



QUALITY OF WORK-BASED LEARNING

Analysis of initial and continuing vocational education and training in Albania, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

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¹ ETF (2025), Work-based learning: an assessment per EU quality standards in [Albania](#), [Kosovo](#), [Montenegro](#), [North Macedonia](#) and [Serbia](#).

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence – hereinafter 'Kosovo'.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the quality of work-based learning (WBL) – including dual vocational education and training (dual VET) – across five Western Balkan countries: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The aim is to support and guide the design and delivery of quality WBL and dual VET in response to structural challenges in the region's education sectors and labour markets, including persistently low youth employment rates, high proportions of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) or who experience delayed or insecure school-to-work transitions. The comparative findings are intended to inform political dialogue at national, regional and international level, serve as a basis for reforms, promote closer alignment with European quality principles³ and provide guidance for further analytical and operational work.

The cross-country analysis draws on five ETF country assessments that applied a common analytical framework mirroring the 14 criteria of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship. These assessments focused primarily on the design of WBL systems (i.e. based on the legal frameworks and institutional arrangements, rather than their implementation) in initial and continuing VET (IVET and CVET respectively), reviewing legislation, by-laws, strategies, curricula, qualification standards, accreditation arrangements, statistical sources and relevant studies, and complementing this evidence through interviews and validation exchanges with ministries, agencies, chambers, training providers and, where relevant, employers and social partners. The resulting comparative summary identifies common patterns, differences in regulatory maturity and implementation, and recurring bottlenecks in both IVET and CVET. This approach enables like-with-like comparison while remaining faithful to national contexts and the varied institutional forms that WBL takes across the region.

IVET

All five countries have made visible progress in embedding WBL into their VET systems, albeit with substantial differences in depth, consistency and in the quality conditions needed to guarantee equitable, attractive and effective learning pathways at scale. Serbia and North Macedonia have the most developed and structured regulatory frameworks, with clear legal bases, more formalised roles for employer and intermediary bodies and stronger efforts to regulate training conditions, mentor responsibilities and company participation. Montenegro has also advanced dual VET and WBL in school-based models, although implementation remains partial and uneven across sectors. Albania and Kosovo have taken important steps, especially through pilot dual VET programmes and strengthened curricular provisions, but their systems are still less institutionalised and rely more heavily on project-based support, school-level initiative and uneven employer engagement.

Throughout the region, WBL is formalised in training agreements or contracts, which do not generally take the form of employment contracts. In all of the countries except Kosovo, the WBL component as a share of the dual VET programme duration remains below the 50 % stipulated in Criterion 4 of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships. All countries envisage the presence of in-company trainers, although their role is not always formally recognised or certified and opportunities for their professional development are non-systematic. Social partners are not directly or systematically involved in decisions about WBL financing (e.g. determining learner compensation), qualification revision or development. Trade unions play a marginal role in most cases. Chambers are important intermediary organisations in some areas of dual VET, although their functions and degree of institutionalisation vary significantly across countries: while they have strong management and operational responsibilities in Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia, they have more limited roles in Albania and Montenegro, where more is left to vocational schools and state institutions. In these latter

³ This is important also to make sure that the education and employment opportunities including WBL that are offered through the Youth Guarantee (European Council, 2020) are up to EU quality standards.

countries, individual firms thus tend to engage directly with schools rather than through structured mechanisms, which makes employer coordination relatively weak and largely decentralised. The strongest areas of WBL quality in IVET concern the existence of regulatory frameworks, the growing use of learning outcomes and the formalisation of agreements between schools and companies. The main weaknesses lie in the limited involvement of social partners in decision-making, insufficient and non-systematic preparation of in-company trainers, weak or uneven incentives for companies, patchy compensation and social protection arrangements, and underdeveloped systems for career guidance, graduate tracking and quality monitoring.

CVET

Provision with a substantial WBL component is present in Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, but remains limited in scale, highly heterogeneous in form, more fragmented and less systematically regulated than in IVET. Kosovo currently has no significant CVET offer with a sufficiently strong WBL component to be assessed within the scope of this report. In the four countries in which such provision exists, WBL in CVET is concentrated mainly in post-secondary programmes or formal and non-formal adult learning programmes and is only partly embedded in coherent lifelong learning systems. North Macedonia and Montenegro have comparatively clearer structures for verified programmes and qualification-linked provision, while Albania is beginning to strengthen dual-type CVET offers in selected sectors. Serbia has a large and diverse adult training landscape, but the WBL dimension is not yet consistently visible or regulated.

Across all four countries with provision, compensation rules are weak or absent, social protection for unemployed adult learners is limited, support for companies is insufficient and transparency regarding available opportunities and outcomes is low. Although learning outcomes and qualification standards are increasingly used, the practical organisation of workplace learning often depends on provider initiative and local arrangements rather than on stable system-wide quality mechanisms. As a result, CVET with WBL remains an important but still developing area, with considerable potential for upskilling, reskilling and labour market inclusion.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the Western Balkan countries have made significant progress in establishing and expanding WBL and dual VET, particularly in IVET, and in aligning their regulatory frameworks with European quality principles. The report also identifies a number of recurrent cross-country patterns and trends that point to areas requiring further attention and development, notably: implementation capacity, systematic involvement of social partners, support for in-company trainers, learner protection, financing arrangements and monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms. Although CVET with substantial WBL remains less developed and less consistently regulated, it represents a significant area for future development in support of lifelong learning, labour-market inclusion and skills adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Work-based learning quality in the European Union

Work-based learning (WBL) occupies a central role in the European Union's vocational education and training and labour market policies. It is defined broadly as all forms of learning that take place in real work environments, ranging from apprenticeships to internships or traineeships and structured on-the-job learning for employees. WBL serves as a bridge between the world of education and the world of work, equipping learners with occupational and transversal knowledge, skills and competences that foster employability, lifelong learning and smoother transitions into the labour market. Employers may gain productivity advantages, access a skilled workforce and tailor training to their needs. At societal level, WBL can foster inclusive growth by opening pathways for disadvantaged groups, reducing inequality and enhancing people's capabilities.

Work-based learning plays a central role in the European Union's reinforced Youth Guarantee (Council, 2020). The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continuing education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

The European Commission supports the efforts of the Western Balkan economies⁴ to reduce youth unemployment and increase the labour force participation and employment rates of young people through the reinforced Youth Guarantee (Council, 2013 and 2020).

Apprenticeships are designed to develop occupational skills and lead to recognised qualifications. They combine school-based learning with WBL, with the latter typically accounting for a significant proportion of the programme. Apprenticeships usually have a relatively long duration, for example 2-4 years.

Traineeships are WBL periods that complement formal or non-formal education and training programmes. Traineeships can be a compulsory and integrated, or optional and supplementary component of a vocational training programme. They may last from a few days or weeks to several months but are generally shorter than apprenticeships and typically do not lead to qualification award.

Under this scheme, both traineeships and apprenticeships may be offered as active labour market programmes if they are organised and funded by public employment services. The European Commission has developed quality standards for both apprenticeships and traineeships⁵.

The **European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA)**, developed on the initiative of and with the support of the European social partners, was approved with a Council Recommendation in 2018 (Council, 2018). It includes 14 criteria divided into two categories: learning and working conditions; and framework conditions (see Table 1.1 below for details). Its core provisions include:

- written agreements setting out the rights and obligations of apprentices, employers and, where appropriate, training institutions;
- a substantial workplace component constituting at least half of the duration of the programme;
- pedagogical support from qualified in-company trainers and vocational teachers;
- payment or compensation, social protection and compliance with occupational health and safety standards.

⁴ All five economies will be referred to as 'countries' in this Report.

⁵ The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) has also set out global principles for apprenticeship systems, including social dialogue, written agreements, protection from discrimination and exploitation, and decent conditions such as remuneration, paid leave, and social security. Alongside the EU 2018 framework, it provides a comprehensive norm base that links high-quality learning with decent work and equality in access and outcomes.

- A clear regulatory framework, involvement of social partners, support for companies, and quality assurance through tracking graduates' outcomes.

The 2014 **Quality Framework for Traineeships** (Council, 2014) contains a set of quality criteria relating to traineeships. The framework can be used to guide the development and assessment of traineeships in various contexts, including active labour market policy (ALMP), but it does not cover 'work experience placements that are part of curricula of formal education or VET' or traineeships whose completion is a mandatory requirement to access regulated professions.

Table 1.1: Detailed criteria of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (2018)

Criterion	Explanation
Learning and working conditions	
1. Written agreement	Should be concluded to define the rights and obligations of the apprentice, the employer and the training institution.
2. Learning outcomes	Apprenticeship programmes should be based on agreed, comprehensive learning outcomes.
3. Pedagogical support	Adequate support should be provided by qualified in-company trainers and vocational teachers.
4. Workplace component	At least half of the apprenticeship should be carried out in the workplace.
5. Pay and/or compensation	Apprentices should be paid or otherwise compensated for their work.
6. Social protection	Apprentices should be entitled to social protection, including necessary insurance.
7. Work, health and safety conditions	The host workplace should comply with relevant rules and regulations on working conditions, in particular health and safety legislation.
Framework conditions	
8. Regulatory framework	National regulatory frameworks should provide clear and consistent rules for apprenticeships.
9. Involvement of social partners	Employers' and workers' organisations should be involved in design, governance and implementation.
10. Support for companies	Financial and/or non-financial support should be envisaged, especially for micro-, small and medium-sized companies.
11. Flexible pathways and mobility	Pathways should take into account prior learning, progression to further education and mobility abroad.
12. Career guidance and awareness raising	Career guidance and awareness-raising activities should promote apprenticeships as an attractive learning pathway.
13. Transparency	Apprenticeship opportunities should be transparent and accessible via national public and private employment services.
14. Quality assurance and tracking of apprentices	Quality measures should include tracking apprentice employment and career progression.

Source: adapted from the European Council, 2018.

1.2 WBL in five Western Balkan countries

This report covers the five Western Balkan countries of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia⁶. Beyond geography, these countries share comparable socio-economic conditions and education and training system structures. They belong to a region that is engaged in ongoing reforms of VET and labour market policies, in respect of which WBL may play a central role in easing school-to-work transitions and supporting youth employment, knowledge, skills and competences development as well as the EU accession and integration processes. However, as this report shows, its quality differs across countries, based on an assessment of its alignment with European Union standards.

As EU candidate countries and potential candidate⁷, the five economies under analysis face the double challenge of modernising their education and training systems and gradually converging towards EU frameworks. Despite noticeable progress, this region continues to experience persistent labour market difficulties, notably high youth unemployment, high NEET rates and skills mismatches. These shared challenges reinforce the importance of strengthening IVET and CVET measures through WBL, both as a tool for improving individual employability and as a mechanism for broader macro socio-economic alignment with the EU.

Following this present introduction, the remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter [2](#) proposes conceptual clarifications of the terms used in the report and the methodology adopted for the comparative analysis;

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the Western Balkan region from the point of view of the key variables relevant to this report;

Chapter 4 discusses governance and management in WBL;

Chapter 5 and 6 constitute the core of this report: they contain an assessment of WBL quality according to the EU criteria, for IVET and CVET respectively;

Chapter 7 provides short conclusions.

⁶ The definitions, statistics and data reported in this Report are extracted from the five country reports. Exact references can therefore be found in these reports. For the sake of brevity, they will not be reproduced here.

⁷ Kosovo is the only potential candidate.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

At international level, work-based learning (WBL) is generally understood to refer to all forms of organised learning that take place in a real work environment (IAG, 2024). It is often part of a pedagogical approach that integrates theoretical instruction with practical experience, thereby bridging the gap between the world of education and the world of work.

WBL may take several different forms, as follows:

- apprenticeships⁸, whereby formal VET programme learners combine school-based learning with substantial training in enterprises through a contractual relationship;
- traineeships, which provide short-term practice in the workplace that is often linked to active labour market measures;
- internships, which provide short-term practice in the workplace that is often linked to education curricular experiences;
- on-the-job training, which is undertaken by employees to maintain, update or expand their skills.

Far from being just ‘learning by doing’, WBL is a structured approach with clearly defined educational objectives, a quality assurance system and an agreed distribution of responsibilities among education and training providers, employers and learners.

Although broadly consistent with the internationally accepted definition provided above, there are some minor differences between the definitions of WBL in the five countries of interest; therefore the national definitions, as per the five country reports, are reported here. Some refer directly to the international literature, hence clearly indicating their mere adoption. Most national definitions refer to WBL in the context of IVET; some do not distinguish between WBL in IVET and CVET; others do not address WBL in the context of CVET.

Table 2.1: Understanding of WBL in Western Balkan countries

Country	Understanding of WBL
Albania	Learning processes and results that occur when someone performs a job in a real work environment.
Kosovo	Apprenticeships, also known as ‘dual programmes’, develop occupational skills and lead to recognised qualifications. They typically last for two to four years and combine school-based learning with workplace learning, with the latter typically accounting for a significant proportion of their duration. Traineeships are workplace training periods complementing formal or non-formal education and training programmes. As such, they may be compulsory and integral to such programmes or optional and supplementary to them. They may last from a few days or weeks to several months but are generally shorter than apprenticeships.
Montenegro	VET is implemented in two ways: ‘school type’ practical training, which takes place partly at a school and partly in a workplace (i.e. WBL);

⁸ While informal apprenticeships may exist in practice, particularly in smaller enterprises or outside formal VET provision, these are not classified as apprenticeships under EU definitions. Therefore, informal apprenticeships are not considered in this analysis.

Country	Understanding of WBL
	'dual type' practical training, which is carried out entirely at a workplace exclusively under the employer's responsibility. Such CVET programmes that include a WBL component are one means to obtain a vocational qualification.
North Macedonia	Learning that occurs when people learn while doing real work, paid or unpaid, leading to the production of real goods and services. However, WBL can also be implemented in actual/real companies that 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 it in the form of ferial practice, that is a summer internship (<i>феријална практик</i>). These take the form of a block of between 10 and 20 days organised in one at the end of the school year, that all upper-secondary school learners are required to spend in the companies with which their VET institutions cooperate.
Serbia	The term WBL (<i>učenje kroz rad</i>) is associated with the establishment of the dual model of teaching and learning in IVET, in which learners learn in two places: theoretical knowledge is acquired at school while practical skills are acquired primarily in the workplace. Practical teaching (<i>praktična nastava</i>) and occupational practice (<i>profesionalna praksa</i>) are referred to as 'practical training'.

Source: national legislation

The scope of this cross-country analysis includes IVET and CVET programmes in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, at least 25 % of whose total curriculum time or programme duration is dedicated to WBL⁹. This report is predominantly based on the information included in the five country reports written up and finalised in 2024 or early 2025 under ETF coordination (ETF, 2025a-e), complemented in 2026 by additional consultations with country experts to provide the latest updates.

The five country reports used an analytical framework developed mirroring the 14 EFQEA criteria and were aligned in scope and terminology. Each report combined desk research with stakeholder interviews. The desk research, which was the main component, covered national laws and bylaws, strategies and action plans, official statistics, policy documents, qualification catalogues, accreditation standards, curricula (school-based and dual), employment service information and relevant studies by ministries, chambers, donor projects and international organisations. Where available, online databases and open-data sources provided quantitative information such as enrolments, duration and participation in relevant programmes. Stakeholder consultations validated the preliminary findings and added qualitative insights, typically involving the Ministries of Education and Labour, VET/adult learning agencies, qualification authorities, chambers, public employment services, training providers and, in some cases, companies and social partners.

The extensive information presented in the country reports was cross analysed for the purpose of drafting the executive summary and conclusions of this report, following a content analysis method with the support of Microsoft Co-Pilot 365. The cross-country analysis applies a two-step method: intensive use of national findings on WBL in IVET/CVET, followed by a comparative summary across systems. This summary highlighted similarities, differences and challenges, tabulating quantitative indicators where available and coding qualitative evidence against EU criteria; missing information was not reported. Although a common analytical framework was used to support comparability, the possibility of a strictly like-for-like comparison was limited by differences in national definitions, institutional arrangements and data availability. This particularly affected graduate tracking, quality monitoring, learner experience and company-level practice. The draft findings were peer-reviewed with ETF experts and national authors to correct inconsistencies, harmonise terminology and confirm

⁹ This is a context-sensitive analytical choice, reflecting the specific structural and developmental context of VET systems in the Western Balkans, where WBL is still in a phase of gradual introduction and institutional consolidation. As such, programmes meeting the EFQEA 50% threshold remain absent and would not yet be representative of broader system-level practices. By selecting programmes with at least 25% WBL, the analysis aims to include VET provisions that demonstrate a substantive, albeit not yet fully mature, integration of WBL into IVET and CVET. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment of current trends, challenges and transition pathways towards more established apprenticeship models aligned with EFQEA standards.

cross-references. The final output preserves fidelity to national evidence while presenting regional patterns, common challenges and areas for policy learning and alignment, while highlighting compliance issues and challenges and supporting actionable conclusions.

3. REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Across Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, the socio-economic context combines demographic strain (see Table 3.1 Population and demographic trends by country below) with weak labour-market integration for young people, persistent gender gaps, and education outcomes that remain below EU benchmarks. The magnitude and configuration vary by country, but the pattern is consistent: low or uneven participation in the labour market, high NEET rates, and schooling systems that do not deliver basic proficiency at scale.

Table 3.1: Population and demographic trends by country

Country	Population (millions) for various years	Trends
Albania	2.4 (2025)	Declining and ageing population, significant emigration
Kosovo	1.6 (2024)	Very young population structure, growing large-scale emigration and the beginning of population ageing.
Montenegro	622 902 (2026)	Ageing population, with rising life expectancy contributing to a shifting dependency structure.
North Macedonia	1.8 (2024)	Population decline, ageing and strong emigration pressures
Serbia	6.6 (2022)	Population decline: 7 % since 2011, driven by low natural growth, ageing and emigration.

Sources: data retrieved from the national statistical offices¹⁰

3.1 Labour market

Countries' demographic profiles shape labour-market challenges in different ways. In Kosovo, the issue is not ageing but absorption capacity: large inflows of young entrants combined with low employment. In Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, ageing and/or net outflows reduce the long-term workforce base while also increasing the need for upskilling and retention. The labour force participation rate is comparable in all countries but Kosovo. The share of population outside of the labour market is highest in Kosovo, followed by Serbia, with the other three countries showing similar inactivity rates. In all countries, female participation in the labour market is considerably lower than average, while the share of female inactive population is much higher. The employment rate is higher in Albania and Montenegro, followed by Serbia and North Macedonia. Kosovo stands out among the other countries also for these indicators, for the lowest proportion of working age population in employment.

Youth employment and unemployment data reinforce the same comparative picture: young people enter late, and too many remain disconnected. All five countries report indeed high NEET shares, with Kosovo at the highest end and Serbia at the lowest, although all remain problematic compared to the EU average (11%). Taken together, these countries share a problem in the transition from education to employment: many young people, also with high levels of education, remain outside work for extended periods. Serbia reported an average of 23.4 months to stable employment and widespread mismatch (64% working outside their field) (ETF, 2026e). When they are employed, they often face

¹⁰ Albania: [INSTAT](#)

Kosovo: [ASK](#)

Montenegro: [MONSTAT](#)

North Macedonia: [MAKSTAT](#)

Serbia: [Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia](#)

mismatch or precarious integration. Gender interacts strongly with these dynamics, especially where inactivity is linked to care and family obligations (explicitly highlighted in Kosovo high shares of inactive NEETs and reflected in North Macedonia's high inactivity among young women).

Table 3.2: Main labour indicators (%) 2024

	Albania	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Labour force participation rate (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	75.7	43.2	72.6	65.9 ^a	72.4 ^a
Labour force participation rate, female (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	69.3	25.9	66.4	54.3 ^a	66.1 ^a
Labour force non-participation rate (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	24.3	56.8	27.4	34.1 ^{a,b}	27.6 ^{a,b}
Labour force non-participation rate, female (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	30.7	74.1	33.6	45.7 ^{a,b}	33.9 ^{a,b}
Employment rate (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	68.6	38.6	64.2	45.7 ^{b,c}	51.4 ^c
Youth employment rate (aged 15–29) 2024 (%)	44.4	28.1	46.9	35.6 ^b	41.3
Unemployment rate (aged 15–64) 2024 (%)	9.4	10.8	11.6	12.3 ^{b,c}	8.6 ^e
Youth unemployment rate (aged 15–29) 2024 (%)	18.9	16.6	19.9	23.2 ^b	16.8
NEET rate (aged 15–29) 2024 (%)	22.2	35.4	16.5	24.1 ^d	15.2

Note: a) data are estimated; b) ETF calculation; c) data for people 15+; d) data for 2023; e) data for people 15-74.

Sources: ETF KIESE data collection, available on the ETF KIESE Data Portal

3.2 Education and training

The PISA evidence paints a consistent regional picture of weak learning outcomes, with variation in how the results are expressed (average scores versus shares reaching minimum proficiency). Albania's PISA 2022 average scores are far below OECD averages in mathematics (368 vs 472), reading (358 vs 476) and science (376 vs 485), reporting also a decline from 2018. Kosovo appears in the lowest-performance group in PISA and reports very small shares of learners reaching at least Level 2 proficiency in 2022: 15 % in mathematics, 17 % in reading and 21 % in science, also declining from 2018 and far below OECD averages cited (69 %, 74 %, 76 %). North Macedonia is described as underperforming OECD averages across domains, with fewer learners reaching minimum proficiency and a decline from 2018 to 2022. Among secondary schools tested in Montenegro in 2022, only a handful are above or at the OECD average, while most are below; it also reports declining scores across cycles, including reading (427 in 2015 to 405 in 2022), mathematics (418 to 406) and science (411 to 403). Serbia is portrayed as somewhat closer to the OECD baseline than the weakest performers but still below it: 57 % of learners reach at least Level 2 in mathematics (against an OECD average of 69 %), and average performance is said to lag by around 1.5 years. (ETF, 2025a-e)

Across the five countries, the shared implication is that large segments of each cohort enter adulthood without the baseline competences associated with meaningful labour market participation (as the Kosovo report frames it), which then compounds the NEET and mismatch patterns described above.

VET plays a central but uneven role in the lifelong learning panorama of these countries. Serbia reports the highest though declining VET student share in the total upper-secondary students at 72.7 % in 2022 (ETF, Kiese data collection), despite improvements in early school leaving. Montenegro maintains a consistently high and stable share of students enrolled in VET (67.1 % in 2017, and 68.9 % in 2023), pointing, however, to NEET challenges among graduates, implying that completion alone does not ensure entry into work. North Macedonia reports a high and rising VET share in upper-secondary enrolment (60.2 % in 2019 to 62.9 % in 2022), while also noting that this shift is partly driven by restricted access to general upper-secondary schools (gymnasiums) and that VET often serves as a pathway to higher education rather than direct labour-market entry. Albania reports a low VET share, with no significant change over the last available years (18.2 % in 2019, 17.5 % in 2023). No recent data are available for Kosovo (ETF, KIESE dashboard).

Participation in adult learning is low across the countries, indicating limited system-level upskilling compared to needs. In 2024, Albania's adult learning participation was extremely low at 1.7 % among 25- to 64-year-olds in 2024. Other countries report slightly higher rates for the same age group and year: Kosovo 2.3 %, Montenegro 3.6 %, North Macedonia 2.8 % (2023); while Serbia's rate is the highest at 5.5 %, it is still less than half the EU average.

3.3 Regional summary

Across the five countries, demographic pressures (population decline due to reduced birth rates, ageing and migration) and labour-market weaknesses interact in different ways but produce broadly similar structural challenges. In Kosovo, a very young population coincides with exceptionally low participation and employment rates, high inactivity and persistent gender disparities. In Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, ageing and/or outward migration reduce the long-term workforce base while increasing pressures for upskilling, retention and more effective use of labour. Labour-force participation rates are broadly comparable across the countries except in Kosovo, where inactivity is substantially higher. In all countries, women participate considerably less in the labour market and are disproportionately represented among the inactive population. All five countries report high NEET rates compared to the EU average, with Kosovo at the highest end and Serbia at the lowest, although still at problematic levels in absolute terms. Many young people, including tertiary graduates, remain outside employment for extended periods while those entering work often face skills mismatch or precarious integration. Low participation in adult learning is a constant across countries. Employment rates are relatively higher in Albania and Montenegro, followed by Serbia and North Macedonia, while Kosovo consistently records the weakest labour-market outcomes.

Educational outcomes further intensify these labour-market vulnerabilities. Across the region, PISA results point to persistently weak foundational skills and declining performance trends in several countries. Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro all report results substantially below OECD averages and, in many cases, worsening outcomes between 2018 and 2022. Serbia performs comparatively better but still below OECD benchmarks, with a significant share of learners failing to reach minimum proficiency levels. Overall, the evidence suggests that a large proportion of young people enter adulthood without the baseline competences required for stable labour-market integration and participation in lifelong learning.

VET occupies a central but uneven position across education systems. Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia maintain high rates of enrolment in VET among upper-secondary students, although this does not necessarily translate into successful labour-market integration, as reflected in persistent NEET rates and mismatch among graduates. In North Macedonia, VET also increasingly functions as a pathway to higher education rather than direct employment. Albania, by contrast, reports a much

smaller VET sector, while recent comparable data are unavailable for Kosovo. Across all countries, participation in adult learning remains very low, ranging from extremely limited levels in Albania and Kosovo to comparatively higher, though still modest, participation in Serbia. This points to insufficient system-level upskilling capacity relative to the scale of demographic and labour-market pressures.

In comparative terms, the countries differ in demographic structure, labour-market performance and educational outcomes, but converge on the same structural constraints: weak school-to-work transitions, high inactivity and NEET rates, persistent gender inequalities, widespread skills mismatch and insufficient participation in lifelong learning. Together, these factors limit both their labour-market inclusion and their capacity to respond effectively to demographic change and economic transformation.

4. WBL GOVERNANCE¹¹

This chapter provides a brief overview of the key legal frameworks and regulations governing WBL in IVET and CVET, and outlines the role played by the main stakeholders in the governance of WBL across the five countries.

4.1 Albania

WBL is regulated by the VET Law (No 15/2017) and subordinate acts. For IVET and CVET, the key instrument is the Regulation for the Implementation of Company-Based Vocational Practice in Public VET Providers (2020), which sets a template for school-company agreements and defines obligations for providers, learners and host enterprises. The Crafts Law (No 70/2016) and related decisions outline a dual-type pathway in crafts, but it is not yet operational pending by-laws. Together, these acts organise in-company practice in upper- and post-secondary VET (AQF levels 2–5) and set basic procedural requirements for WBL.

In Albania, VET is led by the Ministry of Finance and Economy, while WBL governance involves the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation (NAVETQ), the National VET Council, Sectoral Committees and governing boards of public VET providers. Provision is delivered through 35 public VET schools and 10 regional public training centres, alongside a large non-public provider landscape. The National Chamber of Crafts is a statutory partner for crafts qualifications and examinations, for which the Ministry of Finance and Economy provides strategic leadership; NAVETQ steers the AQF, quality assurance, framework curricula and standards; the National VET Council acts as a high-level consultative body; sectoral committees support standards development; ICT and hospitality/tourism committees are actively involved; provider governing boards approve plans and budgets; and development units in vocational schools are expected to strengthen employer cooperation and WBL delivery.

Social partners participate at system level through the National VET Council and Sectoral Committees, shaping standards and the curricular basis for programmes that include WBL. The National Chamber of Crafts holds formal roles in crafts governance and examinations. At provider level, business representatives sit on governing boards and are expected to formalise cooperation for WBL, increase enterprise capacity and support teacher exposure to workplaces. However, as noted by the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023–2030, employer involvement remains limited and is not yet systematic or institutionalised across IVET and CVET. School Development Units in vocational schools (SDU) are the key internal interfaces with employers. SDU members are in charge of school-business coordination and career guidance. There is a Business Relations Coordinator role (positioned in/alongside the SDU function) which handles the practical cooperation workflow (e.g. preparing agreements/contracts and coordinating placements). SDUs also produce annual reporting in collaboration with businesses.

A key role is played by international donors, like Swisscontact Albania.

4.2 Kosovo

In Kosovo, VET is governed by several laws and legal acts. The cornerstone is Law No 04/L-138 on VET (2013), which explicitly enables blended school- and work-based provision, including dual forms where practical training occurs in companies. The qualification system rests on Law No 03/L-060 on

¹¹ The governance and management arrangements for WBL are not always clearly separated from those of the VET system. This section makes a distinction where both can be clearly identified.

National Qualifications (2008), which establishes the NQF and the National Qualifications Authority (NQA).

For WBL implementation in IVET/CVET, Administrative Instruction No 137/2020 on Work-Based Learning in VET specifies actors' roles, procedures for planning and delivery, learner assessment, quality assurance and safety standards.

At central level, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) carries overall responsibility for education policy and legislation, including VET and lifelong learning. It hosts a dedicated VET department covering standards, curricula, quality assurance and lifelong learning. The Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers (MFLT) covers labour-market and welfare portfolios relevant to vocational training, including labour-market needs analysis and the classification of occupations (with the Kosovo Agency for Statistics) and is expected to support MESTI's VET planning.

The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult learning (AVETAE) administers and governs public VET schools in financial, human resources and infrastructure matters, but currently only manages the six existing Centres of Competence. Other VET schools are under municipal authority. The Council of Vocational Educational and Training and for Adults (CVETA) is a tripartite advisory body that guides government and stakeholders on VET policy and approves occupational standards. The NQA, an independent public body with a board of 13 members representing ministries, social partners, higher education institutions, civil society and providers, maintains the NQF, approves VET qualifications, accredits VET providers, sets criteria for occupational standards and verifies occupational standards up to NQF level five.

Implementation also involves the Employment Agency of Kosovo (EARK) (with eight regional public Vocational Training Centres, VTCs) and municipal authorities, which hold extensive responsibilities for public vocational schools. EARK implements employment and vocational training policies via municipal employment offices and regional VTCs, providing an important delivery channel on the CVET side.

Beyond these bodies, sectoral and regional/local governance is insufficiently influential or effective. The role of employers in WBL is unclear, at least at programme design level or in terms of their participation in delivery; the engagement of social partners and private stakeholders is limited. Nevertheless, social partners are embedded in governance structures: CVETA is explicitly tripartite and the NQA board includes social-partner representatives.

4.3 North Macedonia

WBL is framed by the new 2025 Law on VET, which regulates IVET and CVET and defines the 'employer' as any company, institution or craft practitioner at whose premises WBL is carried out, without that being their predominant activity. The 2025 law strengthens WBL, introduces and regulates dual education and training, provides model curricula specifying duality between school-based and work-based learning, sets procedures for initiating and enrolling in dual programmes, and stipulates that learner compensation is compulsory.

Time spent in service to an employer is considered regular work, with learner protection governed by the Ministry of Economy and Labour, although the learner retains the status of a student and not an employee. Complementing the legal basis, the WBL Guidelines (2022) operationalise implementation by consolidating procedures, roles and tools that enable employers and VET institutions to prepare and deliver WBL. The Concept for WBL (2020) offered guidance for governance, cooperation arrangements, mentor support, funding and cost-sharing, quality assurance and working/learning conditions.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) approves curricula, promotes dual education and partnerships with employers and drives the modernisation of facilities. The Centre for Development of

Vocational Education (hereinafter VET Centre) is the lead implementation agency: it conducts or supports labour-market analyses; participates in provider verification and accreditation; develops occupational and qualification standards; designs VET and assessment programmes (with the State Examination Centre); and, for WBL specifically, defines mentor requirements, develops and helps deliver compulsory mentoring, and sets equipment and spatial standards for WBL.

The VET Council serves as a high-level forum that issues opinions on VET strategy, proposes amendments to occupational and national qualification standards and advises on the VET institutional network. The National Board for the NQF recommends measures to better link education and labour-market needs; sixteen sectoral commissions analyse existing qualifications, identify needs and propose new developments.

The Council overseeing CVET (thirteen members) covers adult-learning policy and therefore WBL in CVET. The Public Employment Service (ESARNM) is the largest provider of non-formal training including WBL components and manages labour-market information, guidance, job matching and Youth Guarantee implementation.

The adult education centre (AEC) develops occupational standards for adult learning, verifies adult programmes, and maintains a catalogue of verified providers.

The chambers are an integral part of WBL design and delivery: they propose new or revised curricula and programmes, draft occupational standards, participate in final examinations, connect VET institutions with employers and submit annual reports on verified employers to MES for the in-company component of dual VET. The education sector trade union (SONK) may propose revisions to VET qualifications and occupational standards and submit proposals to improve WBL conditions, although their actual engagement has been limited to far.

Social partners also formally sit in the VET Council, the NQF Board and sectoral commissions, thereby ensuring that they are implicated in setting standards, developing curricula and checking employers.

4.4 Montenegro

Work-based learning in Montenegro is regulated under the General Law on Education (2021), the Law on Vocational Education (2021) and the Law on Adult Education (2017), as well as related secondary regulations (e.g. on quality assurance, teacher development and learner assessment).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation (MESI) plans, implements and improves education policy across all education levels and sub-sectors; the VET Centre develops qualification standards and IVET/CVET programmes, provides advisory support and research and carries out quality-assurance functions for VET and adult learning; the Bureau for Educational Services (BES) sets and monitors quality standards in pre-university education; the Examination Centre conducts external assessment at the end of four-year secondary VET and trains external examiners for vocational qualification examinations; the National Education Council (NEC) advises on programmes, standards and quality across pre-university education (including IVET/CVET); and the Qualifications Council (QC) improves the qualifications system, approves and classifies qualifications in the NQF and steers sectoral work through its fifteen sectoral commissions.

Both NEC and QC include a broad composition (e.g. universities, employer associations, trade unions, education representatives and other stakeholders), enabling contributions to occupational and qualification standards and to IVET/CVET programme content (which embed WBL).

The Chamber of Economy of Montenegro (CEM) and the Employers Federation of Montenegro (EFM) provide an opinion on occupational standards¹². The Employment Agency of Montenegro (EAM) supplies labour-market information supporting VET planning.

4.5 Serbia

Work-based learning is regulated by the Law on Dual Education (LDE, 2017; amended 2023). It regulates the organisation and implementation of dual VET at secondary level, including the mutual obligations of schools, employers and learners, the scope of WBL and the roles of mentors or instructors. At tertiary level, the Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education (2019) extends dual principles beyond secondary VET. System-wide governance and quality processes relevant to IVET and CVET are defined by the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2023), the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (2023) and the Law on Adult Education (2020). Together, these instruments establish responsibilities for curriculum, quality assurance (self-evaluation and external evaluation), qualification standards and their alignment to labour-market needs, with the Office for Dual Education and the NQFS (established 2022) coordinating dual VET and NQFS policy and implementation. In addition, there are detailed rulebooks that standardise in-company practical training and related school procedures.

The Office for Dual Education plays the main role in governing WBL in IVET in Serbia. It supports the Council for the National Qualifications Framework for Serbia (CNQFS)¹³, prepares by-laws and develops projects for the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS); it links the latter to the EQF, monitors the effects of qualifications on employment and lifelong learning, drafts laws relating to dual education, NQFS and career guidance, analyses enrolment policies, coordinates international cooperation and monitors the application and impact of regulations. It also monitors Publicly Recognised Organisers of Adult Education (PROAE) and their adherence to standards.

The Council for Vocational Education and Adult Education advises on IVET and CVET curricula and programmes in relation to labour-market needs; the Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE), through its Centre for VET and Adult Education, develops IVET and CVET curricula from qualification standards, prepares final VET examinations and designs training and examinations for WBL instructors. The Institute for Evaluation and Quality in Education (IEQE), via its Centre for quality assurance, conducts system quality assurance through self-evaluation and external evaluation of institutions. The Sector Councils, operating on a social-partnership basis, identify sectoral qualification needs and shape proposals for standards, competences and expected learning outcomes.

Social partnership is structurally embedded. Sector Councils are tripartite by design and constitute the primary interface for employer input regarding qualification standards and pathways. The CNQFS includes social-partner participation and issues labour-market oriented recommendations, including on enrolment policies. The national partnership framework for dual VET explicitly involves the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia alongside the Ministry of Education, the Office for dual education and the expert institutes; social partners actively participate in the qualifications system and lifelong learning schemes; representatives of Trade Unions participate in the sector skills councils and the Council for NQFS, although they have no direct role in WBL implementation.

¹² External assessments (UNICEF and MESI, 2022) have recommended a more systematic inclusion of world-of-work actors, and regional/local stakeholders, in governance and financing arrangements.

¹³ The CNQFS proposes qualification standards across all NQFS levels, proposes the establishment of Sector Councils and issues recommendations on human-capital development, career guidance coordination, enrolment policies and the discontinuation of programmes that do not meet qualification standards. It also oversees sector-council performance.

4.6 Conclusion – WBL governance in the Western Balkans

All five countries have regulatory frameworks in place for WBL, though at different levels of maturity. Serbia and North Macedonia have comprehensive dual education laws. Montenegro and Albania rely on VET laws with specific articles on WBL. Kosovo's framework is under development.

In each country, the Ministries of Education and Labour are the main authorities providing strategic oversight and regulation; VET agencies or national qualification authorities also play a strong role, notably in quality assurance; social partners, mainly the chambers, are actively involved in governance, as regards curriculum development, workplace arrangements and sometimes funding, but less so in management of the systems; trade unions are formally involved, playing an advisory role in tripartite bodies working on VET (not WBL specifically) in some but not all countries and seem to have little to no role at implementation level.

In the context of IVET and CVET, WBL is financed through a mix of public funds – typically from the ministries – employer contributions and often significant donor support. Serbia has a structured co-funding model under its dual education system. Montenegro's amended vocational education law explicitly provides for a Fund for Support to Dual Education.

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

5.1 Programmes with a WBL component in IVET

This section provides a country-by-country description of all IVET programmes to the extent that they include a WBL component of at least 25 % of the total duration.

5.1.1 Albania

Since the 2024–2025 school year, Albania has been piloting a dual VET model with company partnerships and trained in-company mentors. At the time of writing, curriculum reviews and sectoral skills committees are ongoing.

IVET is delivered through a network of 34 public and 12 private VET schools, as well as three post-secondary VET providers offering AQF Level 5 qualifications in specific areas.

The following programmes are offered:

- two-year programmes (AQF 2);
- 2+1+1 with a possible exit after 2+1 (two years of general education and vocational basics, one year of focused vocational training and one year for consolidation) (AQF 3 or 4);
- 2+2 (two years of general education and vocational basics, followed by two years with a more vocational focus) that combine theory and vocational practice (AQF 4);
- four-year programmes offering qualifications registered at AQF level 4.

All IVET curricula include a practical training component¹⁴. When this takes place in farms or companies it is called ‘internship’. Internships are recommended but not compulsory and may not exceed 50 % of the time allocated to the vocational-practice modules; the exact share and organisation vary by school, profile and year. IVET schools are responsible for matching learners with companies and making the placements and individual internship contracts are signed by the learner, the school and the company.

Since 2017, the statutory basis for dual VET has been the law on VET, although bylaws are still under preparation. Three-year IVET dual programmes have been developed and implementation began in 2024 (in companies providing catering, hospitality and food and beverage services). These programmes are registered in AQF level 2 and 3 and include a considerable compulsory internship component – nearly 37 % of total curriculum time.

5.1.2 Kosovo

IVET is mainly provided via public VET schools typically offering three-year programmes structured as two years of basic vocational training followed by one year of specialisation and consolidation. All IVET programmes include a vocational practice component that is partly hosted by companies. Implementation of the vocational practice and its WBL component varies across schools and occupational profiles.

¹⁴ However, this does not always match with the retained definition of WBL because it may also take place in VET providers’ workshops.

Since 2022, Kosovo has launched dual education programmes covering 12 profiles¹⁵, which has substantially increased the share of WBL within the curriculum. These programmes are based on the existing traditional curricula but have been redesigned to ensure that at least 50 % of the total learning time takes place in companies ($\geq 1\,632$ of $3\,264$ teaching hours) at an average rate of approximately 2.5 days per week over the three years.

5.1.3 North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, VET in the secondary education system mainly consists of three- and four-year programmes¹⁶ delivered by VET schools (a two-year programme exists but is no longer offered, due to low demand).

All programmes include WBL components in varying proportions and compulsory ferial practice at the end of each school year (entirely work-based). The four-year programmes were revisited in 2019 and now include WBL (known as ‘WBL with an employer’) in years 3 and 4 as well as ferial practice at the end of each school year (entirely work-based).

In 2021, the dual four-year programme was introduced to increase the overall share of WBL by starting ‘WBL with an employer’ in year 2 and gradually increasing the share of WBL as learners progress through the programme¹⁷. Delivery is monitored through a memorandum of understanding between the VET school or RVC and an accredited employer.

5.1.4 Montenegro

In Montenegro, VET provision covers lower secondary VET (two years), upper-secondary VET (three or four years) and post-secondary VET (two years). The Law on VET defines practical training both in schools and at employers (WBL) and enables dual VET (especially in the case of three-year programmes). While WBL intensity varies with employer capacity, VET programmes remain predominantly school-based, with dual or WBL components still in the emergent stage.

5.1.5 Serbia

In Serbia, upper-secondary VET offers three- and four-year programmes across more than 300 VET schools. Many learners proceed to additional one or two year(s) of specialist training after graduation. Programmes may be school-based or dual¹⁸, leading to the same qualifications. In school-based VET, practical training is compulsory but WBL is optional. When it is used, WBL may cover up to 25 % of practical training time. In the dual VET track, WBL with one or more employers is compulsory and, under current rules, should be more than 20 % and less than 80 % of the total education and training time (theory and practice). In the dual approach, WBL must be at least 70 % of practice time. Entry to the dual system is typically at age 14–15. Companies must be accredited and provide licensed in-company instructors. In the dual system, changes adopted in 2023 will lead to the WBL component increasing to more than 60 % of total curriculum time for the three-year programme and more than 40 % for the four-year programme, as of the 2026–2027 school year. It will remain fixed at 60 % as of the 2034–2035 school year.

¹⁵ The first pilots were launched in four profiles (hairdresser, cook, hotel hospitality and bricklayer) across four vocational schools in three municipalities. In 2023–2024, dual education expanded to eight additional profiles (auto mechanic, wholesalers/retailers, heating technician, electrician, tailor, aesthetician, carpenter and metallurgist), attracting over 900 learners in grade 10 and 106 learners in grade 11.

¹⁶ This report only analysed four-year dual programmes.

¹⁷ WBL with an employer increased from 4 hours per week in year 2 to 8 hours per week in year 3 and 10 hours per week in year 4). Ferial practice also increased in dual programmes, with 60 to 80 hours after year 1, 90 to 120 hours after year 2, 120 to 160 hours after year 3.

¹⁸ Since 2017, the Law on Dual Education (LDE) has enabled an optional dual track, with significant shares of WBL, operating alongside regular more school-based VET.

5.1.6 Summary – WBL in IVET in the Western Balkans

Table 5.1 provides a comparative overview of the organisation and content of IVET with a WBL component of at least 25 % of programme duration across the region.

Table 5.1: WBL in IVET at a glance

Key aspect	Albania	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia
School-based IVET with/without work-based component	The main IVET offer is school-based programmes with optional internships	The main IVET offer is school-based programmes with a standardised WBL component	The main IVET offer is school-based programmes with employer-based WBL and ferial practice (10–20 days of workplace learning annually)	The main IVET offer is school based	The main IVET offer is school based
Dual VET	Dual IVET with around 37 % of compulsory WBL in the pilot phase	Dual IVET is available, with WBL at least 50 % of total curriculum time	Dual IVET is available, with WBL about 26–28% of total programme duration, for three- and four-year programmes	Dual IVET is available, with compulsory WBL around 45 % of total programme duration for three-year programmes	Dual IVET is available in three- and four-year programmes, with compulsory WBL of at least 20 % of vocational content, entirely with employers
Overall duration of the main programme(s)	IVET programmes: 2+1(+1), 2+2, or 4 years	Three- and four-year vocational programmes	Three- and four-year programmes	Three- and four-year VET programmes	Three- or four-year programmes (by profile)
Occupational standards	Occupational standards are applied in the design of IVET curricula	Occupational standards and competence-based curricula in place	Occupational standards aligned to NQF	Curricula structured by occupational standards	Occupational standards and learning outcomes framework
VET programmes registered in NQF	Yes	Yes	Partly ¹⁹ ,	Yes	Yes
Participation in dual VET (of all students in IVET).	Very limited (only pilots)	Very limited (only pilots)	Limited	Limited.	Still limited but growing
Trends	Dual VET is a political priority pending practical implementation and company	Structured WBL is a priority and being implemented, with increased	Dual VET is a political priority but not fully embedded in IVET curricula	Dual VET is a political priority; it is being formalised and expanded, with	The dual system is legally regulated, institutionalised and expanding,

¹⁹ The country report provides clear evidence that the NQF/MQF is used as a reference point, but it also shows that quality assurance and “registration in the NQF” are not described as fully comprehensive for the WBL part of IVET. So, IVET is positioned within the NQF/MQF and QA exists via accreditation, but the country report itself highlights that QA of WBL provision at employer level is not systemically ensured.

Key aspect	Albania	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia
	engagement in shaping qualifications, employer participation, infrastructure for in-company learning, and the legal framework is incomplete	use of contracts, training plans, pedagogical guidance and growing employer engagement. Yet, system-wide dual VET has not yet been achieved	across the board. WBL is increasing through ferial practice and pilot dual programmes	clearer roles for employers and structured WBL periods. However, coverage is partial, remaining limited to certain sectors and programme types	with accredited companies, certified in-company instructors

Source: prepared by the author

All of the countries under review show commitment to developing WBL in IVET; however, the extent to which stakeholders are involved and the development processes is mature vary greatly: Serbia and North Macedonia have structured legal frameworks and clearly defined roles for employers and public institutions; Montenegro shows a dual-track model supported by formal agreements; Albania and Kosovo are still in earlier phases, with evolving frameworks and less institutionalised stakeholder participation.

The rest of this chapter covers the 14 criteria for WBL assessment according to EU quality standards in IVET (Table 1.1). The analysis covers programmes in which WBL constitutes a minimum of 25 % of the programme duration/curriculum time. It offers a succinct country analysis and regional overview for each of the 14 criteria.

5.2 Contract or training agreement (IVET 1²⁰)

The five systems under review display broadly comparable arrangements in terms of contractual agreements for WBL in IVET, with tripartite agreements between school, company and learner being the prevailing model: Albania uses a standard tripartite internship contract; Kosovo, for its dual learners, combines a school-employer-learner WBL contract with standard employment contracts; North Macedonia applies a national template for a tripartite contract; Montenegro distinguishes between a school-employer contract for regular IVET programmes with a WBL component and a tripartite contract for dual programmes; Serbia operates with two instruments, a school-employer dual education contract and a separate employer-learner WBL contract.

The obligations of the contracting parties are also relatively similar when it comes to employers' provision of mentors, safe working conditions and alignment with curricula; school monitoring and pedagogical support; and learner attendance and adherence to workplace rules. Contract duration is typically aligned with programme length (three to four years) but there are some variations. Working time is regulated across the region under youth labour law or by contract, with age-appropriate limits, but remuneration is regulated differently, being absent in Albania but compulsory or allowance-based in dual schemes (Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia); see the section on Criterion 5.

²⁰ The numbering refers to EFQEA quality criterion, see Table 1.1.

Table 5.2.: Criterion 1 – Summary regarding contractual arrangements for WBL

Main features	Albania	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Type of contract/ agreement	Standard tripartite 'internship' contract between employer, learner and VET provider	WBL contract between learner, school and employer Dual learners also sign employment contracts	(A) School-employer contract for IVET with WBL component (B) Tripartite contract between learner/parent, employer and school for dual VET	Tripartite contract between employer, school and learner/parent	(1) Dual education contract (school-employer) (2) WBL contract (employer-learner/parent)
Obligations of the contracting parties	The employer provides trainer, tools and conditions The learner follows training plan and workplace rules The school develops the training plan, monitors learning and supports evaluation	The school gives pre-contract guidance. The contract defines the WBL schedule, competences and responsibilities Dual learners have employee duties	The employer provides training, mentors, schedule in cooperation with school, and allowance (for dual in the third grade) The learner attends and follows the rules	The employer provides a mentor and conditions for learning and participates in planning The learner attends and follows the rules The school monitors implementation and informs the authorities	The employer ensures workplace health/safety, provides licensed instructors and covers costs The learner attends and follows the rules The school facilitates and supervises the programme
Duration of contract	Typically one contract per school year, the duration of which varies according to the host company's capacity to cover learning outcomes	Typically, one contract per training cycle (usually three years) Dual learners may sign multiple contracts.	Type A: one school year (per grade) Type B (dual): three-year contract covering all grades	One contract typically for three years (starting in year 2). Contracts can be terminated by any party	Three to four years, matching the duration of the programme. The duration of the contract must align with the curriculum
Working hours	Maximum 30 hours/week and 6 hours/day for minors, due to child labour regulations	Regulated under labour law regarding young people: non-hazardous work only, with age-related limits (for dual learners).	Type A: lesson-based schedule Type B: full-year plan including schedule, safety, and learning workload	Maximum 8 hours per day, defined in contract. Weekly schedules vary by year (e.g. 4–10 hours).	Schedule defined in contract. Must follow curriculum and health/safety norms

Source: prepared by the author

5.3 Learning outcomes (IVET 2)

All five countries have adopted a learning outcomes-based approach in their IVET systems that is linked to national qualification frameworks (NQF) and occupational standards. Serbia and North Macedonia stand out for their structured systems combining strong national coordination with clear employer engagement. Kosovo and Albania demonstrate increasing stakeholder involvement, especially through mechanisms like sectoral committees or company-specific training plans; here schools can adjust parts of the national curriculum to reflect local economic needs and employer capacities. Montenegro ensures standardisation and alignment across programmes but places less emphasis on employer-specific customisation of outcomes.

In Albania, learning outcomes are at the heart of all IVET programmes and are developed by the National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ). The agency applies a 'Develop a Curriculum' (DACUM) methodology that relies on focus groups composed of VET teachers, instructors and representatives of relevant businesses. Recently, the involvement of stakeholders has been further formalised through the establishment of Sectoral Committees, whose role is to identify future occupational skills needs at sectoral level, thereby reinforcing the relevance of learning outcomes. In Kosovo, learning outcomes for vocational qualifications are based on occupational standards and structured in modular form to support flexible certification processes. The development process involves the Ministry of Education (MESTI), VET schools, business associations and social partners, although the National Qualification Authority (NQA) often plays a leading role in approving standards. During the implementation of WBL, schoolteachers collaborate with workplace instructors to design training plans that specify the learning outcomes, activities and tools to be used. These are tailored to each company and reviewed on an ongoing basis.

North Macedonia combines centralised and decentralised approaches. The national VET Centre prepares the core WBL curriculum, which defines modular units and general learning outcomes. VET institutions and company mentors develop additional occupational modules that are tailored to specific employers' needs but aligned with national qualifications and occupational standards. Similarly, the learning outcomes of ferial practice are designed annually by schoolteacher commissions in consultation with companies.

In Montenegro, all qualifications from levels II to V are based on learning outcomes that are clearly defined through occupational and qualification standards. The VET Centre leads the development process in cooperation with relevant partners. Learning outcomes are grouped into qualification units and carry credit values, forming the basis of both school-based and dual IVET programmes.

In Serbia, learning outcomes are embedded in qualification standards that serve as the foundation for both school-based and dual VET curricula. The process is coordinated by the Qualifications Agency, with Sectoral Councils responsible for proposing and reviewing these standards. The WBL component of dual programmes is documented in a detailed implementation plan developed jointly by schools and employers. This plan explicitly outlines the learning outcomes to be achieved through workplace training and is revised after each full learner cohort has completed the programme, ensuring continuous feedback and improvement.

Training plans for WBL

All five countries envisage some form of training plan for WBL. Kosovo and Serbia have the most structured, system-regulated formats, especially under dual VET. North Macedonia takes a modular curriculum approach²¹, allowing customisation by company and VET school. Albania's system is less prescriptive.

²¹ The WBL part of the curriculum is built as a set of modules or units, which can be combined and partly tailored instead of being one fixed, linear syllabus.

Table 5.3: Criterion 4 – Summary regarding training plans for WBL

Country	Existence of WBL training plan	Stakeholders involved in preparing the plan	Characteristics
Albania	Yes	VET provider and in-company trainer	Individual training plan, compulsory for internships; based on national format.
Kosovo	Yes	Ministry (template), schools and companies	Dual VET: standardised plan aligns curriculum with job tasks. Operational manual guides all actors.
North Macedonia	Yes	WBL teacher and in-company mentor	Modular structure across years. Customised per company.
Montenegro	Yes	WBL teacher and in-company trainer	The WBL plan is prepared at the beginning of the school year. Details in the schedule depend on the work process in the company.
Serbia	Yes	School and employer	The WBL plan is a compulsory part of the school's annual plan. It details time, location and schedule and also covers multi-employer settings.

Source: prepared by the author.

5.4 Pedagogical support (IVET 3)

All countries WBL systems envisage the presence of an in-company trainer for learners in WBL. However, the maturity of these systems differs in terms of the degree and nature of school-company coordination, the continuous professional development opportunities for trainers and the certification of their roles.

Table 5.4: Criterion 3. Summary of system maturity

System maturity	Country	Features
Advanced	Serbia	Compulsory licensing of in-company trainers, structured training, certified instructors, strong school-company coordination
Developing	Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Certified (by chambers) but not compulsory trainers; structured training for in-company trainers (as well as standards in North Macedonia); coordination with schools currently being strengthened

Source: prepared by the author.

5.4.1 School-company coordination

Serbia and North Macedonia have institutionalised local coordination mechanisms through WBL coordinators in schools, who have clearly defined roles, access to professional development and are tasked with setting up formal collaboration frameworks with companies.

Montenegro uses a three-pronged approach: as well as the teachers providing practical training and the in-company trainers, it also has organisers of practical training, who are in charge of coordination between the school and the employer/in-company trainer.

Albania has school-business coordinators, who collaborate with the vocational practice teacher and the in-company trainer to plan how to implement the internship according to the agreed programme. They also determine the number of learners and the time frame, as well as the duration of the

internship (period of the year, week/weeks, day/days) depending on the availability of proper working conditions and suitable places.

Kosovo lacks strong coordination mechanisms. The absence of structured interaction between schoolteachers and workplace instructors is a known gap.

5.4.1.1 Training of in-company trainers: from project-based to systemic approaches

There are some forms of training for in-company trainers, but these are not necessarily institutionalised, through national frameworks or regulations.

Serbia and Kosovo have structured, certified training programmes aligned with the NQF and embedded in national systems. Serbia's 40-hour course is compulsory for licensing, while Kosovo operates a three-tier certification system (the workplace instructor, at level 4 of the NQF; the workplace trainer, at level 5; and the master trainer, at level 6).

North Macedonia has a well-developed but externally funded system for mentors' training based on standards, implemented by professional chambers and certified by the VET Centre. Albania and Montenegro take a less systematic approach and remain highly dependent on donors ²².

In Albania, training is not recognised at national level, while in Montenegro, although there are programmes for training in-company trainers, such training is not compulsory and support mechanisms (pedagogical, material and networking) remain insufficiently developed, indicating the absence of a fully systemic and sustained support framework.

5.4.1.2 Certification of in-company trainers

Only Serbia has compulsory licensing of in-company trainers. Over 90 % of WBL delivery is covered by licensed instructors, showing strong enforcement and system penetration. Kosovo is moving in this direction. Certification is available for instructors, trainers and master trainers. This is a requirement for companies seeking Chamber of Commerce accreditation for WBL but otherwise not compulsory.

In the other countries certification is still optional for in-company trainers. In North Macedonia, at the request of employers, chambers and the VET centre jointly issue certificates for in-company mentors upon completion of training designed according to the requirements and standards set by the VET Centre. Details of coverage of certified mentors may be found on the Economic Chamber's ['Praksa' Portal](#).

In Albania, no certified in-company trainers are recognised at system level. In the past, donors have issued attendance certificates for their training, but these are not formally recognised although they are gaining credibility in the labour market.

Montenegro does not certify in-company trainers. Only basic qualification and experience criteria need to be met.

5.5 Workplace component (IVET 4)

The share of the total curriculum time dedicated to WBL varies across the region and depends on the type of programme (e.g. dual or non-dual). Kosovo is the only country that specifies this, namely for its dual programmes. Albania and North Macedonia show flexibility but lack clear information about time requirements for WBL as a share of programme duration. Serbia imposes regulatory caps on weekly hours and allows significant flexibility in training locations (schools, training centres and companies).

²² Training of instructors is planned through the Youth Guarantee.

Table 4.5: Criterion 4 – Summary regarding workplace component

Country	Programme track	Share of WBL in curriculum	WBL compulsory?	Organisation of WBL in this programme
Albania	Regular/school-based IVET	No fixed overall share. Company internship is optional and may account for no more than 50 % of the time allocated to vocational practice modules.	No.	Organisation depends on agreements between schools and companies.
	Dual IVET pilot programmes	Around 37 % of total curriculum time.	Yes	The period for internship is negotiated between schools and companies and depends on the availability of proper working conditions and suitable places.
Kosovo	Traditional VET	About 28 % of total curriculum time.	Yes	WBL is organised as structured professional practice within the programme.
	Dual VET	More than 50 % of total curriculum time.	Yes	Learners spend an average of 2.5 days/week in companies. A block model is also possible.
North Macedonia	Regular/reformed four-year VET	WBL is embedded in years 2, 3 and 4, but there is no clear single overall share applying across all regular programmes.	Yes (ferial practice)	WBL is organised through modular workplace components across the years, alongside compulsory ferial practice that are fully work-based.
	Dual VET	In the four-year dual programmes analysed, WBL accounts for about 26–28 % of total programme duration across all years.	Yes	In the four-year programmes analysed, employer-based learning increases from 4 hours/week in Year 2, to 8 hours/week in Year 3, and 10 hours/week in Year 4; ferial practice remains fully work-based.
Montenegro	Regular/school-type IVET	The share depends on the level and programme; no single overall percentage is fixed.	No: practical training is compulsory, but not always company based.	The exact balance between school and company placement varies by programme and employer capacity.
	Dual VET	About 45 % in the dual 3-year model.	Yes	Students spend one day/week in the company in Year 1, two days/week in Year 2, and three days/week in Year 3
Serbia	Regular/school-based VET	WBL is optional; where provided, it can account for up to 25 % of total practical training time.	No.	Where practical training is organised with employers, WBL may last up to 8 hours/day and 24 to 30 hours/week.
	Dual VET	WBL is compulsory and must account for at least 70 % of total practical training time; overall, it must represent 20 % to 80 % of total VET content.	Yes	Practical learning is mainly company-based, but exceptionally up to 25 % may take place in school and up to 30 % in training centres where no suitable workplace is available.

Source: prepared by the author

5.6 Remuneration and/or compensation (IVET 5)

Some of the five countries have provisions relating to obligatory compensation for some of the VET programmes with a WBL component. However, in none of these countries do provisions on learners' compensation refer to the 'national or sectoral requirements or collective agreements' mentioned in the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship.

Albania and Kosovo have the least structured compensation systems, relying largely on voluntary employer contributions or donor support. Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have clearer frameworks with compulsory compensation in dual programmes. North Macedonia's 2025 law marks a significant shift toward compulsory compensation²³. Serbia requires a relatively high average remuneration (more than 70 % of the minimum wage) coupled with reimbursement of transport costs.

Table 5.6: Criterion 5 – Summary regarding remuneration and/or compensation

Components	Albania	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Is compensation compulsory?	No	No	Yes (dual)	Yes (dual, from 2025 law) – optional for ferial practice	Yes, in dual VET for WBL at the employer; not for practice in training centres
Who provides compensation?	Employer	Employer or donors	Ministry (Years 1 and 2), employer (Year 3)	Employer	Employer
Form of compensation	Food, transport and other allowances	Occasional transport or low wages	% of average net salary: year 1: ≥ 10 %, year 2: ≥ 15 %, year 3: ≥ 20 %	Salary but the level is not defined	Based on % of minimum wage/hour; average ≥ 70 % of minimum wage
Other financial or in-kind support surrounding participation in WBL (not compensation)	N.A.	Donor-funded transport in some cases	N.A.	State scholarships (since 2021): about 60 EUR/month	Transport reimbursement; optional employer scholarships
Tax implications	N.A.	Not mentioned	N.A.	Remuneration is taxed as the salary of a part-time worker; no exemption for minors	Remuneration is treated as a wage; in addition, the employer reimburses transport costs

Source: prepared by the author

5.7 Social protection (IVET 6)

In all five countries, accident insurance is the most consistently addressed form of social protection for participants in work-based learning. All countries have some mechanisms – either through schools, employers, or collective insurance – to ensure that learners are protected in the event of work-related accidents or occupational diseases. However, the scope, funding sources and legal clarity vary.

²³ A recent amendment to the VET law abolished the specific amounts (percentages) previously stipulated for compensation payments to dual learners. The amended provisions now include a single sentence requirement for employers to pay compensation to learners (Official Gazette No 74/25).

Albania and Serbia have compulsory employer-based contributions, while in Montenegro and North Macedonia schools or VET institutions provide collective insurance. In Kosovo, accident insurance is officially the responsibility of VET schools but is inconsistently funded and often reliant on donor support.

In contrast, health insurance is explicitly covered only in Serbia (for dual VET learners) and only partially in Kosovo (only for dual VET learners, where they are considered employees). In Albania, the employer-based compulsory contributions explicitly cover accidents at work and occupational diseases.

Pension contributions are rarely granted. Only Serbia and Kosovo provide pension insurance for dual VET learners as, again, they are considered employees under those schemes.

5.8 Workplace health and safety (IVET 7)

5.8.1 Health and safety regulations

In all five countries, workplace health and safety is regulated by national legislation, with learners in IVET typically covered under general occupational health and safety laws. However, the degree of specification for students and dual VET learners varies. Countries with dual education or programmes with an increased share of WBL (e.g. Kosovo and Serbia) tend to have more detailed and formalised frameworks:

Kosovo and North Macedonia have dedicated regulations or protocols specifically addressing learner protection during WBL, including the roles and responsibilities of schools and companies; Serbia ensures compliance through multiple laws (Labour Law, Law on Education, etc.), including specific protection for underage learners;

Montenegro integrates Health and Safety into the curriculum and institutional practice, but without a dedicated WBL regulation;

Albania relies primarily on general labour legislation, with no learner-specific regulatory instruments beyond company obligations.

5.8.2 Workplace inspections

There is no consistent system-wide mechanism for regular external inspections solely dedicated to WBL learner safety in any of the countries and each system is different.

North Macedonia has the most developed inspection framework, with the State Labour Inspectorate empowered to impose fines or halt unsafe WBL activities. As such, it is the only country with a clear enforcement and sanction mechanism for learner safety in workplaces. However, there is no evidence that this power is exercised against training companies.

Albania places the responsibility for inspection on the companies themselves, with no external supervision mentioned.

Kosovo and Serbia imply oversight through institutional or legal obligations but do not set out inspection mechanisms in detail; Montenegro does not have separate inspection arrangements in the context of WBL.

5.8.3 Health and safety training for learners

Health and safety training for learners is perhaps the area with the most significant variations among the five countries.

North Macedonia and Kosovo provide structured compulsory training before learners enter the workplace, often combined with certification (North Macedonia) and coordinated roles between schools and companies (Kosovo).

Montenegro includes health and safety training in the curriculum, delivered by school staff and complemented by company-level demonstration.

Serbia integrates health and safety into the curriculum, with no separate compulsory training before the start of WBL.

Albania lacks any specific provision for training learners on health and safety before the internship, though companies are legally responsible for informing all newly hired individuals.

Table 5.7: Criterion 7 – Summary regarding workplace health and safety

Country	Health and safety regulations	Workplace inspections	Training of learners
Albania	General labour laws apply; no specific learner-focused regulation in internships.	Responsibility lies with the company; no external inspection mechanism specified.	No structured training required before internship; companies have a general duty to inform new workers.
Kosovo	Dedicated regulation (No 135/2020) specifies roles of schools and companies for learner safety.	Schools and companies share responsibilities under the Regulation.	Compulsory training by schools; companies also provide on-site safety briefing and equipment.
Montenegro	Health and safety topics included in curriculum; no dedicated WBL regulation.	During WBL the company is responsible for the health and safety of students. There is no separate inspection for WBL	Training embedded in curriculum and delivered by teachers and in-company trainers.
North Macedonia	Compulsory school-based training and certification; employer responsibilities defined by law.	Inspected by the State Labour Inspectorate; fines and work bans for non-compliance.	Compulsory certified safety training before WBL starts; in-company mentors give additional briefing.
Serbia	Multiple legal texts regulate safety, including special protection for minors; health and safety are part of the curriculum.	Implied through legislation, but no dedicated inspection mechanism described.	Health and safety included in curriculum; no separate pre-placement training.

Source: prepared by the author

5.9 Regulatory framework (IVET 8)

The regulatory frameworks governing WBL in IVET across the five countries show notable differences in terms of legislation, institutional responsibilities, and enforcement.

In Albania, the Internship/traineeship Regulation provides a clear legal framework that defines the rights and responsibilities of schools, companies and learners/parents. Although quality criteria for company selection do exist they are difficult to implement consistently and there is no accreditation mechanism for training companies.

Kosovo has established a detailed Administrative Instruction on WBL that outlines roles and procedures for schools, employers, workplace instructors and learners, including aspects of quality

assurance, safety and financing. However, despite these provisions, company selection criteria are not effectively applied in practice and there is no specific regulation for the dual component.

North Macedonia relies on the 2025 Law on VET and the Concept for WBL, which specify employer obligations, the verification role of chambers and fines for non-compliance. This framework is relatively comprehensive although its implementation depends on the operational capacity of chambers and the Ministry of Education and Science.

In Montenegro, WBL is regulated by the Law on Vocational Education, which sets out the responsibilities of partners in practical training, but social partner involvement in quality assurance is insufficient.

Serbia has developed a comprehensive set of rulebooks regulating different aspects of WBL, including learner placement, employer accreditation, instructor training and health and safety measures. These instruments assign significant responsibility to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia (CCIS) and ensure that employers meet defined conditions before learners are placed in companies. To summarise, the legislative environment is most structured in Serbia and North Macedonia, where employer accreditation is also provided for, while in Albania and Kosovo, gaps remain in enforcing company criteria and accrediting dual programme partners. Montenegro presents a lighter framework with less emphasis on external verification and quality assurance.

5.10 Involvement of social partners (IVET 9)

The role of social partners²⁴ in WBL governance varies significantly across the region, although the role of unions is consistently marginal in all five countries: in North Macedonia, the education sector trade union (SONK) has a legal mandate to protect learners from exploitation but in practice its activities focus on teachers rather than learners; in Montenegro, trade unions participate in advisory bodies at national level and contribute to strategic decisions but their involvement in implementation and assessment of WBL is negligible; in Serbia, trade unions are represented in councils and sector skills bodies but have no direct operational role in WBL implementation.

In Kosovo and Serbia, the chambers are more prominently involved than representative employer organisations. The Kosovo Chamber of Commerce (KCC) is described as the sole organisation with legal status and is explicitly positioned as the representative of the private sector in WBL governance and implementation (membership in the Council for VET and Adult Education and National Qualification Authority board; certified training provider for workplace instructors; tasked with collecting/monitoring WBL agreements maintaining a database of participating companies to facilitate employer engagement, and certifying workplace instructors).

In Serbia, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCIS) is a key implementation partner for dual VET, with concrete system management responsibilities including: company accreditation/listing, instructor training at its premises, licensing/registration, and participation in key councils and enrolment structure planning via an employer involvement plan.

In North Macedonia, the chambers occupy a decisive position: they check employer readiness, train mentors, maintain registers of companies, in company mentors and VET school WBL coordinators and report annually to the Ministry of Education and Science. Employer engagement has expanded rapidly in recent years although discrepancies remain between official lists and actual company participation.

In Albania and Montenegro the role of chambers is less clear. In Albania, employer organisations are formally involved through Sectoral Committees and curriculum working groups and representatives

²⁴ The understanding of 'social partners' adopted in the Western Balkans context does not strictly indicate representative organisations of the interests of workers and employers but it does include other actors like the chambers.

may participate in final learner assessments. However, their role in the governance and implementation of WBL remains limited, and there are no strong mechanisms for employer associations to shape practice. In Kosovo, industry/employer associations such as STIKK (Kosovo ICT Association) or AWPK (Association of Wood Processors of Kosovo), play a marginal role. In Montenegro, employer organisations are not involved in the management of WBL, except to the extent that they compensate dual learners in the third year.

Overall, chambers play a pivotal role in Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo, with varying degrees of formal responsibility; in Albania, the role of employer representatives is consultative in nature, while in Montenegro it is less well defined. Trade unions are institutionally present but weak in North Macedonia and Serbia and largely absent in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

5.11 Support for companies and cost-sharing arrangements (IVET 10)

The five countries take contrasting approaches to the financing of WBL in IVET, both in terms of direct financial support and broader non-financial incentives.

The most advanced system is that of Montenegro, where a cost-sharing scheme is in place: the state budget covers learner allowances in the first two years of dual three-year programmes while employers finance compensation in the third year. However, employers are not obliged to provide health or pension insurance. In 2025, the Dual Education Support Fund was established (Amendments to VET Law, 2025; Rulebook, 2025)²⁵ to provide financial support in different forms to employers offering dual education placements²⁶. As of 2026, when funding will be distributed, the Fund will also cover awards²⁷ to the best students in dual education to cover their transportation costs and meals, as well as the promotion of dual education through the organisation of fairs, competitions, etc²⁸.

Serbia offers another developed financial support system. Beyond the statutory remuneration paid by the employer, a 2023 decree introduced state-funded subsidies for high-demand occupations. These include a direct monthly allowance for learners and partial subsidisation of remuneration paid by the employer, with particular attention to easing the financial burden for micro and small enterprises. In addition, the CCIS provides free instructor training as a non-financial measure to support company engagement.

Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have no, or at least no developed, cost-sharing arrangements. In Albania, companies bear the costs of the learner's WBL placement and assessment and receive neither subsidies nor in-kind support from public authorities. Kosovo similarly lacks a regulated funding model for WBL and dual education, with employers covering all expenses for consumables, equipment and workplace instructors. Public funds are limited to the financing of vocational schools and no tax incentives or subsidies are available. North Macedonia has legally established the possibility of financial, customs and tax incentives for employers under the 2019 and 2025 Laws on VET, yet these measures have not been operationalised due to the absence of implementing by-laws and regulations. As a result, employer participation is not backed by tangible state support.

²⁵ The Rulebook provides for financial support to employers who have three or more students with whom they have concluded individual education contracts, or to employers who, after completing practical education, conclude a permanent contract with these students. It also provides for participation in the employer's costs for the purchase of work equipment, safety equipment and compensation for the work of instructors for the duration of the individual education contract.

²⁶ Financial support for employers may take different forms: payments tied to student fees, participation in the costs of work and occupational safety equipment, participation in the costs of instructor fees, funding for promotions, awards and student support (transport, meals).

²⁷ At the end of December 2025, at the proposal of the teaching council of schools implementing dual education, 35 second- and third-grade students who had concluded individual education contracts with employers received such funding awards. The Ministry also contributed to the costs of remunerating the work of practical education instructors for December 2025.

²⁸ Funds for such promotion may be allocated to the school or the employer.

In terms of non-financial incentives²⁹, each country supports the training process in its own way. While all of their systems have standardised templates for training contracts or agreements, there is often still a lack of comprehensive training guidelines for all training programmes with WBL. Support for recruitment also varies. Learners and training companies are usually still matched locally through vocational schools, which prevents the development of a national training/WBL placement market in which personal, professional and geographical preferences might be better balanced. Serbia, however, has a centralised national matching platform. Career orientation events and job fairs are now widespread but in some cases dependent on support from donors. Networking and learning opportunities for training companies are mainly offered by donors in selected occupational areas.

In summary: Serbia has opted for targeted financial measures and structured support mechanisms; Montenegro applies an advanced shared-cost model; Albania and Kosovo leave companies to bear all costs; and North Macedonia has yet to operationalise the incentives for which it is legislating. Non-financial support is marginal except in Serbia, which offers free instructor training.

5.12 Flexible pathways and mobility (IVET 11)

Pathways, mobility and recognition of qualifications within IVET are at different levels of development across the five countries.

In Albania, IVET qualifications are registered in the AQF, granting access to CVET and higher education. However, accumulation of units of learning outcomes is not regulated, limiting flexible and smooth progression. A legal framework for recognition of prior learning (RPL) is under preparation but not yet operational.

In Kosovo, permeability within VET permits transfers within the same sectoral field during year 10, while transitions across sectoral fields are not regulated. The transition between VET and general education is underdeveloped, with no clear guidelines or procedures. Many public VET schools struggle to meet NQA accreditation criteria and their qualifications largely remain outside the NQF.

North Macedonia has developed modularised curricula, including transferable and soft skills, with WBL carrying 19–26 ECVET credits (European credit system for vocational education and training). Pathways allow continuation into higher education through the State upper-secondary education qualification (*Matura*), although learners taking only the final examination remain limited to the labour market. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (i.e. RPL) is envisaged in the 2025 VET, Adult Education and NQF laws, pending institutional adaptation.

Montenegro applies the same educational programmes for both school-based and dual tracks, ensuring equal qualifications. Graduates of three-year dual programmes can progress to four-year programmes via differential examinations to assess potential gaps and then enter higher education. Four-year graduates have direct access to higher education, irrespective of their training route. Serbia regulates pathways through the dual VET model, linking qualifications to the NQFS. While details are fewer in the current framework, the strong role of CCIS in aligning programmes with labour market needs supports recognition within the qualifications system.

In summary, Montenegro and North Macedonia offer structured modular or examination-based pathways into higher education; Albania and Kosovo have more restricted options due to a lack of regulation and limited accreditation; Serbia's framework is aligned with its NQFS but still under consolidation. Recognition of informal/non-formal prior learning remains either absent or under

²⁹ These can be used to support and motivate training companies to provide high-quality work-based learning and include, for example, support in the training process, development opportunities for in-company trainers, networking and learning opportunities for training companies, as well as recognition and visibility.

development across the region, although North Macedonia and Albania are moving to formalise all forms of learning outcomes.

5.13 Career guidance and awareness-raising (IVET 12)

Career guidance, mentoring and information provision in support of WBL are unevenly developed across the region. The most institutionalised and developed approaches are to be found in Kosovo and Serbia; Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia have provisions and mechanisms in place at school level but their implementation is still developing.

Kosovo has institutionalised career guidance through Administrative Instruction No 18/2023, introducing certified career advisors in VET schools. These advisors support learners in career planning, organise fairs and cooperate with WBL coordinators to develop soft skills. Earlier donor-supported models of school-based and municipal career centres also contributed to linking schools with employers and local labour offices. However, guidance remains underdeveloped in lower-secondary education.

Serbia has established local career guidance and counselling (CGC) teams in VET schools implementing dual education, which include employers and collaborate with primary schools to support enrolment planning. Promotion of dual programmes is reinforced by consistent marketing campaigns and information provided on governmental and CCIS websites.

In Albania, guidance is primarily provided by school staff responsible for business relations and career counselling, who inform learners and parents about internships, labour market opportunities and placement options. VET and internships are publicised and promoted through national and local campaigns, open days and media initiatives.

In North Macedonia, new career guidance advisor positions have been financed from the State budget at all VET schools since September 2025. The number of these positions depends on the number of learners at each school. A rulebook on standards for career guidance counsellors was approved in 2025. These developments concern VET in general, not WBL in particular.

Montenegro relies on career guidance teams within schools but their activities focus mainly on informing learners about further education options rather than employment and labour market needs. Open days and promotional events are held, yet career counselling for WBL and labour market transitions is limited and employer data is scarcely integrated into guidance activities.

5.14 Transparency (IVET 13)

Transparency and access to information on WBL opportunities differ substantially across the region. Serbia ensures the highest level of digital transparency through regularly updated websites managed by the Ministry of Education, the CCIS and other agencies, where information on dual programmes, curricula, and accredited companies is publicly available. The CCIS website also manages the registration of companies for WBL, while NQFS and open data websites provide access to qualifications and institutions.

In North Macedonia, the Ministry of Education and Science publishes a public call for enrolment each year, including information about employer partnerships for WBL. This is accompanied by local media campaigns. Learners, however, cannot apply directly to employers. The Economic Chamber's 'Praksa' website lists verified employers, certified mentors and contact details of WBL coordinators in schools. In addition, despite these initiatives, the way information is presented may limit transparency (e.g. neither the 'Praksa' portal nor the annual enrolment call systematically spell out, by profile, the actual WBL volume/share of programme duration and alternation pattern).

Kosovo relies primarily on VET schools to select and distribute learners, sometimes jointly with employers. Information on WBL opportunities is communicated directly to schools and although learners can apply individually, this remains rare.

Montenegro provides information on dual programmes in school enrolment competitions and the Montenegro Education Information System hosts a web application for practical training. As yet, there is no national database of company vacancies.

In Albania, the websites of the public employment service (National Employment and Skills Agency, NESAs) and the National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ) provide information on IVET schools, occupational areas, curricula and enrolment procedures, while the e-Albania website enables online registration. Nevertheless, internship placements are usually arranged directly by schools, except in cases of donor funded initiatives; for instance, in Swisscontact-supported schools, learners apply with CVs and letters of interest. A private initiative, Praktika.al, intended as a WBL platform, has shifted towards general employment services.

Overall, Serbia and North Macedonia have the most structured use of web sites to support transparency and access, while Albania has developed basic online systems but lacks standardised placement procedures. Montenegro and Kosovo remain reliant on school-level arrangements, with limited digital support and low transparency in allocating WBL opportunities.

5.15 Quality assurance and graduate tracking (IVET 14)

Approaches to school evaluation, self-evaluation and graduate tracking within WBL in IVET also reveal significant contrasts across the five countries.

In Albania, a multi-layered quality assurance system is in place: NAVETQ develops qualifications and occupational standards in consultation with businesses; VET providers conduct self-assessments including collaboration with employers; schools prepare annual reports on business cooperation; Internships are monitored through contracts and learner diaries; and NESAs collect and publishes statistical data. However, systematic tracer studies of graduates are not reported.

Kosovo has established a National Quality Assurance Framework under the NQA, requiring provider accreditation and validation of qualifications. Schools must conduct annual self-assessments and maintain quality coordinators, but communication with central authorities is weak. Donor projects have introduced WBL diaries but as yet there is no structured monitoring system for WBL quality and no mechanisms to track graduate destinations and the added value of WBL as part of the curriculum. North Macedonia applies quality assurance at system, intermediary and provider level. The VET Centre and chambers check employers, set mentor standards and participate in final examinations, while schools perform annual self-evaluations. Learners' diaries form part of the portfolio and are checked jointly by mentors and teachers. Despite this multi-level structure, no systematic graduate tracking or tracer studies are in place for WBL and dual VET.

Montenegro combines internal and external evaluations: VET schools conduct self-evaluations annually and are subject to an external evaluation by the VET Centre every four years that covers WBL provision and cooperation with employers. One indicator concerns graduate monitoring, but in practice this remains limited and learner follow-up is weak.

Serbia has developed a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for the dual VET model, initially created with donor support. Following institutional reforms, it is being revised and will be integrated into the national quality assurance system by 2025, covering external and self-evaluations of institutions. Graduate tracking is not yet systematically implemented although capacity-building measures are planned.

Overall, Albania and North Macedonia operate relatively elaborate self-evaluation mechanisms at different levels, while Montenegro adds regular external evaluation. Serbia is moving towards an institutionalised system-wide M&E framework. Kosovo has established a National Quality Assurance Framework but coordination remains weak and practices are fragmented. Across all countries, systematic graduate tracking is underdeveloped, highlighting a persistent gap in evidence on the outcomes and impact of WBL.

5.16 Conclusions – Criteria for IVET (1-14)

Overall, IVET systems across the five countries show a broadly shared pattern of formally well-developed regulatory frameworks for work-based learning, including dual VET, with increasing levels of participation and strong political support.

The legal frameworks include clearly defined roles and institutionalised procedures for the management of WBL. Chambers play a central role in several countries. They carry out specific tasks such as certifying training companies, training in-company trainers, monitoring implementation and promoting cooperation between vocational schools and employers. Where chambers play a less prominent role, vocational schools are tasked with important responsibilities, such as recruiting, accrediting training companies and matching learners and training companies, which hinders the development of transparent national markets for dual training places.

The influence of social partners on key decision-making processes regarding the design of work-based learning is limited and largely advisory. This diminishes the extent of shared responsibility and can weaken the responsiveness of vocational education and training systems to the needs of the labour market and discourage long-term investment, particularly by the private sector. The marginal involvement of trade unions gives cause for concern regarding representation of the interests of learners and workers.

In all countries, WBL placements are regulated through contracts between schools, learners and employers. In most countries, the compensation of learners is clearly regulated, at least for dual training programmes. All countries regulate occupational health and safety provisions for learners in companies, who are in all cases accompanied by staff with pedagogical support roles; yet professional development opportunities and certification for in-company trainers is more the exception than the rule. On the other hand, learning outcomes and training plans for the workplace-based part of the programmes, mechanisms for coordinating the two learning venues (vocational school and company) and workplace trainers are now widely established.

The structure of dual programmes, in which the in-company component usually accounts for less than 50 % of the training, means that training companies tend to find that their costs exceed the benefits that they derive (i.e. from the learners' productivity). Government subsidies or other incentives that might offset this are only available in some countries, for example for dual training programmes that are in high demand on the labour market.

There are also significant gaps between legal provisions and their implementation, particularly for dual VET, e.g. in terms of availability and quality of career guidance support, validation of non-formal and informal learning, accreditation of companies and cost-sharing mechanisms. Learner compensation is not always compulsory. Countries lack systematic monitoring mechanisms for WBL, exemplified by the absence of tracer studies.

Looking forward, strengthening work-based learning systems across the region requires a broader shift towards more inclusive and effective governance arrangements, as all countries would benefit from employer and employee organisations being further involved in the governance and management of WBL: they could be given decision-making powers rather than being limited to advisory functions and be integrated more systematically into decisions on the financing of WBL.

This need is reinforced by evidence of weak or uneven employer engagement in implementation processes, including cases in which company selection criteria are not consistently enforced and training company accreditation mechanisms are insufficiently developed.

Quality assurance would be strengthened through more systematic and accessible opportunities for in-company trainer training and professional development, as well as clearer regulations regarding employers' responsibilities in terms of workplace learning and learner protection and compensation. In addition, strengthening learner rights within dual and work-based learning arrangements, including fair compensation and clearer contractual protections, emerges as a key priority alongside improved career guidance systems supported by better use of labour market information and administrative data. Across all countries, there is also a clear need to introduce systematic tracer studies to evaluate graduate outcomes and improve the alignment between labour market analysis and programme supply in order to ensure the relevance, quality and responsiveness of work-based learning systems in a context in which WBL is steadily expanding and gaining policy importance.

6. WORK-BASED LEARNING IN CVET

6.1 Types of programmes with a minimum WBL component of 25 %

6.1.1 Albania

In Albania, CVET is offered primarily through public VET providers at upper-secondary and post-secondary levels and is closely linked to the national qualifications framework (NQF)³⁰. All CVET programmes combine general and occupational theory with modules of vocational practice, which are implemented in school-based workshops, laboratories and teaching firms (in schools) or, where possible, in companies, through internships (WBL). At upper-secondary level, the one-year programmes at AQF level 3, the one-year programmes at AQF level 4 and the two-year block programmes at AQF level 4 are formally categorised as CVET³¹, although in practice they are pursued almost exclusively by learners continuing directly from IVET. Access is open to adults under specific age conditions, but their participation remains rare. In these programmes, internships are optional.

Post-secondary CVET programmes at AQF level 5 last one to two years and are open to people who have completed IVET or CVET at level 4, as well as those with general secondary education plus relevant work experience. Internships with companies are a required component. These programmes include both younger and older learners, since they are open not only to recent graduates but also to people with prior work experience. Since public VET schools mainly serve young people and regional training centres are aimed at adults, the actual age mix of participants is not clearly known.

Recent reforms have introduced dual CVET programmes with a markedly higher share of WBL. These include:

- one-year AQF level 3 programmes in hospitality, automotive and electrotechnical services, and the installation and maintenance of electrical power cables, in which around two thirds of curriculum time is spent in internship;
- a two-year AQF level 4 multimedia programme in which more than half of training time is spent in a company;
- a one-year AQF level 5 programme in hospitality management in which over 70 % of training is delivered in the workplace.

They build broadly on corresponding IVET profiles already present in the Albanian IVET system, notably hospitality and catering, automotive services and electrotechnics, as well as related ICT/multimedia and hospitality pathways at higher levels. There is an implicit one-to-one progression route from each IVET programme to each new dual CVET programme. The new policy developments are aimed at strengthening WBL within the formal CVET pathway.

6.1.2 Kosovo

In Kosovo, CVET is still limited in scope and unevenly structured, with only few formal post-secondary offers and a predominant reliance on short training measures. The VET law provides for level 5 qualifications as post-secondary, non-tertiary programmes and some of those have been established in public VET schools and Centres of Competence, alongside accredited provision by private training institutes and higher education institutions. Beyond this emergent formal provision, the main form of CVET is organised through the vocational training centres operated by the Public Employment Service

³⁰ Qualifications/standards are defined in learning-outcomes terms and positioned in the national framework and/or leading to formal educational qualifications.

³¹ This includes pathways structured as two years of IVET followed by either one year plus one year, or a two-year block. Although there are exit points after the two-year IVET exist, most young people continue directly into these programmes, so they operate de facto as part of IVET.

(EARK) (See ETF, 2026f, for details about WBL in the context of ALMP, which is not the focus of this Report).

6.1.3 North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, CVET is structured across both formal and non-formal pathways, with significant WBL components. Formal CVET is delivered by VET institutions and is targeted at individuals who have completed IVET and wish either to obtain a different qualification at the same level or to progress to higher levels of the NQF. Learners are typically employed or unemployed adults enrolled in CVET on a part-time basis, following the same curriculum rules as IVET, including the share of WBL. For Levels III and IV the WBL share is the same as for IVET: approximately 288-360 hours per year (up to two months). For Level V-B the share of WBL is 30–40 %. In the case of non-formal learning, the AEC recommends 60–70 % WBL.

Post-secondary education and training at NQF level V is also part of CVET, divided into specialist education and training delivered by VET institutions and the master craftsperson's examination organised by the Chamber of Crafts. Both programmes last from six months to two years, with modular curricula combining theory and practice, and allocate between 30 and 40 % of the time to specialist practice in companies. The master craftsperson's programmes also integrate a practical component of at least 25 %, alongside theoretical, legal and economic, and pedagogical modules. Participation averages around 350 learners annually in specialist training and about 40 learners in master craftsperson's examinations.

Non-formal adult learning plays a substantial role. Such programmes are verified by the adult education centre and the Ministry of Education and Science. In these programmes, 60 to 70 % of total learning time is devoted to WBL (a recommendation of the AEC); they typically last around three months and can lead either to full or partial qualifications or to specific knowledge, skills and competences not registered with the catalogue associated with the NQF. In 2023, 3 457 adults participated in 380 such trainings for full or partial qualifications and a further 174 participated in shorter skills-focused programmes. Besides these options, other non-verified adult learning programmes are widespread and often the default option, especially for self-financed training. However, due to the lack of an institutional link, whether for verification of the programme or for the issue of a formal qualification, systematic evidence regarding their WBL component or data on their availability and uptake are not available.

Provision is diverse, spanning a wide range of occupational fields. In addition, private training providers offer a variety of courses, often with strong workplace components, especially in ICT, although these are neither linked to the NQF nor formally captured in the system.

6.1.4 Montenegro

In Montenegro, CVET is regulated under the Law on Adult Education and comprises training, retraining and specialisation programmes. These programmes are adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare on the proposal of the National Education Council and, when based on occupational and qualification standards, lead to nationally recognised vocational qualifications at NQF levels II to V. The curricula are modular and specify the theoretical, practical and workplace-based components of learning, alongside expected outcomes and assessment criteria. More than 125 CVET programmes have been approved, including some leading to qualifications such as cook of simple dishes, tourist guide and construction machine operator. WBL is an integral component of the preparation to these vocational qualifications ³².

³² Examples show a significant share of training taking place in companies: in the cook of simple dishes programme, 486 lessons are carried out at the workplace, compared with 25 practical exercises in schools; in the tourist guide programme, 375 lessons are workplace-based; in the construction machine operator programme, 300 lessons; and in the caregiver programme, 288 lessons. Programmes such as accounting technician also incorporate a substantial WBL component.

Alongside vocational qualifications, adult learning also covers key competences such as ICT and foreign languages, where participation is notably higher and growing, though these programmes are not always linked to WBL. The balance between vocationally oriented qualifications with structured WBL and broader competence development illustrates the dual orientation of Montenegro's CVET system, which both enables adults to acquire occupational qualifications and supports adult learning for employability.

In 2023, 128 licensed providers implemented adult learning activities, with 34 961 participants overall, including 994 who completed CVET programmes with a WBL component leading to vocational qualifications.

6.1.5 Serbia

In Serbia, CVET is delivered through a wide variety of programmes offered by publicly recognised organisers of adult education (PROAE), VET schools, training centres and companies. Programmes may be fully or partially aligned with qualification standards or independent of them and successful completion can result in various forms of certification, ranging from official certificates to non-official confirmations of attendance. The share of WBL is not prescribed by regulation and is generally not visible in the PROAE register, but the evidence suggests that where training is provided in collaboration with companies a minimum of one quarter of the programme is carried out in the workplace. Around 30 to 40 % of PROAE training programmes are reported to be delivered in cooperation with companies or by companies themselves once accredited.

Formal post-secondary CVET at NQFS level 5 comprises crafts and specialist vocational education and training, which may be pursued either through VET schools in one- to two-year programmes or through accredited non-formal providers in shorter, practice-oriented formats. Admission requires the possession of a qualification at level 3 or 4 and at least two years of work experience, which can also be validated through RPL. Education for work programmes at NQFS level 2, lasting up to two years, are another route to vocational qualifications through adult learning.

The PROAE system, introduced in 2015 and regulated under the Law on Adult Education, has grown to encompass 185 accredited schools and organisations offering over 800 adult learning programmes. Company-provided training remains a significant element of CVET: according to the 2021 Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS), almost half of Serbian enterprises provided their employees with some form of CVET and around one quarter of employees participated, mostly in off-the-job courses but also, to a lesser extent, in training directly at the workplace.

6.1.6 Summary – WBL in CVET

Table 6.1 (below) provides a comparative overview of the organisation of CVET with a WBL component in the Western Balkan region. It consolidates information on CVET programmes with a substantial WBL component across the five countries under review, bringing together comparable data on their design and implementation, including whether programmes are competence-based and registered in the NQF and their structure and duration.

Table 5.1: WBL in CVET at a glance³³

Element	Albania	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Based on occupational competence or standards?	Yes, all CVET curricula are competence-based and registered in the AQF	Yes, learning outcomes are defined in qualification standards linked to occupational standards.	Yes, both formal CVET and non-formal verified programmes are based on occupational standards (not necessarily so for non-verified programmes).	Yes, CVET programmes are to be based on qualification standards.
Quality-assured/registered in NQF?	All public CVET programmes are registered in AQF (levels 3–5).	Vocational qualifications are part of the NQF; over 125 CVET programmes adopted.	Programmes at levels III, IV and V-B in NQF; non-formal programmes can be verified by the AEC.	Registered in NQFS; PROAE need to be accredited by the Qualification Agency
Structure (school vs WBL share)	Varies: in standard CVET programmes internships are optional; in new dual-type CVET programmes, WBL compulsory: 50–72 % of time in companies.	WBL share varies by programme (e.g. cook: 486 lessons; caregivers: 288 lessons; machine operator: 300 lessons).	Levels III-IV: WBL same as IVET. Level V-B: 30–40 % WBL. Non-formal: the AEC recommends 60–70 % WBL.	WBL share is not prescribed by regulation, it depends on the programme .
Overall duration	Upper-secondary CVET: 1–2 years; Post-secondary CVET: 1–2 years (levels 3–5).	Duration ranges from 8–16 lessons (short) to 1 120 lessons (full vocational qualifications).	Levels III-IV: 1–2 years; level V-B: six months to two years.	Non-formal CVET: 120–880 hours depending on the programme; level 5 post-secondary: six months to two years.

Source: prepared by the author

Overall, the consolidated evidence highlights both commonalities and divergence in the design and delivery of CVET with a work-based learning component. While Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia all have competence-based, quality-assured programmes, their scope, duration and scale vary considerably.

In terms of trends, the picture of participation in the four countries that have integrated WBL into CVET is mixed, but points to a common pattern: the number of participants in CVET programmes with a WBL component of at least 25 % is changing little, while WBL is being strengthened through reformed or newly launched programmes.

Albania shows fluctuating participation rates and is experimenting with new dual CVET offers that deliberately increase the share WBL. In North Macedonia, participation in specialist education and the master craftsperson examination is relatively limited, while non-formal training operates at a far larger scale. Montenegro, by contrast, registers declining participation in CVET programmes with a WBL component. In Serbia, the main point is not so much how many people take part but how closely CVET is connected to employers and workplace training: survey evidence indicates that roughly half of companies provide CVET and that PROAE-related training is increasingly connected to enterprises (SORS, 2022).

³³ In Kosovo there are no CVET programmes with a substantial WBL component.

The following sections provide an analysis based on the criteria for the assessment of WBL according to EU quality standards in CVET (Table 1.1). It is worth noting that in many instances the countries under review have global regulations concerning VET rather than specific regulations for CVET that differ from those for IVET. Therefore, the findings here may sometimes repeat what is in Chapter 6. The programmes selected have a minimum WBL share of 25 %. As there are currently no CVET programmes in Kosovo with a significant WBL component, the following sections refer only to the following countries: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

6.2 Contract or training agreement (CVET 1)

In Albania, when CVET vocational practice is implemented as an internship in a company, it is governed by a written internship contract based on the compulsory template in the Internship/traineeship Regulation. The contract defines the rights and obligations of the learner, the VET provider and the company and serves as the formal instrument regulating the placement.

In North Macedonia, contractual arrangements differ by type of programme. In WBL within formal CVET, learners sign agreements with vocational institutions and a company agreement aligned with that used in IVET. In verified non-formal adult learning, providers must conclude participant contracts setting out the conditions of participation, including the place and duration of training and, where relevant, compensation; rights and obligations are explicitly recorded and prior education and work experience are taken into account.

In Montenegro, licensed providers, i.e. vocational schools or companies, conclude contracts with learners. These contracts specify the delivery arrangements and responsibilities, including the profiles of teachers and in-company trainers, health and safety provisions and training costs. They also formally record the agreed duration of the programme and the basic structure of delivery as part of the contractual package.

In Serbia, publicly recognised organisers of adult learning conclude business/technical cooperation contracts with employers for company-based delivery. The available regulations do not clarify whether learners are parties to these agreements, nor do they prescribe their content. As a result, the regulatory sources do not define the contractual obligations of companies, providers and learners, nor do they establish standard contractual provisions on duration, compensation or working time.

Overall, there is a heterogeneous contractual landscape for WBL in CVET. In Albania, CVET in VET providers is covered by the same internship provisions as IVET, including a written contract and defined limits on working time, and the internship contract shown does not provide for remuneration; Montenegro sets out detailed provider/candidate contracts that embed content, roles, costs and lesson volumes; North Macedonia requires learner-signed agreements with both institutions and companies and defines duration and working time through curricula and verification; Serbia relies on provider/employer cooperation contracts whose content is not specified and which do not include the learner as a signatory. Across the region, provisions on compensation and working hours are either absent (Albania, Serbia), conditional and programme-specific (North Macedonia) or expressed as lesson volumes (Montenegro).

6.3 Learning outcomes (CVET 2)

In Albania, learning outcomes are defined in CVET curricula registered in the Albanian Qualifications Framework. Outcomes are formulated in terms of knowledge, skills and competences and guide the design of both theoretical instruction and vocational practice, which may be delivered in provider facilities or in companies. Qualification supplements record the qualification level, occupational scope and progression opportunities, providing an outcomes-based description of what learners are expected to achieve across programme components.

In North Macedonia, learning outcomes in formal CVET at levels III and IV follow the same curricula as IVET, ensuring alignment between continuing and initial pathways at these levels. At level V-B, outcomes are clearly specified in specialist education and training programmes and in the master craftsperson examination. For verified non-formal adult learning, programme verification by the adult education centre requires defined outcomes; where a full or partial qualification is involved, outcomes must be linked to occupational standards. Even programmes outside the qualification framework must describe expected competences, supporting an outcomes-based approach across continuing provision covered by verification.

In Montenegro, programmes leading to vocational qualifications are built on learning outcomes defined in qualification standards derived from occupational standards. Programme preparation follows an established methodology whereby outcomes are linked to professional roles and developed through working groups involving relevant stakeholders. CVET programmes include a list of expected outcomes and criteria for their achievement, to which assessment catalogues are directly linked. In Serbia, the regulations require non-formal adult learning providers to develop programmes based on qualification standards and associated learning outcomes. Methodologies and guides produced by the Qualifications Agency and partner projects support the structuring of training into modules with defined outcomes. Where programmes include a workplace component, the learning outcomes and content of that component must be specified in the programme documentation. However, outcomes are not recorded through contractual instruments and the registers available provide only general programme descriptions without systematically distinguishing between the outcomes of school-based and workplace-based learning.

Thus, there is a general trend across all five countries towards the gradual establishment of outcomes-based frameworks for WBL in CVET, albeit with differences in maturity and consistency. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia exhibit more systematised use of occupational standards and frameworks to anchor learning (including WBL) outcomes. Serbia has formal methodologies in place but limited transparency in published programmes. Overall, while learning outcomes are increasingly present in programme design, the degree to which these are systematically aligned with labour market needs and effectively translated into workplace learning arrangements remains uneven.

6.4 Pedagogical support (CVET 3)

In most systems, pedagogical support for CVET workplace learning draws largely on the roles and resources also used in IVET, particularly the school-based staff who coordinate placements and liaise with companies. Country differences relate less to school coordination and more to the degree to which company trainers are formally prepared, recognised and subject to quality requirements.

Albania's regulations provide for in-company trainers and sets selection criteria (work experience and basic soft skills) but does not provide a national certification route or formal recognition of the role. In-company trainer preparation has been driven mainly by donor projects, with participation documented through attendance certificates rather than system-recognised qualifications. School-level support relies on vocational practice teachers and business relations coordinators working with in-company trainers to plan and monitor internships.

North Macedonia largely aligns CVET pedagogical support with IVET arrangements: vocational schoolteachers deliver programmes and school staff coordinate workplace learning as in IVET. External masters and teachers are contracted where specialist provision is needed. For verified non-formal adult learning, trainers are expected to have adult-education training organised by the adult education centre and other institutions but there is no evidence of comparable data on company mentor certification or coverage.

Montenegro has the most formalised trainer preparation structure. Licensed adult learning providers must demonstrate that trainers and instructors meet professional and pedagogical requirements, and assessors must be trained and licensed for a defined period. This embeds pedagogical support within licensing and quality assurance processes, including explicit roles for in-company trainers where workplace learning is part of delivery.

Serbia regulates pedagogical competences primarily through requirements for instructors employed by accredited providers (PROAE), including a minimum amount of pedagogical training or recognised equivalence via professional associations. However, there is no distinct certified role for in-company trainers in CVET workplace learning and there is no systematic regulation of company-side trainer status.

6.5 Workplace component (CVET 4)

In Albania, all CVET programmes include vocational practice, which may be carried out in schools or in companies. The workplace element is optional at upper-secondary level and compulsory in post-secondary provision. Newly developed dual programmes specify a markedly increased workplace share: four one-year programmes at AQF level 3 allocate around 63 % of curriculum time to internships; a two-year programme at level 4 allocates 62 % in the first year and 51 % in the second year; and a one-year post-secondary programme at level 5 allocates seventy-two per cent. Individual training plans are prepared jointly by vocational schools and companies, following national guidelines.

In North Macedonia, the workplace component in formal CVET is quantified through curricula and differs by level. At NQF level IV, learners spend 8 hours per week in the third year and 10 hours per week in the fourth, corresponding to roughly two months of full-time workplace practice per year. Specialist post-secondary programmes at level V-B allocate around 30 to 40 % of their duration to on-the-job training. Verified non-formal adult learning programmes are expected³⁴ to include a dominant workplace practice component of around 60 to 70 %. Training plans are required and delivery arrangements specify how workplace learning is organised where providers lack facilities.

In Montenegro, the workplace component is quantified in advance within programmes leading to vocational qualifications³⁵ through predefined lesson allocations for theoretical, practical and workplace learning. The training plan is shared with candidates at the start of the programme, clarifying the quantity and structure of workplace learning.

In Serbia, the workplace component is not prescribed as a fixed share but is defined in terms of 'practice', including WBL, within individual training plans for programmes offered by accredited providers (PROAE)³⁶. The programme documentation must specify the division between theory and practice and define the learning outcomes and content of the workplace component.

³⁴ This is indicated by the Adult Education Centre Programme Verification Committee of but not supported by any statutory regulation.

³⁵ Examples include 219 hours of workplace learning for accounting technicians, 288 for caregivers, 300 for construction machine operators, 375 for tourist guides and 486 for cook of simple dishes.

³⁶ Some programmes assign most of the hours to practical training; for example, 880 hours for locksmith or welder training compared to 220 hours of theory, or 246 hours for butcher training compared to 30 hours of theory.

Across the four countries, the quantity of time spent in the workplace ranges from optional participation in Albanian upper-secondary CVET, to pre-defined shares in verified non-formal provision in North Macedonia, and to very high practice volumes in some Serbian programmes. Systems also differ in how far workplace learning is structured, for example through training plans in North Macedonia, plans jointly developed by schools and companies in Albania and 'lessons' clearly quantified at Ministry level in Montenegro, to more provider-dependent arrangements in Serbia.

6.6 Remuneration and/or compensation (CVET 5)

In Albania, compensation practices differ by level. In upper-secondary CVET programmes, internships are optional and unpaid, with companies permitted but not obliged to provide allowances for food or transport. In contrast, in post-secondary CVET programmes, in which internships are compulsory, the legal framework does not provide for remuneration, making compensation largely absent across the system.

In North Macedonia, learners enrolled in CVET programmes at levels III, IV or V-B of the national framework do not receive any remuneration or compensation for their workplace learning if they are employed and enrolled in WBL at the company at which they work (which is usually the case). Nevertheless, in some cases, companies cover the enrolment fees of their employees attending such programmes. For non-formal adult learning verified by the adult education centre, the costs are usually borne by the learner, although State institutions often contract verified providers and cover the training costs, which indirectly relieves learners of any fees while the companies still do not provide any compensation.

In Montenegro, the costs of training under CVET programmes are usually borne by the candidates themselves. No remuneration or compensation obligation is imposed upon employers when programmes are attended at learners' initiative. Only when training is organised within active labour market measures do participants receive allowances in line with employment regulations. In Serbia, compensation is not regulated for WBL in CVET and there is no direct remuneration for training periods.

To summarise, in all four countries, CVET programmes with a WBL component rarely include systematic financial compensation for participants, although companies may voluntarily choose cover some costs, for instance fees to enrol in CVET programmes. But this remains an exception rather than the rule.

6.7 Social protection (CVET 6)

In Albania, learners in CVET programmes are covered only for workplace accidents and occupational diseases during internships. Companies are obliged to pay a contribution equal to 0.3 % of the gross minimum wage to the tax office for this purpose. There is no health or pension coverage and no provision ensuring continuation of the internship in the case of company failure.

In North Macedonia, social protection depends largely on employment status. Learners already employed and attending CVET programmes benefit from the same health and pension rights as regular workers (but do not benefit from accident coverage). Health and safety conditions during workplace learning are subject to supervision under the Law on Labour Inspection, which empowers the State Labour Inspectorate to check workplaces and require corrective measures. No additional coverage is provided for in the case of those entering programmes as unemployed adults. In non-formal verified programmes, social protection depends on individual arrangements; there is no systemic requirement for accident, health or pension coverage.

In Montenegro, providers implementing continuing programmes are obliged to take measures to protect the health and safety of learners during training, as for regular employees. However, learners who enrol independently do not gain pension or health insurance rights and do not receive allowances. Accident protection is part of CVET providers' responsibility to ensure safe conditions but broader social protection (i.e. social protection beyond immediate training safety) is absent outside active labour market policy schemes.

In Serbia, coverage follows the legal status of the participant. Employed learners retain their regular health and pension insurance. Unemployed participants do not automatically receive such benefits during training. Accident protection is included as a compulsory introductory module in all CVET programmes but insurance itself is not systematically provided. Overall, social protection remains weakly regulated and fragmented between employed and unemployed learners.

In summary, although Albania has a specific accident insurance contribution for internships and Montenegro and North Macedonia extend protection to employed participants, none of the systems ensures full health and pension coverage for unemployed learners in CVET programmes during work placement. Accident protection is addressed to varying degrees, but broader social security rights remain largely outside the remit of CVET learners' rights.

6.8 Workplace health and safety (CVET 7)

In Albania, workplace health and safety for learners is governed by national labour legislation. Companies are legally responsible for ensuring safe conditions during internships, including regular workplace inspections. The internship contract specifies that the in-company trainer bears personal responsibility for instructing and supervising learners in safety matters. However, there is no explicit legal provision requiring learners to be systematically trained in occupational health and safety beyond company-level compliance.

In North Macedonia, the Law on Labour Inspection provides inspectors with the authority to monitor and enforce health and safety regulations at workplaces in which CVET learners are placed. Inspectors may order corrective measures, set deadlines or prohibit unsafe work. Learners who are already employed follow the same occupational health and safety standards as regular employees, while those in non-formal programmes rely on the training provider to ensure compliance. No dedicated provisions specific to CVET are in place beyond this.

In Montenegro, licensed providers delivering CVET programmes are obliged to ensure safe conditions for learners: health and safety rules are integrated into the contract between provider and candidate and providers must take all preventive measures against accidents as they would for employees. Inspections are conducted through the education inspectorate and labour authorities but learners enrolling outside of active labour market measures are not entitled to broader health insurance. In Serbia, health and safety is regulated through the Law on Safety and Health at Work. This applies equally to all training providers (PROAE), who must ensure that hygienic and technical standards are met on the premises, including ventilation, fire protection and adequate installations; inspectors are empowered to verify compliance. Every CVET programme begins with a compulsory health and safety module.

Taken together, all systems rely primarily on national labour legislation to govern occupational safety for CVET learners. Albania has the most explicit allocation of responsibility to companies and schools, while Montenegro and Serbia place obligations directly on licensed providers. North Macedonia has a strong labour inspectorate mandate, though not tailored specifically to CVET. Across the region, workplace inspection mechanisms exist in principle, but enforcement and dedicated adaptation to CVET remain limited.

6.9 Regulatory framework (CVET 8)

In Albania, the CVET framework is anchored in the same legal and regulatory provisions that apply to IVET. The Internship/traineeship Regulation provides a standard contract template that sets out core obligations, but the framework does not establish a specific accreditation status for host companies; quality assurance of placements therefore relies largely on provider-level selection and monitoring rather than on a formal approval regime. There is stakeholder involvement, mainly through the bodies responsible for curricula and standards, but the framework remains less explicit on a structured dialogue that would systematically balance the interests of providers, employers and learner representatives in CVET implementation.

In North Macedonia, CVET is governed through several legal instruments, reflecting different strands of CVET provision. Specialist post-secondary programmes, further training in the craft trades and verified non-formal adult learning are regulated differently. Public authorities and specialised bodies hold central responsibilities for curricula, standards and verification of non-formal programmes as a quality assurance mechanism. In terms of partnership, the relevant legislation and governance arrangements position social partners and chambers as partners in programme development and governance across the different strands.

In Montenegro, the CVET framework is established through the Law on Adult Education and the Law on National Vocational Qualifications, linking adult learning provision to the national system of occupational and qualification standards. Accreditation and licensing are core features: the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation licenses providers while programmes are approved by the National Education Council on the proposal of the Committee for Adult Education. Employers and trade unions participate in the development of occupational and qualification standards through the sectoral commissions of the Qualifications Council. The sectoral commissions identify skills needs, propose new or revised occupational standards, and assess the consistency of qualification standards with occupational standards. Responsibilities are thus clearly defined for licensed providers, which must demonstrate compliance with standards and delivery requirements and ensure appropriate conditions for implementation. The legislation also allows practical learning to be delivered either in companies or in other licensed institutions. This creates flexibility but means that practical learning is not automatically synonymous with learning in the workplace.

In Serbia, CVET is regulated through adult education legislation and the national qualifications framework, complemented by a detailed rulebook specifying requirements for publicly recognised adult education organisers (PROAE). The rulebook-based system effectively functions as an accreditation regime for providers, defining eligibility conditions, staff requirements and programme development obligations. Providers are required to base programmes on qualification standards and to conclude agreements with employers where workplace learning is involved. Quality assurance responsibilities are distributed between state bodies for schools and the Qualifications Agency and other bodies linked to the NQFS or non-school providers. Partnerships with employers are primarily operationalised through provider-employer agreements and employer involvement in qualification development processes; however, employers' responsibilities for WBL in CVET are regulated indirectly rather than through a dedicated, comprehensive framework.

Overall, the legislation in the four countries with a WBL component in CVET programmes provides a basic framework for CVET, but the responsibilities and roles of the main stakeholders are regulated differently in the countries. The legal frameworks provide a baseline allocation of responsibilities for CVET, but they differ in how far they institutionalise (i) a structured, transparent partnership dialogue and (ii) companies' formal accreditation or licensing procedures. Montenegro and Serbia stand out for more developed provider licensing/accreditation arrangements and clearer governance structures involving social partners, while North Macedonia relies on multiple CVET instruments and verification

procedures. Albania regulates placements through standard contracts but does not embed accreditation of host companies as a system feature.

6.10 Involvement of social partners (CVET 9)

In Albania, employer organisations and chambers participate mainly through national-level bodies. Sectoral Committees, created by government decision, involve business representatives in developing curricula, occupational standards and qualifications. Employers also take part in final assessments of learners. Their role at company level, however, remains limited to hosting internships, with little formalised involvement in governance. Trade unions have no direct role in the design or implementation of CVET and their participation in relation to WBL in CVET is not provided for in legislation.

In North Macedonia, chambers are explicitly identified as partners with system management responsibilities. The Chamber of Crafts is responsible for organising the master craftsman's examinations and, together with the Economic Chamber, submits proposals for new curricula and occupational standards. Employer organisations are represented in commissions for final examinations. The Law on Adult Education likewise positions chambers as partners in developing non-formal programmes verified by the adult education centre. Trade unions, notably SONK, are legally required to safeguard learners' conditions during WBL, although the evidence suggests that this function is rarely exercised in practice.

In Montenegro, social partners are systematically involved in sector commissions, which develop occupational standards and qualifications, and in the Adult Education Committee, which reviews curricula for CVET programmes. Employer associations and trade unions are both represented, ensuring that standards and programme design reflect labour market and worker perspectives. Their role is consultative rather than operational but their participation is institutionalised through legislation.

In Serbia, employer representatives are involved in the development of qualification standards and in advisory councils. Chambers appear to play an indirect, system-level role through qualifications, standards and advisory structures, rather than an operational role in organising CVET workplace learning. The regulations envisage local partnerships between training providers and employers, allowing companies to implement workplace learning under agreements with accredited providers; However, employer organisations are not systematically involved, being limited to participation in councils. Trade unions are formally represented in governance structures but their role in CVET is not clearly defined and there is little evidence of active engagement in workplace learning provision.

Overall, the role of employer organisations seems stronger in North Macedonia and Montenegro, where chambers hold formal responsibilities in examinations and programme development. Albania and Serbia involve employers mainly through national committees or councils. Trade union involvement is consistently weak across the region: Montenegro is the only country in which their role is structured through sector commissions and in North Macedonia their limited responsibilities are provided for but not implemented in practice.

6.11 Support for companies and cost-sharing arrangements (CVET 10)

In Albania, there are no cost-sharing arrangements in place to support companies in the implementation of internships in the context of CVET. Employers bear the costs of hosting learners, including participation of their representatives in final examinations. Public authorities do not provide either financial or non-financial incentives to companies engaged in WBL within CVET programmes.

In North Macedonia, companies generally bear the costs of providing WBL for learners enrolled in CVET programmes. When learners are already employed, companies may cover VET programme enrolment fees, but there is no formalised public cost-sharing system. In non-formal adult learning programmes verified by the adult education centre, the State or other public institutions sometimes finance the training directly, covering tuition fees for participants, but this support targets learners rather than companies. Non-financial support is limited to guidance during verification procedures and contracts with training providers.

In Montenegro, learners usually pay fees for adult learning programmes that are not part of active labour market measures. Companies are not subsidised when they provide WBL activities³⁷. Public budgets allocate funds for the preparation of CVET programmes and for the training of assessors, but this support does not extend to companies. Non-financial support is visible in awareness-raising and promotional activities coordinated by the VET Centre and other institutions, but these are aimed more broadly at promoting lifelong learning rather than directly assisting companies in hosting learners.

In Serbia, neither financial nor non-financial support for companies providing CVET is regulated. Companies that collaborate with accredited providers (PROAE) may host learners under contractual agreements, but they do so without subsidies, tax incentives or public recognition schemes such as labels or registers for training companies. While employers are involved in qualification development, no support mechanisms exist to offset the costs of organising WBL placements in CVET.

Overall, the four countries lack structured financial support for companies that are committed to WBL in CVET. Where support exists, it is largely project-driven or targeted at learners rather than employers. Non-financial support is modest, e.g. awareness-raising campaigns in Montenegro, but there is no consistent assistance system for employers. The absence of formal cost-sharing mechanisms stands out as a significant gap in all countries under review.

6.12 Flexible pathways and mobility (CVET 11)

In Albania, CVET programmes are formally registered in the Albanian Qualifications Framework and lead to qualifications at levels 3 to 5. Successful completion grants access to higher levels of vocational or post-secondary programmes, ensuring vertical progression. While internships remain optional in upper-secondary continuing programmes, they are compulsory in new dual and post-secondary schemes and recognition of acquired qualifications is guaranteed. Horizontal mobility between vocational fields is limited in practice, as progression usually follows the same occupational path.

In North Macedonia, vertical progression is possible, as learners from levels three and four of the national framework may enter post-secondary education provided that they meet work experience requirements. Entry into master craftsman's examinations is conditional on work experience regardless of prior education level. Mobility from non-formal verified programmes towards formal vocational or higher education is not yet in place, although the new law on the NQF is expected to strengthen these pathways. Professional experience and prior WBL can be taken into account in certain CVET pathways, which provides some flexibility even if a broader system for validation of non-formal and informal learning is not yet fully operationalised. Thus, CVET learners can potentially have the duration of their training reduced if at least 70 % of their work experience matches the curriculum requirements. Those with lower matches will be required to supplement their training with additional WBL.

In Montenegro, flexibility is formally guaranteed through legislation on the recognition of educational credentials and equivalence of qualifications. Qualifications are structured around learning outcomes and grouped into transferable units, facilitating both recognition and mobility. Non-formal and informal

³⁷ The fee paid by the learners includes WBL activities, if they are provided for in the programmes.

learning outcomes can be recognised by licensed education providers, or by the VET Centre if no provider is available; this provides learners with a mechanism for integrating learning acquired outside formal pathways, thereby supporting progression and mobility across the system, although practical implementation remains uneven.

In Serbia, legislation on CVET emphasises modular programmes linked to qualification standards, with provisions for recognition of prior learning. Accredited providers (PROAE) must structure programmes in ways that allow for recognition of previously acquired knowledge, skills and competences, enabling participants to progress without duplicating training. Vertical pathways are possible, as qualifications are integrated into the national framework, although permeability with higher education is limited. Local partnerships and employer involvement in programme design are intended to support smoother transitions, but systematic pathways for learners across sectors remain underdeveloped.

In conclusion, in the countries where CVET programmes with WBL components are offered, legal and institutional provisions for recognition of qualifications within national frameworks were introduced, with Albania and Montenegro offering the most straightforward vertical progression into higher levels. North Macedonia stands out for its detailed procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning although this is not operational yet, while Serbia provides modular structures but with fewer clearly established pathways into further education. Overall, mobility remains partial, with strong formal provisions but limited practical opportunities for learners to move across systems or into higher education. Little is known about opportunities for learners to participate in international exchanges.

6.13 Career guidance and awareness-raising (CVET 12)

In Albania, CVET provision in vocational schools and centres follows the same arrangements as IVET. All schools have coordinators within their school development units who are specifically tasked with activities such as liaising with employers, supporting placement-related processes and providing learners with guidance and information. Programme information is disseminated through the official channels of the responsible institutions and school-level outreach, and new dual and post-secondary initiatives have additionally benefited from donor-supported promotion targeting both learners and employers.

In North Macedonia, vocational institutions and the adult education centre are active in promoting their programmes. Guidance is offered by teachers and mentors as part of the training while non-formal providers are required to inform participants about programme content and outcomes as part of the programme verification process. The adult education centre publishes information on verified non-formal programmes on its website and chambers also participate in awareness-raising; the Chamber of Crafts notably promotes master craftsman's examinations and training. Promotion relies heavily on individual providers and chambers, while systematic outreach by employers remains limited.

In Montenegro, the VET Centre, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, implements activities to inform young people and adults about available CVET programmes leading to vocational qualifications. Career guidance services are complemented by the Employment Agency of Montenegro, which plays a role in advising unemployed youth, adults and vulnerable groups. Information is disseminated through public campaigns such as 'Days of Adult Education', participation in conferences and workshops, and use of the EPAL platform (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe). Programme promotion remains fragmented, however, as there is no centralised database of offers across providers.

In Serbia, accredited training providers (PROAE) are required to provide career guidance and counselling as part of their responsibilities and this is included as a quality standard in their evaluation. Guidance focuses on supporting participants' career and personal development during and after training. Information is accessible through national registries, including the sub-register of accredited

providers on the Quality Assurance Agency website and the NQF website. Providers also advertise their programmes individually, giving details of duration, content and certification. The promotion of programmes is therefore decentralised, but transparency is supported through public listings.

When comparing the four countries, career guidance, awareness raising and information provision for CVET programmes in Albania and Serbia tend to be decentralised at the level of VET providers, whereas in North Macedonia and Montenegro it is more often institutions and stakeholders at national level that take on these tasks.

6.14 Transparency (CVET 13)

In Albania, information on VET programmes and pathways, including continuing VET offers delivered through VET providers, is available through the websites of the National Employment and Skills Agency (NESA) and the National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ), which present information on schools, occupational areas, curricula and enrolment procedures. In contrast, information on the allocation of internship placements is less transparent, as placements are usually arranged directly by schools; more open application procedures are reported only in some project-supported schools, where learners directly apply to training companies with CVs and motivation letters. One private initiative, Praktika.al, originally designed as a WBL platform, has shifted towards broader employment services.

In North Macedonia, the adult education centre and the VET Centre publish information on verified programmes, requirements and providers. The adult education centre also maintains a website on which non-formal learning opportunities are listed and providers are obliged to make programme content available as part of the verification process. Promotion and outreach remain decentralised, with no single-entry point covering all types of CVET. Also, these services do not cover non-verified adult education programmes, which may include WBL.

In Montenegro, several institutional websites provide access to information: the NQF website includes a list of qualifications obtainable through both IVET and CVET; the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation publishes data on programme completions provided by licensed institutions; and the VET Centre and the Official Gazette also make curricula and programme details accessible. Despite these efforts, consolidated electronic access to all offers remains limited, as provider databases are not interconnected with the VET Centre and qualifications framework websites.

In Serbia, the Quality Assurance Agency hosts the sub-register of accredited training providers, while the Ministry of Education publishes the full list of providers. The NQF website contains information on the programmes available and the employers involved in practical training. In addition, guidance documents, self-evaluation templates and regulations are available on these websites, offering a relatively comprehensive overview. Training providers also actively advertise their courses, ensuring further access to information.

Overall, Serbia and Montenegro have made the most progress in establishing public registries and national websites covering CVET/adult learning provision, although their databases could be better connected. North Macedonia ensures visibility through the adult education centre but lacks a unified website and Albania provides public information through the NESA and NAVETQ websites and the e-Albania portal, but transparency is weaker for internship placement allocation, to the extent that this is usually arranged directly by schools.

6.15 Quality assurance and graduate tracking (CVET 14)

In Albania, quality assurance for CVET follows the same framework as for IVET. Providers are expected to comply with standards set by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Qualifications, which include self-evaluation procedures. However, systematic tracer studies of graduates are not reported, and data on labour market outcomes remain limited.

In North Macedonia, quality assurance operates at several levels. VET institutions conduct yearly self-evaluations forming the basis for school development plans, which are inspected by the State Education Inspectorate. Non-formal adult learning programmes verified by the adult education centre must follow occupational standards and undergo external evaluation. Providers submit annual reports, and external monitoring visits are carried out. Nevertheless, providers are not obliged to systematically track graduates, though some do so voluntarily.

In Montenegro, the VET Centre conducts external evaluations of licensed providers at least once every four years, while providers must carry out self-evaluations annually in certain areas and every two years in all other areas. A manual for self-evaluation has been issued to support implementation. Despite these mechanisms, graduate tracking is not yet in place and the self-evaluation process remains at an early stage of application.

In Serbia, the Quality Assurance Agency conducts compulsory external evaluations of providers of non-formal adult learning during their five-year approval period. Providers with the status of publicly recognised organisations for adult learning are also required to perform self-evaluations against defined indicators in three areas: management, programme quality and learner outcomes. The regulations prescribe monitoring of participants' career development, making Serbia the only country among the four with a formalised tracer function, although specific indicators for WBL quality are still missing.

Across the four countries, the arrangements for WBL quality assurance and graduate tracking in CVET display both commonalities and important differences. All systems formally provide for external evaluation of providers and require some form of self-evaluation of CVET programmes, although these largely derive from those of IVET and do not apply specifically to WBL. The degree of implementation varies: Montenegro and North Macedonia rely strongly on periodic VET providers' self-evaluations and external monitoring, yet the practice of systematic graduate tracking is absent. Albania follows a similar pattern, with evaluation obligations in place but no tracer studies. Serbia is the only country in which graduate tracking is formally prescribed and embedded in the provider evaluation standards, although specific indicators for WBL are not yet in place. Overall, evaluation and self-evaluation are common features, but structured tracer studies remain largely underdeveloped in the region, with Serbia constituting a partial exception.

6.16 Conclusion – Criteria for CVET (1–14)

WBL is harder to assess in CVET than in IVET because where CVET falls outside active labour market policy frameworks, as is the case with advanced or specialised CVET programmes with structured workplace components, it remains limited or only weakly developed in several of the four³⁸ countries under review. This makes it difficult to distinguish WBL in CVET from other forms of adult learning and reduces the availability of comparable evidence across countries.

Despite these limitations, some strengths are visible. Four countries have introduced competence-based approaches in CVET, with learning outcomes formally defined and usually linked to the national qualifications framework. In some cases, programmes include substantial compulsory workplace

³⁸ As there are currently no CVET programmes with a significant WBL component in Kosovo, the assessment referred only to Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

components, particularly in newer dual or practice-oriented offers. Provider licensing and programme approval or verification mechanisms are in place across the region, although with varying levels of consistency. In addition, chambers and craft organisations play a visible role in some countries, especially in relation to occupational standards, assessment and specific craft-based pathways. At the same time, the quality of WBL in CVET is affected by persistent systemic weaknesses. Regulatory frameworks often do not define the respective responsibilities of providers and companies sufficiently clearly, especially regarding in-company mentoring, cooperation with VET staff, feedback arrangements, learner status, remuneration and protection. As a result, the company-side training role remains unevenly professionalised and pedagogical preparation for workplace mentors is often limited or absent.

Financial arrangements are also weakly regulated. In several systems, compensation for WBL is poorly defined or absent. Social protection depends largely on whether participants are already employed rather than on a specific protection regime for CVET learners. The scope and quality of WBL also vary considerably, often depending more on provider or employer capacity than on consistently enforced programme standards. Monitoring remains weak, as graduate tracking and tracer studies are largely absent.

Across countries, the structuring and quality of workplace learning remain uneven and often dependent on local implementation capacity. Although legal provisions frequently provide for contracts, training plans or cooperation arrangements, these do not always consistently define obligations, working time, compensation or quality requirements. Donor support continues to play an important role in sustaining well-developed WBL schemes in some countries. Social partner involvement also remains unbalanced, with chambers more visible than employer representative organisations. Trade unions are largely absent in most systems.

Overall, the main priorities seem to be to strengthen the CVET-specific regulatory basis for WBL, clarify roles and obligations, improve learner protection and make quality requirements more enforceable. More systematic preparation of in-company trainers is also needed, particularly for micro-enterprises and SMEs. Sustainable financing arrangements are also necessary, combining public and employer contributions in ways that support fair participation conditions for adult learners. Better guidance, more transparent access to workplace opportunities and stronger graduate tracking would improve both equity and evidence. Regional cooperation could further support exchanges of practice, greater transparency of qualifications and the gradual mainstreaming of successful pilot approaches.

7. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY TAKEAWAYS

The Western Balkan countries of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have made significant progress in establishing and expanding WBL and dual VET, particularly in IVET, and in aligning their regulatory frameworks with European quality principles. At the same time, there are recurrent cross-country patterns that point to areas requiring further attention and development, notably implementation capacity, systematic involvement of social partners, support for in-company trainers, learner protection, financing arrangements and monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms. While CVET with substantial workplace learning components remains less developed and less consistently regulated, it represents a significant area for future development in support of lifelong learning, labour-market inclusion and skills adaptation.

The findings of this report are based primarily on an assessment of the design and regulatory architecture of WBL systems; evidence relating to implementation practices, especially regarding in-company training and learner experience, is rather more limited. It is important to ensure effective implementation of regulatory provisions and reduce potential gaps between policy intentions and practice, so that formal arrangements translate into consistent, high-quality learning experiences and labour-market outcomes.

Some cross-country patterns can be identified, particularly relevant for IVET:

1. *Regulatory frameworks are in place, albeit with implementation gaps (EFQEA 8, 14).* All five systems regulate WBL, but the provisions vary in their level of sophistication and degree of implementation, especially regarding incentives, accreditation and monitoring and evaluation (notably tracer studies).
2. *Partnership mechanisms are in place, but these are often merely advisory in nature and incomplete (EFQEA 9).*
 - a. System governance
 - b. The influence of social partners on key WBL design decisions is often limited and largely advisory, reducing shared responsibility and potentially weakening responsiveness to labour-market needs. Trade unions' role is typically marginal or absent, including where they are formally represented in bodies but are rarely active in implementation.

The arrangements for WBL and especially dual VET are still relatively new in the five countries and require some fine-tuning, particularly as regards entry level qualifications, the stage at which WBL should begin and the balance between WBL and school-based learning across the various years of the training programme. Corollary issues relate to learner selection for WBL, placement timings, workplace-vocational school transitions and financial support for companies and learners. More reflection is needed on the types of programmes to be offered, including potentially extending the range of programmes for adults.

It is essential to systematically involve companies, vocational schools, learners and their parents in addressing these issues and give the organisations representing them a permanent role in WBL governance, particularly dual VET.

- c. System management
Chambers play a key role in WBL and dual VET management in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia; in Albania and Montenegro, operational management of the system is often delegated to vocational schools.

In the medium term, intermediary organisations such as chambers, sector committees and industry associations need capacity-building to take on key management tasks within the

framework of dual VET: recruiting and accrediting training companies, operating matching platforms and advising (potential) training companies, learners and parents.

3. *Professionalisation and support for in-company trainers is still the exception* (EFQEA 3, 10). All countries' regulations provide for in-company trainers, but their systems offer very different opportunities for continuous professional development and certification. Serbia notably boasts compulsory licensing and structured training; other systems remain more dependent on projects and voluntary uptake; mentor training exists but is not mandatory or systematically recognised and support mechanisms are often insufficient. Trainers' roles in school-company coordination also vary widely.

Although this analysis provides insights into the pedagogical structures and resources allocated to WBL, quality of delivery remains largely a black box and requires further research. Authorities and social partners should promote exchange between in-company trainers on pedagogical and curricular practice, including across borders. Vocational schools should be involved in this exchange to the extent that they support or advise on in-company training. Many teachers at vocational schools in the region lack practical workplace experience, leading to their being poorly received, for example, when assessing companies' ability to provide training or advising companies and learners on participation in WBL.

4. *Financing and incentives are misaligned with the cost structure of WBL* (EFQEA 10). A recurrent issue arises where the in-company component is relatively limited (less than 50 % of WBL in dual IVET in all countries but Kosovo) and costs outweigh benefits for the training companies, which receive few or no public incentives. Cost-sharing and structured support are more developed in some contexts (notably Montenegro and Serbia); other countries lack operationalised incentives or leave companies to bear the costs.
5. *Learner protection and compensation remain patchy* (EFQEA 5–7). Compensation regimes are uneven: in IVET, compensation is absent or optional in some systems and clearly defined in dual schemes elsewhere; importantly, there are no national/sectoral requirements or collective agreements on the subject (as per the EFQEA). Social protection is often limited to accident insurance, with only employees enjoying wider coverage (health/pension). Health and safety arrangements are in place everywhere, but inspection/enforcement and pre-placement training vary significantly.
6. *Transparency, access, and career guidance are uneven* (EFQEA 12–13). Systems differ markedly in how visible and accessible WBL opportunities are: Serbia and North Macedonia have centralised placement systems, while Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro rely more on school-level arrangements. Career guidance and awareness-raising are also uneven: Kosovo and Serbia have quite institutionalised models compared to fragmented approaches elsewhere.
7. *Monitoring and evaluation are still lacking* (EFQEA 14). WBL and dual VET are only sustainable in the long term if the intended outcomes are achieved, but data is scarce. Systematic monitoring and evaluation (e.g. tracer studies) is essential. Social partners should play an active role in this, as it is in their interests to assess learners' and companies' experiences with WBL and their insights regarding improvement.

To sum up, in order to bring dual VET in the Western Balkans closer to the EU quality criteria set by the EFQEA, the region should focus its efforts on the above areas. A possible way forward would be to combine quick wins in the short term, such as standard templates for training plans and feedback, minimum mentor training packages, etc. with medium-term consolidation actions; the latter would require at least stable cost-sharing/incentive models, enforceable employer accreditation and the integration of WBL outcome monitoring into national governance and QA systems.

WBL is more difficult to benchmark in CVET, where structured workplace components tend to be on a relatively small scale in most countries and regulatory provisions are often less explicit about company responsibilities. In Kosovo, there are currently no CVET programmes with a substantial WBL component within scope. Elsewhere, compensation for WBL in CVET is rarely systematic, social protection is often conditional upon employment and graduate monitoring is largely absent; Serbia

notably has a formalised tracer function in provider-evaluation standards but WBL-specific indicators remain limited.

In order to improve the quality of WBL in CVET, the countries might want to consider:

1. clarifying CVET-specific WBL rules (share of WBL in CVET programmes, responsibilities, quality assurance, etc.);
2. associating employer engagement with provider licensing/verification;
3. ensuring that WBL placement offers can be accessed transparently, rather than relying on ad hoc local-level arrangements.

A central cross-cutting message is that WBL quality heavily relies on the operational capacities that make WBL work at scale, including multi-stakeholder governance arrangements that enable genuine partnerships involving employer and employee representatives, enforceable quality assurance at employer level, sustainable cost-sharing and reliable data on participation and outcomes.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

General

ALMM	Active labour market measures
ALMP	Active labour market policy
CVET	Continuing vocational education and training
CVTS	Continuing vocational training survey
EaA	European Alliance for Apprenticeships
EFQEA	European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship
EPAL	Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQFT	European Quality Framework for Traineeships
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
ICT	Information and communication technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IVET	Initial Vocational Education and Training
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NQF	National qualifications framework
OeAD	Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PES	Public employment service

PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VET	Vocational education and training
WBL	Work-based learning
YG	Youth guarantee

Albania

AQF	Albanian Qualification Framework
CPD	Continuous professional development
EFQEA	European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships
INSTAT	Albanian Institute of Statistics
NAVETQ	National Agency for VET and Qualifications
NESA	National Employment and Skills Agency

Kosovo

ADA	Austrian Development Agency
AVETAE	Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult learning
BLOs	Business liaison officers
BMOs	Business member organisations
CoCs	Centres of competence

CVETA	Council of Vocational Educational and Training and for Adults
EARK	Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo
EO	Employment offices (under EARK)
EOs	Employment offices
EQET SEE	Enhancements in the quality of education and training in Southeastern Europe
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of Southeastern Europe
EYE	The Enhancing Youth Employment project (SDC-funded)
ITP	Individual training plan
KAS	Kosovo Agency of Statistics
KCC	Kosovo Chamber of Commerce
KIESA	Kosovo Investment and Enterprise Support Agency
MCYS	Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports
MEDs	Municipal education departments
MESTI	Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation
MFLT	Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers
NDS	National development strategy
NQA	National Qualification Authority
NQAF	National Quality Assurance Framework
OJT	On-the-job training scheme
SBLAs	School to business liaison assistants
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation
VTCs	Vocational training centres

WB6 CIF	Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum
YES	Youth Employment and Skills (GIZ)
YGIP	Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan

North Macedonia

AEC	Adult education centre
BDE	Bureau for Development of Education
ESARNM	Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia
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
OP	Operational Plan for Active Programmes and Measures for Employment and Services
RVC	Regional VET centre
SEC	State examination centre
SEI	State Education Inspectorate
SONK	Самостоен синдикат за образование, наука и култура (Independent trade union for education, science and culture)
SSO	State Statistics Office
TWG	Technical Working Group

ZELS	Заедница на единиците на локална самоуправа (Association of units of local self-government)
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Montenegro

AE	Adult education
BES	Bureau for Educational Services
CGC	Career guidance and counselling
CIPS	Centre for providing information and professional counselling
CEM	Chamber of Economy of Montenegro
EAM	Employment Agency of Montenegro
EFM	Employers Federation of Montenegro
MED	Ministry of Economic Development
MEIS	Montenegro Education Information System
MESI	Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation
MLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
NEC	National Education Council
QC	Qualifications Council

Serbia

CCIS	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia
CGC	Career Guidance and Counselling
CVEAE	Centre for Vocational Education and Adult Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EFQEA	European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships

EIB	European Investment Bank
ERP	Economic Reform Programme
ESRS	Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia
EQF	European Qualification Framework
HE	Higher education
IEQE	Institute for Evaluation and Quality in Education
IIE	Institute for Improvement of Education
LDE	Law on Dual Education
LDMSHE	Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education
LFESS	Law on the Foundations of the Education System in Serbia
LNQFS	Law on the National Qualification Framework of Serbia
LSE	Law on Secondary Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoERD	Ministry of Economy and Regional Development
MoESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (until 2022)
MoLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
NES	National Employment Service
NQFS	National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
PROAE	Publicly Recognised Organizer of Adult Education
RS	Republic of Serbia
SC	Sector Councils
SEDS	Strategy for Education Development in Serbia

SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
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QA	Qualifications Agency
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QFT	Quality Framework for Traineeship
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