etc).

secondary VET programmes at V-B level, while NQF level IV learners may enter directly (MES, 2019). Learners for the 'master craftsman examination', regardless of the previously completed NQF level, should have at least three years of experience as a craftsperson or five years as a worker in a relevant sector (MES, 2008).

Entry requirements for verified non-formal adult education programmes are defined for each specific programme by the training providers themselves and are checked before issuing verification. Usually, there are minimum requirements and desired entry requirements. Mobility towards formal education and training is currently not applicable, although new developments (bylaws and rulebooks), following the adoption of the new Law on the NQF in January 2025, are expected to enhance the integration of non-formal/informal and formal education and training.

7.12 Career guidance and awareness raising, and transparency (Criteria 12 and 13)

VET institutions increasingly promote their offer through cooperation with interested parties, social media, websites and personal contacts.

The AEC offers useful information on non-formal learning on its website, while verified training providers are those most active in promoting their offer. The Chamber of Crafts also raises awareness and understanding of WBL and of the 'master craftsman examination' on its website and in social media, but also does so in an informal way, through personal contacts.

There is no systematic initiative by WBL providers (employers) to promote their WBL vacancies and other information and advertisements on WBL.

7.13 Quality assurance and tracking of apprentices (Criterion 14)

Quality assurance is implemented at several levels. Quality assurance mechanisms for CVET programmes at NQF levels III-IV follow the same rules as those explained for IVET ([section 6.14](#)). Learners in post-secondary VET at level V-B take a specialist or a master craftsman examination and obtain a diploma. VET institutions conduct self-evaluations yearly, which are the basis for the development of a school development plan that is inspected by the SEI.

In order to be verified, any non-formal adult education programme referring to the acquisition of a qualification or part of a qualification should be developed in accordance with the occupational standards. The verification decision is issued for a duration of three years. The next step is the verification of training providers, guided by 'Rulebook on the standards, space, equipment and staff of adult education institutions' (*Правилник за стандардите, за просторот, опремата и кадарот на установите и институциите за образование на возрасните*) (MES, 2014).

The training provider conducts a self-evaluation for the continuous improvement of its quality in line with participants' needs. This process, guided by AEC-defined criteria, should be ongoing. AEC is informed through annual reports submitted by the provider on the implementation and evaluation of the programme.

The AEC also monitors and provides an external evaluation of the implementation of the verified programmes, in accordance with defined criteria. The monitoring reports are based on external evaluations and visits by the AEC. The director of the AEC, on the basis of the information reports collected, may make a decision to withdraw/revoke the verification.

After successfully completing the training, participants receive a certificate. In the programme verification process, training providers indicate the method, time and tools of assessment.

Verified training providers are not obliged to track learners in programmes that lead to a qualification or a part of a qualification, although some do track the learners on their own initiative after completion of the programme. The results sent to the AEC reveal 605 employed learners in 2023.

With regard to post-secondary education, quality assurance procedures for level V (internal and external evaluation) seem to be lacking.

7.14 Conclusion

Strengths

- VET institutions and CVET learners sign a contract for participation in formal CVET programmes that stipulates the rights and obligations of the parties. Similarly, institutions/training providers of non-formal education programmes sign a contract with learners. (Criterion 1)
- Learning outcomes for CVET programmes and non-formal education programmes are clearly defined. (Criterion 2)
- WBL teachers in CVET programmes undergo initial training. The institutions/training providers specify and propose the type of and requisites for personnel who can implement non-formal education programmes. (Criterion 3)
- Existing recommendations indicate that the share of WBL in non-formal education programmes should be 60-70%. (Criterion 4)
- The Law on VET regulates post-secondary education and training. The Law on Craft regarding 'apprenticeships' (traineeships in EU terms) regulates WBL in craft activities. (Criterion 8)
- Chambers are the key partners and are systematically involved in the design and implementation of WBL, including by submitting proposals to the VET Centre and the AEC for new and innovative curricula and new occupational standards. (Criterion 9)
- Prior WBL is fully or partially recognised for learners in CVET programmes at NQF levels III-IV. (Criterion 11)
- VET institutions and verified training providers provide information on their offer through cooperation with interested parties, social media, websites and personal contacts. The Chamber of Crafts raises awareness and understanding of WBL and of the 'master craftsman examination' on its website and in social media. (Criterion 13)

Challenges / gaps

- There seems to be no statutory source of regulation for the contract for implementing WBL between the learner and the company. (Criterion 1).
- Unemployed learners participating in CVET programmes at VET institutions are not covered by social and health protection at work measures. (Criterion 6 and 7)
- The legal framework is incomplete: the refined 2019 Law on VET does not define provisions for WBL in CVET, and the new 2025 Law on VET does not include specific provisions about WBL in CVET or post-secondary education (Criterion 8).
- There is no mechanism in place to promote structured and transparent dialogue between all social partners. Except for the Chambers, other social partners do not participate in the design and implementation of WBL. (Criterion 9)
- No financial support for companies (cost-sharing arrangements) has been identified. (Criterion 10)
- Following the adoption of the new Law on Adult Education and the new Law on the NQF in January 2025, a development of the relevant bylaws and rulebooks is required in order to operationalise the recognition and validation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired during WBL in non-formal education programmes, in formal education and in the training system. Cross-border mobility for learners in CVET programmes and non-formal adult education programmes has not been identified. (Criterion 11)

- Career guidance by qualified professionals is not systematically developed under CVET schemes, including WBL. Informal channels, e.g. personal contacts, seem to be used more than formal ones. (Criterion 12)
- Employers or providers of WBL usually do not include information on the terms and conditions of WBL in their vacancy notices and advertisements (either for CVET or for non-formal education programmes). (Criterion 13)
- There is a lack of quality assurance procedures for level V (internal and external evaluation). (Criterion 14)

8. WORK-BASED LEARNING IN ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

8.1 Types of programmes with a work-based learning component

According to the ESARNM Operational Plan for Active Programmes and Measures for Employment and Services (OP) for 2024, the Annual Report for 2023, and the interviews and consultations conducted with ESARNM representatives for the purpose of this report, five ALMP programmes managed by the ESARNM have a minimum WBL component of 25%. These are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: ALMP programmes managed by the ESARNM

Programme	Duration
Internship	Usually for a period of 3 months when it is implemented as ALMP defined in the OP. No minimum duration is defined, maximum 6 months when implemented on the free market.
Training for occupations in demand on the labour market	Fixed duration of 3 months.
Training for drivers	Fixed duration of 1 month.
On-the-job training for a specific employer	No minimum duration is defined, maximum 3 months.
Professional training qualifications according to the requirements of employers	Minimum of 3, maximum of 4 months.

Source: ESARNM OP for 2024, ESARNM Annual Report for 2023, and interviews/consultations

In North Macedonia, terms other than 'traineeship'³⁹ are used for the WBL component of ALMPs. However, in this chapter, the quality criteria of the EU Quality Framework for Traineeships are applied.

The Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment (MLSP, 2012) is the basis for preparation of the OP, although the law does not contain specific requirements for types of active programmes and measures for employment. The Internship programme is implemented as an ALMP defined in the OP or on the open market. The legal basis for the Internship programme on the open market is the Law on Internships (Chapter 2). The 'Training for drivers' is regulated by the Law on Road Traffic Safety and the 'Rulebook on the criteria, the working method of driving schools'. Other measures are prepared by the OP and made available on an annual basis.

Internship as an ALMP under the OP is still the most popular programme: the number of interns over the years 2019-2024 is on average approximately 1 500 per year. However, the number fluctuates frequently, ranging from around 1 300 to 1 700. The aim of the programme is to acquire the practical knowledge and skills needed to perform work tasks in certain workplaces. It is not based on occupational competence and is not linked to qualifications registered in the NQF. The curricula, prepared by the employer, sets out activities and work tasks for each month, which are divided into theoretical and practical activities (this basically defines how much of the training is theoretical/practical), and the skills and knowledge that the intern will acquire. The largest part of the training is always work-based. The beneficiary target group is decided on an annual basis by the ESARNM; for 2024, the internship programme targets unemployed people aged up to 29 with a minimum of an upper-secondary education, with no previous work experience.

³⁹ From 2025, the term *traineeship* will be used instead of the term *internship*.

The procedure to apply for the internship programme includes a public call and/or notification to employers / internship providers and the unemployed, followed by the application process for participation in the programme and verification of fulfilment of criteria by the interested parties. After the matching process conducted by the ESARNM, cooperation is formalised in a contract ([see section 8.2](#)).

Table 6: Number of unemployed people participating in the internship programme offered through the ESARNM in 2019-2024

Participants / Years	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Males	608	609	488	542	598	
Females	1,089	935	795	978	977	
Total	1697	1544	1283	1520	1575	1300

Source: ESARNM Annual reports for 2019-2023, ESARNM OP for 2024

Another programme deserving attention due to the number of participants and its stable existence is 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market'. According to the 2024 OP, this programme aims to meet the needs of in-demand occupations, social services and qualifications leading to 'green jobs' and e-commerce, and to increase the employability of returnees (jobseekers who have returned from abroad). The available public announcement for this programme includes 23 different training courses⁴⁰.

The Technical Working Group (TWG), consisting of representatives of the ESARNM, AEC, MES and MLSP, defines which specific training courses will be offered to unemployed people. Once this is done, the AEC publishes an advertisement for training providers to participate in the programme, while the ESARNM publishes an advertisement targeting unemployed people. The selection of training providers and unemployed people is done by the TWG, and the enrolment criteria depend on the training courses concerned. The ESARNM requires that the third month out of the total of three months of training be WBL, which means that two months are theory and one is WBL. Training groups should be composed of at least of 10 trainees per group, otherwise training may not go ahead, except when the training provider accepts a smaller number of trainees. Trainees bear the costs of travel and/or accommodation if they want to participate in training that is not available in their place of residence.

Table 7 shows the number of participants by year. In 2023, the large number of participants is explained by the EU funded project 'Labour Market Activation of Vulnerable Groups' (2019-2024) taking over the management of these training courses. In 2022, the small number of trainees was due to technical reasons and, as a result, the training was cancelled for the 954 interested candidates.

Table 7: Number of participants in the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme in 2019-2024

Programme / Years	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Training for occupations in demand on the labour market	726	304	233	129	1079	620

Source: ETF database for 2019-2021, ESARNM Annual reports for 2022 and 2023, and ESARNM OP for 2024

The three remaining programmes included in Table 5 are presented below for the sake of completeness. However, they will not be analysed according to the EU criteria because the number of participants over the last few years has been very small (see Table 8).

The 'On-the-job training for a specific employer' programme obliges the employer to employ at least 50% of the trainees on a full-time basis for at least three months after the training has finished, and not to reduce the total number of workers for a certain period. This makes this training not very attractive

⁴⁰ Such as: fitter and installer of solar panels; caregivers for persons with disabilities; graphic and web design; manicure and pedicure; confectioner; cook; etc.

to employers, even though the ESARNM offers them compensation of approximately EUR 400 per trained person and offers trainees approximately EUR 180 per month. The employer must implement the programme in line with the previously established plan and appoint a mentor. Learners sign an agreement for taking part in the training.

The 'Professional training qualifications according to the requirements of employers' programme is conducted by verified training providers. The ESARNM provides compensation to employers of approximately EUR 500 per trained person, and to trainees of approximately EUR 180 per month. Two agreements are signed, an individual agreement between the trainee and the ESARNM, and another agreement between the ESARNM and the training provider.

The 'Training for drivers' programme is offered at licensed driving schools. Considering that driving on public roads (during night and day) is WBL, the percentage of WBL amounts to 45-60% (MIA, 2019).

Table 8: Number of participants in the 'On-the-job training for a specific employer', 'Professional training qualifications according to the requirements of employers' and 'Training for drivers' programmes in 2019-2024

Programme / Years	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
On-the-job training for a specific employer	94	61	59	8	15	184
Professional training qualifications according to the requirements of employers	96	13	95	15	165 ⁴¹	80
Training for drivers		50	50	100	100	150

Source: ETF database for 2019-2021, ESARNM Annual Report for 2022- 2023 and OP for 2024

8.2 Conclusion of a written agreement (Criteria 2 and 3)

Internship as an ALMP of the OP: A written tripartite internship contract is entered into between the intern, the ESARNM and the internship provider/employer. The contract, which is not an employment contract, stipulates the rights and obligations of the parties, the start and end date and the minimum number of weekly working hours⁴². Termination of the contract without prior notice (urgent) must be mutually agreed upon, and if the intern or internship provider/employer terminates the contract, they must inform the other party, as well as the respective Employment Centre with two weeks' notice. The contract lists the reasons for termination, such as unsatisfactory level of professional performance of the intern, non-compliance with the contract, etc. The ESARNM pays the monthly internship allowance amount for the period that is advertised (this is usually three months). The amount paid is part of the contract.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: Two contracts are usually concluded for implementation of this programme; one is between the ESARNM and the trainee, and the other is between the ESARNM and the training provider. The contracts stipulate the rights and obligations of the parties, compensation amount, location and duration of the training (total, per day and weekly).

8.3 Learning and training objectives (Criteria 4 and 5)

Internship as an ALMP of the OP: The internship programme contract is general for all interns and does not include specifics for individual interns such as: i) a description of the goals and the process of on-the-job-learning of an individual intern; or ii) a description of the tasks that an individual intern will do. However, development of curricula for internships is a compulsory part of the internship provider's application process in this programme. An integral part of the curricula is a description of the work activities and tasks, the skills and knowledge that the intern will acquire (training plan), for which the

⁴¹ This was the planned number as the annual report does not give information on actual signed agreements. There were in fact 147 interested candidates.

⁴² Night shifts are not allowed

intern will be hired and which he/she will carry out every month. The contract and the curriculum are considered to be a single set of documents.

The internship provider is obliged to present a monthly attendance report for each intern containing brief descriptions of the activities of the intern for each day, along with signed evidence of working time. At the end of the training, a final report and evaluation of the internship should be prepared, which are needed for payment to be made.

The internship provider is required to appoint a mentor to guide interns, assign tasks for them, and monitor and assess their progress. Mentors are employees without any specific qualifications, since there are no relevant provisions concerning educational or professional requirements or training for them.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: Considering that the ESARNM works with programmes verified by the AEC, during the verification process, the training provider defines the goals of the programme, its content and modules, the learning outcomes, the duration of the programme, the relationship between theory and WBL, the way of assessing candidates, etc. All of these elements are different from programme to programme. Since the duration of the verified programme and the ESARNM's programme may differ (the verified programme may be longer than three months, which is usually the maximum duration of the ESARNM's support), the training provider is sometimes required to adjust the programme, which it does by adjusting the training plan.

The training provider is also obliged to submit a monthly attendance report for each trainee and a report on the implementation of the training plan for the previous month. At the end of the training, a final report and evaluation of the training should be prepared and submitted. All these are conditions for receiving the monthly and final payments.

Good-quality staff, who are themselves assessed on their verification skills and knowledge, should be selected to carry out verifications of training providers.

8.4 Working conditions applicable to trainees (Criteria 6, 7 and 8)

Internship as an ALMP of the OP: The internship provider should provide protection measures at work, if these are mandatory in the workplace where the internship programme is carried out, and should also ensure the confidentiality of the intern's personal data and protection of their privacy. The intern's work may be arranged in shifts, but it must not be performed between 22:00 and 06:00. The number of working hours of the intern should not exceed 40 hours per week, from Monday to Saturday.

Unemployed people who join the internship programme receive a monthly allowance in the amount of MKD 11 000 (approximately EUR 180) per month, out of which MKD 3 000 (approximately EUR 50) will be paid by the ESARNM as insurance for disability and physical damage caused by injury at work and occupational disease, and towards personal income tax for a period of up to three months.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: The training provider is obliged to provide the means for conducting the training, the materials, hygienic-technical and protective equipment.

Compensation is paid to trainees by the ESARNM in the amount of MKD 11 000 or approximately EUR 180 (this comprises about EUR 130 per month plus about EUR 50 for insurance for disability and physical damage caused by injury at work and occupational disease, and towards personal income tax). If the trainee is employed while participating in the training, he/she can continue the training, but will not be financially compensated. Training providers receive compensation of about MKD 30 000 (approximately EUR 490) per trainee.

There are no specific provisions related to working conditions and confidentiality and ownership of intellectual property.

8.5 Rights and obligations (Criterion 9)

Internship as an ALMP of the OP: The intern is obliged to dedicate their working time to the assigned tasks, to use protective measures at work, to keep confidential data and to compensate for any possible damage due to negligence. The internship provider defines the goals and tasks of the internship and makes it publicly available in an advertisement during the application process. In addition, the internship provider provides a mentor to instruct and monitor the intern, and provides appropriate working conditions, protective measures and materials and the means to work.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: The selected trainee must attend the training regularly and conduct WBL. If the trainee is unable to attend the training, they must inform the training provider within 24 hours and submit the relevant documents to justify the absence. The trainee should be disciplined, respect the prescribed order, keep the property and tools in proper condition and handle the materials entrusted to them conscientiously. If the trainee causes damage due to reckless behaviour or negligence, they are obliged to compensate for this. Candidates who stop attending the training for unjustified reasons are deleted from the record of unemployed people for one year.

8.6 Reasonable duration (Criteria 10, 11 and 12)

Internship: In the OP plan for 2024, the ESARNM provides funding for up to three months, while in accordance with the Law on Internships the duration of the internship can be up to six months.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: In 2024, the ESARNM introduced a requirement that the third month out of the three months in total should be WBL. This may cause the original AEC-verified programmes to be adjusted, as the percentage of WBL in programmes may differ from this requirement.

8.7 Proper recognition of traineeships (Criterion 13)

Internship: The internship provider should issue a certificate to the intern for the completed internship, that is, for the acquired knowledge, skills and competences, as well as a description of the internship and its duration. Internships do not lead to a recognised (partial or full) qualification.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: Unemployed people who complete the training and pass the examination verifying their acquired knowledge and skills before the committee, receive a certificate issued by the verified training providers prescribed by the MES. The 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme usually leads to a recognised (partial or full) qualification. However, mobility towards formal education and training is currently not in place – following the adoption of the new law on the NQF in January 2025, the relevant by-laws and rulebooks need to be developed to operationalise improved mobility between formal and non-formal/informal education and training.

8.8 Transparency requirements (Criteria 14 and 15)

Internship: The ESARNM promotes the internships every year, inviting both internship providers and unemployed people to participate on its website. In addition, employment fairs are held periodically, where useful information for all ALMP programmes is disseminated through direct contacts.

Training for occupations in demand on the labour market: The ESARNM promotes and supports the ALMP programme, disseminates information through its website, and occasionally organises and takes part in employment fairs. The AEC provides most of the information on the verified training providers, and training providers also promote themselves.

8.9 Use of European Structural and Investment Funds (Criterion 18)

North Macedonia has access to a range of EU funding instruments and donor projects to support human capital development and its preparation for EU accession.

The EU has supported, through IPA funding, the implementation of eight projects on boosting employment for jobseekers and other vulnerable groups, including with direct grants, twinning projects and projects for strengthening the capacities of the ESARNM. The direct grant schemes have included an internship component in several project components, which was considered a successful model and was improved from one project to another, for example, the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' and the internship programme⁴³.

As an EU candidate country, North Macedonia has been required to build its capacities and prepare strategies for future use of EU-specific funds for traineeships and other human capital development actions, in particular pre-accession funds (namely IPA) as well as post-accession funds such as the European Social Fund (ESF). As per the 2023 EC country progress report, there is a moderate level of preparation for participation in the European Social Fund, and the public bodies need to build their capacities to use EU funds.

8.10 Conclusions

Strengths

Internships are based on a written contract signed between the intern, the internship provider and the ESARNM. Two contracts are usually signed for implementing the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme, one between the ESARNM and the trainee, and the other between the ESARNM and the training provider. All contracts stipulate the rights and obligations of the parties. (Criterion 1)

Internship curricula state the work activities and tasks, and the skills and knowledge that the intern will implement and acquire (training plan). For the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme, training providers define the learning outcomes. The internship provider designates a mentor to guide, monitor and assess interns' progress. For the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme, the training providers propose experienced personnel (mentors) who are also themselves assessed on their verification of programmes/training providers. (Criterion 2)

Rights and working conditions for internships under national law are respected, and the weekly working time is defined. For the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme, the ESARNM pays compensation to trainees and covers their insurance for disability and physical damage caused by injury at work and occupational disease, and personal income tax, for a period of up to three months. (Criterion 3)

The duration of the internship is reasonable; it is usually three months when implemented as ALMP, and a maximum of six months when it is on the open market. The 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme usually lasts three months. (Criterion 5)

The 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme usually leads to a recognised (partial or full) qualification, as the acquired knowledge and skills are examined by a committee consisting of representatives from the education and training sector (VET Centre, AEC, MES, training providers) and an observer from the ESARNM (Criterion 6)

Challenges / gaps

- Employers' reporting requirements (e.g. describing interns' activities on a daily basis) could be revised in the interest of efficiency. For example, a concrete learning plan could be designed and assessed for longer periods with clear learning and practice objectives. (Criterion 2).

⁴³ Supporting the employment of young people, long term unemployed and women; Supporting the employment of young people, long term unemployed and women II; Supporting the employment of young people. All projects available at <https://av.gov.mk/ipa-2007-2013.nsp.x>.

- For 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market', specific provisions related to working conditions and to confidentiality and ownership of intellectual property are absent. (Criterion 4)
- No certificate referenced to the NQF, recognising the intern's achievements, acquired experience etc., is issued. This would increase the transparency of the learning outcomes, thus improving the intern's employment prospects and labour market mobility. (Criterion 6)
- Internship providers are usually not very active in promoting and advertising information on the terms and conditions of the internship. (Criterion 7)
- The opportunity to spend part of the internship or 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' programme abroad is not yet available. This would be relevant under the European Commission's priorities in the area of VET mobility, Erasmus has supported opportunities for mobility, etc. (Criterion 8).

ANNEX 1: PERCENTAGE OF WBL TIME OUT OF TOTAL TIME SPENT IN THE SCHOOL AND ON THE JOB (FERIAL PRACTICE AND WBL AT AN EMPLOYER)

The table below shows the percentage of WBL time out of total time spent in the school and on the job (ferial practice and WBL at an employer) for seven qualifications within seven professions, for each year of education and for the total programme.

Profession		Educational profile / qualification	WBL time out of total time spent in school per year of education (%)				Total respective programme (%)
			Year I	Year II	Year III	Year IV	
1	Geology, mining and metallurgy	Geological – mining technician – for a class with a higher number of hours of practical education	6.8-9.1	21-23.7	37-40.6	36.7	25.8-28.1
2	Electrical engineering	Electrician technician for high power – for a class with a higher number of hours of practical education	6.8-9.1	22,1-24.9	37-40.6	36.7	26.2-28.5
3	Agriculture, fisheries and veterinary medicine	Veterinary Medicine Technician - for a class with a higher number of hours of practical education	6.8-9.1	22.1-24.9	36.1-39.6	35.7	25.8-28.1
4	Health and social protection	Pharmacy technician for a class with a higher number of hours of lessons	6.6-8.8	21.5-24.3	35.3-38.7	34.8	25.2-27.4
5	Hospitality and tourism	Hotel restaurant technician for a class with a higher number of hours of practical education	6.4-8.6	22.1-24.9	37-40.6	36.7	25.8-28.1
6	Personal services	Cosmetic care and beauty technician for a class with a higher number of practical lessons	6.8-9.1	22.1-24.9	36.1-39.6	35.7	25.8-28.1
7	Economics, law and commerce	Economic technician for a class with a higher number of practical lessons	6.8-9.1	22.7-25.6	35.3-38.7	35.7	25.8-28.1

Source: Calculations by the author based on publicly available information on the VET Centre website, taken from decisions on 'Curricula with a higher number of hours of practical education' – signed by the MES.

ANNEX 2: DETAILS OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Organisation	Position	Date
Interviewee 1	Centre for the Development of VET	Senior Advisor	26.03.2024
Interviewee 2	Centre for the Development of VET	Senior Advisor	29.03.2024
Interviewee 3	ESARNM	Head of Sector for ALMP	29.04.2024
Interviewee 4	ESARNM	Head of Unit for EU integration	21.03.2024
Interviewee 5	ESARNM	Senior Advisor	17.04.2024
Interviewee 6	ESARNM	Senior Advisor	18.04.2024
Interviewee 7	Chamber of Craft – Skopje	CEO	11.04.2024
Interviewee 8	Economic Chamber of North Macedonia	Project Manager	15.04.2024
Interviewee 9	AEC	Head of Unit for the Preparation and Adoption of programmes	11.04.2023
Interviewee 10	AEC	Head of Department for the Development of Adult Education	11.04.2023
Interviewee 11	AEC	Head of Department for Quality Assurance, Development and Cooperation	11.04.2023
Interviewee 12	VET School SETUGS Mihajlo Pupin- Skopje (for electrical profiles)	Deputy Director – Coordinator for WBL	09.04.2024
Interviewee 13	SOMU 'Gostivar' VET School, Gostivar (medical profiles)	Coordinator for WBL	22.04.2024
Interviewee 14		Regional VET Centres Consultant; Consultant for a Sustainable Environment; WBL Expert	5.06.2024
Interviewee 15	Increasing the Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education EuropeAid/140265/IH/SER/MK, The European Union IPAll 2017 Programme	NKE	5.06.2024
Interviewee 16	ESARNM	Coordinator for the 'Training for occupations in demand on the labour market' measure	19.09.2024

ANNEX 3: QUALITY CRITERIA FOR APPRENTICESHIPS, BASED ON THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY AND EFFECTIVE APPRENTICESHIPS

Criteria for learning and working conditions

Written agreement

1. Before the start of the apprenticeship a written agreement should be concluded to define the rights and obligations of the apprentice, the employer, and where appropriate the vocational education and training institution, related to learning and working conditions.

Learning outcomes

2. The delivery of a set of comprehensive learning outcomes defined in accordance with national legislation should be agreed by the employers and vocational education and training institutions and, where appropriate, trade unions. This should ensure a balance between job-specific skills, knowledge and key competences for lifelong learning supporting both the personal development and lifelong career opportunities of the apprentices with a view to adapt to changing career patterns.

Pedagogical support

3. In-company trainers should be designated and tasked to cooperate closely with vocational education and training institutions and teachers to provide guidance to apprentices and to ensure mutual and regular feed-back. Teachers, trainers and mentors, specially in micro-, small and medium-sized companies, should be supported to update their skills, knowledge and competences in order to train apprentices according to the latest teaching and training methods and labour market needs.

Workplace component

4. A substantial part of the apprenticeship, meaning at least half of it, should be carried out in the workplace with, where possible, the opportunity to undertake a part of the workplace experience abroad. Taking into account the diversity of national schemes, the aim is to progress gradually towards that share of the apprenticeship being workplace learning.

Pay and/or compensation

5. Apprentices should be paid or otherwise compensated, in line with national or sectoral requirements or collective agreements where they exist, and taking into account arrangements on cost-sharing between employers and public authorities.

Social protection

6. Apprentices should be entitled to social protection, including necessary insurance in line with national legislation.

Work, health and safety conditions

7. The host workplace should comply with relevant rules and regulations on working conditions, in particular health and safety legislation.

Criteria for framework conditions

Regulatory framework

8. A clear and consistent regulatory framework should be in place based on a fair and equitable partnership approach, including a structured and transparent dialogue among all relevant stakeholders. This may include accreditation procedures for companies and workplaces that offer apprenticeships and/or other quality assurance measures.

Involvement of social partners

9. Social partners, including, where relevant, at sectoral level and/or intermediary bodies, should be involved in the design, governance and implementation of apprenticeship schemes, in line with national industrial relations systems and education and training practices.

Support for companies

10. Financial and/or non-financial support should be envisaged, particularly for micro-, small and medium-sized companies, enabling cost-effective apprenticeships for companies, taking into account, when appropriate, cost-sharing arrangements between employers and public authorities.

Flexible pathways and mobility

11. To facilitate access, entry requirements for apprenticeships should take into account relevant informal and non-formal learning and/or, if relevant, the accomplishment of preparatory programs. Qualifications acquired through apprenticeships should be included in nationally recognised qualification frameworks referenced to the European Qualifications Framework. Apprenticeships should allow access to other learning opportunities, including at higher education and training levels, career pathways and/or, where relevant, the accumulation of units of learning outcomes. Transnational mobility of apprentices, either at the workplace or education and training institutions, should be progressively promoted as a component of apprenticeship qualifications.

Career guidance and awareness raising

12. Career guidance, mentoring and learner support should be provided before and during the apprenticeship to ensure successful outcomes, to prevent and reduce drop-outs as well as support those learners to reengage into relevant education and training pathways. Apprenticeships should be promoted as an attractive learning pathway through widely targeted awareness-raising activities.

Transparency

13. The transparency of, and access to apprenticeship offers within and between Member States should be ensured, including with the support of public and private employment services as well as other relevant bodies, and, when appropriate, by using Union tools such as EURES as provided for in the EURES regulation.

Quality assurance and tracking of apprentices

14. Quality assurance approaches should be in place taking into account the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), including a process allowing a valid and reliable assessment of the learning outcomes. The tracking of employment and career progression of the apprentices should be pursued, in accordance with national and European legislation on data protection.

ANNEX 4: QUALITY CRITERIA FOR TRAINEESHIPS, BASED ON THE EUROPEAN QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR TRAINEESHIPS

1. Improve the quality of traineeships, in particular as regards learning and training content and working conditions, with the aim of easing the transition from education, unemployment or inactivity to work by putting in practice the following principles for a Quality Framework for Traineeships:

Conclusion of a written traineeship agreement

2. Require that traineeships are based on a written agreement concluded at the beginning of the traineeship between the trainee and the traineeship provider;
3. Require that traineeship agreements indicate the educational objectives, the working conditions, whether an allowance or compensation is provided to the trainee by the traineeship provider, and the rights and obligations of the parties under applicable EU and national law, as well as the duration of the traineeship, as referred to in recommendations 4-12;

Learning and training objectives

4. Promote best practices as regards learning and training objectives in order to help trainees acquire practical experience and relevant skills; the tasks assigned to the trainee should enable these objectives to be attained;
5. Encourage traineeship providers to designate a supervisor for trainees guiding the trainee through the assigned tasks, monitoring and assessing his/her progress;

Working conditions applicable to trainees

6. Ensure that the rights and working conditions of trainees under applicable EU and national law, including limits to maximum weekly working time, minimum daily and weekly rest periods and, where applicable, minimum holiday entitlements, are respected;
7. Encourage traineeship providers to clarify whether they provide coverage in terms of health and accident insurance as well as sick leave;
8. Require that the traineeship agreement clarifies whether an allowance or compensation is applicable, and if applicable, its amount;

Rights and obligations

9. Encourage the concerned parties to ensure that the traineeship agreement lays down the rights and obligations of the trainee and the traineeship provider, including, where relevant, the traineeship provider's policies on confidentiality and the ownership of intellectual property rights;

Reasonable duration

10. Ensure a reasonable duration of traineeships that, in principle, does not exceed six months, except in cases where a longer duration is justified, taking into account national practices;
11. Clarify the circumstances and conditions under which a traineeship may be extended or renewed after the initial traineeship agreement expired;
12. Encourage the practice of specifying in the traineeship agreement that either the trainee or the traineeship provider may terminate it by written communication, providing advance notice of an appropriate duration in view of the length of the traineeship and relevant national practice;

Proper recognition of traineeships

13. Promote the recognition and validation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired during traineeships and encourage traineeship providers to attest them, on the basis of an assessment, through a certificate;

Transparency requirements

14. Encourage traineeship providers to include in their vacancy notices and advertisements information on the terms and conditions of the traineeship, in particular on whether an allowance and/or compensation and health and accident insurance are applicable; encourage traineeship providers to give information on recruitment policies, including the share of trainees recruited in recent years;
15. Encourage employment services and other providers of career guidance, if providing information on traineeships, to apply transparency requirements;

Cross-border traineeships

16. Facilitate the cross-border mobility of trainees in the European Union inter alia, by clarifying the national legal framework for traineeships and establishing clear rules on hosting trainees from, and the sending of trainees to, other Member States and by reducing administrative formalities;
17. Examine the possibility to make use of the extended EURES network and to exchange information on paid traineeships through the EURES portal;

Use of European structural and investment funds

18. Make use of the European Structural and Investment Funds, namely the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, in the programming period 2014-2020, and the Youth Employment Initiative, where applicable, for increasing the number and quality of traineeships, including through effective partnerships with all relevant stakeholders;

Applying the quality framework for traineeships

19. Take appropriate measures to apply the Quality Framework for Traineeships as soon as possible;
20. Provide information to the Commission by the end of 2015 on the measures taken in accordance with this Recommendation;
21. Promote the active involvement of social partners in applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships;
22. Promote the active involvement of employment services, educational institutions and training providers in applying the Quality Framework for Traineeships;

ACRONYMS

AEC	Adult Education Centre
ALMP	Active labour market policies
BDE	Bureau for Development of Education
CVET	Continuing vocational education and training
ESARNM	Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organization
IVET	Initial vocational education and training
ME	Ministry of Economy
MEL	Ministry of Economy and Labour (since 2024)
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
MF	Ministry of Finance
MIA	Ministry of Interior Affairs
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
MQF	Macedonian Qualification Framework
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NQF	National qualifications framework
OeAD	Agency for Education and Internationalisation

OP	Operational Plan for Active Programmes and Measures for Employment and Services
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RVC	Regional VET Centre
SEC	State Examination Centre
SEI	State Education Inspectorate
SONK	Independent trade union for education, science and culture
SSO	State Statistics Office
TWG	Technical working group
VET	Vocational education and training
VET Centre	Centre for the Development of VET
WBL	Work-based learning
YG	Youth Guarantee
ZELS	Association of the units of local self-government

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