



# LEARNING FROM 'LEARN'

## HORIZONTAL LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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# **LEARNING FROM 'LEARN'**

## **HORIZONTAL LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE**

**EDITED BY SØREN NIELSEN,**

January, 2011

Final publication of the ETF LEARN project



# PREFACE

This publication presents documentation, analyses and reflections on the ETF LEARN project for South Eastern Europe, which was carried out between 2007 and 2009. The project, which was co-financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was designed as an innovative way of making use of peer learning. Both experience and scientific studies have demonstrated that for learners who are adult professionals, peers may be the best vehicle for learning, compared with traditional training.

The project started from the idea that developing reform policies (especially in transition countries) is really about learning new policy knowledge. There has to be ownership of such knowledge, and it has to be relevant to the context, otherwise it will not be sustainable. The 'best practice' knowledge that is provided by international experts as part of conditional assistance or development policies is not usually very useful, and this teacher-centered method has rarely been effective. At the ETF there is felt to be a need for a different approach, in which mutual learning becomes much more central; this is where the new social and constructivist learning theories become relevant. However, in practice this implies a fundamental rethinking of all basic aspects of the traditional development aid mechanisms. So as well as applying learning theories, there is also a need to connect with new approaches to participative policy development and critical thinking about the way international assistance is organised (this is still normally done in a very technocratic way, through projects and programmes). There is much work to do in this field, though it is a very exciting process.

The LEARN project is an attempt to develop a method that takes forward the ETF's work on 'policy learning', an approach that is greatly inspired by the concept of a 'community of practice' (CoP), and that also includes attempts to foster learning networks. The project has built on creating such CoPs, with members coming from equivalent institutions in different countries. A CoP was created among people who had a strong common interest in a specific set of issues. Most of the participants already knew one another from the ETF VET Teacher and Trainer (TT) Network for South Eastern Europe. They knew one another's levels of competence and, as they have similar starting points, they face the same development challenges, though often with different levels of exposure to the same problem.

The LEARN project has been given extensive support by the Italian government. Italy, together with other EU partners, has for many years strongly asserted the need for the implementation of cooperation initiatives in the fields of education, institution building, intra-country dialogue, and strengthening networks. Hence, ETF activities for the enhancement of human resources in the Balkans are a priority for Italian Cooperation in this region; cooperation between these two actors on the LEARN project has been particularly significant in terms of producing outcomes that are exactly in line with the interventions promoted by Italian Cooperation in South Eastern Europe.

Communities have been entrusted with designing their own learning programmes. This has been achieved partly with the help of experts, partly through a dedicated website, and in particular through genuine exchanges between participants. The CoP method adds a greater degree of autonomy than that which is normally found in policy learning across countries. The communities are at the centre, and can decide to a large extent what to do and how to go about their learning. The project anchors are the national VET centres, and the project has enabled these to carry out self-defined school-development projects so that knowledge sharing can start from action. Three additional components have helped to make such horizontal learning processes meaningful over the three years. The CoP structure was combined with the concept of learning networks, enabling interactivity and connectivity through the internet. A steering committee from national ministries created a policy interface with national policymakers, to enable cross-fertilisation with other national policies. In addition, the project set up an 'accompanying research' function which made feedback available immediately to ETF project management from the very start of the project.

The major findings of the project are presented and discussed from a critical perspective in this report. What has been new in the LEARN project is the implementation of learning – not least horizontal learning – in a culture where teaching is the dominant approach. The CoPs were designed to become a transnational learning platform, and brought together VET experts from different system levels in eight South Eastern European countries that had very troubled recent histories. One key lesson can be drawn from the LEARN experiment: when (VET) specialists are brought together and given a free learning space, they quickly realise how much they can learn from one another. They want to hear one another's stories and discuss their experiences. Rather than being a vertical relationship between a provider and a recipient of knowledge, this is a horizontal relationship between people negotiating how their respective experiences can be relevant to one another. Many of the discussions are on how they can take what they learn in the community back to their own organisations. Hence, the project has been very successful in developing resourceful human beings, rather than what is covered by bland terms such as 'human resources' and 'human capital'.

Here learning is seen as an open-ended process through which outcomes are constructed in the mind of each individual learner. The advantages and disadvantages of the horizontal learning approach are discussed at different levels of

analysis. A second key lesson learned is that the changing paradigm from teaching to learning may not be effective if teachers and trainers are not fully engaged in reform, and if they are not empowered with the appropriate competences. Teachers should be seen, and should see themselves, as professionals and stakeholders in this process. Continuing professional development is necessary at all levels of the education system when innovation in learning systems is taking place.

The LEARN project covers new ground, but it can only be a start. A further project should carry out a deeper analysis of the 'core' of the dynamic horizontal learning processes taking place in CoPs. New strategies can then be designed to shape e-network solutions that focus on what is relevant to participants and are consistent with where they are now, and where they want to go.

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# INTRODUCTION

## SØREN NIELSEN

In 2001 the European Training Foundation (ETF) established a VET Teacher and Trainer (TT) Network for South Eastern Europe. This was established in the Balkans and for the Balkans. Based on this network the LEARN project 2007–09 tested a range of new approaches to the professionalisation of policymakers, providers and practitioners in the field of teaching and learning.

The purpose of this collection of studies on teaching and learning in VET systems and practices is to stimulate innovative thinking for improved policy, provision and practice (three broad but interrelated levels) in the VET TT sub-sector. The discussions revolve around the following issues.

- What are the fundamental requirements of vocational teachers who are teaching for a profession?
- What does the new learning paradigm imply in practice, for the education and continuing development of teachers, for the organisation of learning processes in classrooms, and for the role of vocational schools within governance systems?
- How can links be established between national policy and practice in schools and to what extent can the new VET centres function as an anchor?
- How should innovation of teaching and learning be carried out in these particular transition contexts?
- How can teachers play a greater part in VET reform processes?

These questions have been discussed repeatedly in the broader VET TT Network as part of a social learning process within the well-established collaborative culture of the group. Targeted work has been undertaken as a collective activity in the LEARN project, and authors of this publication have continuously exchanged knowledge and shared expertise during the writing of the chapters.

There are many similarities between countries in the region. They share common cultural and educational roots, and face similar challenges in reforming their VET systems, which are currently implementing donor-driven and in particular EC-funded reform programmes. The report may serve as a regional policy platform for the countries taking part in this profound process of transition and transformation. However, it should be remembered that this is still a post-conflict region in which there is a need to facilitate learning across borders.

### South Eastern Europe: a region under post-war reconstruction

For the Ottomans, as well as for western countries, the Balkans formed the bridge between the East and the West, a metaphor adopted by Ivo Andric in his Nobel-Prize-winning novel *The Bridge over the Drina*. A bridge between East and West encapsulates the Balkan experience of 'in-betweenness'. For reasons that are unknown, during the Kosovo war and with the introduction of the EC Stability Pact for the region, the term 'Balkan' suddenly disappeared from the media and was replaced with 'South Eastern European' (Bjelic and Savic, 2002, p.34). This term will be used in the current document.

The countries of South Eastern Europe are in a special position in Europe: they are on the path to integration into the EU, but still have a long way to go. They have so much in common, however, that a regional approach aimed at creating common learning processes is very meaningful, and this has been a substantial argument for establishing a VET TT Network in South Eastern Europe. It should be noted in passing that the EU has proved itself to be an outstanding agent and sustainer of 'regime change' through the instruments of soft power (Patten, 2006, p.143).

The LEARN project encompassed Albania, Turkey, and the new countries that have emerged from the former Yugoslavia: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244<sup>1</sup>), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

It is not possible to reflect on the situation in the region today without having an understanding of the disasters of the very recent past. Education cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social, political and cultural context. The most widely accepted explanation for the tragic events in the early 1990s in what was Yugoslavia is that the long-standing ethnic tensions in the region became uncontrollable once the repressive authority of socialist rule had been broken (Glenny, 1993). This explanation is in line with the future situation predicted by Samuel P. Huntington (1993) in his essay in *Foreign Affairs* (later extended into a book): he foresaw a 'clash of civilizations', and argued that the most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural 'fault lines' that separate civilizations from each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter referred to as Kosovo for the purposes of this document.

However, the experience of the regional ETF VET TT Network suggests that this explanatory model is incorrect. When the ETF set up the network in early 2002 it was impossible to organise a conference in one of the new states where representatives from other countries would feel safe. The conference was therefore held in Sofia, Bulgaria, and the main aim became to persuade the participants to talk to one another again. At the next conference in Dubrovnik in 2003 there were still some tensions. However, since 2004 there has been a warm working atmosphere that has completely transcended ethnic and national 'fault lines', nurtured by a shared language and common past traditions and values in education. A common lesson to be drawn from this experience is that the 'cause and effect' explanation put forward by Huntington needs to be reversed: it is the collapse of a strong state authority, a protective shield, that makes people run to their ethnic groups for protection, often actively stimulated by harmful policies that are designed to ensure that people can never live together again, as was the case in the Bosnian war. In the ETF mini-universe, network participants assumed during the first two years that the other parties would never work with former colleagues who had been stigmatised by the stereotypes propagated by all sides – Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians and Muslims. Fortunately, this was proved to be a fundamental misconception.

The question could then be asked, why did the federal state collapse? Suffice it to say that by 1990 Yugoslavia had ceased to be a national market and could no longer be managed from the centre (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1990). As a result of the past decentralisation of almost all decision-making to the republics – heavily aggravated by enormous foreign debts, economic stagnation, inflation, and the great disparities in economic development with the breakdown of the redistribution of income from the rich north to the poor south – the break-up of the federation was inevitable.

### **VET reforms and innovation in teaching and learning during a period of radical change**

It is difficult to predict the details of future VET systems in partner countries, but international experience clearly points to a number of basic characteristics that modern VET systems should possess. Such VET systems should be:

- decentralised;
- responsive to labour market and learner needs;
- transparent;
- well resourced;
- able to provide flexible and open pathways for young people and adults;
- capable of innovating and adapting to changing conditions.

All modern VET systems around the world are trying to develop these characteristics. But there is no best practice standard for how such systems should be organised, neither in developed market economies nor in transition countries. There are many examples of context-specific good practice, and perhaps also a small number of examples of bad practice.

The reform of VET systems in South Eastern European partner countries has been ongoing for more than a decade. Education reform is not simply about changing policies, regulations, curricula and teaching materials. The teachers and trainers are the pivotal point for implementing reform that impacts on vocational students and trainees. They have to handle the changes in curricula and methodology and to fit their work to the changing needs of the employment system and of students. This involves developing new skills, new flexibility, new experiences and new beliefs. The ultimate test of good practice is whether it increases the effectiveness of teachers and trainers in terms of preparing their students and trainees for present and future employment or entrepreneurship. The aspirations for VET also extend beyond questions of employability to the promotion of good democratic citizenship. Many fine words have been composed to inspire teachers and trainers to face these great challenges. However, 'good practice' requires concrete action and achievement, which are harder to find than good intentions.

In recent years it has become apparent that increasing attention is being given to teachers and teaching in educational agendas, at national, regional and international level. The 'neglected human factor' of educational change has been rediscovered and brought back into the main arena. There is a great need to bring teachers back to centre-stage in South Eastern Europe, and it is hoped that this publication will inform local educational planners, researchers and practitioners and the international donor community, and will nurture new efforts to innovate teaching and learning.

Hence, this publication seeks to fill a gap by developing and presenting the outcomes of a long and joint learning process on the transformation of vocational teachers and teaching in South Eastern Europe. This will hopefully help to establish a more coherent approach to the reform of VET teacher training which is better embedded in national structures, traditions and values. There is a need for a meaningful and relevant systematisation of knowledge that can serve as an informed policy tool in the national, EU and other donor-funded VET reform projects focusing on teachers and teaching.

A publication on VET TT approaches, institutions and practices in South Eastern Europe could contribute to the establishment of a common platform of understanding that can support a more profound dialogue and allow a sharper

and more precise look ‘over the garden fence’. In line with the ETF’s ambition to promote policy learning activities that are based on local ownership and that fit into the specific context, this publication has been co-written with the participants of the ETF VET TT Network. It is the outcome of a common development process that has taken place over the past eight years, and in particular the LEARN project 2007–09.

### Structure and contents of the publication

The various chapters encompass almost all disciplines within educational science (psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and political science). This is a natural consequence of the broad scope of the LEARN project. All levels of the system must be mobilised in order to achieve change.

**Chapter 1** establishes the context for the subsequent chapters. The concrete project design, activities, results and follow-up recommendations of the LEARN project and the wider VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe are presented in order to create a foundation for the following chapters. Lessons learned are highlighted and a number of critical factors for this type of project are discussed, in particular in relation to the use of a CoP approach. The chapter is written by the project manager of the ETF VET TT Network and the LEARN project, Søren Nielsen.

The LEARN project was created as a vehicle for the transnational sharing of knowledge and experience in networks, and employed a CoP approach to horizontal learning. **Chapter 2**, written by Hans Jørgen Knudsen, Sanja Hadžihajdić, Sam Cavanagh and Søren Nielsen, presents a more detailed discussion of this concept, analyses the methodological aspects, including how to organise a web-based CoP, and argues that the ‘core’ of the concept is useful for horizontal learning in South Eastern Europe, but that it needs to be adapted to concrete conditions. The chapter includes discussion of a CoP application that builds on the LEARN project in a national context, that of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Chapter 3** analyses how real change can be achieved in school classrooms and workshops, and argues for a strategy of collective competence development. This chapter, written by Hans Jørgen Knudsen, Maja Jukic and Søren Nielsen, discusses modalities for teachers’ continuing professional development through the establishment of platforms for horizontal learning. The concrete approach proposed is one of collective competence development at school level, which must include teams of teachers and school leadership. The chapter argues for strategic school development rather than development for individual teachers, and presents three concrete examples – from Croatia, Denmark and the LEARN project – of how knowledge sharing and horizontal learning processes can be organised.

A significant focus of the LEARN project was to develop a better understanding of the need to establish policy interfaces between national VET policies in education ministries and the proliferation of pilot projects in schools. **Chapter 4**, written by Margareta Nikolovska, describes the ways in which the institutional transmission links between policy and the project were developed. On the basis of an analysis of the national projects in LEARN, the chapter takes forward some of the key findings of the project and extracts central messages as issues and challenges requiring the attention of policymakers in the countries.

There is a risk that initiatives such as horizontal learning in networks, knowledge sharing, and joint project work in pilots will remain as isolated cases if they are not anchored in national institutions that have the capacity to consolidate, accumulate and take forward new knowledge. In **Chapter 5**, by Margareta Nikolovska, with contributions from Sanja Hadžihajdić and Nada Stoimenova, the important role of national VET centres as policy-implementing institutions is analysed. These new institutions are caught in a surge of expectations from above and below, and in this chapter some guidelines are developed on how in which they can become the ‘missing link’ between ministerial policy and school practice.

The ambition of the LEARN project has been to develop institutional capacity in VET centres to enable them to engage professionally and autonomously in future transnational network activities. The project has therefore concentrated on supporting participants from VET centres in the countries to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and to formulate consolidated strategy papers for future international activities. These strategy papers were written by Alqi Mustafai, Lepa Trpceska, Sanja Hadžihajdić, Tatijana Glisic and Vladislav Koprivica, and have been edited and summarised in **Chapter 6** by Rebecca Warden.

The LEARN project designed a new approach to evaluation by incorporating an ‘accompanying research’ function that is based on assessments and feedback from the very start of the project, and is carried out by a participant who is both inside and the project and able to step outside it for assessment purposes. In **Chapter 7**, by Søren Nielsen and Alqi Mustafai, the methodology of this evaluation principle is analysed, and examples of continuous findings and recommendations from this early-warning system presented. The wider implications of using this function as a learning platform when foreign experts work in the country is discussed in relation to increasing the accumulation of local expertise.

**Chapter 8** presents an analysis of the effects on the professional identity of vocational teachers under conditions of radical societal transformation. The chapter, written by Lucian Ciolan, examines the question of how transition is

reflected in the teaching profession and how these societal changes relate to inner identity processes. It is argued that the tensions experienced by teachers must be addressed through a development in their role as professionals in South Eastern Europe, and that this will need to transcend the old 'myths' of teaching, such as the teacher as 'illuminator' of the masses. Teachers across the region have a strong 'vocatio', and this must be the basis for their professional development.

### **Conclusions, and an open question: How can teachers be brought back to centre-stage?**

The role of teachers as professionals and stakeholders in VET is crucial for the success of VET reform in all countries. In the transition countries of South Eastern Europe it is noticeable that teachers are not yet seen as subjects or drivers of change. This is a barrier to systemic innovation, which is defined as 'any kind of dynamic, system-wide change that is intended to add value to educational processes and outcomes' (OECD, 2009). It has become increasingly difficult everywhere for policy to change practice; paradoxically, during the 1990s there was a surge in large-scale reforms in most Western countries, with few of these reforms having much impact on levels of student achievement. This demonstrates that rather than the direct correlation that is assumed to exist between policy and practice, the nature, extent and pace of change at local level has been a product of local factors that are largely beyond the control of higher-level policymakers (McLaughlin, 1990, p.12).

There is now an increasingly strong body of evidence to suggest that any strategy to promote student learning needs to give attention to engaging students and parents as active participants, and to expanding the teaching and learning repertoires of both teachers and students. This implies a transition from an era of 'prescription' from the top towards one of 'professionalism' on the part of practitioners. There is a need to find a different balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches. But how is this to be achieved? As pointed out by Michael Fullan (2003, p.7), it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to 'professionalism' provides the basis for a new approach. It will not be possible simply to move from one era to the next without deliberately building professional capacity throughout the system. In this respect it will be vital to build capacity among policymakers, VET centres and school principals. However, teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) must be the main response.

There is a need to bring teachers back to centre-stage. Unless teachers see their continuing development as an essential part of their professionalism, the system will not be able to take the next big step forward in standards of learning and achievement. This is not merely another discourse on making teaching comparable to other respected professions; it is primarily a very practical question of being part of development teams and using a rich repertoire of teaching strategies to meet students' needs. This will require a radically different form of professional development with a strong focus on coaching and establishing schools as professional learning communities.

The ETF VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe was an effort to achieve this overall goal. The LEARN project 2007–09, which has its roots in the VET TT Network, called attention to the challenge of developing new teacher-professionalisation strategies in the region. The various chapters in this publication aim to document and explain how this was achieved.



# 1. DESIGN, ACTIVITIES, RESULTS AND CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

SØREN NIELSEN

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the initiative taken by the ETF in 2002 on the development of VET teacher competence in South Eastern Europe. It briefly describes the rationale and activities of the ETF VET TT Network and the design, components and outcomes of the LEARN network project from 2007–2009. The chapter is partly descriptive and partly evaluative. In the second part there is an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the LEARN project; the final section presents a number of findings and recommendations based on the experience of the LEARN projects, with their implications for other projects based on horizontal learning in networks, or CoPs.

## 1.2 THE ETF VET TEACHER TRAINING NETWORK FOR SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Reforms of the VET systems in ETF partner countries have been under way for more than a decade. EU-funded programmes such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) have led to numerous projects, and the creation of the ETF has provided the means for sharing examples of good practice through the exchange of VET materials, expertise and personnel, institutional links and national reforms, which all contribute to the modernisation of VET systems. However, educational reform is not only about changing policies, regulations, curricula and teaching materials. The pivotal point for implementing reform that impacts on vocational students and trainees is teachers and schools. This is why vocational teacher training (TT) is now increasingly being given a high priority in EC policies and the IPA education strategy papers for partner countries.

Radical VET and labour market reforms are currently taking place in all South Eastern European countries. The reforms have introduced several elements that will affect the role of teachers and trainers and the nature and significance of the competences required to teach. Briefly, these elements are:

- increased autonomy for schools;
- an approach to learning that places the student at the heart of the learning process;
- a competence-based approach to programme design;
- the policy of adapting vocational schools to the needs of local labour markets and communities and of all students, whether children or adults.

As professionals, teachers and school principals in South Eastern Europe are committed to carrying out innovative work. However, there is a clear need to establish exchange and dissemination strategies through peer learning or CoP, beyond the school level and even, in the ongoing transformation phase, beyond the national VET system level.

The reform of teacher and trainer education has lagged behind VET curriculum reform in many countries (Grootings and Nielsen, 2005). In response to these challenges the ETF set up a regional VET Teacher and Trainer (TT) Network in South Eastern Europe to support innovation in teaching and learning with the aim of establishing a platform for the participating countries during a period of great transformation in the region. All are now designing and implementing VET reforms that are driven to a considerable extent by foreign donors, and they are often undertaking the same activities but without learning from one another. The European integration and enlargement process is changing the region. The countries of South Eastern Europe are already either going through the EU accession process, or at least waiting to start this process, with Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey negotiating membership, and with membership on the agendas of all the countries of the West Balkans. While these countries are awaiting membership, the VET TT Network has an important role to play as a vehicle for the dissemination of both EU and local policy developments and for reflection on innovative practices in the region and elsewhere, and as a forum for stimulating shared development projects.

In 2002 the ETF set up a VET TT Network in the region and for the region. This South Eastern European regional network comprises the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

An annual conference takes place in different countries across the region and includes a 'national day', where local VET reform developments and initiatives in teacher training are presented and discussed among peers. Each conference focuses an overarching topic. The ETF invites a small group of relevant actors from each of the countries. Four VET specialists (from the education ministry, teacher-training institutions and schools) in each country are given the opportunity, over the course of the three days, to engage in two types of dialogue:

- intra-country – between policy level (policymakers), support level (providers) and institutional level (practitioners) within their own country;
- international – between policymakers, providers and practitioners in the countries of the region and experts from the EU and candidate countries.

The dialogue is concentrated on the development and dissemination of good practice in VET TT, with a particular focus on the role of teachers in VET reform. The conferences attempt to sow seeds that will germinate through:

- dialogue at the conference;
- subsequent development projects and continuing dialogue within each country;
- networking between the countries.

Over the years this network has developed a strong culture and a shared vision for, and experience with, learning in networks. The network started out with many obstacles as a result of the recent wars in the countries of the region, which destroyed collegiate links for a number of years. The history of the ETF VET TT Network can be described as a process of gradual community building in the following way:

- *Forming* (Sofia, 2002)
- *Storming* (Dubrovnik, 2003)
- *Norming* (Skopje, 2003)
- *Performing* (Tirana, 2004 to Sakarya, 2009)

The added value from the shared learning that is facilitated by the VET TT Network is its contribution to

- i) closing the gaps between policy, providers and practitioners;
- ii) closing the gaps between countries;
- iii) the enhanced confidence and competence of the individuals empowered.

Thus, the regional network activities involve multi-level actors in eight educational systems and the target groups are located at three levels within eight VET systems in South Eastern Europe.

## 1.3 THE LEARN PROJECT

New learning theories<sup>2</sup> argue that learners are more successful in acquiring, digesting and retrieving new knowledge, skills and attitudes when they have been actively engaged in these processes. Education reform can only be sustainable if reform policies are owned by local stakeholders who are motivated to learn new ways

of organising education and training systems. Moreover, the need for embeddedness implies that local knowledge and initiative is a key source of and starting point for change.

The ETF VET TT Network functions as a platform for dissemination and reflection, and as a forum for stimulating shared development projects. However, in order to achieve more permanent and sustainable capacities for the innovation of teaching and learning, there is a need to anchor network activities in national institutions that have sufficient leverage potential to carry forward ideas and projects. The network has representation from the national VET centres<sup>3</sup> or their equivalents in the region. The LEARN project (2007–09)<sup>4</sup> supports these new institutions within the broad framework of the VET TT Network. The ambition is to support their institutional capacity to continuously stimulate VET system development, nurture innovation in teaching and learning in vocational schools, and increase their capacity for international networking and project cooperation.

### 1.3.1 Objectives and results

The long-term objective of the project was to contribute to the national capacity for VET policy formulation and implementation by strengthening the professional expertise of the recently established VET centres (or functional equivalents) in South Eastern Europe.

The project's immediate goals included:

- a) to clarify the challenges faced by the new VET centres and to familiarise participants with practice examples from abroad relating to the innovation of teaching and learning;
- b) to establish local capacity to cope with and carry out innovative school-based development projects, to translate the concepts of innovation and entrepreneurship learning into meaningful teaching and learning arrangements, and to master international cooperation in VET, including forming partnerships with foreign institutions;
- c) to take a leading role in the planning and implementation of the annual conferences of the ETF VET TT Network, which rotated between the countries in 2007–09;
- d) to make an operational and efficient example of how practitioners share and develop competence and knowledge together in practised communities and contribute to the international debate on communities of practice.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of new learning theories, see Viertel (2007).

<sup>3</sup> These new national VET centres are described in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>4</sup> The LEARN project was made possible by significant funding from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



### 1.3.2 Project phases

<b>2007</b>	The project clarified issues, familiarised participants with good practice in EU countries, developed the participants' competences to act as a CoP and defined shared project work. Development projects focused on the topic of innovation and entrepreneurship in education. An accompanying research function was established at the start of the project.
<b>2008</b>	Activities focused on project work in the field of VET reform that was defined locally by VET centres. The centres formulated and implemented a concrete school-development project. Local capacity was developed in each centre to enable them to carry out innovative and school-based development activities. Staff in the VET centres were trained to enable them to participate in international VET programmes and project collaboration, and equipped to join transnational partnerships. Participants applied peer-learning principles and were encouraged to use working methods characterised by a CoP, supported by the ETF electronic LEARN platform.
<b>2009</b>	The results of project work have been implemented in national vocational centres and in selected vocational schools; capacity has been developed for international partnerships in institutions; and a CoP is functioning.

### 1.3.3 Outputs

The project has produced the following tangible outputs:

- 1) study visit reports and accompanying researcher's reports;
- 2) reports from national project work on topics defined by participants;
- 3) strategic papers from each VET centre on national development plan for VET reform issues and international partnership agreements;
- 4) programme and summaries of ETF VET TT annual conferences in 2007, 2008 and 2009;
- 5) a compendium of 10 innovative vocational schools;
- 6) published papers on the experience of applying CoP principles in South Eastern Europe explaining how social learning theory can be applied in organisations and how the centres and schools as practitioners have developed competence and knowledge together.

### 1.3.4 Outcomes

- The project has contributed to the international discourse on CoPs by exploring how and to what extent social learning theory can be applied within and between organisations in a specific domain.
- Participants have been enabled to translate common European policy frameworks into local didactic learning arrangements based on in-depth knowledge and understanding of innovative practices used in different countries.
- Shared peer learning through networks has contributed to expert discussions in the region.

- VET centre staff are better prepared to carry out national VET reform activities and equipped to join international partnerships and participate in knowledge sharing.
- VET TT development has been strengthened by increased South Eastern European ownership and by a sharper focus on national and regional needs.

### 1.3.5 Rationale

The project was based on a peer-learning approach with a focus on how to organise policy learning platforms and environments within and between countries.

The project used knowledge sharing to enable decision-makers and VET centre staff from each of the countries to learn about VET reform experiences from elsewhere for the formulation and implementation of their own reform objectives. The project took as its starting point the fact that the industrial model of knowledge is being challenged and corrected by the assumption that learning is happening on a continuous basis. The project therefore made use of and tested the principle of participating in communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al, 2002) as the best way of achieving certain learning outcomes, of ensuring the professionalism of staff in the VET centres and selected vocational schools, and of making them stakeholders in the reforms.

A CoP is a new phenomenon in organisation theory, and it is worthwhile examining how it differs from other types of organisation, as illustrated in the table below (Wenger and Snyder, 2001).

**TABLE 1: A SNAPSHOT COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF ORGANISATION**

	<b>Purpose?</b>	<b>Who belongs?</b>	<b>Holding it together?</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<b>Community of practice</b>	Develop members' capabilities; build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
<b>Formal work group</b>	Deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganisation
<b>Project team</b>	Accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
<b>Informal network</b>	Collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

A CoP is thus a group of people with a common interest who work together informally in a responsive and independent fashion to promote learning, solve problems and develop new ideas. Knowledge management is an integral element of CoP. The relationship between knowledge and action must begin with action (in this case, development work on innovation and entrepreneurship in a concrete school context) rather than with knowledge. The project has focused on areas defined as important by the VET centres, structured so that they were clearly operational and targeted to address specific needs. Experience acquired through action at an operational level has also led to action at tactical and strategic levels in the internal organisation of the participating VET centres. Knowledge sharing has systematically been integrated into work processes that create value for the VET centres.

The project made use of three additional components in order to ensure that the horizontal learning processes were meaningful during the lifespan of project. First, the CoP was combined with the concept of learning networks in the context of a technology-dominated decade of interactivity and connectivity through the internet. Second, the project established a policy interface with national policymakers by creating a Steering Committee appointed by national education ministries to enable cross-fertilisation with other national policies to be achieved. Third, the project established an accompanying research function so that immediate assessment of and reflection on project activities, based on participatory observation by a critical friend, could be continuously fed back into the overall management of the project from the very start. Thus, attempts have been made to build some navigational support into the flexible design of the project, in which participants are co-producers of their own learning.

The ETF management of the project focused on forging links between CoP members, nurturing learning cultures, and ensuring that topics were relevant, innovative and valuable. In addition, the ETF has supported capacity building by providing conceptual, methodological and practical support, including through training sessions, study tours, workshops, professional process consultancy and coaching. An electronic conference system set up by the ETF has enabled knowledge sharing to take place and, in theory, stimulated the learning network to become an integral part of participants' day-to-day work.

### 1.3.6 LEARN – a policy learning approach

Policy learning has been the overarching aim of the project. 'Policy' refers to visions for development and the ways in which goals can be achieved. Briefly, the policy learning concept was developed in order to emphasise that systemic reforms of VET in transition countries (and indeed any kind of major reform in any country) will only be successful and sustainable if policy development, formulation and implementation are based firmly on broad ownership and embeddedness in existing institutions. The ETF has developed the concept of policy learning through a critical discussion of more traditional approaches to policy transfer and policy copying<sup>5</sup>. It emphasises not simply involvement but rather the active engagement on the part of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions based on the understanding that there are in fact no universally valid models, but at best a wealth of international experience in dealing with similar policy issues in other contexts. The concept has major implications for foreign assistance, and in particular for the role that individual and institutional policy advisers can and

<sup>5</sup> Since 2002 Søren Nielsen worked closely at the ETF with his colleague Peter Grootings to develop the concept of policy learning and new guidelines for the facilitation of policy advice in the ETF's 29 partner countries. Peter Grootings died on 3 July 2009, and much of the thinking in this chapter is inspired by his incredible creativity and unending generosity with his time.

should play in their cooperation with colleagues in partner countries<sup>6</sup>.

Many assistance projects that are funded by and undertaken on behalf of international donors are characterised by policy transfer or policy copying. They are based on the assumption that 'best policy practices' exist that are relevant for any other country and can therefore be easily taught by and learned from international consultants, or studied and copied by national policymakers. The practices are considered 'best' because they fit into particular theoretical or ideological constructs, or because they 'work'. However, policies based on the transfer or copying of best practice have generally resulted in unsustainable policy proposals. The main reasons for this are that they did not fit into the wider context of the country concerned, there was no real ownership among key national stakeholders, and there was therefore no commitment to, or even possibility of, making the policies work in practice after the funding agency had withdrawn. As a result, the implementation of new policies rarely achieves the results that were anticipated. There is always a need to search for a deeper understanding of why certain practices may be effective, of the circumstances under which different practices are effective, and of practical issues that must be addressed in developing and implementing them.

Policy learning, on the other hand, involves using comparisons to better understand one's own country, current policy problems and possible solutions, by observing similarities and differences across different national settings. Peer policy learning therefore seems to be a more effective way for governments to inform policy by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience (Grootings, 2004; Raffe and Spours, 2007; Chakroun, 2008).

Recent work by the ETF (*ETF Yearbooks 2004–2008*) suggests that policy learning – as distinct from policy borrowing and policy copying – encourages situated problem solving and reflection. New policies need to be strategically linked to goals and outcomes for national education systems, and must be firmly related to the specific institutional context of the country<sup>7</sup>.

Policy learning can be defined as the ability to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience. Effective policy learning should aim for a deeper understanding of policy problems and processes than that which is provided by a simple search for best practice (Grootings, 2008). The concept includes:

- the ability to learn from past experience;
- the ability to learn appropriately from other countries;
- the ability to learn from local innovation.

Therefore, there is a great deal to be derived from ongoing learning theory discussions on the issue of ownership, despite the fact that the practical and

operational dimensions of creating strong policy learning environments have in the main yet to be developed.

One lesson learned is that policymakers in ministries tend to have been neglected in ETF development projects and, since the approach of the project required the active participation of all levels of the education system, the ETF decided to give greater emphasis in the project to the role of the LEARN project Steering Group representing the national ministries. Their role was to function as an anchor in the policy interface with national education policies, by informing the ETF about the relevance of project steps, by giving presentations on reform policies at workshops and conferences, and by supporting the ETF team in continuous problem solving in relation to barriers in VET centres. They have formed their own CoP and were very active and results-oriented in project events.

### 1.3.7 Towards the dream: communities of professionals and schools functioning as professional learning communities (learning organisations)

Vocational schools play a key role in the provision of human capital in their regions. The opening up of schools requires a change in teachers' professional profile and, in particular, that teachers give up their traditional identity of being transmitters of domain-specific expert knowledge and skills and become facilitators and coaches of learning processes. Moreover, the emphasis on meaningful contexts leads to a new school-based learning environment in VET for teachers themselves. Schools are good places for teachers to learn, provided that the organisation of work within the school allows space for the development of staff competences rather than simply allowing work tasks to dominate learning. Designing appropriate learning environments that contribute to the development of competences has emerged as an important element in strategic school development.

The LEARN project has used the CoP approach to find ways of changing practice within the countries of South Eastern Europe in relation to key competences, schools for the 21st century, and opening up schools so that they can respond to human capital needs. Which new teacher competences are required and how can these be developed? How can this renewed focus on educational substance and learning processes be fed into VET reform policy in transition countries? How do university teaching faculties and national VET centres organise their work in order to continuously prepare pedagogical staff for the new challenges?

Over recent years the ETF VET TT Network has raised the issue of schools as learning organisations. How can a strategy based on the engagement of teachers and trainers as stakeholders and professionals be developed in schools, and how can an institutional and organisational

<sup>6</sup> The policy learning approach was formally endorsed by the ETF Advisory Forum (AF) conference in 2003 and reinforced by the Advisory Forum conference in June 2006. See formal statements on [www.etf.europa.eu](http://www.etf.europa.eu).

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting analysis of the 'push' and 'pull' in policy reform in relation to the introduction of national qualifications frameworks in the Arab region perceived from a policy learning perspective, see Chakroun and Jimeno Sicilia (2009).

environment be created in which teachers and school principals are able to play these roles? The concept of the school as a learning organisation coupled with the establishment of teacher teams inside schools may create the necessary enabling environment for schools to become and remain innovative, and for teachers to continuously develop their expertise. This would give practical meaning to policy learning at school level.

The most significant requirement for countries in transition is to strengthen their capacity to formulate national reform agendas. Countries will need to develop capabilities to formulate their own policies to shape reform initiatives that fit into specific contexts, and hence establish better conditions for ownership and sustainability of VET reform. This requires a more intense focus on the way policy learning platforms and environments are organised within the countries so that a critical mass of key actors and stakeholders can gradually develop VET policy understanding and competence. The LEARN project has worked with challenges such as how VET teachers as stakeholders and professionals can become involved in a concrete way in policy learning and support the development of national reform agendas, and how school organisations can be developed into policy learning platforms.

Over the past few years, 'teacher teams' have become a key concept in the pedagogical debate. Vocational schools have witnessed the development of a new pedagogical scenario: from teaching and instruction with teachers in the central and performing role, to a setting in which the focus is on the students' learning processes and on forms of organisation that support this learning. Team-work focuses on students' subject-related and personal learning processes and the teachers' own culture of cooperation and mutual relationships. Teachers must therefore work with the same demands and challenges as those faced by students in terms of cooperation, responsibility, self-reflection and evaluation. In practice, this means that teachers work within their own culture of interpersonal contact, mutual communication and mutual relationships. It is this duality, in which both students and teachers find themselves part of a learning process, that makes team-work a dynamic way of organising teaching.

In recent years the 'learning organisation' has been on the agendas of EU school development projects. The concept seems to cover perspectives that will be in demand in the future: i.e. an organisation that is subject to continuous transformation and development and that is able to systematise and evaluate its experience, making learning an ongoing process in the widest sense. In the team-based organisation there is a direct connection between the 'learning team' and the 'learning organisation'. The team represents a platform that compiles, elaborates on and assesses pedagogical experience in a more subtle and complex way than it is possible for the individual teacher to do.

In this sense the team can be said to be a link between students' learning and the learning of the organisation. By virtue of its organisation, the team is ready to become a dissemination forum between the learning processes at student level and the learning of the organisation as a whole.

The capacity to interconnect student learning, team learning and the learning of the organisation requires that the vocational school is aware of the value of the team organisation. In both EU and partner countries, a vocational school that is focused on the future will benefit from developing teachers who can function as team workers and process owners. In partner countries there is a great willingness to develop the teacher role and to create a new pedagogical practice<sup>8</sup>. The ETF will give priority to this element of strategic school development in the coming years.

## 1.4 ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE LEARN PROJECT

'Transition country projects' have often been analytical activities in which researchers and civil servants collect information and write reports. With the ETF VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe and the LEARN project, the ETF wanted to create a new type of project in which the emphasis is on concrete and practical collaboration between individuals and institutions working in the field. LEARN was designed as a 'network project' in the sense that it was organised as a cooperation between a number of local development projects that have their institutional homes in national VET centres in South Eastern Europe and narrow links to the national education authorities in their respective countries.

The aim of this short analysis is to systematise and assess the experience of the network activities of the LEARN project. This experience is likely to be of interest to all who want to organise shared learning in networks. It is hoped that the findings from the project, which has encompassed research and development for policy development and practice in education, will serve as an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of this type of work.

Within organisation theory, a 'network' can be described as a type of organisational interaction that is characterised by an informal, non-hierarchical, process-oriented structure, and that has its own dynamics and culture beyond and across formal channels and organisations. A 'network organisation' is normally characterised by:

- decentralisation of influence and flexible distribution of competence;
- a flat structure with smaller and relatively independent units;
- flexible rules and management;

<sup>8</sup> Piloting of the idea of schools as learning organisations has begun, for example in Croatia. At the ETF VET TT NET conference in Tirana (20–22 January, 2006), Maja Jukic, a teacher at the vocational school in Slavonski Brod, Croatia, organised an excellent workshop on how to proceed when developing schools as learning organisations.

- an organisational culture built on informal contacts and manifold practices.

Personal contacts, informal discussions and the development of new organisational cultures should not therefore be perceived as useful by-products but as important integral components of a network organisation. Such a network can provide both 'hard' (the electronic platform and organised conferences) and 'soft' (such as informal social contacts, eating and drinking together, and helping with translations and presentation slides) means of facilitation, communication and interaction.

The LEARN network project has introduced a form of project in which the emphasis is on practical cooperation between policymakers, VET expertise providers and practitioners. Thus, the key elements are a focus on practical and concrete development work (rather than expert reports), on the involvement of national and local authorities and institutions, and on the sharing of experience between practitioners.

The LEARN network project had two different sets of objectives. The first related to innovation in terms of the development of new methods and VET policy chain procedures. New VET strategies have been pursued through concrete innovation projects, the development of methodologies and the sharing of experience between countries in South Eastern Europe. This set of goals emphasises the mobilisation of local resources and development potential, and focuses on activities that promote the sharing of knowledge and experience as well as personal contacts.

The second set of objectives relates to the dissemination and anchoring of new VET experiences within and between countries in the region. Here the emphasis is on establishing networks between policymakers and administrative institutions, and on a structure that can ensure transfer from concrete (pilot) projects to the system as a whole (the intra-country policymaker-provider-practitioner links).

The LEARN project deliberately encompasses both sets of goals. On the one hand, the national project activities were established under the policy and operational structures of national ministries. On the other, the main ambition was to create new and non-traditional forms of collaboration with a great deal of free space for the actors in the project, and to strengthen informal personal contacts across borders (the inter-country or regional sharing and support, which, in the post-conflict context of South Eastern Europe, also had broader spin-offs).

In large transnational development projects it can be difficult to fully delineate the network and the actors involved. From a narrow perspective it is possible to see the network as consisting of the individuals who participate in the project work on a more or less permanent basis. Members of the Steering Committee are also part of this network. This is the group of people who regularly meet one another, for example at conferences, on study visits, and through transnational working groups. They are the core of the network – or at

least, of the network in a narrow sense. However, in a broader sense the network is much wider. Network participants are not only individuals but also representatives from a number of local and national institutions. Anchoring and disseminating the project outcomes to these institutional actors, who can be described as the 'external network', is a very important component of the LEARN project. Thus, it is possible to differentiate between an internal and an external network in LEARN, each having different functions and tasks:

The internal network consists of local, national and transnational project participants, and functions as a forum for sharing experience across borders.

The external network consists of national education policymakers and governance representatives who have the responsibility for generalising and disseminating project experiences to national policy systems at central and local levels.

### 1.4.1 What worked well?

The various network activities in the LEARN project have demonstrated that some activities function better than others and that there are barriers that the project did not manage to overcome. A number of more general conclusions can be drawn from the LEARN network project.

#### Large regional conferences

The aim of these events is to disseminate important results and share experience, also with national policymakers. They involve the external network, including the members of the VET TT Network, and they have all been very successful as platforms for learning and dissemination. However, there are three fundamental conditions for the successful learning and dissemination of experience.

- i) The individual participants must be carefully selected; whether information 'seeds' are spread afterwards depends on whether the conference topics are closely related to participants' daily work tasks.
- ii) This type of conference cannot stand alone but needs to be flanked by other activities, such as shared planning or tasks given as 'homework' for participants.
- iii) The key themes of conferences must concentrate on genuinely cross-national issues. It is important that participants are not simply following a single conference and also that conferences are not too dominated by national considerations.

The LEARN project has coped with these challenges very efficiently.

#### Study visits

These are significant activities that have played an important role in the LEARN project as learning platforms. The first study visit to a vocational school in Denmark in



2007 created the development horizon for project leaders, and the final study visit to Slovenia in 2009 brought the different elements of the project together into a coherent whole. Such activities are excellent vehicles for learning about innovative working methods. Participants are given concrete and context-bound opportunities to acquire an in-depth understanding of aspects that are particularly relevant for their own projects. Direct contact and personal experience provide much more detailed knowledge about institutions, practices and projects than written reports. A key feature of successful study visits is the production of clear guidelines written for each study visit; the Slovenian study tour was based on an innovative paper on 'bench-learning'.

### Transnational working groups

Such groups have been effective in stimulating the development of working methods and experience sharing. They are conducive to deeper discussions on the transferability of different projects and working methods. Because group members are from different countries but have common problem solving tasks, the work also stimulates the development of personal networks across borders, and thus an increased understanding of differences and similarities between the regional education systems and rules.

### Targeted workshops for segments of the network

Workshops were organised flexibly according to need. An effective workshop for members of the LEARN project Steering Committee was organised by the ETF in early 2008 to strengthen the policy interface with national ministries and to ensure better national accountability of development projects. When it became clear that the genuine 'drivers' of innovation in VET were the schools, a workshop for school principals was organised in Sarajevo to agree on a stronger school focus. These ad hoc activities are invaluable in projects that run for three years.

### Sustained support

Support will be provided for up to seven years from the same foreign experts who have contributed both technical and culture-building skills (hard and soft dimensions). They have generously volunteered to offer personal help to project participants, including contributing to a discussion forum, providing resource materials, and editing material written in English by second-language users. Building trust and a warm and positive culture, which are key factors, requires particular personalities and experiences as catalysts, in addition to a sustained level of face-to-face and electronic contact.

### Documentation

A range of different forms of documentation, including non-traditional ones, were used to record the regional project experiences and lessons learned in the LEARN project. Detailed written reports are indispensable for documentation purposes, but they tend to be read only by a very small number of people. As was the case throughout the implementation of the project, it is also

important to produce short, easy-to-read papers for all components, events and activities. More use should be made of videos and other visual presentations at conferences in future network projects.

To summarise the experience of the LEARN project network, it can be said that the many different network activities have various functions, and send different signals. Activities such as study visits, cross-national working groups, and work and training sessions for project leaders function as platforms for sharing experience and ideas, and as frameworks for developing approaches and methods for *the internal network*.

Elements such as large conferences, information materials and media contacts function as signals to the environment, to *the external network*. This supports the dissemination and wider discussion of network learning with a view to influencing decision-makers and to embedding new approaches and methods into various fields of practice.

## 1.4.2 Barriers encountered

At the core of the internal network was the establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP), which as an organisational form, should ideally have the following characteristics:

- it should develop its members' capacities with the purpose of building and exchanging knowledge;
- its members should select themselves;
- members are bound together by trust, passion, commitment and identification with the group's expertise;
- it continues to exist as long as there is interest in maintaining the group.

CoPs are probably as old as humanity itself, but their conceptualisation and instrumentalisation in modern organisation theory is new. Also new is the strategy of 'wiring' such CoPs in electronic networks where members share knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problem-solving. However, the LEARN project made use of this methodology based on the assumption that a sufficiently strong network culture had been nurtured within the ETF VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe from 2002 to 2007, and in spite of the fact that this would be a transnational strategy, and that language barriers do exist.

The strength of CoPs as innovation platforms is their ability to mobilise local environments, establish decentralised personal networks and sow seeds relating to approaches to VET development. However, the LEARN experience has shown that, in contrast to the intense face-to-face interactions that took place during the conferences, there was an insufficient sharing of experience and knowledge via the website set up by the ETF, which offered privileged access to a range of relevant policy documents and studies, links to other websites and a discussion forum for participants to allow easy access to answers from colleagues and international

experts. It is a paradox that the key technical core (what could be termed the 'hard' element) of the project is the one that was used least. Language barriers and the lack of ICT facilities and skills go a long way to explaining the reasons for this situation, though they are not the whole explanation. For hard-pressed, multi-job citizens/professionals of South Eastern Europe, going to the computer to check the latest contributions to the discussion forum and then composing and adding a response is unlikely to be seen as a high priority during the course of a busy ministerial, academic or school year. The 'soft' element of motivation, a lack of confidence regarding making one's thoughts public, and the difficulty of choosing between conflicting pressures of time are likely to have played a negative role.

The innovative design of the LEARN project was also expected to stimulate an intense sharing of transnational experience between local and national participants on their own initiative, since project members were given a great deal of freedom to act, while the ETF project management would mainly take care of coordination functions. This structure places many demands on individual participants in terms of initiative, ideas, independence, assertiveness and the ability to cooperate. However, while there was a considerable amount of bilateral interaction between participants, there was too little horizontal interaction via the electronic network among the project members in between the many organised formal events. One explanation may be the existence of track dependency, the cultural inheritance of dependence rather than habitual proactive initiative-taking, and possibly the remnants of post-conflict resentment and prejudice.

The discussions on new learning are definitely relevant for education and training reforms in transition countries. They provide key criteria for successful reform and reform assistance. Education reform can only be sustainable if reform policies are owned by local stakeholders and are embedded in the context of the country. Such reform is really a question of motivating stakeholders to learn new ways of organising education and training systems: system wide and system deep. Learning is about developing new roles for all stakeholders at all levels in all the building blocks of the system. Hence, the challenge for donors and aid agencies is not that of selling standard solutions but that of helping people to help themselves.

This underlines the need for more in-depth preparatory work in the design phase of regional projects that build on active learning principles. The LEARN project was designed on the platform of the ETF VET TT Network, and the historical experience among participants was that everything would be organised by the ETF. The organisation of regional conferences is traditionally based on a structure in which the respective norms, roles and expectations of organisers and participants are quite different from those in a CoP, as everything is designed and executed according to a plan defined by the ETF. One of the things to emerge from the LEARN project is that participants did more than was expected of them in terms of delivering the products requested, of being active and committed during events, and of being willing to accept a

great deal of responsibility for their own national development project. However, they have found it more difficult than had been expected to transcend the boundaries of their existing cultures. The expectations had always been that the ETF would organise the details of the project's progression and would even take responsibility for the discussions on the website. The corollary was then that participants would always deliver, just-in-time and to a high standard, all that was required from the project when mediated by the ETF. Hence, this was basically a problem relating to different expectations.

## 1.5 LESSONS FOR FUTURE ETF NETWORK PROJECTS

CoPs have begun to emerge as a promising development approach to VET reform. Their underlying principles are also used in the EU as a 'soft' governance tool through the open method of coordination and in mutual peer-learning activities. CoPs may be both cost-effective and interesting for policymakers and practitioners as a platform for reflective practice, a foundation for professionalism, and a basis on which these can be shared with others in the professional field. This merits more attention at policy, provider and practitioner levels.

The LEARN project used the CoP principle as an instrument for network learning in which participants share a given practice, are able and willing to learn together, actually work together on improvements in practice – inventing new procedures, models and tools – and share the results of their mutual work. Shared learning activities are based on the sharing of experience among participants, and the approach brings together improvements in policy, the implementation of revised practice in schools, and the development of teacher competence. The positive results from the LEARN activities are presented in the following chapters.

However, the ETF may also draw some lessons for the future. The most important concrete recommendations for the implementation of network projects carried out in contexts similar to that in South Eastern Europe, based on the analysis and findings of the LEARN project, are described below.

The network should be organised very much on the basis of clear objectives and a shared set of expectations regarding outputs and outcomes. The aim of the project as a whole must consequently be tangible and clearly specified from the start. If there is no detailed specification of goals, and if the objectives are not efficiently communicated to – and accepted by – all the project participants, the individuals taking part will not feel secure about the overall aim of the whole activity.

In particular, it is worth emphasising that network projects can promote two relatively distinct types of goal. The first relates to the mobilisation of local initiative and potentials for development. From this goal flows the need for local 'champions' to be identified and for activities to be created to bring these individuals into contact with one

another. The second concerns the dissemination and anchoring of knowledge about new forms of activity and working methods. Here projects must find activities that mediate knowledge between the network and the environments, and appoint network participants who are strategically placed to spread and use information. The selection of capable, committed and flexible individuals who have 'clout' in their respective environments is important. But without clearly specified goals it is difficult for such participants to prioritise activities and resources.

The individual local projects should fit together well. If there are no obvious similarities, it becomes difficult to stimulate the sharing of experience. It is particularly important to ensure a good match if the goal is to develop and mobilise local resources.

ETF project management and the network project Steering Committee had a very important role to play throughout the whole cycle in terms of maintaining and specifying project goals, overcoming barriers and disseminating outcomes to environments. In particular, they played a vital role in the launch phase of national network projects in terms of helping to select local projects and project participants. Often there will be strong national interests relating to appointments and the allocation of resources. It will sometimes be difficult to align all the elements in order to achieve an optimal regional network project.

It is important to train individual project participants in project management and collaboration, particularly at the start of a network activity. Issues such as the formulation of goals, implementation and evaluation will be important. Skills in the communication of project topics and results, both to the internal network and to the environment (e.g. the media) are also important.

Network projects such as LEARN function exceptionally well as an alternative to traditional survey projects that produce thick documents because they are based on personal contacts and individual experiences, for example study visits and conferences. Such network projects can be expensive, and are an activity in which direct results are more difficult to account for than when a project ends in a 300 page report. However, this should not prevent the ETF from using network project approaches based on personal contacts and mutual enlightenment. The continuous accompanying research reports from the LEARN project have documented the fact that it is precisely these types of activity that provide an important opportunity to spread and anchor experience and new knowledge, and that are remarkably more efficient than many reports.

It takes time to overcome the many barriers that exist for any network collaboration, not least when it operates across borders, as is the case for the LEARN project. The experience of the LEARN project demonstrates that project periods of less than two to three years are probably not optimal. On the other hand, there is a clear risk that the momentum of network projects will be reduced if the project duration is too long. The VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe has been running since 2002 and it has been a huge and valuable social learning process. However, it could now be time to dismantle its organisational structure, with its established strong values, norms, roles and expectations, so that energy can be diverted to activities on other learning platforms.

It is now important to ensure that the strong 'cluster' of shared competences which have been developed, and the knowledge and experience that has been accumulated by all project participants, will be capitalised upon and utilised in new national policies and regional cooperation projects.



# 2. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

HANS JØRGEN KNUDSEN, SAM CAVANAGH, SANJA HADŽIHAJDIĆ AND SØREN NIELSEN

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the ETF's principal approaches to supporting reform processes in partner countries is to facilitate policy learning within and between countries by assisting stakeholders with and guiding them through participatory learning processes. The approach takes into consideration the specific policy contexts and gives the actors involved in the learning process a firm stake in setting the agenda. It is based on a continuous cycle of action and reflection.

This chapter explores the opportunities for applying new and active learning principles for education reforms in transition countries. If systemic policy reform is about national stakeholders having – and being willing – to actively learn new policies rather than being told what to do, efforts must be made to organise learning processes in a new way. The new learning paradigm is firmly based on new insights about how individuals learn and about how more experienced 'experts' can help them to become competent.

Development agencies and their staff often act like traditional school teachers in that they assume they possess the required knowledge and that they know best about what needs to be done. From this perspective, knowledge simply needs to be transferred to partners who do not yet possess it, and partners are expected to implement measures that are presented to them as best practice. Local policymakers and local stakeholders are regarded as passive receivers of knowledge and instruction who do not have sufficient relevant prior knowledge and experience. Accordingly, development or reform is normally seen as a process of social engineering that will be successful if it is properly managed in technical terms. In reality, most reform projects are short-lived because they do not fit into the particular context and there is no local ownership. Reforms are often unsustainable: they tend to come and go with the donors and their agencies.

One reason for this situation is the prevailing understanding, which is often only implicit, of why and how people learn and develop new knowledge and expertise. The standard assumption underlying most

traditional learning approaches is that someone (in this case the foreign expert) possesses the correct knowledge, and learners (here, the local policymakers and other stakeholders) who do not have this knowledge should simply listen carefully and put into practice what they have learned. The new learning theories, however, argue that learning is more successful when learners have been actively engaged in these processes. Facilitating active policy learning rather than policy transfer may therefore have a better chance of contributing to sustainable reformed systems.

The LEARN project took as its starting point this concept of policy learning. Its ambition was to try to employ a new methodology for developing knowledge and local expertise. LEARN was established to make it possible for members of the network to learn, and to learn from one another. This was achieved through presentations from national and international experts, through national projects, and first and foremost through horizontal learning processes during the project's three-year duration. The project was designed with a focus on finding new methods to improve participants' knowledge and skills by sharing and developing examples of good and innovative practice in vocational teaching and learning. It involved policymakers, national VET centres, and vocational school leaders and teachers.

This chapter establishes the context by discussing what knowledge is and how it can be handled, developed and managed in a transnational development project. The CoP concept is analysed, with a particular focus on its function as a framework for knowledge management. The main section of the chapter is an analysis of how the LEARN project was designed as a CoP, how it worked in practice and the results it achieved. Finally, the lessons learned are taken forward in guidelines for future development projects based on CoP principles, and in descriptions of how the CoP horizontal learning model has been used in two projects in continuation of LEARN. The chapter concludes with an open question on the as yet unresolved tension within CoP network learning that occurs when projects such as LEARN combine two approaches, the CoP model and the concept of web-based learning networks.

## 2.2 THE LEARN PROJECT AS A KNOWLEDGE-DEVELOPMENT AND -SHARING PROJECT

The whole purpose of a learning project is to acquire, develop and share knowledge; the various elements represent different ways (and processes) of obtaining more knowledge. In the LEARN project this was achieved through lectures and presentations, through participants' cooperation in horizontal learning processes (see Chapter 3) and through learning from practice and from the dissemination of examples of good practice.

Knowledge is considered to be something that is produced or constructed by individuals themselves, on the basis of what is presented to them (by whatever method) and to the extent that each individual decides to act on it. The result of this working process is called knowledge.

The process of knowledge sharing is rather complicated. Some knowledge is explicit and will normally be articulated by those who possess it, assuming they are able to articulate it. Some knowledge (implicit) may not be articulated because it is assumed that it is not of interest to the participants, or that they already know it. Some knowledge will not (and cannot) be articulated because it is tacit. Those who possess such knowledge are not aware of it; they can use it, but are not able to articulate it, or, as Michael Polanyi (1966, p.4) wrote, 'we can know more than we can tell'.

This can be illustrated as shown in **FIGURE 1**.

This indicates that some knowledge is articulated, some knowledge is not – though it can be articulated if

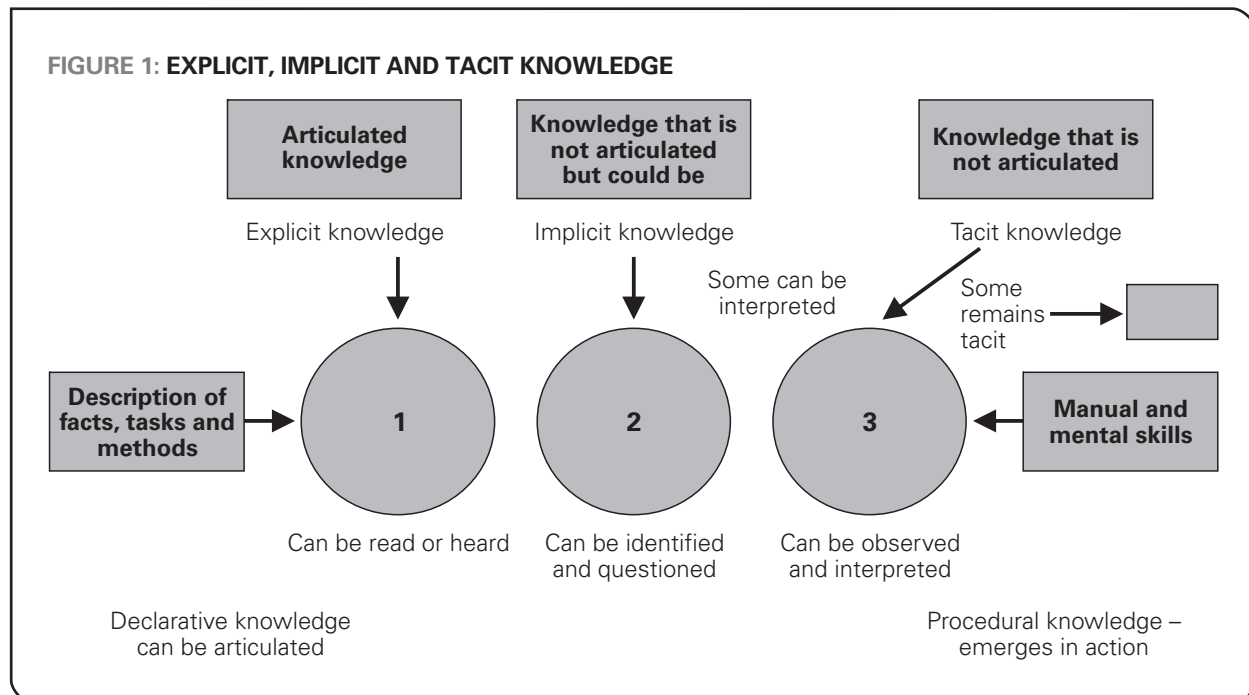
required – and some knowledge (the tacit) can only be identified when used (in a process), which means that it might be possible to identify at least some of it by observation.

This is how the LEARN project has been working in relation to knowledge sharing, and it has been undertaken within a CoP structure that was very much inspired by the work of Etienne Wenger et al. (2002).

## 2.3 COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Etienne Wenger defines CoPs<sup>9</sup> as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'.

Defined in this way, it is not a new concept. People have been learning from one another for many years. However, the term 'community of practice' was coined quite recently by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and since then has been a useful concept encompassing discussions and perspectives on knowledge and learning. It has also changed over the years. It has developed from being a model describing how apprentices are equipped to enter the world of work (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to a model of how organisations can learn. But the concept has also moved on from the original idea that CoPs first and foremost had to be self-organised, towards the idea that they could be nurtured by management (according to Wenger), or be established as 'sponsored CoPs', as Nickols (2003) refers to them.



It is according to this understanding that the CoP is used as a framework for the LEARN project's activities.

### 2.3.1 The structural elements of a CoP

According to Wenger et al. (2002), CoPs share a basic structure.

- The domain: this concerns the purpose and its value to members and stakeholders (Wenger et al., 2002, p.27). In the LEARN project the domain (or topic) was the improvement of teaching and learning in VET.
- The community (Wenger et al., 2002, p.28): this is the social fabric of learning. It relates to the members and their willingness to participate and to learn from one another. The LEARN project had different communities with slightly different domains: policymakers, teachers, school leaders and, not least, VET centres. However, all had a common interest in the main domain: the improvement of teaching and learning in VET.
- The practice: this is 'a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that community members share' (Wenger et al., 2002, p.29). In the LEARN project, practice was dealt with through workshops, through the exchange of examples of good practice, through the use of the project's electronic platform<sup>10</sup>, and in several cases through visits to one another in between the established meetings and conferences.

It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a CoP, and 'when they function well together these three elements make a community of practice an ideal knowledge structure – a social structure that can assume responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge' (Wenger et al., 2002, p.29). This has worked well in the LEARN project, though it has not been without problems (see section 3.3).

The concept of a CoP as described above is used in private companies, the public sector and education. In many cases it operates across borders. The LEARN project certainly worked across borders: geographical, organisational and in terms of language.

### 2.3.2 Sponsored CoPs and knowledge management

CoPs are typically thought of as self-organising groups, but in recent years the concept has also been used to refer to what could be called sponsored CoPs (Nickols, 2003). These are established by management and are intended to deliver results that benefit the company or, as in the LEARN project, to deliver results in accordance with aims and goals set up by those managing the project (in this case the ETF).

As in all CoPs, members are expected to learn from one another, share results of learning, and work within a

specific area (the domain). In sponsored CoPs such as sharing, learning and working is encouraged and supported by management – in the LEARN project by the ETF project management team.

In a project on knowledge development and sharing such as the LEARN project, culture is a very important issue. It has been employed and nurtured over the years. In the culture of this particular project it has been necessary to consider:

- social factors, because knowledge is shared socially and because members must trust one another in order to engage in the activity;
- organisational and managerial factors, in order to support and facilitate the knowledge work and established goals and a framework for the CoP;
- technical factors, so that members can communicate during the periods between organised events; this is important not least because of the geographical spread of the project.

This is in line with Smith and McKeen (2003) and their work on knowledge-sharing cultures, and with Wenger's (2004) conceptualisation of knowledge management, and the relationship that he finds between knowledge management (or 'sponsored CoPs' as Nickols calls it) and CoPs.

In his article 'Knowledge management as a doughnut: Shaping your knowledge strategy through communities of practice', Wenger describes CoPs as the cornerstones of knowledge management, and suggests that sponsored CoPs (such as the LEARN project) should support the knowledge-sharing process by:

- allocating explicit roles to members;
- making resources available for meetings and travel, and for specific projects;
- setting up a technological infrastructure that enables members to communicate regularly, collect and share information, and accumulate and store documents;
- establishing a support team that is able to provide the CoP with logistic and process advice, and with access to management and to other CoPs in the organisation.

This advice was taken on board by the ETF management group from the very start of the LEARN project.

## 2.4 THE LEARN PROJECT AS A SPONSORED COP – ORGANISATION AND RESULTS

The project was set up around a network of individuals representing ministries, VET centres and vocational schools in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

### 2.4.1 Objectives and structure

The main aim of the LEARN project was to develop and share knowledge in the field of vocational teaching and learning by formulating strategies and implementing examples of good practice.

The diagram below represents the organisation of the project. As can be seen from this diagram, the project had many different elements. From one perspective it was a project operating as a CoP with a domain focused on improving teaching and learning in VET in the different countries, and involving a community representing schools, VET centres and ministries, which all have a stake in this development. On the other hand, it was also a project consisting of three sub-CoPs, one on policymaking issues, another on VET centres as facilitators and the link between ministries and the vocational schools, and a third with a focus on school development and best practice in the classroom and in the school leadership team.

### 2.4.2 The LEARN project as a CoP

As a sponsored CoP the LEARN project had a domain, a community and a practice. Aside from the project's overall organisation, its design followed the rules of support (from the sponsor) as defined by Wenger (see section 2.2).

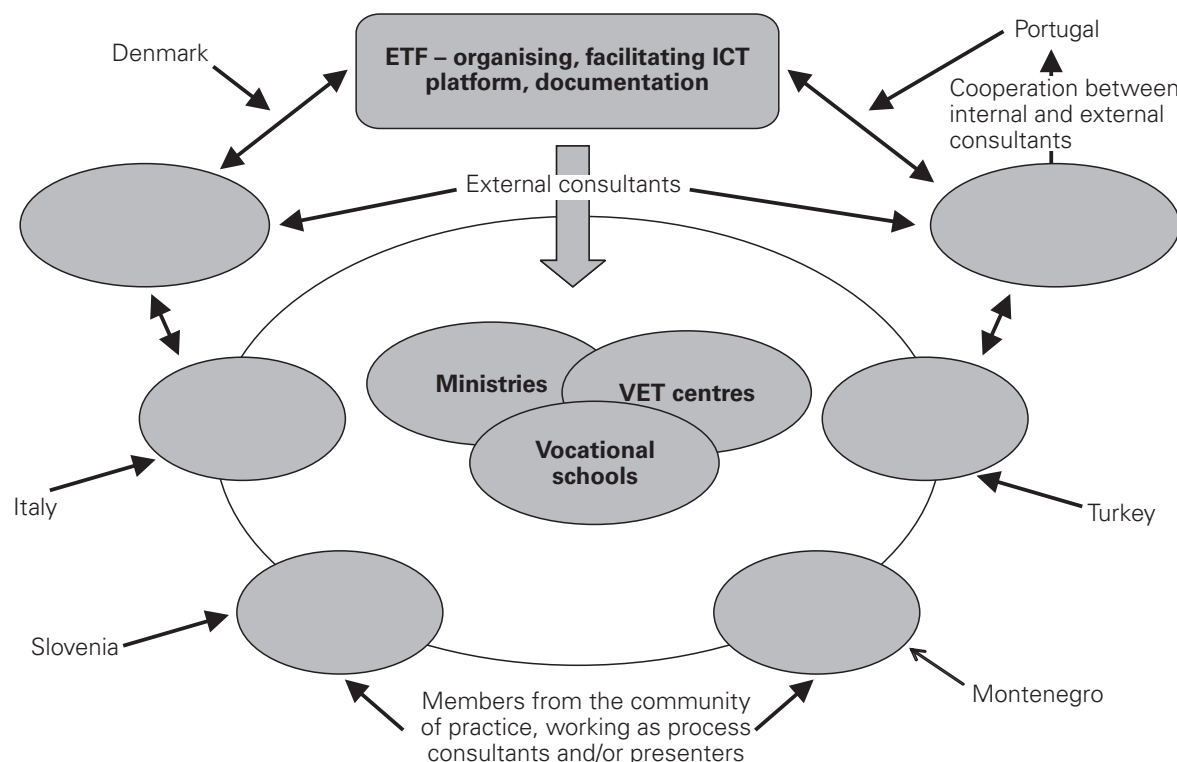
- Some members of the CoP(s) had explicit roles – in most cases from event to event – allocated by the ETF.
- Resources were made available for meetings and travel, and money was provided for specific initiatives, which were a very important part of the project.
- A technological infrastructure enabling members to communicate regularly and to accumulate documents was set up by the ETF. This element was not without problems (see below).
- A support team consisting of members of the ETF and external consultants was established. An accompanying researcher (who was also a member of the CoP) followed the project from the very beginning and systematically reported back to the ETF and the CoP throughout the project (see Chapter 7).

### 2.4.3 The results of the project

The project was ambitious, though it achieved most of its objectives through the following outcomes.

- It was possible to adhere to the original concept of horizontal learning. Learning took place and new knowledge was created, not least when participants worked together.
- A great deal of valuable information was provided by outside partners, by the ETF, by external consultants and guests, and through visits to other countries. Experience on specific countries was gained from study visits to Denmark, Portugal, Italy and Turkey, and from workshops held in Montenegro and

**FIGURE 2: ORGANISATION OF THE LEARN PROJECT**



Slovenia. These activities offered opportunities not only to gain access to explicit knowledge but also to seek out implicit knowledge, and sometimes even to obtain some of the tacit knowledge. This was possible because participants had the time and opportunity to observe and reflect on phenomena in their true contexts.

- From the start of the project, participants from the different countries were expected to deliver reports on good practice and to try to learn from one another in a systematic way. All the countries delivered written reports on good practice, and described what and how they had learned from others. All had learned a great deal from activities back in their home countries, and from informal meetings, including during coffee breaks and group work, throughout the project.
- One valuable outcome was the fact that participants managed to overcome barriers and share information with one another using the internet.
- Most of the material produced during the project was placed on the project website and made publicly available<sup>11</sup>.

In addition, participants have benefited a great deal from participating in the project and most of its activities. The final report, which was prepared by the accompanying researcher, Alqi Mustafai, documents clearly what has been achieved in terms of capacity building in all the countries concerned and among all participants, in terms of a culture of cooperation, communication, learning, and sharing experience and examples of good practice (see Chapter 7).

The report also states that the organisation of the project contributed to its success, since it had (Mustafai, 2009):

- a clear concept;
- an appropriate number of members of an appropriate calibre;
- well-planned and carefully arranged project activities;
- relevant topics selected for its events;
- appropriate distribution and sequence of events;
- appropriate selection in terms of the countries chosen to organise events;
- high-quality papers, presentations and facilitation provided by the project team/experts.

Of direct relevance to the CoP concept is the fact that according to the findings of the accompanying researcher, the LEARN project contributed to 'a strong LEARN culture and a shared vision for acting and learning in networks', and that ideas presented as part of the project, such as horizontal learning, experiential learning, learning networks and CoPs, have been further discussed and elaborated, and that new CoPs have been set up in the ETF and within the countries themselves (Mustafi, 2009).

#### 2.4.4 Lessons learned for future projects

Although the ambitious objectives of the LEARN project seem to have been achieved, there are a number of

aspects about which organisers of future projects should be concerned.

- There were, and continue to be, difficulties in making resources available, in most cases because of problems in transferring money to countries outside the EU.
- The electronic platform did not work well as a tool for communication between members, mainly because it was too complicated to use, because it was wholly managed by the ETF rather than by participants, and also as a result of language problems. ETF and external experts needed to communicate in English, whereas most members wanted to use their own language.
- The domain was not always crystal clear – at least, not for all.
- The community was not stable, since new members joined and left. On the other hand this may have had a positive impact on the dissemination of experience and good practice.

The experience of this project suggests that CoP principles are a successful framework for projects such as LEARN: a domain to set the scene for the issues to be addressed, a dedicated group of people (the community) from different countries, a practice to be developed through the project, and finally, support from the sponsor (the ETF). See **TABLE 2**.

## 2.5 EXAMPLES OF COPS BASED ON A CONTINUATION OF THE LEARN PROJECT

### 2.5.1 ETF Mutual Learning Project

Building on the experience of the LEARN project, the ETF Mutual Learning Project (MLP) aims to cultivate CoPs in:

- adult learning;
- quality and quality assurance in VET;
- post-secondary professional education.

As was the case in the LEARN project, the MLP covers the IPA beneficiary countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. The aim of the MLP is to improve the quality of policy development and implementation by strengthening regional networking between policymakers and experts in order that they can learn from one another's experience and practice. The MLP wishes to capitalise on the explicit, implicit and tacit knowledge that CoP participants bring to the community through the organisation of meetings, peer-learning visits and the sharing of details of methods and approaches to common challenges.

Again, as in the LEARN project, the model is a variant of a sponsored CoP, in that the ETF initiated the process and

11 [http://www.etf.europa.eu/Web.nsf/pages/Project\\_area:\\_SEE\\_VET\\_TT\\_network\\_EN?OpenDocument](http://www.etf.europa.eu/Web.nsf/pages/Project_area:_SEE_VET_TT_network_EN?OpenDocument)



**TABLE 2: A POSSIBLE CONCEPT FOR NEW PROJECTS SUCH AS LEARN**

<b>Element of knowledge management</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Domain</b>	The identity of the project, defining the key issues to be addressed. This is what the project is about, set out as clearly as possible.
<b>Community</b>	The group of people for whom the domain is relevant and who want to establish relationships with others in order to work on the problems and share knowledge about it.
<b>Practice</b>	What members bring to the community in terms of what they know already, and the tools, methods and documents that they possess, and that they wish to improve.
<b>Support elements</b>	Description
<b>Explicit roles recognised by the organisation</b>	Roles such as accompanying researcher, international consultants and local project leaders worked well in the LEARN project. National policymakers formed a Steering Committee for the project in order to ensure policy relevance. They also formed their own CoP, which was an excellent idea.
<b>Resources made available for meetings and travel, and money provided for specific projects</b>	The ETF made resources available for meetings, conferences, workshops and travelling, and for members' project work and documentation.
<b>Technological infrastructure enabling members to communicate regularly and to store documents</b>	The ETF set up an electronic platform. It is recommended that such platforms are set up as members' platforms, and that they are easy to use and controlled by the community itself. All communication and all documents should be delivered directly by the members.
<b>Support team able to provide the CoP with logistics and process advice, and with access to management and to other CoPs in the organisation</b>	The ETF team, and to some extent the external consultants, functioned as a support team, and this proved to be a vital component.

identified participants from the region through consultation with national ministries and other relevant stakeholders. However, as the participants are from different countries and organisations, the MLP cannot be seen as a management-led CoP. It is guided by the ETF and relies on ETF support and organisation. Of primary importance is the motivation and initiative of the CoP members. The MLP CoPs aim, to varying degrees, to share best practice, develop expertise and experience, and innovate and develop new ideas.

The launch meeting of the project in Turin in May 2009 marked the foundation of the three CoPs. The event brought together all the identified participants, and each of the three thematic communities had the task of defining their respective domains and confirming their interest and commitment. Each MLP CoP also established a work plan outline for the duration of the project.

Regular interaction is the key to the development of the CoPs, and the members will meet frequently over at least three years in structured, dedicated project events, in addition to other initiatives. An additional focus of this project is based on examples of innovation in different countries and, as in the LEARN project, the aim is to

gather valuable information and develop ideas from the involvement of external consultants (for example from the Netherlands for the post-secondary professional education CoP) and through visits to other IPA countries, such as Turkey for quality and quality assurance in VET, and Croatia for adult learning.

Stability of membership continues to be an issue, as was the case in the LEARN project. The aim is to actively involve all those who take part in the MLP CoPs as much as possible in order that the experience reaches across the community. In under-resourced transition countries in which the reforms have agendas that are heavily loaded with initiatives, there are frequent changes in roles at the institutional level, and the demands on individuals' time are high. However, there does appear to be a core membership in each of the MLP CoPs, and the new members broaden the communities' network.

Furthermore, these CoPs are based on the concept of learning networks in a technology-dominated decade of interactivity and connectivity through the internet and other networks, enabling resource-based, personalised and social learning in communities. MLP thus takes forward key components of the LEARN project, and this

process is further strengthened by the fact that 14 of the LEARN participants are now involved in MPL, helping to consolidate and take forward lessons learned from earlier CoP participation.

### 2.5.2 National CoP in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Important education reforms are currently taking place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of them relating to VET. Several elements have been introduced that are vital for the success of VET reform. Briefly, these elements are:

- a new learning paradigm that implies a changed role for teachers as organisers and facilitators of the learning process, and an approach to learning that places students at the heart of the learning process;
- a competence-based approach to programme design;
- the philosophy of lifelong learning;
- the policy of adapting vocational schools to the needs of the local labour market and community, and of all students, whether children or adults.

Since Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the ETF LEARN project, its team was given an opportunity to design and implement a school-based development project funded by the ETF. Because of the complex structure of the education system in the country (for instance, there are 14 ministries in charge of education at different levels and in different regions), implementing a state-level initiative proved to be a real challenge. Taking this into consideration, members of the Bosnia and Herzegovina team decided on a project that would overcome this barrier and establish a network of schools across the country. The Bosnia and Herzegovina Community of Practice Project was designed to assist the implementation of the VET reform and, through peer learning, to build capacity for knowledge sharing and dissemination, national networking and human resources development. The aim was to create capacity for horizontal learning through an electronic forum linking three vocational schools (Technical School in Banja Luka, Agricultural and Medical School in Brčko and Vocational Trade School in Sarajevo) and the Pedagogical Institute of the Zenica-Doboj Canton (as participants in the LEARN project). They had an opportunity to exchange knowledge and information on entrepreneurial learning and the implementation of good practice. This electronic platform provided a communication and learning forum for a wide range of stakeholders in the VET reform, including other vocational schools, education ministries and pedagogical institutes.

The topics most frequently discussed related to practical issues, such as the administration of final exams, the organisation of practical instruction, adult learning, and web presentations. Schools presented their examples of good practice – ‘what works’ – and demonstrated their entrepreneurial approach. They were also able to learn about the implementation of new curricula from one

another’s websites. The topic of students with special educational needs was highlighted from a new pedagogical perspective in which a distinction is made between inclusive education and education for special needs. Inclusive education is usually regarded as the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular schools. However, the term ‘barriers to learning and participation’ shifts the focus from the student’s ‘deficiency’ to activities in the classroom, school yard and staff room. This understanding can be used to direct attention to what should be done to improve education for every student, bearing in mind that inclusion in education can help to achieve social inclusion.

The CoP in Bosnia and Herzegovina was used as a forum to allow participants to learn from one another, acquire expertise and exchange examples of good practice, to stimulate the development of new ideas, and to motivate vocational schools to be more innovative and proactive in relation to change. However, the outcomes of the project remained relatively limited as a result of various factors, including the low level of interest among schools in communicating in this way and the inadequate technical skills and capacities. However, it should be recognised that this was the first time that vocational schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina had engaged in electronic networking with a view to building such a community and, as a starting point, the CoP experience was a valuable contribution to future efforts.

## 2.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

A CoP is a simple, commonsense concept, and it is important to remember that CoPs are not a new invention. They are not a technique, and they played a role in learning long before they became the current focus of attention. The concept was formulated by Lave and Wenger in the late 1980s in their study of apprenticeship and the process of legitimate peripheral participation, the process through which newcomers become members of communities.

A CoP can be defined as a group with a shared history of learning that has become an emergent social structure. People who face a common challenge and interact regularly with regard to this challenge will learn together and develop practices that become a bond between them. This gradually happened over the years in the VET TT Network for South Eastern Europe, and it was reinforced through the LEARN project. As a medium for peer-to-peer learning, CoPs place the responsibility for managing knowledge where it belongs: in the hands of practitioners who use this knowledge in the performance of their tasks.

What was new in the LEARN project was the implementation of learning – not least horizontal learning – in a culture where teaching is the dominant approach. The CoPs were designed to become a transnational learning platform<sup>12</sup> and to forge links between VET experts at

<sup>12</sup> This dimension is not completely new. In 2007 the World Bank PEM-PAL project aimed to improve capacity in public finance management by forming a CoP of internal auditors from post-Soviet countries, as an alternative to twinning schemes, which are often less effective and more expensive. The PEM-PAL method added greater autonomy, with the CoPs at the centre deciding to a large extent how to go about their learning.

different system levels from eight South Eastern European countries that had recent troubled histories. Two different lessons can be learned from the LEARN experiment. When (VET) specialists are brought together and are given a free learning space, they quickly realise how much they can learn from one another. They want to hear one another's stories and discuss one another's experiences. Rather than a vertical relationship between a provider and a recipient of knowledge, a horizontal relationship develops among people negotiating how their respective experiences can be relevant to one another. Much of the discussion relates to how participants can take what they are learning in the CoP back into their own organisations.

The use of the internet was another new approach. Such technologies have enabled individuals to interact in new ways across time and space, and to form new types of dispersed yet interactive CoPs. The interplay between technology and community seemed to be an obvious solution for forging links between the LEARN participants,

and thus enabled various new kinds of collaboration to take place among professionals. The new infrastructure had the potential to provide highly flexible, self-directed learning opportunities that could be integrated into the day-to-day schedules of busy professionals in the domain. However, this was never fully achieved, and the web-based facilities were the least-used tool in the project.

In conclusion, the two approaches – the CoP and web-based learning networks – will need to move from a complementary relationship towards one in which they are closer to each other, for the benefit of both concepts, and most importantly, for all learners involved. Future projects would benefit from undertaking a deeper analysis of the 'core' of the dynamic horizontal learning processes taking place in CoPs and devising new strategies for shaping e-network solutions that focus fully on what is relevant to participants and that are consistent with where they have been, where they are now and where they want to go.



# 3. HORIZONTAL LEARNING: A PROMISING STRATEGY FOR TEACHERS' CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

HANS JØRGEN KNUDSEN, MAJA JUKIC AND SØREN NIELSEN

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out some of the conceptual background of the LEARN project and provides guidelines for the way in which shared learning has taken place within the project. It describes the strategies employed to enable school-based development work on innovation and entrepreneurship, based on learning in networks, or horizontal learning. The idea behind the learning network is that people who have very similar professional backgrounds and who are faced with similar challenges can learn a great deal together, and from one another.

The LEARN project made use of knowledge sharing to enable policymakers, the staff of VET centres (as anchor institutions), and schools and teachers to learn about VET reform experiences in other countries. The aim was to share knowledge and to stimulate the project group to recognise the value of horizontal learning.

The elements of the learning network concept that was used in the LEARN project are as follows.

- The learning network consisted of representatives from participating VET centres from different countries and networks between VET centres and national school projects within countries.
- The content on teaching and learning related to innovation and entrepreneurship.
- The process was undertaken as experiential learning.
- The learning network operated as a CoP.
- Horizontal learning occurred in a number of forms:
  - personal and electronic communication;
  - action learning;
  - intensive knowledge work.

The project as a whole had these principles at its outset, but was also concerned with setting up a new and better concept for working in international learning networks. This chapter discusses the key concepts and three examples of horizontal learning activities.

## 3.2 WHAT IS CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

### 3.2.1 The knowledge society and an era of change: the need for new training approaches and new teacher profiles

There is widespread agreement that knowledge is becoming the most important component of production, although land, labour and capital are still fundamental production factors.

The EU Education and Training 2020 Programme illustrates this very clearly<sup>13</sup>. It is 'based on common objectives and aimed primarily at supporting the improvement of national education and training systems through the development of complementary EU-level tools, mutual learning and the exchange of good practice via the open method of coordination'.

The document also emphasises that education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many challenges facing Europe and its population in the coming years, and hence, that investment in education and training systems is an essential component of the Lisbon strategy, with its special focus on the lifelong learning perspective. It is clearly stated that lifelong learning is essential for European citizens, education institutions and their teachers, and European policymakers.

If it is necessary for all citizens to participate in some kind of education or training throughout their lives, it is crucial that teachers be trained and updated in the latest developments in their respective professional areas, and in the best and most effective and efficient ways of delivering education programmes, whether formal or non-formal. This places a special focus on teachers' continuing competence development – or, as it is usually called, their continuing professional development (CPD).

### 3.2.2. Teachers' continuing professional development

One reason for the use of the term 'CPD' is that for many years teachers have been considered professionals in the sense that

- they have a solid theoretical grounding;
- they have a number of years of practical experience within their professional field;
- they are best placed to decide when and where to prepare their work, and how to teach their students.

This is how professionals have been defined for years, and it is how many professionals and semi-professionals still understand the teaching role. For such professionals it is not acceptable that others (for instance, leaders) set the standards and give the orders in terms of teaching and learning processes.

In recent decades, with the focus on effectiveness and efficiency, a great deal of pressure has been placed on the classical concept of professionalism. Politicians want schools (Ball, 1999) to deliver services that are at the same time better and cheaper, and in most cases leaders have been given responsibility for this.

This has led to a new professional, the professional leader, who has a great deal of influence on pedagogical principles and processes, and who is able to decide what and how to teach, by what means, where and for whom. Decisions on how much time can be spent, what resources are available and how to allocate these are (in many cases) being made locally through cooperation between school management and teachers (and their organisations), based on the conditions under which the schools have to operate. Sometimes conditions are influenced by the market, sometimes by political ambitions; sometimes schools have a certain degree of autonomy, and sometimes almost all decisions are taken by central authorities.

For some years now the two types of professional mentioned above have been working in the field of education, and both have felt that they should have overall responsibility for teaching students the right things, in the right way and under the right conditions (Sachs, 2003).

According to Sachs, having two groups of professionals working in the same field and with the same issues is not

an ideal situation. The problem must be solved by creating a new professionalism ('activist professionalism'), in which cooperation rather than competition shapes a relationship based on what Anthony Giddens (1994) calls 'active trust'. Here the emphasis is on new forms of relationships with colleagues, students and society. Such relationships will be closer and more intense than those that existed previously (Hargreaves, 1994). The parties are expected to 'get into the same room' to talk together. Sachs (2003, p.16) suggests the following principles for 'active teacher professionalism':

- inclusive membership
- public ethical code of practice
- collaborative and collegial
- activist orientation
- flexible and progressive
- responsive to change
- self-regulating
- policy active
- inquiry oriented
- knowledge building.

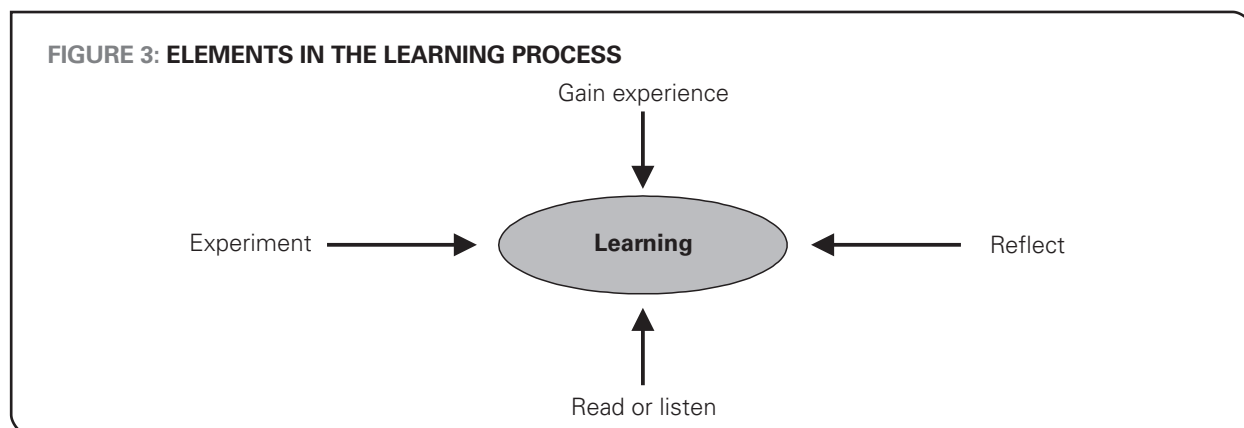
The concept requires mutual acceptance (and respect), and new and more comprehensive competences are required for both teachers and (middle-) managers. At the same time, changes and improvements must take place. This all requires cooperation between teachers, and between teachers and managers. New teacher profiles are emerging, as are new kinds of cooperation. This calls for new learning environments (or communities).

## 3.3 HOW PROFESSIONALS LEARN

### 3.3.1 Learning and learning environments

Learning is about perceiving inputs from the outside, either by reading or listening, or by observing and gaining experience from one source or another in the outside world. But it is not enough simply to perceive something: it is also necessary to actively work with it. This can be achieved by reflecting on or experimenting with it.

The elements and sequences can be illustrated as shown in the following diagram (inspired by David Kolb, 1984).



The external inputs can be delivered by a teacher, a book or experience. This can be accomplished through two different processes:

- a vertical approach, which is the traditional situation of an individual (the teacher) who has more knowledge, a number of individuals (students) who have less knowledge, and some facilities, such as whiteboards, flipcharts, tables and chairs;
- a horizontal approach, in which participants learn together and from one another, and where they can be viewed as experts.

Professionals are experts themselves and have a great deal of knowledge and experience to share with others. Hence, horizontal learning would seem to be very useful approach and an effective and efficient framework for learning together. In order to be useful, a horizontal learning approach must focus heavily on the learning environment. Smylie refers to Dewey when he points out that 'learning begins with ambiguous situations that present a dilemma, problem, or felt difficulty for the individual' (Smylie, 1995, p.94), and that this is a good starting point for the establishment of a learning environment. Such ambiguous situations create a need for change that leads to cooperation between different groups of staff in what could be called a 'professional learning community' (Hord and Rutherford, 1998), containing:

- a principal who shares leadership, power and authority, and participates collegially by encouraging staff involvement in decision-making;
- a shared vision that is developed from staff's unswerving commitment to students' learning and is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff's work;
- opportunities for teacher-to-teacher collaboration and observation accompanied by feedback and assistance as needed;
- opportunities for staff reflection, collective inquiry and the sharing of personal practice;
- the sharing of success stories and celebration of achievements.

This seems close to the concept of the 'activist professional' (Sachs, 2000) and provides a suitable environment in which to work on the improvement of learning as well as change.

More specifically, Smylie (1995, pp.104–106) concludes that the following phenomena characterise a well-functioning learning environment:

- teacher collaboration – providing teachers with opportunities to work and learn together;
- shared power and authority – teachers and administrators;
- egalitarianism among teachers – status, power and authority;
- variation, challenge, autonomy and choice for teachers in their work;
- organisational goals and feedback mechanisms;
- integration of work and learning;
- accessibility of external sources of learning.

A learning environment such as this will certainly promote horizontal learning and also constitutes an excellent basis for changing and improving practice.

### 3.3.2 Horizontal learning: a useful concept for CPD in South Eastern Europe

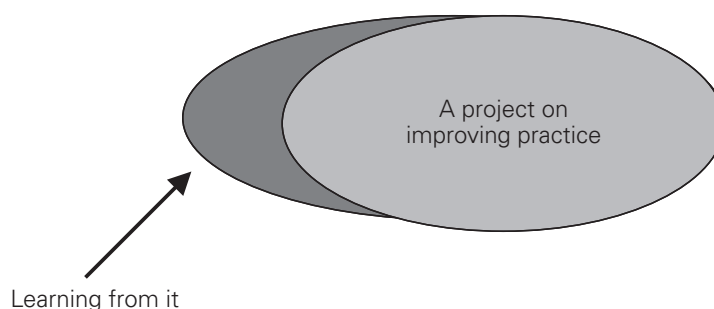
Since there is a great need for teacher education, in particular in transition countries that have very few resources, it is not possible to accomplish this in a vertical manner; this would simply be too expensive. Another reason for choosing the horizontal approach is that so many more experts are involved, and in most cases the learning process is so close to practice that it can be used directly. Hence, it is a more useful approach in which a very important connection is established between learning and change.

The improvement of practice must, of course, take place in the workplace. Competence development within an organisational environment is based on experiential learning. In short, this means that undertaking an activity leads to experience and, if the experience is reflected upon, it provides improved knowledge for participants and the ability to perform better in the future.

In order to improve competence and practice at the same time, it is necessary to use practice as an activity to learn about and to learn from.

The starting point is to choose a (real) project that offers opportunities to improve practice and from which it is possible to learn.

**FIGURE 4: LEARNING FROM AND IMPROVING PRACTICE**



All participants are expected to be experts (in a particular area of the project) and interested in improving both the practical field and their own competence. They should all be willing and able to cooperate, including with external experts (if necessary or appropriate) and with the school management.

The project must be carefully chosen and suitable for the learning purpose, and must cover activities on which it would be strategically relevant for the school to work and to spend resources.

In this way, CPD makes a difference to participants' competence development while at the same time improving practice. Moreover, it can be achieved in a much more cost-effective way than through a traditional course.

### 3.4 EXAMPLES OF HORIZONTAL LEARNING

Brief descriptions of three examples of the use of horizontal learning follow.

#### 3.4.1 Croatia

Teachers in Croatian vocational schools are very well educated in many different subjects. This is why most schools use their own resources for teachers' CPD. In each school year the teachers meet to discuss which themes should be covered, who should organise the learning activities, how this will be done, and who should lead this type of competence development – through lectures, practice, demonstration lessons or the dissemination of new information – using their own resources and organising activities as horizontal learning, i.e. learning from each other.

A network of regional (covering one or more counties) professional councils was established 10 years ago. This is a simple and efficient way of organising CPD, and requires minimal input from the education system: the only contributions are the selection of schools to be the headquarters of the councils, and the appointment of the head of the school council where the individual council is to be seated. The financial resources required consist of allocating an hour per week in the teaching schedule of the head of the council, and financial support to the school council for the costs of organising meetings (3–5 per school year), paying lecturers, training council leaders and supporting participation in the work of the state council. Schools provide travel costs (if any) to their teachers to enable them to participate in regional meetings. Around EUR 1 000 is spent annually on around 40 teachers. The benefits of such organised horizontal learning have become increasingly important over the years, and have produced exponential results.

Most of the county councils start their activities by interviewing council members regarding what can be shared and who wishes or is able to share new knowledge with other colleagues. Such discussions will cover:

- themes, methods and contents in which they are interested;
- examples of innovative practice that they are able to offer from their own work;
- the content of activities and possible experts outside the council who can provide inputs at professional meetings so that exchanges can take place, including of achievements, details of programmes, materials, links to companies or universities, and information regarding equipment.

Over the past few years, vocational and pedagogical issues have been clarified and potential trainers identified. A large number of both same-subject and different-subject councils have been brought together through demonstration sessions and seminars of a day or more, organised by trainers.

The methods that were applied in the mutual, horizontal learning by teachers during their training have also been extremely useful for working with students. Thus, participants gained and exchanged the experience necessary to enable them to apply modern methods, through:

- interactive workshops (icebreakers, brain-storming, SWOT analyses, evaluations and mental maps, project work);
- working in teams;
- simulating work, with self-evaluation;
- demonstrations;
- learning through music.

The benefits of the horizontal learning model in Croatia are:

- significant results (output), because learning is closely linked to teachers' daily practice;
- low costs (input), since it is provided regionally and makes use of internal resources;
- the network brings together schools and councils in the same vocational field subjects, but there is also the facility to connect the various professional fields or subjects at regional, state and international level;
- opportunities to exchange good practice that is of direct relevance for classroom teaching;
- improvements in the work of schools, the quality of teaching, and teaching resources and tools.

However, problems do exist with this horizontal learning model. These include the fact that schools work in two shifts, and that there has been insufficient preparation for teaching based on working in teams because of the lack of space and equipment in school (as well as the absence of a database for trainers' competences and their areas of expertise, i.e., what is available, and what can be shared with others).

The Croatian networks have been used effectively for the dissemination of information obtained through the LEARN project. More than 1 500 teachers of different disciplines (electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, textiles and clothing, construction, leather and footwear, design, agriculture, chemical technology), and of general subjects

(history, English, German, chemistry), together with school pedagogues and principals, are familiar with experiences and achievements in Denmark, Portugal and Italy as examples of good practice and of ideas for changes that can be applied in their own work.

Dissemination started with a seminar at state level for more than 100 vocational teachers on the theme of the modern vocational school. The experience of the Danish and Portuguese vocational school systems was presented at this event, and, at the request of participants, the main messages and objectives of teaching in modern workshops were highlighted. Examples of good practice have been published regularly in the school newspaper since February 2008.

Topics covered in teacher training have included teacher competences, school as a learning organisation, modern methods in the teaching profession, new learning paradigms, and school-based curriculum or open curriculum (as in the case of Slovenia).<sup>14</sup> These lectures and workshops have been presented to and practised with more than 1 500 (mostly) vocational teachers over the past two years through the network of county councils. Evaluation and feedback has shown that participants were satisfied with the usefulness and applicability of the information offered and the workshop exercises they undertook, and with the stimulation that these activities provided.

It should in theory be possible to create a virtual network of ETF LEARN practitioners as a useful group, especially for teachers who speak the same language. However,

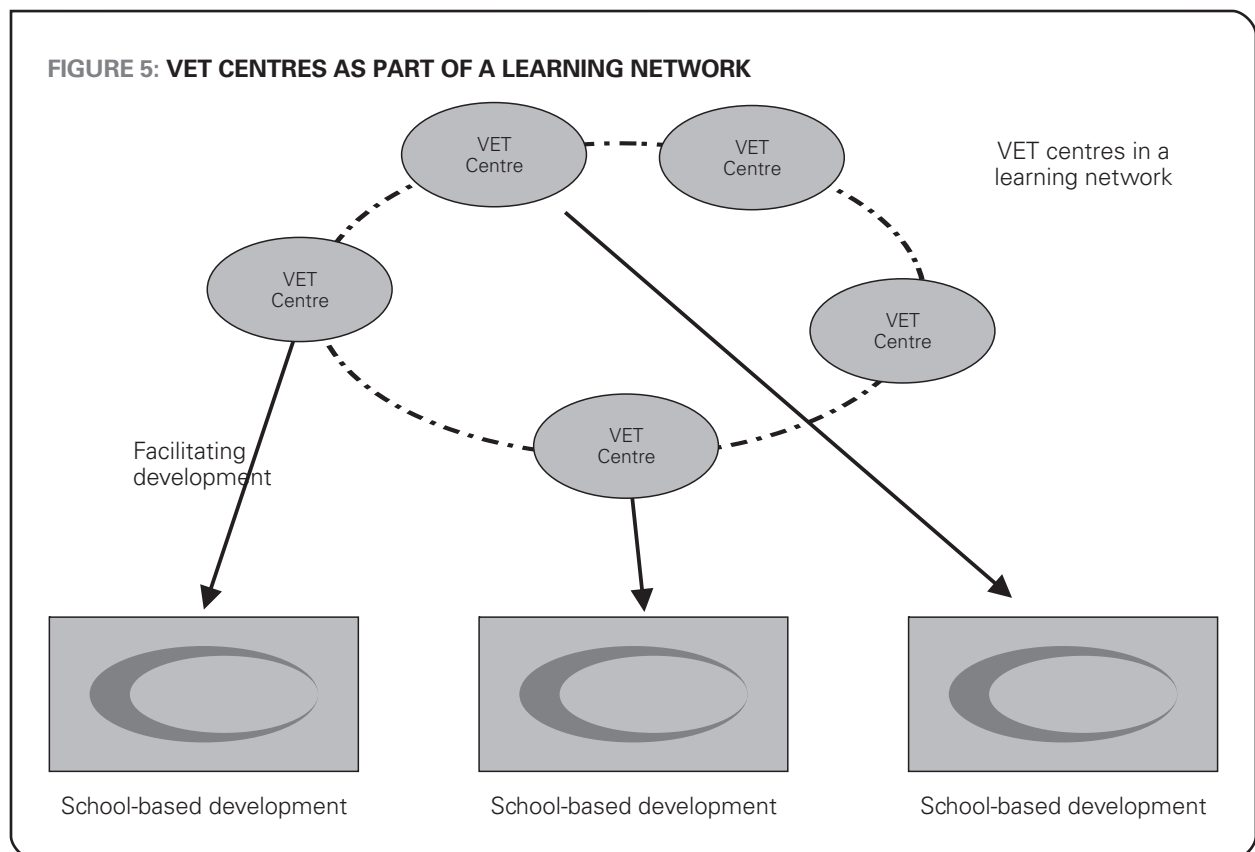
this will depend on the availability of regional funding. Such a network would enable teachers to share information even more widely, discuss problems, help one another with solutions from their own personal practice, plan common projects, and organise e-twinning lessons at a distance.

### 3.4.2 International network cooperation

The LEARN project for all Western Balkan countries aimed to empower national VET centres to gradually professionalise their roles through horizontal learning in a network. The project's ambition was to help prepare participants to function as a CoP with the aim of sharing knowledge and promoting learning in the particular areas identified by the national VET centres.

The project has established a learning network in which participants with almost identical professional backgrounds, the same challenges and the same ambitions can learn a great deal from one another. Organising this as a CoP (a specific form of learning network) – with a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, and using VET centres as facilitating units – is a new concept. There has therefore been a need to learn it as part of the project, through a 'learning-by-doing' approach, organised as action learning, and by sharing and developing knowledge together, both face to face and electronically.

It can be illustrated as in **FIGURE 5**.



<sup>14</sup> Some of the lectures and workshops that were systematically disseminated after key LEARN project events are available in the Croatian language from the website [www.freewebs.com/mjukic](http://www.freewebs.com/mjukic)

In a project designed in this way, much of the work and cooperation must be based on participants' experience. According to Bushe (2001), an experience consists of:

- observations;
- thoughts;
- feelings;
- wants.

The LEARN project allowed participants to develop new and better knowledge by doing something (activities)<sup>15</sup>, gaining experience from it, reflect on the experience and finally acquiring new knowledge.

Defining the appropriate activities from which to learn, and the reflection on the experience acquired, are the most important tools in experiential learning. Experience and knowledge will follow almost automatically. Moving from activities to revised practice is the crucial step, not only in school-based development projects but also in the network itself. VET centres facilitate schools (this is an activity in itself), and each VET centre gains experience from this, reflects on the experience, and creates the knowledge required for a VET centre as a facilitating unit. It is exactly this knowledge that has been shared in the network.

- The LEARN network has been working on a learning platform in which the VET centres as a group have:
- shared a specific practice;
- been interested in learning from one another, and together;
- had a common ambition to share ideas, papers and models in a specific area.

Participants in the learning network bring useful experience back to their own national institutions (and departments), and relevant information from the school-based projects is provided for common use. Hence, the LEARN network was able to function as a temporary CoP for the duration of

the project. If participants wished to continue, they had the option to do so.

The knowledge work has taken place as horizontal learning, in the sense that participants have primarily learned together and from one another, rather than from an external expert. This process is illustrated in **FIGURE 6**.

Knowledge sharing should start from action, from doing something together and then sharing experiences. An important tool in the project has therefore been the use of action learning principles through which participants have learned from undertaking specific activities, in particular the self-defined school-based development projects that have been anchored in the VET centres.

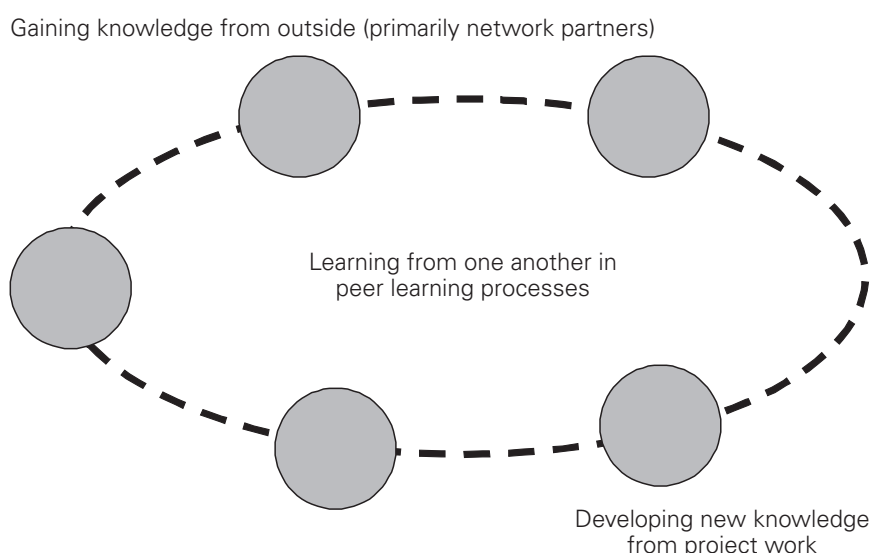
The national development projects were all formulated because they were important to the schools (and to the VET centres), and hence, the projects can be said to have their own lives and their own meaning. Those who were appointed to work on the projects are expected to learn from this activity, and at the same time to improve their practice in the relevant area. Thus, knowledge on content and processes was brought from the school-based projects to the LEARN network and vice versa.

### 3.4.3 Denmark

Denmark has a long tradition of ministerial funding for development projects carried out by vocational school teachers. Hence, a large number of teachers have learned through participating in such projects, though little of that knowledge has been shared with others.

This situation led to the establishment of a network of nine vocational schools, called the 'SAMlaer' network (SAMlaer means 'learning together' in Danish). The schools are spread across Denmark and represent all the

**FIGURE 6: HORIZONTAL LEARNING**



<sup>15</sup> In the LEARN project these were the five national development projects (see Chapter 4).



country's regions. The idea behind the network was to improve practice by developing together and by sharing knowledge with one another. Most initiatives are organised as action learning projects in which participants can learn from practice and at the same time improve it.

In the past there have been many projects that stopped even before they had started. It was therefore decided that all projects should be directly related to the schools' strategy, and should aim to improve both participants' practice and their competence. In order to ensure this, school directors have been directly involved in constructing the network.

1. School directors take the final decision on what the network should focus on, under what conditions, and how. The directors know one another very well, and meet regularly. The meetings are traditionally '12-12' meetings (from midday to midday) at which the host presents a real problem and the others contribute to a solution for that problem. They also usually discuss problems in general, mainly those relating to the issues that are currently real and relevant for school directors. Finally, they obtain information about ongoing projects so as to ensure that projects are on track and in line with the strategic goals established at the outset.
2. Once a decision has been taken regarding what to focus on, and how, and once the funding is in place (this is usually based on a ministerial grant), management of the project is delegated to a group of managers (one from each school) who are responsible for delivering the expected results, in terms of improvements in competence and pedagogical practice. These managers know one another well, and meet regularly during the project, to coordinate the project work as a whole and to inspire one another. The managers ensure that projects are staffed, allocate resources in accordance with the overall project budget, and act as facilitators for members of the project group. Since they meet with

one another regularly they are able to bring experience and good ideas from one school to another.

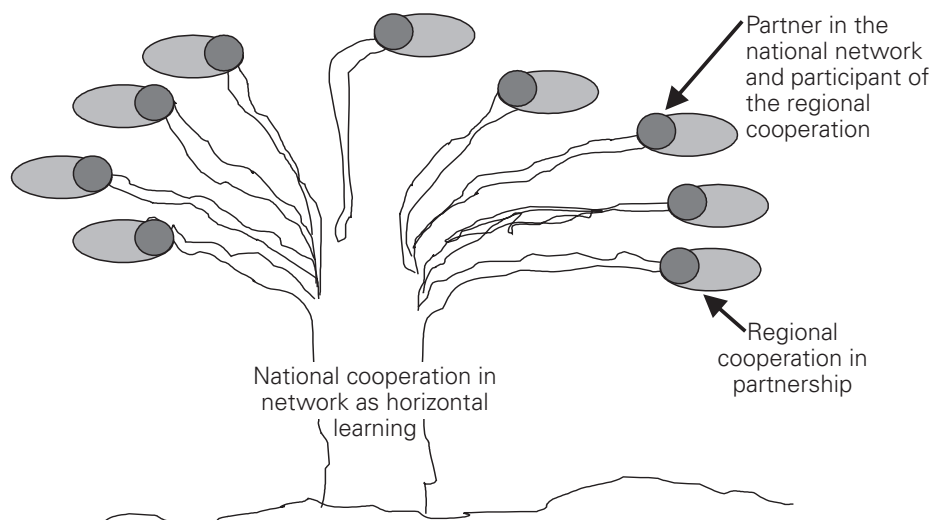
3. There may be several different projects covering various different areas, and in this case the aim is to gain as much experience as possible and to ensure that all this experience is shared among all schools in the network. Alternatively, a project may cover only one area, and in this case the intention will be to gain as much experience in that specific area in order to improve practice and to share knowledge with the others. An example of this is the current project on how to deal with able and gifted students.

Members of the workgroups are teachers appointed by the management group to work on the different projects. These individuals are chosen because it is expected that they will deliver good results and also because there is a desire (from both the school and the individuals) for them to improve their competence. One of the participants may be appointed project leader, though that function could be performed by a manager.

It is very important for the output of the project that all groups are represented – in different roles – but also that they learn together and from one another (in accordance with the horizontal learning approach). Horizontal learning takes place sometimes within the specific group, and sometimes through the cooperation between groups.

As a result of the worsening financial conditions for vocational schools it has become ever more important that projects are not only related to the schools' strategies but that the schools' strategies are in line with the political directions at central or regional level. This in turn has led to an expansion of the network, since each of the participating schools is also involved in regional networks, and in that context establishes projects in partnerships consisting of (for instance) regional schools, regional colleges and regional universities. **FIGURE 7** illustrates this situation.

**FIGURE 7: NETWORKS AT VARIOUS LEVELS**



The network (SAMlaer) has been focusing on knowledge sharing since 2004, and one of the important learning outcomes has been that it is almost impossible to take an example of good practice from one organisation and transplant it into another. Important elements such as conditions, aspirations, culture, tradition and competence vary greatly among different organisations. In the current project – on how to deal with able and gifted students – participants work with a number of examples from each of the participating schools. Rather than trying to use each example as it is, they analyse it in order to find its core, using the core principle (see **FIGURE 8**).

Only the core of the example is taken from one school to another. In the second school the core will be used as the essential element, whereas the rest of the process and activities are changed and a new concept is developed on the basis of the aspirations, competences, culture and of the second school.

It has been a very positive experience for schools to use principles from horizontal learning and thus ensure that projects are related to the schools' strategies. Moreover, the use of core principles in knowledge sharing is a promising development, and horizontal learning has a number of advantages.

### 3.5 CONCLUSIONS: WHY HORIZONTAL LEARNING?

The following conclusions can be drawn from the aforementioned examples.

Horizontal learning is an efficient and possibly even indispensable way for teachers to learn. The Croatian horizontal learning system described above could be applied, with small adjustments, in any of the South Eastern European countries' CPD systems. The outputs and benefits are numerous, and only limited inputs are required. It is also a very useful system for sharing good

practice and exchanging necessary and available information. It has a number of spin-offs, including greater autonomy and influence for individual teachers in their own CPD, proactive behaviour and enhanced responsibility for their own professional growth, and improved self-evaluation skills. Many other benefits were produced, and improved on in the course of the implementation process, including the creation of a list of trainers, the development of ideas for possible CPD themes, mutual networking, a greater level of self-confidence among teachers following professional improvements, higher levels of motivation in their everyday work, and more confidence to introduce innovations.

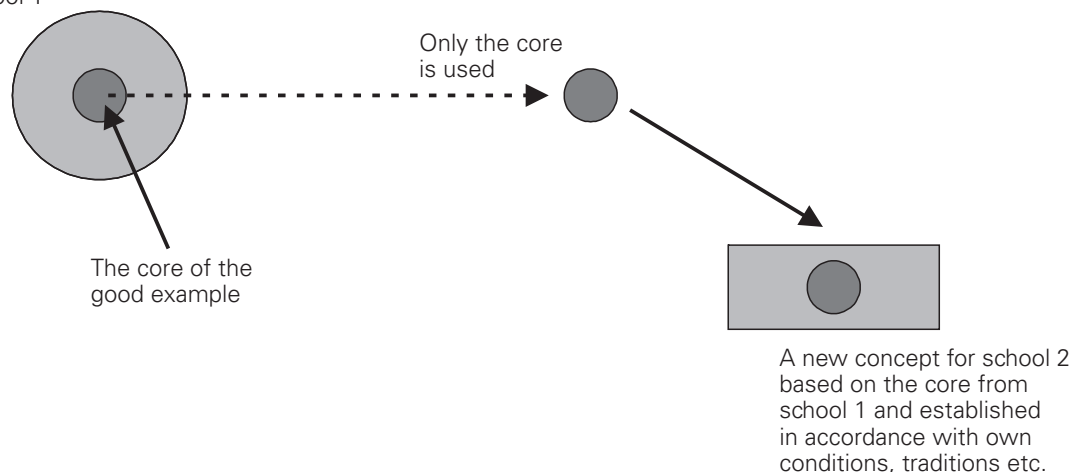
The LEARN project has established a number of learning platforms that enable horizontal learning to take place. These are critically examined in Chapter 1 as examples of transnational network learning. It should be sufficient here to simply highlight some of the advantages and disadvantages from the policy learning perspective, which is the organisational principle on which the project was based.

Effective policy learning should aim to achieve a deeper understanding of policy problems and processes than is provided by a simple search for 'best practice'. The concept includes the ability to learn appropriately from other countries, as well as the ability to learn from local innovation.

The advantage of using the horizontal learning concept in this project has been the shared learning through the many transactions that have taken place across borders over a period of time through study visits, conferences, training workshops, local school development projects coached by national VET centres, and local dissemination activities. The LEARN project has established a policymakers' network, a VET centre network and a school network with teachers and principals, and these have had an impact at both transnational and national level. The project has nurtured and consolidated a culture that has stimulated numerous bilateral contacts between project events.

**FIGURE 8: THE CORE PRINCIPLE**

The good example from school 1





One barrier that has not been overcome relates to the use of the internet for the CoP. This never functioned as planned, partly as a result of language and ICT obstacles, but also because of time constraints. In addition, it remains to be seen to what extent countries will be able to learn from their own local innovation projects designed and implemented by the LEARN anchor institutions, the national VET centres, and how these experiences can be shared with partner institutions in other LEARN project countries.

The Danish network has acquired a great deal of experience with horizontal learning and knowledge sharing – by actually doing it. The network has been in operation since 2004, using action learning principles, and by doing this it has been able to improve both competence (CPD) and practice. It is important to emphasise that the case of the Danish network underlines that all projects must relate directly to each school's strategy, and that as much experience as possible must be shared among network members. Experience from the mature Danish network shows that horizontal learning principles are very effective and efficient, in the following ways:

- They represent a much cheaper way of working than traditional in-service training courses.
- The results achieved are much better, in terms of both improved competence and pedagogical practice.

Working with horizontal learning requires specific competence. After having worked in this way for a number of years, the network possesses most of the required competences, and it no longer uses much external assistance. The competence remains within the network, which is in itself a great advantage.

The network concept has a number of advantages over traditional competence development through continuing training and other forms of CPD. The national examples from Croatia and Denmark illustrate these advantages.

- Because cooperation has taken place over several years, it operates very quickly.
- Establishing concrete cooperation and development projects is easy; it is possible to work with several different projects at a time, and to learn from one another after completion.
- Horizontal learning involves many more of the schools' own staff, and thereby makes a greater contribution to more widespread competence development.
- Use of the core principles in knowledge sharing makes it more likely that good examples from one school can be made useful at another.

Based on experience – not least from the examples above – it appears that horizontal learning is a promising approach in relation to teachers' CPD in both national and transnational contexts.



# 4. THE LEARN PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE PLATFORM: LESSONS FOR ETF POLICY LEARNING

MARGARETA NIKOLOVSKA, NADA STOJMEANOVA AND SANJA HADŽIHADJIĆ

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Policymakers<sup>16</sup> are key players in the process of setting VET policy agendas. Their concerns relate to policy issues within their own VET systems. Policymakers are in charge of developing a vision and formulating policies and a strategy for tackling and eventually solving problems in the VET system. The challenge for them is that they are dealing with so-called ‘ill-structured’ problems, for which the consultation process usually reveals a number of possible solutions.

The ETF LEARN project attempted to provide additional inputs and to facilitate support to policymakers on solutions to policy problems in the VET system. This was not an attempt to find solutions to very concrete problems, such as how to improve in-service teacher training in order to ensure smooth implementation of the VET curriculum. Rather, it was an attempt to take a more general perspective and provide opportunities for the policymakers who took part in the ETF LEARN project to benefit from structured learning experiences that incorporated ‘policy problem-solving’ approaches. Two major instruments were used.

1. A LEARN project Steering Committee was established. This involved policymakers from the education ministries responsible for VET. The committee was organised as a smaller regional network of policymakers within the larger LEARN CoPs, with participation from South Eastern European transition countries.
2. A small country project was implemented in each country, mostly in the form of vocational school-based development work carried out by the VET centres, with a critical role for the Steering Committee member from the respective country.

Against the background of the outcomes of the LEARN project, and in particular the lessons learned in relation to using the Steering Committee as a network of policymakers, this chapter reflects on the important and relevant issues to be considered for the ETF policy learning approach in future. It includes a discussion of the functioning and usefulness of a Steering Committee

network and of the ways in which policymakers can benefit from taking part in networks that are designed with dedicated and relevant activities. The chapter also reflects on the learning experiences of policymakers at country level and on the ways in which they can benefit from learning-by-doing within their own countries. The following more concrete issues are also addressed.

1. What was the role of the Steering Committee in the LEARN project, and what lessons have been learned by the ETF from the networking of policymakers?
2. How and why did the small country projects in the LEARN project prove crucial for tackling policy problem solving?
3. What are the possibilities for the ETF policy learning approach, and how can learning from experience, reflection and action be further developed in order to support policymakers in the process of VET policy implementation?

The structure of the chapter reflects these questions, more or less in sequence. The objective is to develop a better understanding of the challenge that policymakers face in real VET policy over a period of time, but also to draw together a summary of lessons learned that may prove useful for easing the burden of VET policy implementation.

## 4.2 THE POLICYMAKERS’ NETWORK AND ITS ROLE IN THE LEARN PROJECT

### 4.2.1 Steering Committee platform

The rationale for having a Steering Committee in the ETF LEARN project is rooted in the lessons learned by the ETF during the first cycle of the VET TT Network from 2002. The issue goes back to the fact that many good ideas about curriculum reform and innovation in teaching and learning processes had little impact on the overall performance of the VET systems<sup>17</sup>. Innovation had tended to be pilot-based, remain isolated and reach few

<sup>16</sup> In this chapter the term ‘policymaker’ is used in a wider sense to refer not only to those at higher levels of the hierarchy in the ministries, but also to those civil servants in middle managerial or expert level positions who are in daily contact with VET policy issues, and who, through their day-to-day responsibilities, have an influence on the policy process and help shape the policy design and implementation.

<sup>17</sup> The pilot project and pilot school model were never taken up to the system level in transition countries (see European Training Foundation, *Review of EU PHARE Vocational Education and Training reform programmes, 1993–1998*).

classrooms, let alone whole vocational schools. Looking across the VET systems it is clear that policymakers are dealing with a whole range of fragmented issues, such as introducing the state matura to make sure that students receive high quality education, and introducing teacher incentives to ensure they remain motivated.

Against the backdrop of the challenge of solving problems of scale in VET systems, when the ETF LEARN project team considered why it needed a Steering Committee, the answers were straightforward.

VET policy implementation can only succeed if VET policies are owned by country policymakers who are motivated to learn new ways of 'solving policy problems'.

Local knowledge and local initiatives are key resources and starting points for solving problems of scale in VET systems.

The dynamic phase in VET policy development in Europe and involvement in the Lisbon, Bologna and Copenhagen processes has put substantial pressure on policymakers and practitioners in the region, and there is a need to mobilise them.

One of the most critical issues in VET systems is teaching and learning, and therefore all those involved – policymakers, school principals and teachers – should be committed to carrying out new approaches in their work.

All these are common to countries in South Eastern Europe. Using these issues as starting points, it became clear that there was a strong need to establish a platform for horizontal networking which would allow for the exchange and sharing of knowledge that goes beyond the national VET system level. In line with the ambition to build on policy learning in the ETF, it was decided that a horizontal network of policymakers should be introduced in the form of a project Steering Committee in order to ensure ongoing engagement, sustainability and suitability in relation to national contexts. Countries selected their representatives, who were officially appointed by the ministries. Thus, the regional network involved actors from eight different VET systems<sup>18</sup>, who acted as a small team.

The fact that the ETF LEARN project addressed the issue of teaching and learning practices did help a great deal to clarify ideas regarding the Steering Committee. Innovation in teaching and learning in VET is a particularly challenging and complex task for VET systems. It has different consequences for different institutions within the system; it means different things to different stakeholders. Even a minor change in teaching and learning practices can

trigger significant movement at various levels of organisations and institutions, and can then have an impact on VET policy implementation. The central government, through the education ministry, regulates most aspects of the education systems, including those relating to students, teachers, funding and facilities. It sets policy and performs management functions such as paying the teachers, and providing pre-service and in-service teacher training. Therefore, ministries of education representatives from institutions at national level were best placed to be members of the LEARN project Steering Committee. They had an accurate picture of their own VET system, and this needed to be carefully incorporated into the design of the LEARN small country projects.

The Steering Committee network was launched in September 2007 in Lisbon, during the annual conference of the LEARN CoP. The core question addressed by the Steering Committee in Lisbon was: Why does the LEARN project need a Steering Committee? The members concluded that the Steering Committee was needed for the following reasons:

- the need to provide advice and support to the ETF on the feasibility and implementation of the complex regional project;
- the need to provide advice and support to the country team on the integration of the small country project within the context of the policy environment in the country concerned;
- the need to provide advice and ensure links and support within the education ministry during the implementation of the small country project.

These last two points provided an obvious opportunity for the Steering Committee members to start to explore their concrete role further, bearing in mind their function and responsibility within the ministry of their home country. As a result, during the second meeting in March 2008 at the ETF in Turin, the role of the Steering Committee was further developed. It was agreed that the main functions of the Steering Committee would be:

- to enable policy interface to develop and to ensure that each small country project was well integrated into the existing policies of the respective education ministry, and well integrated into the current infrastructure of the national education system;
- to play a bridging role in the policy chain between the education ministry, the VET centres and the vocational schools, and to further strengthen the relationships and linkages between institutions;
- to develop a role as a driver for change that would promote mechanisms for support, incentives, and self-regulation within the country teams.

<sup>18</sup> The members of the LEARN Steering Committee were civil servants from the institutions that shape the policy process in VET. Participating countries were Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

### 4.2.2 The Steering Committee platform: the policy interface in project–policy integration within education ministries

Designing a small project is one issue, but trying to implement that small project in the real world is another. In public VET, overall policy and strategic planning is usually undertaken by education ministries. Decisions on VET reforms and policies are usually taken at central level rather than at regional, municipal or school level. The expectation in this top-down process is that vocational school level actors, and particularly principals and teachers, will transform policy intentions and goals into real outcomes. In the VET sector, such targeted outcomes typically include more effective learning environments, and improved knowledge and performance on the part of students. How can a small country project be implemented within this broader policy picture?

The agreements reached in country team sessions – such as the decision to implement and test a small country project, for example by testing teachers' mentorship, project-based learning, and e-learning platforms – were challenged when confronted with the realities of ongoing macro-policies on the ground. This became apparent for members of the Steering Committee when, together with their respective country teams, they began to help implement and monitor the small country projects. During the meeting in Lisbon, the Steering Committee members discussed the small country project proposals received from the country teams. They concluded that one of the specific roles that each policymaker from the Steering Committee would have in the country projects is to inspire the country team, to support the process of implementation, and to monitor the progress of country teams in the implementation of the project. Once these small country projects had been launched<sup>19</sup>, it became clear that this Steering Committee agreement was crucial. The policymakers now had a concrete problem on their hands, one on which they were in a position to act.

It was emphasised that it is not sufficient to be able to describe, understand and explain problems and challenges, but that it is also necessary to take action and to make required adaptations to pave the way for change as perceived in the design of the country projects. By supporting self-defined small projects in the countries, the LEARN project incorporated local engagement as an important dimension of its activities. Above all, the objective was to achieve a particular set of goals in a sustainable way. This required local commitment to development policies and programmes, and to their implementation. The Steering Committee members were

therefore expected to work with their local counterparts within the countries and to invest in the preparation and support for the implementation of these projects.

One very concrete example is that of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The role of the policymaker from the Ministry of Education and Science (the LEARN Steering Committee member) was to take part in the planning, design and implementation of the small country project (Box 1). In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia a large number of teachers from secondary vocational schools have been involved in various training activities delivered through EU projects or by other donors. Such donor projects usually represent an effective contribution to the development of teachers' competences. However, the country team felt that within the LEARN project and with ongoing ETF expert support they could ensure greater sustainability for the results in terms of teacher competence development. One way to achieve this was to develop a new practice consisting of:

- i) strengthening the schools' capacities for teacher training and establishing a system of teachers' mentorship;
- ii) the participation of the VET centre in the school-based implementation of project activities in order to strengthen the VET centre's capacities and ensure broader dissemination;
- iii) defining the role of the ministry in the process of launching, monitoring and evaluating the new practice.

In its early stages the small country project in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia faced delays in the approval of the idea, which prompted adjustments and changed the timeframe. While the activities were taking place a number of radical changes took place: team members were replaced, a new head teacher was appointed in one of the schools, and a new VET centre director was appointed. The crucial task of the ministry representative was to manage these new situations successfully<sup>20</sup>. 'The implementation of the project was a challenge for all the involved participants, their active participation in the policy learning process, coordinating the process in conditions of changes in the different positions, and additional workload for a number of participants involved.' This clearly indicates that project–policy integration was a challenging and necessary task. There was a need for all those involved to focus on different dimensions that have an impact on implementation, and this concrete experience illustrates the dynamics involved when integrating a small country project into the broader picture of the ongoing policy process.

<sup>19</sup> Five small country projects have been implemented in the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey. These projects had a lifetime of around ten months in each country. It was a requirement that the projects be implemented either by national VET centres, as was the case in Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro, or by vocational schools, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by a University in Turkey.

<sup>20</sup> Nada Stojmenova, Project report from the Steering Committee member from the Ministry of Education and Science, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

**BOX 1: TEACHER MENTORING: THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA PROJECT**

The teacher mentoring project is an effort to introduce a system of mentorship within vocational schools. The mentorship programme involves supporting teachers in lesson preparation, monitoring lesson delivery and giving feedback, and developing plans for improvement. It is an example of sharing the best school practice in mentorship, and of developing competences and knowledge within vocational schools as a strategy for innovation in, and improvement in the quality of, the teaching and learning process. In order to achieve this, the country team in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia used existing experience within the country from the vocational school ASUC 'Boro Petrushevski', which had implemented mentorship as a strategy for improving teaching. This was used as a basis for 'exporting' the mentorship model to two other selected schools.

The project created a network of cooperation between the three schools, ASUC 'Boro Petrushevski', SSU 'Zlate Malakoski' Gostivar and SSU 'Goso Vikentiev' Kocani. The main goals were:

- to share the best school practice in mentoring and to transfer this experience to the schools involved;
- to develop competences and knowledge within the vocational schools as a strategy for improving the quality of the teaching and learning processes;
- to introduce career development for teachers in vocational schools;
- to develop a manual on teacher mentoring;
- to promote cooperation between the vocational schools and the VET centre, including ongoing dialogue with the Ministry of Education.

The role of the ministry representative was to take an active part in the process of planning, designing and implementing the project. The delayed start of the project resulted in financial difficulties being experienced. The team started to implement activities without official approval and without the funding being transferred, which meant a slightly shaky start for the project. Various personnel changes took place while the project activities were ongoing. Hence, it became one of the ministry representative's key roles to manage these changes successfully. The workload of the day-to-day activities within the ministry frequently resulted in overtime in order to complete the project's activities and to attend various meetings.

What has been clear from the start is that in the countries of South Eastern Europe, VET policy rests on a distinction between policy 'making' and policy 'implementation'; teachers are often passive recipients of policy, or practitioners responsible for policy implementation, but are excluded from having any input into policy formulation. The distinction and the gap between policy and practice in VET seem to be enormous, and they affect the whole of the education system. The momentum is further complicated by the fact that during the transition period a distinct 'policy environment' developed in the VET sector: a mixture of donors with their projects and 'policies', and the country's own VET policy challenges. Moreover, the 'policy environment' is an ever-changing environment, the VET policy process is a dynamic one, and therefore the participants in the small county projects needed to develop a clearer understanding of what was and was not desirable, taking into account each country's policy perspective.

An interesting case for studying project-policy integration is Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country with 13 ministries of education. During the Lisbon regional conference in 2007 the country team designed a project proposal for creating a 'mini-CoP' at national level (Box 2). The idea was to link three vocational schools to allow them to share VET pedagogical practice, for example on teachers' approaches to entrepreneurial learning and examples of lesson plans for vocational subjects<sup>21</sup>. The aim was to create capacity for horizontal learning through a forum linking the three vocational schools. This electronic platform proved to have potential as a learning forum for a wide range of stakeholders in VET reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the country's complex institutional infrastructure made organising such an initiative a real challenge. Other challenges have been encountered that are common to any attempts to integrate small projects into ongoing policy<sup>22</sup>. These included the different priorities in the VET agendas of different entities, overstretched capacities, and the fact that full involvement in the small project was hindered by individuals' participation in a variety of different projects and activities.

<sup>21</sup> Specific VET profiles included were: mechanical engineering and transport, agriculture, food processing, health care, hairdressing, and ecology and trade.

<sup>22</sup> Sanja Hadžihajdić, project report from the Steering Committee member from the Pedagogical Institute in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



### **BOX 2: E-PLATFORM FOR TEACHER COOPERATION: THE SMALL COUNTRY PROJECT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

The CoP project in Bosnia and Herzegovina was designed to assist the implementation of VET reform and, through peer learning, to build capacity for knowledge sharing and dissemination, national networking, and human resources development, particularly in relation to vocational teachers. The aim was to create capacity for horizontal learning through a forum linking the three vocational schools: Technical School in Banja Luka (which was a base for the IT management of the activities), Agricultural and Medical School in Brčko and Vocational Trade School in Sarajevo. The idea was that linking these vocational schools in an e-network would create opportunities to exchange knowledge and information on the implementation of new curricula, entrepreneurial learning, innovative assistance for students with special education needs, and implementation of good practice with the support of the Pedagogical Institute in Zenica. This electronic platform would provide a communication and learning forum for a wide range of stakeholders in the VET reform, including other vocational schools, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, education ministries, pedagogical institutes, the VET Department of the Agency for Education (under establishment), and the EU CARDS VET 3 project implementation team.

The implementation of the project has been particularly challenging for the teachers. They considered a number of the tasks involved to be additional activities; hence, since they were preoccupied with their day-to-day activities, they did not fully recognise the potential benefits offered by the e-platform. An important lesson learned from the implementation of this small country project is that more effort is required to ensure that teachers use e-platforms to support the teaching and learning process. In order to support teachers in using e-platforms and benefiting from them, it is important to understand the nature of the professional community in which teachers operate.

The LEARN Steering Committee policymakers operated within these realities, and the small projects have been implemented under, and informed by, these circumstances. The LEARN Steering Committee gave excellent support in terms of problem-solving, and members functioned as necessary transmission links between the different layers in the governance structure. They had expected the small country projects to be implemented in the way they had planned them, whereas the vocational schools that were selected to take part were more inclined to implement projects according to the needs of the school. These differences in perspective play an important role in relation to the integration of small projects into the realities of the wider policy perspective. In summary, the lessons learned relate to the following issues.

- Before embarking on any change to the system, it is important to analyse and understand the teaching and learning processes at vocational school level from the point of view of different stakeholders, and not only in terms of the top-down perspective of the ministry.
- It is essential to work in wider networks and to hold in-depth discussions at different levels covering the wider policy issues that are affected by the action that is implemented.
- It is important to relate these discussions to the policy targets set by national policy.
- It is necessary to identify policy and implementation issues that have an impact at school level, and to open them up for wider discussion and further consideration.

### **4.2.3 The Steering Committee platform: a CoP network at regional level**

The ETF objectives for the LEARN project at regional level were relatively broad:

- to clarify the challenges faced by the new VET centres and to familiarise participants with the realities of project-policy integration;
- to establish local capacity to cope with and carry out innovative school-based development projects, and to translate the concepts of innovation into meaningful teaching and learning arrangements;
- to build capacity in international cooperation in VET, including the formation of partnerships with foreign institutions;
- to create an operational and efficient example of how practitioners can share and develop competence and knowledge together in practised communities, and to contribute to the international debate on CoPs.

In the early design phase of the ETF LEARN project, participants reflected on past experiences with regional projects, and there was a general recognition within the ETF team of the need to ensure that policymakers benefit from the experiences and the lessons learned. The overarching idea behind the design of the LEARN project was to share knowledge to enable policymakers, VET centre staff and participating practitioners to learn about VET reform experiences from elsewhere, and try to use these experiences in the formulation and implementation of VET policy in their own countries. In addition, it was decided that the LEARN project would make use of and test the principle of participating in CoPs as potentially the best way of supporting the professional development of policymakers. Hence, the idea for setting up a Steering Committee as a smaller CoP was born.

CoPs start from the fact that their members share problems. In the case of the LEARN project, members of the Steering Committee shared highly centralised and regulated VET systems, in terms not only of financial mechanisms, but also of other aspects of the system, including curricula, and weak intra- and inter-sectoral communication, with policy signals and decisions being slow to reach the lower levels, or not reaching them at all. The core argument for setting up the LEARN Steering Committee was the desire to find new approaches to the professional development of policymakers, to assist them in learning from their own experiences in their everyday professional lives. They have only limited time available to engage in capacity development activities, and do this only sporadically. The idea was to take the 'policy problem solving' approach derived from real practice and integrate it into the real cycle of VET policy implementation; the intention was to optimise the learning benefits for policymakers engaged in the Steering Committee.

Within the policy framework of the VET system one relationship path is particularly important: education ministry–VET centre–vocational school. There are different approaches to this relationship in the policy chain. On the one hand it can be based on a bureaucratic system in which all details are decided at central level, and institutions simply follow what is decided and prescribed for them. On the other hand the system can be more decentralised, with more autonomy given to institutions, which are required to follow certain goals set by the central authorities. In Denmark, for instance, there is a so-called 'target and framework management' system in which goals and frameworks are set by the government, but the way in

which these are to be achieved is decided by the institutions (Knudsen, 2008). The relationship between the ministry and the educational institutions can be configured in very different ways. The small country projects were an excellent mechanism for policymakers to test these relationships and explore how they function in their own countries. The challenge of learning-by-doing in the small country projects enabled policymakers to draw different lessons regarding the challenges of integrating good ideas into the system, and in particular regarding the relationships between education ministries, VET centres and vocational schools. This experience was particularly worthwhile for the steering committee members in respect of the CoP network.

In the case of Albania, for example, the VET centre – the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVETA) – played a very important role in the implementation of the small project (Box 3). The NAVETA staff team took the lead, from the planning of the small country project through to full implementation. Despite the fact that in reality NAVETA as an agency has little autonomy, the team worked to find appropriate solutions to various issues that emerged in the course of implementation. This triangular arrangement, with the ministry, NAVETA and vocational schools taking part in the small country project, resulted in the identification of a number of challenges. These included the fact that financial regulations were a serious barrier to smooth implementation, and that the curriculum framework was too complicated to allow for project-based learning (PBL). Knowing what and how things happened within the small country project provided a resource for providing useful input to the national or regional system.

### BOX 3: PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL): THE ALBANIAN SMALL COUNTRY PROJECT<sup>23</sup>

The idea of the project was to support selected vocational schools in Albania in the implementation of innovative teaching and learning approaches and to test PBL as a methodology for innovative teaching. The general expectations were that using PBL would increase awareness among the teachers of its benefits, and that this would help teachers to develop confidence and competence to take effective action that would contribute to making students more employable. Teachers would be able to design and implement PBL activities in schools, students' professional skills would be enhanced through the PBL approach, and cooperation between schools and business would be improved.

PBL activities were implemented by teachers' teams in four vocational schools:

- The Hotel and Tourism School in Tirana implemented lessons on promoting the value of traditional food and cooking in Albania.
- The Agriculture School in Kamza implemented internal teacher training for PBL.
- The Food Processing School in Durres developed a catalogue of food production centres in Durres.
- The Agro-business School from Kor a implemented a project on the production of apple juice.

Although one of the major outcomes of the project was the networking opportunities it provided for the vocational schools, NAVETA discovered many challenges within the VET system that were serious obstacles to implementing PBL in schools. These challenges include overly prescriptive syllabi; highly defined subjects and numbers of lessons; the fact that the education inspectorate controlled the implementation of PBL; and a level of resistance at various levels to the revision of syllabi and the change from traditional ways of working.

**BOX 4: E-PORTFOLIO FOR TEACHERS: MONTENEGRO SMALL COUNTRY PROJECT**

Inspired by study visits to Denmark and its examples of good practice with e-portfolios, the Montenegro team decided to develop an e-portfolio for teachers through the LEARN project. The project built on software from SDE College in Odense, Denmark. A working group with representatives from the Ministry of Education and a vocational school, and a team leader from the VET centre, designed the activities for the project. The project included twelve teachers from three vocational schools in different areas of Montenegro: the mixed school 'Mladost' in Tivat, the vocational school 'Spasoje Raspopović' in Podgorica, and Economic and Catering High School in Nikšić. One teacher in each school was designated as the facilitator. Workshops were held at which material was provided on how to create an e-portfolio, for the school facilitators and two counsellors from the VET centre. Additional workshops were held in each school, and focused on providing information about what an e-portfolio is, why it is interesting, and how e-portfolios can be created (technical description) and used.

In general, teachers' e-portfolios are helpful tools. They can foster improved cooperation between schools, and they have a number of benefits for teachers. Within schools e-portfolios can increase communication and cooperation between leaders and teachers, and among teachers themselves. They can help teachers to learn from one another (horizontal learning) by sharing examples of good practice, but can also be used to record the progression of individual teachers. Students are able to see the competences their teachers possess. The VET centre can cooperate better with schools, and teachers can more easily identify suitable colleagues for future projects, or select teachers whose work may be useful for the others.

There were some difficulties in the planning and implementation of the project. Rather than asking teachers to volunteer to take part, school principals nominated them based on their own opinion of who would be able to create a good e-portfolio. This meant that some teachers were reluctant to create e-portfolios. Some teachers considered it to be another imposed task, and others were not IT-literate, and were not willing to create their e-portfolio.

As in Albania, the role of the VET centre in the small country project in Montenegro (Box 4) was crucial. However, it is important to point out that the size of the country does matter, and the possibility of day-to-day contact with almost all vocational schools in the country makes a difference. The smaller the number of vocational schools there are to oversee, the better position the VET centre will be in to draw lessons which can potentially lead to policy design that will make sense in a broader VET reform framework. It is clear that a comparison between what was achieved and what was expected could create an impression that it is much easier – given the size of the country – to reach conclusions on the feasibility of the policy of introducing e-portfolio for teachers. The final project report<sup>24</sup> gives clear recommendations on what is necessary: the ministry and VET centre can create a database (of teachers' basic data, profiles, competences and CPD activities), which teachers themselves can update. Such a database should improve collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the VET centre and teachers. The development of a national teachers' database hosted on the Ministry of Education web portal is a necessary condition for the next steps. This suggests that for smaller countries in which the VET centre has greater autonomy in relation to vocational schools, the policymaking and policy implementation processes in the VET system will be more predictable.

A well-known finding from policy research is that 'policy formulation is seen as a prestigious task, reserved for those with high status, and contrasting with the much less prestigious task of implementation' (Fullan, 2001). This is underlined by the belief that there is an inherent resistance among teachers and trainers to change, and that change is therefore only going to happen when decisions are in the hands of policymakers. Consequently, change has usually been viewed by teachers as something 'done to' them rather than something 'done with' or 'done by' them, which, of course, has not nurtured their commitment. Teachers frequently use new curriculum materials or technologies without altering their teaching approach, or alter some of their teaching behaviour without embracing fully the concepts or beliefs underlying the change. Such situations served to demonstrate to the Steering Committee members in their own countries that the relationships between institutions and the individuals within these institutions were of paramount importance for the success or failure of their small country projects. Although the focus within these small country projects was on only the small number of actors involved at different levels of the VET system – the ministry, VET centre, and a limited number of vocational schools – this process generated a number of important insights regarding the manner in which different institutions and different people mediate policy implementation.

<sup>24</sup> Final report on 'Project-based Learning in Montenegrin VET', February 2009 – October 2009, Prepared by Vladislav Koprivica, Team leader of small country project, Montenegro.

**BOX 5: WEB-BASED IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMMES ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR TECHNICAL TEACHERS: TURKEY SMALL COUNTRY PROJECT**

In-service training is necessary for teachers, not only in their own fields but also in terms of new technological subjects such as ICT. However, it is very difficult to create in-service training opportunities for all teachers, not only because of the very large number of the teachers across the country, but also because these teachers are already committed to their duties and full-time jobs. According to data from the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the In-service Department is able to provide courses for only 5% of teachers. This project – with partners from Sakarya University Technical Education Faculty (team leader), the MONE and Istanbul Bahcelievler Technical/Vocational High School – developed and tested a new, efficient, web-based in-service training programme for VET teachers, with a focus on those teaching electrical, electronics and ICT subjects. Web-based and blended in-service courses were designed and implemented in the three vocational fields. 'Moodle', a shareware learning platform, was used to create a web-based medium. The idea for the project was taken from an innovation project, WITPET, under the Leonardo da Vinci Programme. The main objective of the project was to create opportunities for competence development of technical teachers who work at vocational schools by defining training needs assessments, preparing in-service training courses, and organising teacher training using e-learning, and to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the blended in-service training model<sup>25</sup>.

A survey carried out following the LEARN small country project found that in-service training programmes are greatly appreciated by teachers, not only for their motivating effect but also because they are an opportunity to learn about new subjects. Since the course content is web-based, materials can be used by the MoNE In-service Department in future activities. Teachers can use their knowledge afterwards in school and can now use blended learning methods to teach some courses. The results of the training could be widely disseminated. Blended learning creates a new perspective for institutions and teachers. In addition, private sector organisations can be encouraged to implement similar e-learning systems. The fact that the In-service Department was a partner means that the new model can be scaled up, and both Sakarya University and MONE have agreed to take forward the project results.

The small country project in Turkey was implemented by the university. However, the direct cooperation that took place between the university, the vocational school and MoNE demonstrates that this kind of collaboration facilitates implementation (see Box 5). This hierarchical approach, with direct involvement of a responsible person from ministry level, demonstrates that the conflicting situations that often appear in the realities of the policy cycle can be reduced, and the process of implementing more substantial initiatives in the system improved.

The major assumption of the LEARN project was that at regional (South Eastern European) level, Steering Committee members would have the opportunity to act as a coherent team, learn from one another, share their unique experiences and develop new and much-needed knowledge for the reforms of the VET systems in their own countries. The core principle on which the team philosophy rests is that learning and knowledge creation is a social as well as an individual process. Each member of the team is an individual with specific life and professional experiences and responsibilities. At the same time each participant has knowledge of different parts of the policy cycle. Some of the members of the Steering Committee have been policymakers with direct influence on, or responsibility for, policy developments in the education ministry, while some have been responsible for policy implementation, for example, curriculum implementation at vocational school level. The way in which this small

team of eight Steering Committee members interacted and the relationships that emerged between its members helped to create a platform that encouraged the exchange of professional experiences. This is the core of each CoP: a learning forum in which motivated and skilled participants share specific practice and then work together on improvements of that practice. In doing so they mutually develop new procedures, models and tools that they will share with the wider community. CoPs are useful both as vehicles for national learning activities and as knowledge-sharing tools across countries.

### 4.3 CONCLUSIONS: HOW CAN STEERING COMMITTEES ORGANISED AS NETWORKS BE USEFUL FOR POLICY LEARNING IN REGIONAL ETF PROJECTS?

The ETF applies the concept of policy learning in its work with partner countries. Policy learning, which can be defined as 'the ability of governments, or systems of governance, to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience' (Raffe and Spours, 2007, p.1), has very concrete objectives.

<sup>25</sup> Final report on the 'Web-based In-service Training Programs on Information and Communication Technologies for Technical Teachers – WITPET', January 2009 – June 2009, Prepared by Prof. Dr. Hüsseyin Ekiz, Team leader of Turkey small country project.

Its major objective is to develop the capacities of policymakers, and this very much depends on involving them at the appropriate point and at the appropriate moment in the policy cycle. As a regional project, LEARN faced the challenge of combining the common framework established as a CoP and innovation in teaching and learning practices with meeting the needs of different participating countries. Under these circumstances, policy learning becomes a challenging task. This is very obvious from the fact that all participating countries have different VET systems. Although general rhetoric is used – VET policy formulation, VET policy implementation, VET policy cycle – it is important to bear in mind that, in fact, these differ from country to country. There are different policy challenges, and different policy objectives. However, at regional level there are also strong common themes that make it meaningful for the ETF to embark on experimenting with and testing the active role of a Steering Committee in order to gain a deeper insight into how learning from reflection and learning from action can be useful, not only for Steering Committee members but also for the ETF's future work in policy learning.

The knowledge component of the LEARN project, which directly targeted the Steering Committee, derived from broader areas of the discipline of policy studies, public administration and political science. This meant that the ETF devoted effort into shaping a dialogue at regional level that presented and explained the issues from the perspective of policy rather than merely specifying new ideas for innovation and reform. 'Implications for education', 'policy objectives', 'VET policy cycle': this was the language widely used within the group. The intention was for the Steering Committee platform to assist the ETF to better understand and take account of the innovation and reform frameworks that were common to participating countries; and to gain a better understanding of the issues that were key to the further development of the concept of policy learning. One obvious implication for future ETF policy learning activities at regional level is that when designing capacity building for policymakers, the framework should always take into account that these are real policymakers in the real VET policy cycle, which means that their concerns are VET policies and solving problems of scale. How did the LEARN Steering Committee contribute to bringing knowledge creation and policy learning a step closer to solving problems of scale in VET systems? Two points are worthy of mention.

1. Learning from experience and reflection:

The Steering Committee acted as a regional policymakers' network – a smaller CoP. The participating group of selected policymakers benefited from sharing their insights and opinions. Activities and reflection are the elements that need to be organised, whereas experience and knowledge tend to follow automatically. Although the activities have had the greatest impact on those directly involved in the ETF LEARN project, it is also important to understand that they can play an

important role in the policy process in partner countries, and the ETF could capitalise on the experience by organising more comprehensive policy learning strategies that include a series of knowledge-sharing activities.

2. Learning from action: Steering Committee members have been engaged in real action – the implementation of small projects in their own countries. The cornerstone of the project idea is that if people do something together (activities), they gain experience from it. If they reflect on the experience, they acquire knowledge that makes them more capable of doing things in the future. They know what they have experienced and can actively use that knowledge. The role played by Steering Committee members in both the small country project (policy integration) and the policy chain (ministry–VET centre–vocational schools) has been a very important learning experience acquired through learning-by-doing. The added value from the shared learning facilitated through the Steering Committee is a promising contribution to closing the gaps between policy, providers and practitioners, and is a rich opportunity for the Steering Committee policymakers to act as a policy interface. Closer confrontation by policymakers with the realities of VET policy implementation in schools could result in more effective policy design and VET policy implementation. Only then will policymakers be equipped with the knowledge necessary for addressing the problems of scale.

Given that this was a small network of policymakers, which was active for around three years, the function and the role of the Steering Committee is open to challenge. First, there is no question that this kind of horizontal network undertook relevant policy work within the VET policy process in participating countries. However, since it started and operated at regional level, the question remains as to how much impact it had on national policy processes. Second, there is a great deal of scepticism and ambiguity around this kind of network in which the objectives are connected with policies. There is evidence that if these networks become strong enough, they can both enhance and reduce the efficiency and legitimacy of policymaking. Both issues relate directly to the way in which the ETF can improve its knowledge of how to facilitate policy learning that will lead to sustained policy change. In the search for valid and useful platforms for policy learning and the appropriate professional development of policymakers, at the appropriate point in the policy cycle, there are two core challenges:

- i) learning in networks
- ii) the ability of networks to have an impact on the policies in the VET policy cycle.

These are issues that the ETF needs to explore further in order to ensure that policy learning also leads to policy change and implementation in VET.





# 5. THE ROLE OF VET CENTRES AS POLICY IMPLEMENTING INSTITUTIONS: THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN THE MINISTRY AND VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Institutions play an important role in the policy process. The ability of governments to establish and maintain institutions that will remain at the cutting edge of innovation in the VET policy process, and at the same time will ensure that VET policy is implemented, remains one of the greatest challenges for South Eastern European candidate and pre-accession countries. During the lifespan of the ETF LEARN project, different institutions started to develop and to be transformed in order to support VET policy implementation. The key developments related to the VET centres<sup>26</sup>, which began to proliferate as a result of ongoing VET reforms within the countries. One common factor for all these institutions, whether they are newly created VET centres or institutions undergoing transformation, is that they are charged with the complex task of implementing VET policy. This means they need to achieve policy objectives as defined in VET strategic documents that aim to develop and improve VET systems. Hence, as institutions occupying a position between the ministry and the vocational schools, VET centres represent an important link in the policy chain.

Analysing recent developments in relation to VET centres from a regional point of view, together with lessons learned through the implementation of the ETF LEARN project, this chapter reflects on several issues of concern to policymakers in education ministries, and staff in VET centres and vocational schools. More specifically, the following questions are addressed.

1. What is the role of VET centres in policy implementation, and why is this role not easy?
2. How can VET centres better exercise their role as a 'missing link' between the relevant ministry and vocational schools?
3. How can VET centres strengthen their capacity to act effectively and responsibly in VET policy implementation?

The structure of the chapter reflects these questions, more or less in sequence. The objective is to develop a better understanding of the existing barriers in VET policy implementation in IPA countries, and in particular to develop an understanding of how VET centres can

improve their functioning in order to achieve the VET policy objectives in the country in which they operate.

Two important limitations need to be taken into account.

- The organisational structure of the VET centres varies from country to country, and this certainly affects VET policy implementation. Given the broader objectives of this chapter, these organisational differences are not included in the analyses.
- While this paper is focused on VET centres and their role in VET policy implementation, in practical VET policy processes it is very difficult to draw such a sharp distinction between VET policy formulation and VET policy implementation. The border between the two is practically indistinguishable, and the policy process is a complex cycle (Hill and Hupe, 2009, p.114).

## 5.2 THE CHALLENGING ROLE OF THE VET CENTRE BETWEEN TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES TO POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

This section discusses the development of VET centres in South Eastern European countries as institutions and as key elements of the infrastructure for supporting VET reform implementation. One of the critical challenges for VET policymakers in IPA countries is that, since they are caught in the middle between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up', the role of VET centres in policy implementation is not an easy one. Why is this the case, and what are the major issues that create uncertainties in the process?

VET systems in the countries of South Eastern Europe have been much criticised for failing to address the needs of society. Governments face serious pressure from both inside and outside the VET systems. External trends affecting the performance of VET systems include globalisation, the growing importance of knowledge in society and the economy, innovations relating to ICT, and a general emphasis on the role of the community in

<sup>26</sup> 'VET centre' in this chapter means newly established institutions such as the National VET Agency (NAVETA, in Albania) or equivalent institutions undergoing transformation to support the VET reform.

education. VET innovation agendas are long-term and all-encompassing reforms, being a complex mixture that includes changing laws and structures, new curriculum frameworks and new assessment standards. In addition, a symptomatic situation can be observed: one set of actors defines the problem and designs the policy, while a completely different set of actors then implements the policy, and there are no clear feedback loops that would allow for corrective measures to be taken at policy level. This leads to the conclusion that VET policy implementation is a problematic issue<sup>27</sup>.

The debate about VET policy implementation often concerns the distinction between top-down and bottom-up approaches. A top-down approach to VET policy implementation considers the system from the point of view of VET policy and strategy, gaining insight into government-level ministries, legislation and financing issues. Here, the major vehicles for policy implementation are legislation, executive orders and decrees from the government. This perspective gives a better sense of the magnitude of change required to meet the objectives of VET reform, and is essentially concerned with policy and setting objectives. The bottom-up approach is linked to vocational schools rather than to policy and strategy. From this perspective, vocational schools are the focal point for policy implementation.

However, all initiatives at the VET system level – the whole legislative, structural and institutional framework – will be ineffective if the teaching and learning processes in vocational schools are not substantially improved, and if students and teachers are not satisfied with their achievements. This is exactly where the new VET centres should play an important role, and in the policy agenda ahead they need to prove that they are worthwhile recipients of the resources invested by governments, schools and donors. The newly created VET centres are situated in between, and they seem to be the 'missing link' between top-down and bottom-up strategies. With the new institutional development and establishment of VET centres, the expectation is that the responsible ministries will have a tool with which they can really affect what happens in VET systems. What are the obstacles and challenges they face, and how can they respond to the growing pressure brought about by the challenges of VET policy implementation?

Institutional development is very much bound to the policy objectives of the VET reform, but also depends on the country context. The countries in the region have taken different approaches to the institutional development of VET centres in support of the VET reform process. These developments have understandably not been without dissent and disagreements.

### 5.2.1 Albania

The National Agency for VET (NAVETA) in Albania is an example of a VET centre that was established with the objective of supporting the implementation of VET reform from a top-down perspective. NAVETA was set up in 2006<sup>28</sup> as a subordinate institution of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). It has a clear mission: 'to boost VET development in Albania according to European standards, following labour market demands and the country's social development. The agency is expected to ensure a better social partnership in all levels and to develop and implement VET programmes'<sup>29</sup>. This highlights the fact that NAVETA commenced its operations with a top-down perspective in policy implementation. This is also the message from the Statute, which states that NAVETA prepares proposals for VET development and improvement that are approved by MoES and MoLSAEO (Ministry of Labour, Social Policy and Equal Opportunities). NAVETA also deals on a daily basis with a range of sub-policies in the implementation of VET reform: preparation of the national list of specialties (professions), the Albanian Qualification Framework (AQF) and Framework Curricula; accreditation of VET providers; establishment of standards for initial and continuing training for teachers and trainers; and the establishment of VET evaluation and certification criteria.

NAVETA, which employs 15 operational staff, has managed to elaborate crucial documents for VET in Albania, including initial results of work on the national list of occupations, a list and description of qualifications, and framework curricula for Level 1 of the VET structure. The agency cooperates on a daily basis with MoES. For example, participation in the MoES Working Group for restructuring secondary education, including VET, has been a rewarding cooperation experience that will have a significant impact on VET in Albania. There are a number of sub-policies that require regulation, legislation and executive orders in order to ensure the necessary infrastructure for VET policy implementation. If, as part of the reform process, the VET centre has to deal with some of these policies – some of which will be better implemented through a top-down and others through bottom-up approach – then it is clear that the VET centre concerned is acting in a relatively complex environment.

### 5.2.2 Montenegro

The Montenegro VET centre deals more easily with both top-down and bottom-up approaches in policy implementation. This is understandable given the size of the country. It is interesting to note that this VET centre operates in an environment in which VET is provided by some 35 schools, with around 21 000 students in VET at secondary level, representing around 65% of all

<sup>27</sup> The most influential definition of policy implementation was formulated by Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980): 'Implementation is the carrying out of basic policy decisions usually incorporated in a statute but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions. Ideally, that decision identifies the problem(s) to be addressed, stipulates the objectives to be pursued, and the variety of ways which structures the implementation process.' However, this definition has been challenged by various researchers; for example, O'Toole (2000) states that the central question in policy implementation is: 'What happens between the establishment of policy and its impact in the world of action?' (Hill and Hupe, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Government Decree No. 237, date 10.05.2006.

<sup>29</sup> On strategic planning of the NAVETA, see Chapter 6.

secondary students (Montenegro Statistical Yearbook, 2008). The centre was established in May 2003 as an independent public institution involving a social partnership between the government of Montenegro, the Chamber of Commerce, the Association of Independent Trade Unions and the Employment Agency. It was created 'to improve social partnership in relation to VET, and to contribute to the further development of vocational education for young people and adults, up to university level in all areas of work'<sup>30</sup>. The objectives of the Montenegro VET centre are:

- developing vocational education and adult education;
- introducing a quality assurance system;
- encouraging partnerships and linkage between education and work;
- achieving lifelong education;
- introducing European dimensions into vocational education.

These objectives also give the VET centre a mandate to work directly with vocational schools.

Issues confronting the VET centre are often strongly linked to the political conditions in which they are embedded. VET reform is taking place in a complex web of political relationships, both within and outside the VET system, and this has an influence on the everyday work of the VET centre. This is a particularly sensitive area, since it is sometimes self-interest and preservation of the status quo that motivate those with power and influence, rather than a commitment to the public good, which, in the case of VET reform, ultimately means the quality of teaching and learning in the schools and its knock-on effect for the labour market and the citizenry as a whole.

### 5.2.3 Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina – a post-conflict state that attempts to reconcile three ethnic constituencies – the development of new institutions always provides interesting and unique cases. The post-Dayton country of approximately 3.8 million people has 13 education ministries (one in each of the ten Federation cantons, one in the Republika Srpska, one for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a functionally equivalent Education Department in the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina). In this context it would be a remarkable achievement to make significant progress and reach a consensus on VET developments, and particularly in relation to the legislation and development of new institutions at the national level. The process of institutional development in VET, and in particular in VET at secondary level, in Bosnia and Herzegovina was legally established by the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education approved in June 2003. A wider Agency for Education was established comprising a department for the framework and core curricula and an

associated VET department. Legislation on this new agency was approved in 2007.

According to the Framework Law on Secondary Vocational Education and Training adopted in 2008, the goals of the VET department in this agency include establishing and maintaining the national framework of qualifications; establishing, maintaining and updating a database of all the modernised teaching plans and programmes; establishing and maintaining standards for national diplomas; and promoting these standards. It is important to mention that the transformation and modernisation of the work of the Pedagogical Institutes<sup>31</sup> at entity level is relevant to VET reform. These institutes have traditionally played a significant role in curriculum development, and they will play various roles in VET at secondary level that will certainly be a challenge for the Agency for Education to influence and coordinate.

### 5.2.4 Serbia

There is a considerable risk of institutional instability when a change of government leads to the closure or the reduction of the functions of newly established education and training institutions as a result of a shift in policy objectives. The developments relating to the VET centre in Serbia present a clear example of this. In June 2003 the Law on Education introduced a number of changes to the previous system, including the establishment of a VET Council that would have ensured dialogue among different stakeholders, and a VET centre, which was intended to be the main professional institution for supporting VET modernisation. In May 2004 the Education Law was substantially amended. The revised law abolished the VET Council and replaced it with a National Educational Council and an Institute for Improvement of Education. Four centres make up the Institute: the Centre for Strategic Development and Quality Assurance of Education, the Centre for Development of Curricula and Textbooks, the Centre for the Professional Development in Education, and the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education (in short, the VET centre).

At present the VET centre in Serbia functions as part of a larger institution, and it is difficult to ascertain clearly the responsibilities of the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education, in particular in relation to the tasks of the other three centres. For example, the VET centre is responsible 'for development, monitoring and quality assurance of vocational and artistic education'; the Centre for Development and Evaluation, on the other hand, is responsible 'for development, monitoring and quality assurance of education in all its levels and types'. The VET centre is required to perform expert tasks in 'vocational education and training curricula', while the Centre for Development of the Curricula and Textbooks has to prepare 'the curricula for all levels of the education system and types of education'. The amendment to the Education Law in 2004 thus shifted the focus. Based on

<sup>30</sup> For more information about strategic planning of the VET centre in Montenegro, see Chapter 6.

<sup>31</sup> In this case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Pedagogical Institute of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of the Zenica-Doboj Canton took part in the ETF exercise. For more information on strategic planning of the Pedagogical Institute of the Zenica-Doboj Canton, see Chapter 6.

the latest legislation, adopted in September 2009, the VET centre will continue to operate within the Institute for Improvement of Education<sup>32</sup>.

These latest changes in the legislation clearly established the course for the VET centre in Serbia: 'The VET centre is responsible for developing, researching and counselling activities relating to: development, monitoring and quality assurance of vocational and adult education; vocational matura, final exam, specialist and master craft exam; and vocational teacher training.'

### 5.2.5 Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

There have been many pilot VET initiatives promoted by donor projects in the transition countries of South Eastern Europe. All recognise that school-based innovation is likely to be more effective if it is owned by those individuals within schools who must make changes in their approach to their role as professionals. However, the pilot school approach has given rise to different uncoordinated and isolated activities at school level. Although these have contributed significantly in terms of developing the capacity of individual schools to handle innovation, they have often also caused frustration – for both schools and policymakers – because they have not been embedded in and consistent with a national reform framework. They continue to use their status as pilot schools, and challenge the implementation of centrally conceived VET reform. This presents another challenge for VET centres, a challenge that can be seen as a problem, an advantage, or even both.

The VET centre in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was developed to respond to such challenges, to consolidate ongoing reforms, and in particular to mainstream the widespread innovation taking place at school level. During transition a variety of donor-led pilot activities proliferated in the VET system in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. However, there was no institution that could support the continuing development of a VET system responsive to labour market needs. VET legislation adopted in 2005 proposed the establishment of a National VET centre<sup>33</sup>. The idea was to create a more specialised VET institution that was separate from the Bureau for Development of Education (which was the institution with sole responsibility for all levels of education, including secondary VET). This new institution was given the main responsibility for curriculum development, textbooks and teacher training, and has become a key link between education institutions and the labour market. Despite considerable efforts from all involved, the VET centre in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is currently facing functional difficulties. These are likely to be a result of its ambiguous mandate and the issue of whether its main accountability is to the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Labour, or both.

### 5.2.6 Summary

All the abovementioned issues characterise recent experiences in the development of VET centres in the region, and to some extent explain the understandable uncertainties surrounding these institutions. An examination at the development of the VET centres in the various countries reveals that their role in VET policy implementation is challenging because of uncertainty concerning:

- how to develop a new institution that will remain focused on VET policy implementation;
- how to balance top-down and bottom-up approaches in VET policy implementation;
- how to resolve ownership issues at various levels in the VET system;
- a general lack of knowledge regarding institutional development to support VET policy implementation.

The shaping of VET policy implementation does not only depend on the VET centres. It also depends on the nature of policies that are put in place<sup>34</sup>, in terms of the goals to which they aspire, the categories of actors targeted as policy implementers, and the tools used to implement the policies. All these factors are of concern for the newly established VET centres. If VET policy implementation in general terms is about the end users (students and teachers), and if the VET centre is the missing link between the responsible ministry and vocational schools, then the VET centres' continued development becomes crucial for the implementation of VET policies.

## 5.3 REDUCING THE GAP IN VET POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

As part of the LEARN project's policy learning objective, the team participated in a bench-learning investigation in the form of a study visit to Slovenia. The objectives of the visit were to expose participants to an example of VET centre best practice. By visiting and familiarising themselves with the role, funding, activities, position in the overall VET structure, and staff competences of the Slovenian VET centre (CPI), participants could ascertain:

- i) how far they still had to go;
- ii) how they could possibly get to their desired position;
- iii) how the activities of the 3-year LEARN project could support them in reaching their goals.

One of the most interesting experiences of the study visit to Slovenia was the presentation by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) on policy objectives, and developments relating to the role of the National VET centre in VET reform. The reform began in 2000, when

<sup>32</sup> For more information on strategic planning of the VET centre in Serbia, see Chapter 6.

<sup>33</sup> On strategic planning of the VET centre in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, see Chapter 6.

<sup>34</sup> As an example, in some participating countries there are VET policies in which the major objective is to increase the number of students enrolling in vocational schools, whereas in other countries the major objective is to have full national qualifications framework in place.



critical decisions were taken to base the reform on three main strategic elements:

- the development of social partnership;
- the deregulation of the education system;
- the introduction of flexibility in vocational schools and VET programmes.

These strategies were introduced in the VET legislation of 2000, with later amendments in 2006. In addition to the VET legislation, a number of new institutions and bodies were created, including the National Centre for VET (CPI) and the VET Expert Council in 2001.

The current experience of the MoES shows that the strategic decision to establish the CPI was crucial for the changes. The VET centre in Slovenia, which currently has 43 staff, has evolved into a central development and advisory institution for VET in the country. Deregulation, linked with flexibility in legislation, proved to be of key importance for the support that the VET centre is providing to vocational schools. This has also led to increasing flexibility in schools. In Slovenian schools, flexibility relates to much more than just curricula and programmes: deregulation also relates to the framework of vocational education programmes. Schools can determine 20% of the programmes, though only through cooperation with social partners who are active in the region where the vocational school is located. Another important step forward is the fact that theoretical and practical VET subjects are now integrated; students learn mainly through project-based approaches that encourage the integration of theory with practical activities. This allows for significant innovation and creativity on the part of both teachers and students. The interpersonal relationships between the staff of schools and the CPI are central to the process of co-created change. Implementation must be a process of co-creation. It cannot essentially be imposed. Co-creation requires a positive, mutually respectful and affirming relationship between the partners. Their sense of efficacy is just as important as the results they are required or are aspiring to achieve. Moreover, the interpersonal contact between MoES staff and the staff of the CPI should also model this co-creation process.

Another issue that needs to be taken into account across the entire framework for policy implementation is the financing of vocational schools. VET legislation in Slovenia has introduced new arrangements into the VET system: the money is now allocated on a per capita (per student) basis, though the vocational school must decide how the students are to be organised. A key objective when introducing this approach was to create greater freedom in the internal organisation of the school structures, particularly class sizes and student grouping. Schools have become less rigid and more flexible, less bureaucratic, and more organic in the sense that they could easily adapt to changing needs. This has required the VET centre to take a more active and practical role in supporting the schools on a daily basis.

In the case of Slovenia and its National VET centre, it is easy to identify the link between top-down and bottom-up

approaches in VET policy implementation. However, an equally important issue is how the MoES can ensure that sufficient tools and instruments are available, not only for the VET centre, but also for the vocational schools to enable them to adopt approaches and act in a spirit of innovation. It is important to note that the team recognised the national VET centre of Slovenia as a key player in VET policy implementation, and were able to ascertain how this is achieved in practice. The centre was also identified as a newly created actor that is well prepared to act effectively and responsibly in the country's ongoing reform process.

It is important to highlight the role of the Department for International Cooperation within CPI. This department has designed and tested a number of projects within the framework of the European Social Fund for the support of VET development in Slovenia. Examples of such projects include:

- the 'e4 VET Community Portal', which aims to establish a VET Community Portal for the Members of the Slovenian Vocational Teacher Training Network (part of the Cedefop VET TTnet);
- 'Intent', an international entrepreneurship project involving cooperation from around 20 EU Member States, in which the main aim is to contribute to the Lisbon objectives of making Europe the world's leading economy by promoting the quality of international entrepreneurship;
- the 'NETWork' project, which aims to test the best approach to implementing ECVET in VET tourism profiles.

The benefits of participating in these activities are multidimensional for the CPI. Professional development of staff is achieved in a much more dynamic way, and ideas and innovation can be better integrated with the centre's work programme. The team's assessment was that this is a very modern organisational structure that not only fits well into the overall governance logic of the Slovenian VET system, but is also appropriate to the EU's education and training reform agenda.

From a top-down perspective, if VET centres in South Eastern European countries are there to implement policy, then from the point of view of the centres themselves, implementation is nothing more than carrying out policy decisions, usually in the form of legislation or executive orders and complying with the 'rule of law'. In most cases, decisions and orders should identify the problems to be addressed, and stipulate the objectives to be pursued and the ways they should be implemented. The rule of law as a basis for policy implementation, and hence the role of VET centres within it, needs to be considered carefully and challenged further; this is one of the major concerns regarding top-down approaches to policy implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2009).

From a bottom-up perspective, policy implementation looks fundamentally different. It is within the vocational school that it takes effect; it is the school principal who needs to initiate 'small policy action'; and it is the teacher who must go further and take another even smaller policy

action, such as developing a plan to teach a new curriculum. Those at the end of the policy chain are concerned not so much with how the policy objectives are translated into concrete actions, but about the concrete actions themselves.

This can be explained using an example from existing policy that is often witnessed in VET reform in the countries of the region. A country has designed and adopted a VET policy in which the key objective is 'improved quality in VET'. The strategy selected is based on 'curriculum reform focused on students' learning outcomes'. In order to achieve 'improved quality in VET' the ministry has created a full infrastructure of supporting institutions, but has also adopted new legislation, which has a significant impact on various actors in the policy environment. The impact is greatest for the teachers who are at the bottom of the policy chain: they need to change their way of teaching. Rather than focusing on curriculum inputs they should concentrate on adopting teaching and learning approaches that focus on student learning outcomes. This is fundamentally different from teachers' previous experiences. At the bottom of the policy chain, the teacher needs to take the 'small policy action': moving away from a focus on curriculum input towards a focus on student learning outputs.

All vocational schools are complex social systems with staff who bring their own unique values and attitudes to their work. These attitudes often range from enthusiasm to resistance when faced with demands for change. Policymakers usually greatly underestimate the complex links in the policy chain between new requirements stipulated in the policy documents and the small policy actions that need to be taken at the bottom of the policy chain. The bottom-up approach to implementation, which is about small policy action taken by those at the bottom of the policy chain, has different meanings for the people in the institutions in which it is to be implemented. The key question is what role the VET centre should play in strengthening the commitment of the vocational schools and teachers to policies mandated from the government and ministries. How VET centres can support bottom-up policy implementation appears to be one of the fundamental issues in this area.

In order to tackle the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy in a constructive way, during the study visit to Slovenia the ETF suggested that a simplified form of strategic planning (Nikolovska, 2009) be used by VET centres in the IPA region on voluntary basis. A simulation workshop was provided following discussions with the MoES and the national VET centre (CPI). The objectives of this exercise can be summarised as follows:

- to help each VET centre to understand the value of analysing the problems it faces as an organisation/institution;
- to foster capacity in VET centres to act effectively and responsibly in the ongoing reform process in the country;

- to develop each VET centre's potential for effectively using opportunities gained through international cooperation and networking.

The starting point for the exercise was to create, agree and experiment with a simplified framework for strategic planning, limited in terms of its scope and timeframe and based on the real needs of VET centres. The exercise focused in particular on international cooperation and networking. In general, the framework encouraged self-evaluation and organisational improvement. The process required reflection and response to four questions:

- Where is the VET centre now?
- Where does it want to go?
- How is it going to get there?
- What support will the centre need?

This exercise provided valuable experiences for the purpose of future development of the VET centres that took part<sup>35</sup>. Suggestions and recommendations emerged that will be useful and valuable for future VET policy. As an example, in some cases VET centres see the ministry as the institution that 'tightly controls the situation'. In general, there is a tendency for VET centres to see themselves as a means of implementing directives rather than empowering schools to do so. This creates a danger that they can be perceived as controlling institutions rather than as institutions that enhance schools' capacity for taking the initiative in terms of improvements. On occasions there appears to be a general misunderstanding between the ministry and the VET centre regarding who is doing what, and regarding where the responsibility of the ministry stops and that of the VET centre starts. From a bottom-up perspective, and focusing on the role of VET centres in relation to vocational schools, it emerged from the strategic papers that although VET centres play a role in supporting vocational school innovations – with variations from country to country – these links are unclear, uncertainties prevail in the dialogue, and it often seems that neither the VET centre nor vocational schools are clear about who's who in the process of VET policy implementation.

As well as illuminating the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy, the results of the VET strategic planning exercise left no doubt that the challenge relating to VET centres in the policy chain is very complex, and it would be naive to imagine that VET centres alone can provide straightforward solutions. In order to reduce the gap in VET policy implementation, the following steps are necessary.

- The education ministry must see the VET centre as one part of a complex system of linkages. It shares an essential role with the ministry: to empower schools to deal with change. This is also the role of the leadership of each school, bearing in mind that policy implementation usually involves changing the hearts and minds (consciousness and commitment) of the staff and the other stakeholders involved. Thus, the

35 Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania. See Chapter 6 on VET strategy papers.



ministry's expectations would ideally be that the VET centre should be an active partner agency that is given resources and responsibility for guiding and developing school-based VET initiatives that support the country's VET policy implementation.

- If VET centres are to be effective, they will need to be developed as pioneering institutions that are constantly engaged in innovation and improvement, in the same way that schools will also need to be developed to be receptive to continuous improvement. Whether they are helping schools to carry out directives or helping them to become adaptive and flexible, VET centres need modern organisational structures and positive cultures that are geared to coping with, and helping schools to cope with, the challenges of reform.
- Strong, dynamic bonds with the ministry and vocational schools are a prerequisite. There is clearly a need for a more innovative and proactive approach in relation to policy within the framework of the legislation: policy implementation is not 'rule of law implemented line by line, article by article' (O'Toole, 2000).

## 5.4 THE ROLE OF VET CENTRES AS A 'MISSING LINK' IN VET POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The tasks of the VET centre in VET policy implementation are not straightforward. Vertical and horizontal communication mechanisms have an important impact on policy implementation and sustainability. The vertical communication mechanisms and the policy chain between the education ministry, the VET centre and vocational schools make it difficult to mobilise around particular issues with a view to influencing changes in VET. In any one country the list of stakeholders is very long, and includes the heads of department in the ministry, legislative bodies, teachers' unions, and various parent, teacher and student associations. These often have opposing interests in VET policy. In addition, VET policy implementation has different consequences for different institutions within the system; it means different things to different stakeholders. The level of involvement of the various stakeholders also changes over time, from full support and participation to total neglect. These circumstances require the VET centre to navigate in very difficult terrain, communicating with many stakeholders, in both vertical and horizontal directions.

The greatest challenge remains the actual policy implementation. Challenges exist in relation to the input, the process and the output of the system. The choice of approach to be used to support countries to improve VET reform depends on the context, and on the way in which stakeholders in a given country perceive new policies. Given the fact that VET centres are in the middle, between the responsible ministry and vocational schools, and based on the team's past experience and work with the centres, the following issues are now becoming clear.

- In spite of the fact that policy formulation and policy implementation are referred to as two separate elements of the policy process, in the real life of VET centres it is not possible to treat them as such: VET policy formulation and VET policy implementation are on a continuum. As an example, one centre was in the process of implementing a new curriculum framework that had been under development for two years; the ministry embarked on a new reform agenda – e-learning – and the curriculum framework needed to be adapted accordingly. This example clearly shows the overlaps between VET policy formation and implementation. It is a situation that occurs frequently, and represents a challenge and a source of frustration for VET centres. Such situations should be seen as an opportunity for VET centres, which could take on the role of providing policy analyses as a feedback loop to the policymaking process, and hence strengthen their position. VET policy implementation can also be supported through the use of a simplified framework: What is next in the policy cycle? Where do we go from here? And how we are going to get there?
- In the VET policy process the VET centres need to understand how to deal with problems that arise in the course of policy implementation. Legislation and executive orders setting out policy outlines from the ministry are often vague. This requires VET centres to take a more proactive approach towards the responsible ministry, and to clarify the policy to facilitate the process of implementation. This is the element of flexibility that both policymakers and VET centre staff need to better understand. It is important to define and support this flexibility without introducing excessive bureaucracy or additional red tape, so that policy objectives and the process of policy implementation become more streamlined.
- Complex policy problems in the VET sector can only be solved through the application of technical expertise. For example, without the knowledge possessed by the education agencies (such as for curriculum development, for teacher training and for VET), state-level ministries will be unable to decide how to handle the issue of vocational students dropping out, or how to make VET more attractive and streamlined for students. Being at the heart of the implementation process provides added value which justifies the role of VET centres in VET reform. VET centres that are handling the daily problems of implementation also accumulate knowledge, and this provides insight into policy problems and barriers relating to the achievement of the policy objectives. This knowledge cannot be gained from a one-off evaluation of a particular programme or policy. It represents important knowledge that VET centres develop and accumulate in the process of VET policy implementation.
- Since vocational schools are the organisations in which VET policy is implemented, it follows that VET centres should clearly understand the implementation barriers that these schools face. Typically, vocational schools are dissatisfied if implementation requires only the strict application of detailed legislation and executive orders. They expect more freedom and flexibility, as was clearly seen in the case of Slovenian

VET reform and the role of the VET centre in Slovenia. Schools expect and demand implementation that includes flexibility, creativity and responsiveness to changing needs. Since VET centres are involved in VET policy implementation directly with vocational schools, they must be well prepared and in a position to communicate the obstacles to implementation faced by the schools to the policymakers responsible. Pressure from the local environment (schools, parents and social partners), which is a pressure in the political process, is different from the pressure in the policy process. Supporting the schools in this way can be very fruitful and can gradually reduce quite strong perceptions that the state (or its representatives at the intermediary level) should solve all problems, including minor ones. This will certainly have an impact on the daily work of VET centres, especially in their attempts to encourage schools to take responsibility for implementing improvements themselves. It can also be very encouraging for VET centres to create and run their own vocational school development projects, as was convincingly demonstrated during the LEARN project.

This analysis highlights some potential roles for VET centres in the VET policy chain. At the early stage of their development, these roles face in two different directions: supporting the responsible ministry and supporting vocational schools. The challenge remains to achieve the best 'trade-off' between these different roles.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING VET CENTRES TO FULFIL THEIR ROLE IN VET POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The establishment of VET centres in the countries of South Eastern Europe should be seen as a focused effort on the part of governments to bring the development of the VET system into line with current innovations that are taking place in VET in the EU. It is clear that in this context, where education ministries are responsible for all segments of the education system, and where VET is usually only a small part of this, these government efforts are a significant step forward in ensuring an improved institutional infrastructure for VET policy implementation.

There are a number of possible approaches towards strengthening the role of these important players in VET policy implementation. It is not only governments that can

play a role: the EU, with programme funds, can also potentially support their development.

In the LEARN project the ETF experimented with a number of tools that could assist in the development of VET centres. The following are the key lessons learned:

- Vertical networking of actors from different levels of the VET system within one country, and horizontal networking of actors in different countries are powerful tools. At country level the LEARN project created and experimented with a policy network<sup>36</sup> that was involved in VET policy design and implementation. At cross-country level the LEARN project set up a CoP as a horizontal network of actors with an interest in dealing with the same or at least similar problems in VET policy.
- As part of the LEARN project the VET centres were encouraged to engage in learning-by-doing exercises, and were challenged to create and run their own school-development projects. Important lessons were learned by the VET centres in relation not only to the content issues tackled in the project, but also to the entire project management cycle, including the initial design of the project, resourcing the project with VET centre staff, and cooperating directly with vocational schools.
- Knowledge-sharing events, the foundation on which the LEARN project activities were built, can be the source of inspiration for the design of effective policy learning in a short period of time. Examples include the design of the bench-learning study visit to Slovenia, and ETF peer-learning and peer-review activities. The ETF policy learning methodology builds on existing local knowledge and develops capacities that are embedded in the specific VET policy environment in partner countries; learning and VET policy are central to this approach.

With carefully structured capacity-building activities and a step-by-step approach, VET centres can become centres of expertise for VET policy implementation in their countries. This will require all players to be aware of and understand the role of the VET centre as the 'missing link' between the ministry and vocational schools. Only then will VET centres be able to make the VET policy environment more stable, and only then will vocational schools experience smoother VET policy implementation. However, there is still a long way to go, and the LEARN project represents only a first step.

<sup>36</sup> In public policy and research on policy implementation there has been a recent increase in interest in so-called policy networks, and these have been found to be very useful where there is a complex policy problem to be solved, where there is a lack of consensus among the actors, and where the institutional infrastructure is particularly complex.

# 6. VET CENTRE STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

A study trip to Slovenia in May 2009 was the starting point for a journey of self-evaluation and reflection for staff from five VET centres from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. During the visit, staff members from the VET centres were invited to take part in a simple exercise in strategic planning using a tool developed by the ETF. The framework for this activity was discussed and agreed based on the needs of VET centres.

The aim of the exercise was to help the VET centre staff to become aware of what was needed if they wished to make the most of opportunities for international cooperation and networking. By undertaking the exercise, staff would be encouraged to analyse their own institutions and consider what was needed to make them work better.

However, this seemingly straightforward exercise soon started to move beyond its limited mandate, as participants used it to conduct a much broader review of their institutions. They started to examine exactly what tasks they currently carried out, which tasks they thought they should also be doing, and what was preventing them from doing so.

The place of VET centres in the national fabric of institutions became an additional recurring theme, with their degree of dependence on or independence from the line ministries providing an interesting subtext. Another recurring theme was the ways in which VET centres currently support schools, and how they could support them better. Finally, the task led participants to reflect on what constitute the underlying culture and values of their organisations.

## 6.2 ALBANIA

'When the organisation was set up two and a half years ago, part of our initial agenda was preparing a policy paper. Now, with the impulse given by the LEARN

project, we have totally reviewed it, considering all the new elements that have arisen since then. Every institution must have such a paper.'

*Alqi Mustafai, Specialist in VET Curricula Development and Teacher Training Standards, NAVETA*

### 6.2.1 Where is NAVETA now?

Albania's National VET Agency (NAVETA) was created by government decree in May 2006. It is broadly responsible for occupations and vocational qualifications, developing curricula and teacher training standards, assessment and certification of students and accreditation of VET providers, and encouraging social dialogue and coordination between stakeholders.

The more specific duties of NAVETA include:

- maintaining a national register of occupations and their descriptions, and one of vocational qualifications, including all relevant levels and standards;
- defining criteria for VET assessment, certification and qualifications;
- curricula development;
- accreditation of VET providers;
- ensuring compliance with best international practice, in particular with the European Qualification Framework and the European Credit System for VET;
- designing teacher training;
- facilitating the involvement of social partners in the design, development and delivery of VET and ensuring coordination between key stakeholders.

### 6.2.2 Where does NAVETA want to go?

NAVETA has recently finished work on a national list of occupations, and a list and description of qualifications and framework curricula for VET Level 1. Future challenges include making existing qualifications more flexible and increasing vertical and horizontal pathways in Albanian VET.

The establishment of a National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) will generate new tasks, including adapting assessment criteria to NVQF standards, drafting descriptions of certificates that are recognised nationally and internationally, and setting up a post-secondary cycle of VET.

Other tasks for the future include improving the current institutional arrangements for in-service training for VET teachers and trainers, and developing their managerial skills as appropriate. A final, significant task for NAVETA is helping to complete the new legal framework governing Albanian VET in order to support reform initiatives in the sector, in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.

### 6.2.3 How is NAVETA going to get there?

Although NAVETA is a young organisation, staff members have a clear picture of the most important challenges that face them, and of what must be done to reach their objectives.

These interventions include the following.

- *Developing a strategic plan and corresponding action plans*  
NAVETA has already outlined the priority areas for action in accordance with its mandate and current developments in Albanian VET. A series of discussions within the organisation and with stakeholders will produce a final strategy document, supplemented by action plans that will serve as the basis for the daily work of NAVETA staff.
- *Improving the legal and institutional framework*  
NAVETA is a young institution that frequently has to adapt to changes in the fast-changing environment in which it operates. Hence, the organisation uses a pilot approach in which each activity is followed by analysis and feedback, and then by the institutionalisation of positive experiences. This may require changes in the legal framework or a reshaping of NAVETA's functions or structures.
- *Promoting staff development*  
Both new and more experienced personnel should have easy access to a well-prepared, need-orientated programme of staff development. This should include a programme for improving core skills that is open to all, and tailored programmes for updating specific skills relating to particular functions or activities. This should be supplemented by individual study, attendance at seminars and conferences, and participation in study visits, networks and other forums for the exchange of experience and know-how.
- *Improving partnership and boosting participation in national and international networks*  
NAVETA can only fulfil its role if it works in close partnership with the main stakeholders in VET, including public and private schools, social partners and the local community. Developing this active partnership, as well as participating in international –

especially European – networks with similar institutions, is one of NAVETA's strategic priorities.

- *Improving the working environment*  
A plan to improve working facilities involving updating equipment and improving communication facilities will be drawn up, although its feasibility ultimately depends on the availability of funding.
- *Improving the work culture*  
The exchange of experience with other European institutions and analysis of European models should help the gradual development of a new work culture at NAVETA.
- *Improve funding arrangements*  
NAVETA currently operates within a very rigid funding framework that limits its ability to be flexible. A review of this financial framework should pave the way for new funds to be accessed, for example through participation in international projects, and for support to be given to new activities not currently permitted under existing regulations.

### 6.2.4 What support does NAVETA need?

As a new institution in which most staff have relatively limited experience, NAVETA is keen to further develop its expertise and standing in the arena of Albanian VET. National and international support to facilitate this process is welcome, and could help in the following ways.

- *International technical support*  
NAVETA benefits from and contributes to several international development projects supported by the EU or through bilateral agreements. Future technical support will focus on some of NAVETA's core work, such as classifying and describing occupations and vocational qualifications, curriculum development, teacher training, accreditation, assessment and certification. The most recent activity that could benefit from international support is the design of NAVETA's strategic plan and action plans.
- *Support for participation in networks*  
Taking part in networks such as the ETF's Teacher Training Network for South Eastern Europe, the LEARN project and the fledgling network of South Eastern European VET agencies is all good experience. However, there are other initiatives, such as various ETF regional programmes, in which NAVETA does not participate.
- *Exchange of experience*  
NAVETA is keen to share experience with its opposite numbers in the region and the EU. It needs technical and financial support for making contacts, exchanging experts, organising study visits and implementing joint projects, especially with neighbouring countries.
- *Improving NAVETA's organisational structure*  
International support is needed in order to reshape the structure and functions of NAVETA. In addition, the new technical skills, work culture and experiences gained through international exposure will need to be given support if they are to be successfully embedded in the new organisational structure.

## 6.3 BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

‘The exercise was useful as it made us focus on the right questions – there has to be an environment created so that we can implement and participate in international programmes.’

*Sanja Hadžihajdić, Senior Educational Adviser, Pedagogical Institute Zenica*

Since the Dayton Agreement of 1995 the responsibility for education in Bosnia and Herzegovina has rested with 13 different education ministries in the different cantons and entities, with ultimate responsibility resting with the single Ministry of Civil Affairs. A national VET agency – the VET Department of the Agency for Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education – has now been established in the town of Banja Luka. The Pedagogical Institute of Zenica-Doboj Canton has responsibility for secondary VET as well as all other sub-systems of the basic education system for Zenica-Doboj Canton.

### 6.3.1 Where is the Pedagogical Institute Zenica now?

The Pedagogical Institute Zenica (PI Zenica) provides support to schools in order to ensure the provision of high-quality inclusive education for all children, young people and adults from pre-school through to secondary education, and promotes equality, democratic values and partnerships with families and communities. Its vision is that of high-quality education for all students in accordance with their abilities, needs and interests as the foundation of a more just and equal society.

PI Zenica has 18 staff and works with 114 education institutions ranging from pre-school through to secondary education, with some 60 000 students and 4 000 teachers. It forms part of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of Zenica-Doboj Canton and provides professional support to this ministry.

The services it provides include:

- developing curricula and evaluating their use;
- monitoring and evaluating the work of teachers and school leaders;
- providing in-service training for teachers and principals, and training for school boards and inclusive school teams consisting of students, staff, parents and representatives of the local community;
- approving the annual work plans and programmes of schools;
- running cantonal competitions for students;
- assessing the quality of activities and projects put forward by local and international organisations for implementation in schools;
- maintaining databases on schools;

- publishing *Didactic Guideposts*, a journal on teaching theory and practice, produced in collaboration with the Faculty of Education in Zenica.

PI Zenica also cooperates with parents through the Parents’ Councils, and with government institutions such as the cantonal employment agency, the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Agency for Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education. In addition, PI Zenica works with international organisations and local NGOs.

PI Zenica aims to maintain a culture of transparency, a people-oriented approach and a readiness to initiate and adapt to change as a learning organisation.

### 6.3.2 Where does the Pedagogical Institute Zenica want to go?

PI Zenica is actively involved in the ongoing process of reform in Zenica-Doboj Canton which encompasses pre-school institutions, primary schools, general secondary or grammar schools and vocational secondary schools. It provides professional support to the development of policy and practice of education.

Education in Zenica-Doboj is facing a number of challenges. Pre-school education is not currently compulsory, and one of PI Zenica’s aims is to push for a new law that would give access to high-quality pre-school education to all. Primary schools have recently seen the introduction of nine-grade education, the first time this has been done in Bosnia and Herzegovina, bringing more inclusive education in its wake. In grammar schools, the first cohort of students has recently completed a new-style programme of education; this has optional subjects in the third and fourth grades that are tailored to students’ needs and that use curricula that have been revamped to foster the development of key competences in line with the principles of lifelong learning. A preliminary analysis has shown improved results compared to previous cohorts, though further research is needed.

Reform of secondary VET is another important area, and one in which PI Zenica is relying on substantial support from EU projects, since this reform calls for a level of financial investment that is greater than the resources available locally. The introduction of modular curricula is currently being piloted with EU support, and a major task ahead for PI Zenica is to develop these curricula for all vocational schools, thus making this reform sustainable throughout the canton.

### 6.3.3 How is the Pedagogical Institute Zenica going to get there?

In order to rise to the challenges described above, PI Zenica is placing great emphasis on the professional development of its staff. Staff are encouraged to take every opportunity to acquire new knowledge and



competences, including those provided by NGOs. A significant example of this is the training on how to use the Index for Inclusion – seven advisers have become trainers – and that of Education for Social Justice – eleven advisers have become trainers in an initiative run jointly with Save the Children UK (STC UK).

PI Zenica has since gone on to deliver these courses in all primary schools in the canton, with logistical support from STC UK, STC Norway, the OSCE and USAID. In these times of economic crisis and austerity, PI Zenica would be hard pressed to contribute to local human capital development without this support. Furthermore, a number of schools have now produced proposals for increasing their inclusiveness, and these initiatives will be funded in the same way.

### 6.3.4 What support does the Pedagogical Institute Zenica need?

PI Zenica believes its strategic goals would best be served by continuing the professional development for staff, improving the technical infrastructure in its office and facilities in its library, and expanding the vehicle pool (it is currently very difficult to cover the whole territory with just one vehicle).

As a result of the limited human and financial resources available, PI Zenica has neither a dedicated unit for international cooperation nor a specific budget for this purpose. Support for building capacity to prepare international grant proposals and manage project cycles would therefore be welcome. In the same way, creating an environment that allows PI Zenica to participate generally in international projects and to apply for funds to engage in knowledge-sharing activities with similar institutions and schools from abroad would certainly be beneficial and would allow the organisation to serve its policy objectives more effectively.

## 6.4 THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

'After the visit to Slovenia, we organised a workshop and all the advisers gave their opinions on each of the questions. There was a big debate about what the answers should be. It was a useful experience as all of the questions were very relevant for painting the whole picture of where the centre should be positioned and where there is room for improvement.'

*Lepa Trpceska, Adviser, Vocational Education and Training Centre*

### 6.4.1 Where is the Vocational Education and Training Centre now?

The Vocational Education and Training Centre (VET centre) was set up in June 2005 and is based within the Bureau

for the Development of Education of the Ministry of Education and Science. The VET centre is in charge of:

- research, analysis and general development of the Macedonian VET system;
- designing certain types of VET;
- research on the labour market and cooperation with social partners;
- creating occupational standards;
- developing curricula and evaluating programmes;
- professional development of teaching staff;
- consulting and mentoring of teachers, principals and other staff in vocational schools;
- coordinating cooperation with international organisations.

The Ministry of Education and Science rarely calls on the VET centre for help with formulating education policy, though there is potential for greater cooperation in the future. The VET centre usually works with the ministry on designing courses for all types of VET, making suggestions and developing curricula, creating models for different subjects within VET and reporting to the ministry on possible accreditation for institutions wishing to offer VET courses.

The VET centre works with the 72 secondary schools that provide VET in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In the course of their duties, VET centre staff visit the schools to provide mentoring and advice, but there is a need for them to visit schools more often. Aside from direct contact with schools, the main channel for communicating the needs of schools is the Board of the VET centre. According to its statutes, the centre reports to the Board on its activities through annual work programmes, reports, financial plans and an inventory. However, there is no institution responsible for the centre at national level.

The VET centre's overall aim is to promote the provision of quality and up-to-date VET in line with the needs of the labour market.

### 6.4.2 Where does the VET centre want to go?

The VET centre aspires to be an independent, modern and efficient institution that supports the development of state VET. Such an institution would be open to cooperation with all interested parties, would enjoy a high level of visibility in its field, would be staffed by a highly educated team working in optimal conditions, and would collaborate with similar institutions abroad.

The VET centre currently provides services to schools in the following areas:

- assistance in the design of new courses;
- consulting and mentoring teachers, principals and occupational associates;
- delivery of new and innovative courses;
- providing expert advice on extra classes;



- support to schools on extra-curricular activities such as competitions and special projects.

The areas in which its services could be improved include:

- increasing the number of visits to schools; these are currently limited by the lack of resources;
- developing greater insight by becoming involved in the evaluation of VET programmes; this is currently undertaken done by the State Inspectorate of the Ministry for Education and Science;
- providing more training and more resources for designing new and innovative programmes;
- the introduction of a system for evaluating the professional development of teachers.

In future, the centre could provide the following services to the ministry and other stakeholders in VET:

- reporting on conditions and problems in VET;
- reporting on educational needs, based on an analysis of the labour market;
- tracking studies on where VET graduates end up working;
- providing advice on changes needed in educational provision and enrolments.

### 6.4.3 How is the VET centre going to get there?

The VET centre's ability to perform its role would be improved if it were to be redefined as an independent state institution with its own budget. Giving it a new institutional framework would also reduce the political influence on its work. If this were to happen, the centre would need to adopt a new organisational structure, and the appropriate laws and regulations would have to be revised. Other critical areas include improving workplace conditions and the technological facilities available to staff, strengthening relations with social partners, establishing direct links with similar institutions abroad, and developing a system for the professional and career development of staff as well as a system for recognising their achievements.

Currently the VET centre has limited experience of international cooperation and networking in the field of VET and is not free to choose its international partners. What links do exist tend to be channelled via the Ministry for Education and Science rather than directly. This makes it difficult to build sustainable relationships, especially once projects have ended. Other obstacles to effective international relations include inconsistent policy, the lack of funds, the low level of motivation on the part of project participants and the lack of mechanisms for monitoring quality.

Other institutions and organisations, such as relevant ministries, social partner organisations, local authorities and vocational schools, are interested in international cooperation. However, because of a lack of coordination, the results of international activity are not fully utilised and tend to become lost in the system.

A strengthening of international cooperation could bring the following benefits:

- an exchange of experience and practice;
- support for projects;
- an exchange of documentation and other information;
- professional development for VET centre staff;
- strengthening of the institution itself.

### 6.4.4 What support does the VET centre need?

The blueprint for the VET centre foresees the creation of a unit for network cooperation, both with social partners and internationally. However, this unit does not yet exist. In order to create such a unit, the centre requires sufficient staff, more office equipment and appropriate training for new employees.

## 6.5 MONTENEGRO

'We already had a strategic plan, prepared several years ago, but I was able to use this exercise to introduce several new items that have arisen since.'

*Vladislav Koprivica, Adviser on Curricula and Standards, Centre for Vocational Education*

### 6.5.1 Where is the Centre for Vocational Education now?

In recent years Montenegro's Ministry of Education and Science has decentralised in order to improve the performance of the education system. New institutions – the Centre for Vocational Education and the Bureau for Education and Examination – have been created as part of this drive. It was intended that the Centre for Vocational Education would develop VET for young people and adults up to and including higher education, working closely with the social partners.

Founded in May 2003, the Centre for Vocational Education is a public institution and legal entity as defined by Montenegro's Law on Basic Education. It was established by the Government of Montenegro, the Employment Agency of Montenegro, the Chamber of Commerce of Montenegro and the Association of Independent Trade Unions of Montenegro.

The main responsibilities of the centre include:

- developing occupational standards, curricula for two-, three and four-year school programmes, and catalogues of examinations leading to certification;
- adult education;
- monitoring, evaluation and quality control;
- in-service training for teachers and school managers;
- publishing textbooks for VET.

### 6.5.2 Where does the Centre for Vocational Education want to go?

In order to create a network of institutional support for implementing new concepts in Montenegrin VET, the Centre for Vocational Education needs to consolidate its position as a responsible and professional partner to schools and education providers, one that can help them to improve their performance. In accordance with ISO standards on organisation and management, the centre should establish partnerships with local communities and social partners in VET and in adult education, and should forge international links in order to participate in relevant activities and projects.

The three main goals of the centre are to develop as an institution, to promote international cooperation and to contribute to improvements in the education system.

### 6.5.3 How is the Centre for Vocational Education going to get there?

In order to achieve these aims, the centre needs to improve the way it organises its work. An important component will be to improve the collective competence of its staff by providing them with regular training. Another will be to establish a network of relevant institutions, organisations and individuals, including strengthening social partnership and networking with partner institutions.

The centre should play a stronger role in encouraging schools and adult education institutions to form a single network, and in supporting the process of setting up new public vocational schools and centres for adult education.

It is of strategic importance that the VET centre builds good relations with vocational associations, education institutions (including universities), NGOs and other relevant organisations in Montenegro and abroad, and that it helps to connect schools, institutions and other partners working in VET in Montenegro with suitable international partners.

The centre's own links with international organisations and institutions abroad need to be strengthened. There is also a need for the centre to keep track of relevant developments in European VET in order to improve the Montenegrin system. An immediate step would be to develop capacity to prepare proposals for submission to international organisations, and to plan projects for vocational schools and centres for adult education which could be supported by international donors.

### 6.5.4 What support does the Centre for Vocational Education need?

The centre does not currently have a dedicated unit for international cooperation. There is one adviser in charge of international cooperation and individuals are nominated to

participate in international work according to their other duties in the centre, or because of their personal interest or motivation. There is no funding specifically earmarked for international activities. For these reasons, the greatest contribution that could be made in this area would be the provision of funds and training for the purpose.

## 6.6 SERBIA

'When I was told of the idea in Slovenia, I said "Not another international expert asking me to do a strategic plan". We have plenty of those but the problem is getting them implemented. But when I started researching and writing it, I found it really useful as a tool for self-evaluation.'

*Tatijana Glisic, Adviser, Centre for Vocational and Art Education*

### 6.6.1 Where is the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education now?

The Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education was set up in August 2003 as an independent institution; one year later it became part of the new Institute for the Improvement of Education, together with the Centre for Strategic Development, the Centre for the Development of Curricula and Textbooks and the Centre for Professional Development in Education. In September 2009 the Centre for Strategic Development left the umbrella of the institute, and a reorganisation of the remaining three units is still under way. Hence, this analysis is based on the current situation.

The centre's main role is to design and support the development and implementation of VET reform. Its broad responsibilities include development, monitoring and quality assurance of vocational and adult education, the overseeing of the development and revision of vocational matura, final, specialist and master crafts examinations and the training of vocational teachers.

More specifically, the centre's work includes:

- labour market analysis and developing standards in the VET field;
- proposing changes in the VET system, both formal and non-formal, including developing new curricula and updating existing ones;
- training teachers to design, implement and assess outcome-based curricula;
- monitoring the implementation of pilot curricula;
- developing and piloting new models for VET examinations;
- developing teaching materials, manuals and guidelines, and policy;
- promoting the harmonisation of Serbian VET in line with EU developments such as national qualification frameworks;
- developing social partnership in VET.

The Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education has two divisions. The first deals with research and development of occupational standards, qualifications standards in vocational and adult education, and developing and piloting a VET examinations system. The second monitors the implementation of reform activities, including evaluation and self-evaluation standards in VET. Each of these two divisions has five employees. Around 50 teachers act as external associate experts.

In terms of stakeholders and accountability, the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education primarily responds to requests from the Ministry of Education. Up to now all official documents produced by the centre have had to be approved by the National Education Council, something that has slowed down the pace of work. A new body, the Council for VET, is soon to take over this function, a development that could streamline the process. The centre has also tried to set up formal cooperation with employers' representatives via relevant institutions, though so far this has met with little success. Hence, the centre works alone in conducting most of the training needs and labour market analyses, as well as the development of occupational standards.

The centre was conceived in 2003 as an independent, highly professional, non-bureaucratic organisation that could act as a driver for reform. Political developments in 2004 led to its gradual integration into the bureaucratic chain of command, a change that has to some extent isolated it from its natural environment. However, staff have retained their initial enthusiasm and willingness to work closely with schools, social partners and other stakeholders in an informal fashion. They have also maintained an internal ethos that fosters values such as professionalism, learning every day, proactive attitudes and a service orientation.

### 6.6.2 Where does the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education want to go?

In its first two years of operation the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education managed to be at the epicentre of all VET reform activities. This resulted in the mobilisation of teachers and social partners, good relations with key institutions and the production of numerous significant documents such as new curricula, strategies and concepts. Political developments from 2004 onwards caused a crisis of identity for the centre as partners began to associate it with the much more closed culture of the Institute for the Improvement of Education. During this time of stagnation, the centre began providing fewer services to vocational schools, while the weak links between the Ministry of Education and the institute meant that joint activities became rarer and more bureaucratic. In this context, international cooperation became less intensive and often took place on an ad hoc basis.

The services that the centre could offer to stakeholders in the future include:

- preparing standards for the vocational element of the curricula and examinations for formal and non-formal VET;
- preparing NQF standards for secondary and post-secondary VET, as well as other forms of VET;
- preparing the list of educational profiles;
- providing professional support to vocational schools and other providers of VET in planning, developing and delivering VET;
- facilitating networking between vocational schools and adult education centres and monitoring the results;
- designing development projects, both national and international, that connect VET to the world of work;
- encouraging social partners to become involved in planning, developing and delivering VET.

### 6.6.3 How is the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education going to get there?

In order to regain its original standing and functions, the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education needs to be governed by a management policy that is resistant to political changes. This would lead to a stronger positioning within the system and would require a degree of financial independence. An immediate step could be an institutionalisation of social partnership.

The centre should concentrate its efforts and sharpen its focus on having:

- a proactive approach to planning and carrying out project-based work;
- a service-orientated philosophy;
- solid networking with experts and the willingness to use a variety of human resources locally and internationally;
- a stronger motivation to learn;
- more intense international cooperation, especially in preparing applications for funding, and in developing and implementing projects.

### 6.6.4 What support does the Centre for Vocational and Art Education need?

One of the first strategic goals of the Centre for Vocational and Artistic Education was to develop strong international cooperation. However, the aforementioned political developments changed this priority. Although the centre does not currently have a unit for international cooperation, or a separate budget line for this purpose, it does have the capacity to prepare applications for funding, project-cycle management and monitoring and evaluation of international projects and activities based on its experience since 2003. If international cooperation once more becomes a priority under the new arrangements, past participation in projects such as IPA could prove a good starting point for this endeavour.

## 6.7 CONCLUSIONS

Strategy formulation refers to many different models used by organisations to plot their future. In simple words,

strategic planning is the way an organisation will look forward and decide what it will do in the future. It is primarily related to strategy formulation, but it can also be a very effective way for VET centres to analyse where they have been, where they are currently, where they would like to be in the future and how they will get there.

This exercise, the results of which have been captured through strategic papers, demonstrates that VET centres have different roles in each of the countries surveyed, though some core responsibilities are common to all. These include developing curricula and occupational standards, assessment and accreditation, the professional development of teachers and school managers, and liaison with and mentoring of schools. Staff in many of the centres believe they should spend more time working directly with schools, but they are often constrained by lack of time and material resources such as transport. Most centres are formally under the remit of their ministry of education. While all take their policy direction from the ministry, it is clear that some have limited influence on the policy process, and may therefore struggle to present themselves to schools and other stakeholders, such as social partners, as organisations with a distinctive identity and a broad mandate to link the worlds of work and education.

The leadership role for the VET centres in supporting ongoing VET reform policy implementation is important from the perspective of ensuring their function and status as newly created VET expertise institutions. This will require considerable capacity building and development of know-how. The strategic papers document that the staff representatives of VET centres are keenly aware of the need for their own professional development, both to gain experience and to be able to handle new developments and methodologies as they arise. Within the context of LEARN as a regional learning project it is important to emphasise that the strategic papers exercise was also focused on the issue of learning to learn from one another in the region. While some members of staff do have experience of participating in international cooperation and networking, none of the centres has a dedicated unit nor a separate budget allocated for this purpose. All are keen to develop stronger international cooperation; they see this firstly as a way of gaining access to new knowledge and possibly helping to better position their organisation on the national stage, and secondly as a means of increasing resources. This emphasis on strengthening a practical problem-solving approach, rather than the traditional capacity-building approaches that are often delivered through formal staff training in different technical assistance projects, would appear to be considerably more promising.

# 7. ACCOMPANYING RESEARCH IN THE LEARN PROJECT AND ITS FUNCTION IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

SØREN NIELSEN AND ALQI MUSTAFAI

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The ETF LEARN project introduced the new function of an ‘accompanying researcher’ to become part of and monitor the project’s progress from the start. This chapter describes the rationale behind introducing this function into the project’s design and implementation, and presents and discusses findings and recommendations that have been made available for the ETF management of the project over the past three years.

The purpose of introducing a monitoring function from the very start of the LEARN project was broader than simply to provide continuous reporting on this specific project. The activity should be seen as a learning exercise to be shared among all project participants. This new role is a natural long-term activity that should, in theory, be performed by all VET centres across the region in their national VET reforms, and to an even greater extent in relation to external, donor-driven reform activities. There is an acute need in all South Eastern European countries to document reforms, consolidate expertise, systematically accumulate knowledge, make inventories of good practice and learn directly from the wealth of international experts made available by the international donor community.

The concrete objective of the assignment for the local expert, who was contracted following a selection process organised by the ETF, was, in the first project phase, to operate as an accompanying researcher by taking part in all project activities, to observe, describe, analyse and document the project’s progress during 2007, and to produce a mid-term report and a final first-year progress report at the end of 2007. These reports were intended to provide input for the ETF on any adjustments necessary in the design and implementation of the LEARN project.

The local expert from South Eastern Europe who carried out this task participated in all the project activities during the first year, as follows:

- a. project-launching study tour to Denmark, (5 days) August 2007;
- b. ETF annual VET TT Conference for South Eastern Europe in Lisbon, 20–22 September 2007;
- c. training workshop for national project leaders in Skopje (5 days), October 2007;

- d. drafting two reports, a mid-term report in October 2007, and a first-year report at the end of December 2007.

During 2008 and 2009 the researcher participated in all the main events, closely followed the web-based communication and interaction taking place within the CoP, read all the project materials, and wrote a first interim report (November 2008), an interim report (April 2009) and the final report (November 2009). In addition, he followed more closely the project activities in his own country, Albania, by observing almost on a day-to-day basis how the Albanian LEARN project team was able to cope with the external conditions set by the ETF.

## 7.2 THE RATIONALE FOR ACCOMPANYING RESEARCH

There are many examples of externally led reform initiatives that have not been successfully adapted to the traditions and practices of the VET system in recipient countries. There is a risk of fragmentation and incoherence among elements of the system. The tradition, and the prevailing practice, is to demand ex-post evaluations, but there are risks associated with this approach. In transition countries the dynamics of change are so overwhelming that it is often impossible to stop and take stock, wait and see, and following an evaluation decide on the next step. Assessments must come earlier in the process and be forward looking, and should preferably run in parallel with the design and implementation of the project in order that necessary adjustments can be made along the way.

This approach has been inspired by the evaluation experiences that derive from the work carried out by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) (Stern, 1989). The approach has been described as ‘developmental evaluation’; it seeks to carry out evaluative activities in a way that also contributes to the development of a particular scheme, programme or policy. The purpose of developmental evaluation is learning, improvement and development, rather than generating reports and summative judgments for external audiences and accountability.



A developmental approach to evaluation involves a number of components. First, it offers participants in the setting that is being evaluated a voice in shaping the evaluation agenda. It is important that those directly involved are able to see the contribution that evaluation can make in their future development. Second, it involves an active feedback policy; feedback should be provided and discussed on a regular basis throughout the evaluation process. Third, a developmental approach concerns utilisation and implementation. Experience shows that unless early decisions are made on how to use the results, follow-up actions cannot be taken for granted. The TIHR approach therefore builds implementation and utilisation into the design of the evaluation. Fourth, it involves a commitment to action research, in which the process of undertaking an evaluation, how it is negotiated and managed, and how it impacts on the 'subjects' of an evaluation, is itself seen as a legitimate object of study, because such transactions between evaluators and programme participants may often affect the findings. As argued by Patton (2002), in many cases the specific findings of an evaluation can be secondary to the more general learning that results from being involved in the process, a distinction he calls 'process use' as opposed to 'findings use'.

## 7.3 MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

The purpose of continuously monitoring the ETF LEARN project activities was to ensure that the project remained forward looking and focused on:

- i) what had been achieved;
- ii) what did not function well;
- iii) how the project implementation could be adapted;
- iv) how the project results could be taken forward with a view to developing further policy implementation.

The approach is based on a policy learning philosophy in which national ownership, suitability for the context and sustainability are important, and in which the key issue is always to concentrate on where the country is now, where it should go next, and what kind of support will be needed.

In order to make the ongoing assessment more meaningful, the LEARN project also set up a national Steering Committee with a view to increasing awareness among policymakers of the ongoing project and its results. The combination of accompanying research delivering just-in-time findings and recommendations and the awareness and commitment of policymakers is intended to strengthen national ownership of the project and to make it possible for countries to take forward many of the ideas and concrete proposals developed during the course of the project.

## 7.4 EVALUATION PHILOSOPHY

The field of education evaluation is made up of different disciplines and a variety of approaches. Often it has many masters to serve, in recent years primarily the evolving human capital<sup>37</sup> imperative and its relationship to education. Increasing emphasis is placed on international, horizontal comparisons in education evaluation. How do reading, mathematics and science scores compare with others? This horizontal comparative dimension has spawned a vastly expanded evaluation 'industry' in the form of studies of international educational performance. There are a number of definitions and specifications of categories relating to evaluative activities in education. 'Monitoring' has a mainly chronicling and appraisal function. 'Evaluating', meanwhile, is the act of making a judgement and is a retrospective undertaking measuring already existing phenomena. 'Accompanying research or assessment' in the current context is a forward-looking activity based on analysis with a clear prospective purpose.

The definition of accompanying assessment that was used in this project is set out below.

'Accompanying assessment' is organised in order to determine the significance or worth of something by careful appraisal and study. It is a development process that illuminates or enlightens the specific policies, processes and practice of its stakeholders and contributes to collective learning.

In principle, assessments or evaluations can be carried out for two different reasons: accountability and improvement. Accountability relates to an 'inspectorial' exercise that seeks to justify a particular activity. It investigates whether the best value for money has been achieved, and provides a measuring stick for judgement of the activity. In contrast, improvement relates to providing the actors with a thorough review of an activity's achievements against its potential. A development process assessment exercise for policy learning is principally aimed at providing recommendations for the future continuation and improvement of activities, and will allow for illumination and development.

It was the firm belief of the ETF LEARN project that in this phase of rapid reform in the countries involved, the improvement dimension was the most important. However excellent or disappointing the results of a project or programme, policy development and reform must go on, and the added value of products and new insights produced by the project needed to be taken forward in current and future contexts. Knowing what happens in the project was above all a resource for making useful contributions to the national or regional system to support its ongoing development. The systematic follow-up development, based on project results (sustainability), and the programming of next-phase activities (strategic planning) were therefore clear priorities for the participating countries.

<sup>37</sup> This is a term that came into widespread use as a result of the research of Nobel Laureate economist Theodore Schultz.



## 7.5 ACCOMPANYING ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

Another important question relates to the point in time at which the assessment is carried out: as interim, final, ex-post, or accompanying evaluation. Each of these requires the collection of different information, the use of different methods and the production of different outputs.

However, it is usual for such assessments to be carried out at the end of a project, i.e. as final evaluations. In contrast, an accompanying assessment exercise starts asking evaluation questions right from the start of the project. It allows for critical review to take place at an early stage, and enables actors to undertake corrective action when there is a risk that the objectives, outputs, products or deliverables of the project will not be achieved.

Assessments organised as accompanying research are carried out from 'inside' a project. Hence, instead of being an external expert collecting information via secondary sources after project activities have taken place, the accompanying researcher is one of the project partners, and is therefore well informed about the project, and interested in its success.

In normal monitoring research the evaluator is an outsider who is observing from a distance and producing critical findings afterwards. The accompanying researcher, on the other hand, strives to be part of the solution and comes up with proposals for adjustment immediately if these are felt to be required. The accompanying researcher could even be viewed as an expert who carries out supportive implementation research. Hence, the 'improvement' function of evaluation is even stronger here, and assessment should be seen as a critical but supportive consulting function from within the project.

## 7.6 SPECIFIC SCOPE OF WORK

The scope and function of the accompanying research within the LEARN project were presented at the main events and discussed continuously with participants during the three-year duration of the project, and in particular during the initial phase.

With regard to the specific role of the evaluator, the following activities were expected:

- acting as a project partner with a particular perspective: asking questions, ensuring there is understanding, assessing the feasibility of activities;
- analysing project documents and other relevant materials;
- conducting regular interviews with partners on the progress of the project;
- providing formative feedback during the process;
- exchanging information with the ETF project team and country teams;
- administering feedback questionnaires;

- proposing ideas for new directions if initiatives reached a dead-end;
- observing how participants work – community, cooperation, shared goals;
- monitoring e-communication in the web-based CoP.

The accompanying research enabled the ETF to ensure that it, and the co-funding Italian government, received a return on its investment in the project; supported the internal (and external) monitoring of the project; was absolutely instrumental in keeping the project on track and on time; and provided useful corrective assessment and constructive recommendations in verbal form, and twice a year in writing, for feedback, observation and reflection.

## 7.7 CONCRETE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ACCOMPANYING RESEARCH

A huge amount of knowledge, skills and experiences was accumulated by the participating professionals and institutions during the three years of the LEARN project. In a 'learning' society, the project has convincingly justified the use of 'LEARN' in its title. It is significant that all project events and all experiences between the events have been observed and assessed using the accompanying research mechanism. Being part of the process (the 'accompanying' attribute) and assessing its elements (the 'research' attribute) has made it possible to capitalise immediately on evidence-based findings and recommendations that could then lead to positive changes in the project implementation.

The following list of findings, taken from an interim report, illustrates how this immediate feedback chain worked. The findings relate to a number of problematic issues that were discovered by the accompanying researcher in a specific phase of the project.

- Financial issues (delays in the transfer of funds, at least in the case of Albania) have postponed the launch of country projects.
- There are positive signs with regard to the use of the electronic forum, but communication through this medium remains limited.
- The substitution of participants continues to create continuity problems, though at the same time it extends the impact of the project to other actors.
- During the main events there are still cases of presentations overrunning, sometimes outside the main topic of the session concerned.
- At the conference an abundance of helpful documentation was provided for the participants, but in some cases presentation slides were printed in a very small size and were impossible to read.

Such findings were always followed by relevant recommendations (as part of the same accompanying research interim report).

The LEARN project should be more focused on:

- intensifying efforts to summarise, document and publish positive experience, and the impact of the LEARN project should be one of the main issues to be addressed in 2009, where the contribution of country teams will be essential;
- the issue of changes in the country teams and the involvement of a considerable number of new participants in the project; this calls for both continuity and familiarisation events, taking place in parallel, in order to increase synergy between 'old' and 'new' team members;
- better support for project staff and experts with regard to implementation, reporting and financial issues relating to the country project, both during and between events;
- continuing to find ways to promote greater use of the electronic platform, not only by the project staff, experts and country team leaders, but also by other participants;
- filling in the gaps between the main events through concrete tasks/assignments planned for the country-based activities, according to the specific projects being carried out;
- more strict moderation of conferences and workshops to avoid long and generic presentations, which are sometimes outside the topic concerned, in order to give more time to focused presentations, discussions and individual and team work;
- better quality documentation of presentations (slides, in particular);
- a better social programme during the main events.

The accompanying researcher was not an outside observer, and his role was not isolated from the rest of the project participants. The findings and recommendations are not simply the researcher's personal opinions. The feedback collected from the participants was one of the main sources of information, and provided the basis for drawing the main conclusions.

The following list is a summary of participants' opinions with regard to the progress and achievements of the LEARN project in a particular phase of its implementation.

- In general, participants have a very positive opinion of the overall design and implementation of the project.
- Participants appreciate the quality of the experts and their presentations, their flexibility, and the variety and applicability of methodologies applied during project events and activities.
- Establishment of networks and the sharing of experience (both EU and Western Balkan) are considered by participants to represent the main added value for the country teams and other project participants.
- Participants greatly appreciated the way in which the main events (with very few exceptions) were organised.

By the time the LEARN project had ended, a great deal of know-how and experience had been accumulated; this

represents potential for further development in the everyday activities of participating individuals and institutions. From the accompanying research perspective this was summarised as follows in the final report.

- The network established in the context of the LEARN project has developed its own strong culture and a shared vision for acting and learning in networks. Such experience has been extended in the countries, by establishing networks beyond the people and institutions directly involved in the project.
- Many innovative ideas presented during the events, such as 'horizontal learning', 'experiential learning', 'learning network', 'community of practice', 'bench-learning', etc., have been discussed during and after the events, and further elaboration of these 'core' elements should be taken forward in new regional projects, and should inform national project development in the coming years.
- The self-directed national development projects have provided a learning platform for shared learning for all participants, and this action at an operational level has also led to action at tactical and strategic levels in the internal organisation of participating VET centres/agencies.
- There is clear evidence that the main, very ambitious objectives of the LEARN project – such as to support institutional capacity, to continuously stimulate VET system development, to nurture innovation in teaching and learning in vocational schools, and to increase capacity for international networking and project cooperation – have been satisfactorily fulfilled.

## 7.8 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ACCOMPANYING RESEARCH, AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

From an ETF project management perspective, the accompanying research function has been a highly valuable resource for continuous adaptations and reformulations in relation to project implementation. It establishes an 'early warning' system, and the written reports and oral communications with the accompanying researcher have been helpful in terms of achieving the overall project aims as well as the defined objectives set for the major components in the three-year project. The fact that the accompanying researcher was from Albania also provided an informed opinion on the barriers faced by national pilot projects, how these were overcome, and how the LEARN project was generally perceived among policymakers and stakeholders in the country. This was invaluable feedback for a project that had its main focus on activities at regional level of activities but that also needed to monitor value for money from the participating countries' perspective.

Another important benefit of using this assessment strategy is that a double feedback loop is created. On the one hand, the assessment reports are based on interviews with participants together with observations

and analyses carried out by the accompanying researcher. On the other hand, evaluative findings and recommendations are also shared directly with project participants, and this constitutes a strong sense of accountability for the ETF team. This is evaluation with meaning, delivered in a very timely manner.

The accompanying researcher was the main actor in charge of putting this mechanism into operation. From the accompanying researcher's perspective, the following challenges had to be faced:

- to study and internalise the preliminary concept paper developed for the accompanying research instrument (prepared by ETF) and understand the philosophy behind the paper;
- to carefully analyse the relevant information and documentation and to create a clear picture in relation to the LEARN project;
- to prepare a strategy for the implementation of the accompanying research mechanism;
- to design and prepare the necessary tools for collecting and elaborating information;
- to find ways of recommending and making possible positive changes to the project management;
- to make eventual adaptations to the design concept of the accompanying research, according to the context and demands of the reality of the project.

This process of transition from the philosophical and theoretical aspects towards the more practical and operational ones is considered to be the most valuable experience acquired during the project, and it is an experience that is well worth disseminating to others. For the accompanying researcher it has been a real learning process within the context of the LEARN project.

It was not an easy task to maintain an appropriate balance between the two roles of the accompanying researcher: being an objective evaluator and an active contributor at the same time. The main aspects of these two role positions can be described as follows:

- from the position of an external and passive observer towards the role of an internal and active contributor to the process (sometimes in the role of the Albanian team member);
- from the use of standard tools for collecting information (questionnaires, inventories, reports), towards direct observation and even personal contribution;
- from focusing on one or a few (important) events/activities towards a broad but also detailed view of all that is happening in the context of the project;
- from drafting formal reports (interim and final) towards direct verbal exchanges of opinions and advice, group discussions, presentations and e-communication.

As an integral component of the LEARN project, the accompanying research function has been a successful and helpful invention, and it represents an example of good practice that can also be used in future ETF projects.

From an Albanian perspective, the accompanying research mechanism could also be successfully applied in other pilot projects, which are very common and are often guiding the reform processes in the VET systems of transition countries. In many similar projects there is clear evidence that a lack of sustainability seems to be the main limitation of such reforms.

Accompanying research as a feature of pilot projects could help in the process of adapting 'Western' models and experiences and bringing them closer to contexts in transition countries, with improved chances for the sustainability of interventions. It reduces the distance between the three phases – doing, evaluating and improving – and could therefore help to improve the results produced at the end of the reform cycle. This could be considered the main benefit of establishing accompanying research as part of VET projects in transition countries.

These are the wider lessons to be learned from this component. In experimental development projects such as LEARN, the different elements always have internal project logics, but they also have a wider exemplary function for participants. The overarching aim was to familiarise participants with a method of working that could be taken back to their own countries and potentially become part of established practice in national VET centres. There is a fundamental lack of education research in all South Eastern European countries and also a completely unnecessary lack of systematic learning from the large number of international experts who have worked in each of the countries during the past 15 years. Countries are exposed to a variety of elements from foreign systems; these are often not fully compatible with the countries' own arrangements, but it is nevertheless extremely worthwhile for countries to learn from them. Countries need to learn from all visiting international experts, follow their work and thereby gather experience, consolidate their own national knowledge base, accumulate this knowledge, and also acquire the capacity to ask critical questions if the foreign concepts and guidelines for reform do not fit well with established national priorities and values in education and training.

The experience with direct and project-internal assessments that run in parallel with the normal project activities should inspire a new strategy towards policy learning. Many assistance projects that are funded by and undertaken on behalf of international donors are characterised by policy transfer or policy copying. They are based on the assumption that there exist best policy practices that are relevant for any country and can therefore be easily taught by and learned from international consultants, or studied and copied by national policymakers. The practices are considered 'best' because they fit into particular theoretical or ideological constructs, or because they are seen to 'work'. However, policies based on the transfer or copying of best practices have generally resulted in unsustainable policy proposals. The main reasons for this are that they did not fit into the wider context of the countries, there was no real ownership established among key national stakeholders, and therefore no commitment or even opportunity for

anyone to make the policies work in practice following the withdrawal of the funding agency. As a result, implementation of new policies has almost never achieved the expected results.

Another important barrier to optimising available foreign expertise was pointed out by Steiner-Khamsi (2004) in her analysis of the politics and economics of policy borrowing. Based on her studies in Mongolia, she found that there is often a 'policy bilingualism' in play that the international experts need to understand. The national government simultaneously engages in 'global speak' (geared towards international donors) and 'local speak' (addressing its Mongolian constituents). This challenge is shared with many partner countries.

This combination of donor and recipient expectations and behaviour has created problems of sustainability for many

donor-supported reform initiatives. Much of the earlier assistance given to support VET reform in the partner countries was guided by principles of policy copying and policy taking. The guiding principle on the donor side seems to have often been, 'we know your future and your past is irrelevant'. Stakeholders and policymakers in transition countries have not been able to learn much about their new roles in a changing VET system, although they may sometimes have become experts on the systems of other countries.

Effective policy learning should aim for a deeper understanding of policy issues and processes than that provided by a simple search for best practice. Becoming familiar with the principle of accompanying research could well be a first step in this direction.

# 8. THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF VOCATIONAL TEACHERS IN TRANSITION CONTEXTS

LUCIAN CIOLAN

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on teacher professionalism and the professional identity of vocational teachers, which is under pressure across South Eastern Europe. The starting point is the fact that radical social change in transition countries has had a deep psychological impact on teachers and on their self-perception of their professional roles and tasks. The analysis argues that it is necessary to find a new perspective on the fundamentals of being a vocational school teacher. In all countries there is a need to redefine what should characterise and inform modern teacher training in contemporary society. It is argued that a redefined strategy will need to transcend the mythic approach to the teaching profession, to go beyond the prevailing managerial approach and to move towards a genuinely professional approach.

This chapter builds on a comparative analysis of countries participating in the LEARN project, but broadens its perspective by also including developments in the new South Eastern European EU member countries – Bulgaria and Romania – which are in many ways still coping with the many challenges facing transition societies.

## 8.2 THE CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS DURING TRANSITION

The tremendous transformations that have taken place in transition countries have generated challenging developments, especially in the public (services) field, including education. There is a great deal of research and analytic literature on this topic, and there are even respected scholars who specialise in transition. In most cases this unique phenomenon that is taking place in Central and South Eastern European post-communist countries has been approached from 'outside', from an economic, political, social or cultural perspective. The approach has predominantly established an analysis from what is best described as a 'macro' perspective, while neglecting the impact of changes on the human beings involved in the structural change process. This is not an adequate basis on which to understand the substantial effects of transition. The focus here, therefore, will be on one of the specific and mostly neglected aspects of transition in education, namely the transition(s) in teachers' professional identity; an attempt will be made to capture a sense of transformation at this 'micro' level of

individuals. The analysis will refer in particular to teachers in vocational and technical education.

The issue raises a number of questions.

- How is transition reflected in the teaching profession?
- How can this unclear and controversial process, which is already a well-used phrase that is accepted in public and academic discourse, be related to inner identity processes?
- Which dimensions and aspects of the professional identity of teachers are changing?
- In which direction is this identity changing?

Some of these questions have already been addressed in previous chapters, while other aspects will be presented here for further reflection. What will be emphasised here is the fact that transition, as a complex process specific to South Eastern European countries following the collapse of communism, is not only a 'social' phenomenon, but also an individual identity transformation process, in personal, social and professional life.

There is sometimes a limited awareness of how dramatically the lives of individuals in the region have changed over the past 20 years. In this chapter an 'insider' perspective will be used to examine the professional identity of VET teachers in a transition context, since this perspective may allow a better understanding of the evolution of the education sector. At the same time it could provide a real insight into the 'what' and 'how' questions that relate to initial and continuing professional development of VET teachers in the context of the educational reforms.

## 8.3 TRANSITION AS A TALE – A PROFESSIONAL TALE

Transition as both a concept and a reality has become much more pervasive in the region than a 'simple' academic paradigm or the 'simple' world we live in. In reality it has become almost a myth that has been constructed and reconstructed to create a framework for interpretation which may explain the unexplainable: the hasty passage from communism to post-modernism. VET teachers, as will be shown, have played a special role in the configuration of this myth since, as a result of their professional responsibilities, they were (are?) located at the crossroads of education and the world of work.



It is useful to explore briefly the possible meanings of 'transition' in order to capture the characteristics of this particular context<sup>38</sup>.

- a. **The historical meaning:** emphasises the time perspective, the passage from one historical era to another. The transition phase began following the break from communism. This was a period that was at the crossroads of two social aims: the demise of the past and plotting a path towards the future.
- b. **The political meaning:** emphasises the abolition of the communist regime and the construction of democracy. A whole new range of political values started to structure the public arena, including freedom, democracy, well-being, competition, property, the market economy, dignity and human rights.
- c. **Economic meaning:** the movement from a centralised, state-planned and -owned, command-driven economy towards a market, custom-oriented and demand-driven economy.
- d. **Social meaning:** the emergence of democratic citizenship, accompanied by all civic rights and responsibilities; the development of associative life and the transformation of the institutional landscape.
- e. **Cultural meaning:** the emergence of cultural diversity, acceptance and encouragement of cultural identities (different social-cultural groups); the demise of ideology in cultural life.
- f. **Educational meaning:** the giving up of the ideological ballast and radical developments towards modernisation, the separation of politics and policy, a change of educational message on the basis of the values mentioned above. A new educational ideal developed and schooling was reconstructed on the basis of new principles: democracy, diversity of learning styles and needs, quality, accountability, autonomy and competence.
- g. **Personal/identity meaning:** accompanying the other meanings, but very different in nature. This perspective makes the shift to the self, to the multiple transformations of the self, especially as a result of changing values and principles. This is a characteristic that is deeply perceived and grappled with at the individual level, and that is also making an impact (and maybe most strongly) on VET teachers, by challenging a wide range of professional beliefs and practices.

With regard to these various facets of transition, a whole 'transition culture' is being articulated in individual and social contexts: an 'inter-regnum' culture (as Cezar Birzea (1996) calls it) situated between post-communism and post-modernism.

The culture and climate of transition contexts is a complicated reality, and one that can be identified and described in different ways, since there is no such a thing as one transition. Transition can be perceived and understood in a different way from the perspectives described above when the dynamics and magnitude of transformations, and also the contextual, historical and

social variables, are considered. Nevertheless, common features are apparent in all these contexts.

- *Coexistence* of some past and new present (future) values, in a mixed and sometimes conflicting manner. In all of the countries of South Eastern Europe, when interpreting the situation of teachers and the way they view their profession, it is possible to identify two types of individual. One is the progressive teacher who is heavily influenced by innovation and development goals. The other is the nostalgic teacher who has not adapted to, and appears to be somewhat lost in, the new professional reality, and who therefore regrets the passing of the 'good old days' when there were fewer worries and greater predictability, and when the system or the state took care of everything, starting from their salaries and ending up with the guarantee of jobs for their graduates. Often these two realities coexist in one individual, and are embedded in the same professional identity.
- *Ambivalence* in terms of a double-sided reality, which is often comfortable for the people, who tend to see it not as transition to something, but as a way of life. This characteristic is strongly linked to the type of individual described above who is apparently able to accommodate the old and the new within the same professional identity, and to be ambivalent and somehow live in two concurrent realities at the same time.
- *Precariousness* is also a natural consequence of accelerated, sometimes forced change, with limited time for reflection and internalisation, for participation and a critical approach. Uncertainty about (almost) everything, including one's own professional development, combined with the constant pressure to move forward rapidly, which is driven mainly by external factors (such as policy measures, donor programmes and student requirements), can create the sense for VET teachers that they in an apparently artificial professional environment that is unstructured and subject to continuing change.

As simple, obvious and 'normal' as they may appear, all three characteristics (and possibly others) have placed VET teachers in South Eastern Europe in a unique and tremendously complex situation: they have to take on a very new professional life in a very short time, to change, almost overnight, a whole set of consolidated and formerly valued professional practices (whether good or bad), and to enter the strange new world of constructivist approaches, in which there is no ultimate truth, but only collaborative constructions of knowledge and values, of learning and competences.

These uncertain times, and sometimes the unclear perspective at the end of the road, have produced a kind of appetite for transition that tends to turn it into a reality, and to situate the discourse and behaviours in a culture of transition. Instead of transiting from one stage to another, there is also the option of living in a state of continuous transition. In this way, transition has become, at the same time:

38 See also Ciolan (2006).



- a complex process of social, political and economic transformation in post-communist countries that are on their way to becoming modern, democratic societies. The 'end' of transition would mean reaching a level of development, stability and prosperity that changes people's social perceptions about the times in which they live. A broad social agreement has been reached that when sound democratic citizenship, a market economy and social well-being are achieved, the country will move out of the transition phase. But in addition there is also an implicit belief that once a new identity has been consolidated, and a new type of professionalism not only accepted but also understood and supported, VET teachers in transition contexts will be able to situate themselves and their practices outside the transition context.
- an everyday situation to which there is no end in sight, since society is increasingly dynamic and complex, and has a 'variable geometry' (Lipovetsky, 1996). Transition is the reality of our times, unstable, chaotic and highly unpredictable. Change has become the only constant in contemporary society.

Returning to the subject of VET teachers and trainers, some key events that have occurred in the past 20 years have shaken their professional lives.

- The collapse of the large-scale socialist economic activities, and, as a consequence, the economic failure of, in particular, heavy industry and collectivised agriculture. Privatisation processes in industry and the restitution of land ownership have broken the strong traditional links between vocational schools and the enterprises for which they were the main producers of personnel. Teachers and trainers in VET were called upon to enter the new game of social partnership, in which the networks are not established, and in which participants must make a real contribution and must actively attract partners. The close linkages between the world of work and the world of education were previously the fundamental governing principle in VET, but today vocational schools in South Eastern Europe are facing the serious problem of establishing links with the industries for which they train students, and very often they complain about the unwillingness of companies to open their doors for the practical training of students or other types of cooperation.
- Technological developments that have rendered their cherished workshops and technical equipment obsolete over a very short period of time. Because of the chronically underfunded education systems, vocational schools all over the region have been unable to keep pace with, or at least avoid dramatically falling behind, industrial developments. This is still the case. With the probable exception of those that have been equipped through various EU projects (including Phare, CARDS and IPA) or those that have benefited from sponsorship arrangements, school VET workshops and laboratories resemble museums. Technological evolution has left a large number of VET teachers and trainers in a completely parallel world to that of the industries for which they are supposed to train.
- The open market mechanisms that no longer guarantee a job for the graduates in a local company, but obliged them to enter into competition with others, to look for a job themselves, and also to learn how to keep it and how to continually upgrade their skills in a lifelong learning environment. As a consequence, a significant number of vocational schools/specialisations and their teachers and trainers find it difficult to make a complete break with the past. Furthermore, since VET courses have not been adapted, they are continuing to teach for the trades and competences they used to train for, but which are no longer required under the new economic conditions. This is taking place in an artificial, out-dated learning environment that has made VET a last resort for students and their parents. Although the central governance of education continues to maintain the VET stream, this is not an attractive option<sup>39</sup>, and a large number of lower secondary graduates enrol in VET because they have no alternative rather than because they wish to become professionals in a particular field.

The struggle within the professional identity of VET teachers and trainers was, and still is, exacerbated by such wide-ranging and profound transformations, which affect the whole range of factors, from social life in its broad sense to individual inner self-development. A whole new outside world has appeared, and teachers and trainers have had to internalise and rebuild their own world accordingly, with little time for reflection, critical analysis, or accommodation to the changes.

## 8.4 THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF VET TEACHERS AND TRAINERS

It is not the intention here to have a theoretical debate on whether VET teachers are professionals, and what their professionalism is. Rather, from the classical perspective of the teacher's professional identity components, the identity processes themselves will be investigated.

Various authors (for example, Grosso de Leon, 2001; Reynolds, 1992; Jegede et al., 2000; Borko and Putnam, 1995; Glaser, 1987) have proposed different kinds of skills, knowledge, dispositions, and values in which effective teachers must be proficient. These include:

- general pedagogical knowledge: this includes knowledge of learning environment and instructional strategies; classroom management; and knowledge of learners and learning;
- subject knowledge: this includes knowledge of content and substantive structures, and knowledge of syntactic structures (equivalent to knowledge of a discipline);

<sup>39</sup> There are a number of exceptions to this, in circumstances where the immediate benefits are obvious, or where employment is almost guaranteed (such as post and telecommunications, construction, natural gas, and catering and food processing).

- pedagogical content knowledge: a conceptual map of how to teach a subject; knowledge of instructional strategies and representations; knowledge of students' understanding and potential misunderstandings; and knowledge of curriculum and curricular materials.
- a repertoire of metaphors (in order to be able to bridge theory and practice).

*(Villegas-Reimers, 2003, pp.39–40)*

#### 8.4.1 The VET teacher as a subject expert: struggling in the middle

Already at this stage the reasons for the 'second-class' image and position of vocational subject teachers and trainers can be identified, and this is often associated with the image of the VET system as a whole. Almost all VET systems have a certain image deficit, but in the post-communist economies and education systems of South Eastern Europe this has become a definite reality. Being perceived mainly as engineers and not primarily as teachers, they had, and still have, to deal with the significant diversity and fragmentation of their subjects. These small technologies cannot compete in the school's academic environment with the prestige of the respected disciplines (such as physics, mathematics, and mother-tongue language studies).

As long as teaching was regarded mainly as transmission of knowledge, a good command of the subject knowledge and eventually some on-the-job training were considered sufficient for being a good teacher. 'Nowadays, it is widely accepted that such a conception of teaching takes insufficient account of the complexity of teaching, and new conceptions of the teacher as a classroom manager, facilitator of learning, etc., are acknowledged. Teaching is much more than the transmission of knowledge' (Beijaard et al., 2000, p.751).

The reality is that vocational knowledge has rapidly become obsolete and outdated, as market economies and new technologies have started to develop. Many VET teachers have found themselves struggling to keep up with all technological developments and innovations and to be eventually one step ahead of the official curriculum, which was often not adapted and renewed in terms of its content. The difficulty has been exacerbated by the existing gap in many of the education systems in the region between VET teachers and respective industry. Even if they came into the education system with a background in the relevant industrial branch, teachers slowly lose touch with the real world of work out there.

Since they are seen to represent rather weak, marginal disciplines, VET teachers struggle to keep their place in academia, in the teachers' world, and since they are not up-to-date with the technological content of their subjects, they struggle to gain acceptance as qualified engineers from colleagues in industry. Struggling somewhere in the middle, between theory and practice, between education and engineering, and between schools and enterprise,

VET teachers in South Eastern Europe have not yet managed to consolidate a desirable or at least acceptable status for themselves. From this perspective it is very surprising that Western economies continue to seek VET graduates from South Eastern Europe creating another 'down-side effect': it is difficult to find high-quality workers in South Eastern Europe, since the best ones are abroad. This is also a reason behind the lower quality of work in these countries, despite the significant funds invested recently in infrastructure projects.

#### 8.4.2 Teachers as pedagogical experts – a saving myth?

The structure of pre-service teacher training results in a large number of VET teachers in South Eastern Europe becoming teachers by accident rather than by design. The capacity to understand and work with diverse groups of student, operational knowledge of learning processes that correspond to the characteristics of age groups and contexts, and the moral and ethical dimensions that exist in teaching are among the general pedagogical concerns of a teacher.

The weak point of the specific domain of VET is that there has been limited and slow development towards VET pedagogy. As pedagogy has changed and developed in general, to involve more complex and constructivist approaches, there is one particular myth that goes against this competence-based approach, namely the concept of a vocation. From this perspective it is not the mastery of pedagogy that makes good teachers, but the sense of vocation, a certain pre-determination, and an almost artisan approach that they should possess.

As a result of the low social and economic status of teachers that has prevailed in recent years, a 'saving myth' has been created on the basis of the former image of a teacher. Teaching was proclaimed, mainly by the teachers themselves, to be a matter of vocation, an almost divine gift that an individual either has or does not have. Teachers should be, from this perspective, apostolic missionaries who are ready to sacrifice themselves on the altar of knowledge and illumination of the younger generation. This myth was often used to boost the self-image of teaching staff, who were constantly underpaid and neglected, with poor material and symbolic benefits from their jobs and, most painfully, a decline in their social status from the position of respected community leaders.

This perspective is not very conducive to a professional approach to a teaching career, to the professionalisation of teaching, or to the consolidation of the professional field itself. There is a vicious circle here: pedagogical skills are superficially taught in the case of future engineering teachers, in concurrent but mainly consecutive teacher-education programmes, which are similar to academic teachers' programmes. The low level of attractiveness of the profession and its marginal status in the academic landscape within South Eastern Europe places VET teacher-training programmes in a shadowy

world that the majority of students are not willing to enter. Teaching vocational subjects has remained a 'stereotypical job', seen from one perspective as being similar to the teaching of academic subjects – too theoretical and knowledge-based – and from another perspective as being oriented towards outdated industry practices, because of the missing link between VET teachers and the industries to which their teaching relates.

### 8.4.3 Teachers as didactical experts: beyond 'rage against machines'

Being knowledgeable about how to teach a specific subject or a family of related subjects has always been a component of the teaching profession. In the area of VET, vocational didactics is generally seen to have a relatively low status among the academic pedagogical-didactic disciplines. Didactic knowledge to a large extent remains confined to the teacher-training departments of universities, disassociated from job practice and from the context of application. Little consistent research has been done in the field of didactics of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and this has had a serious impact on the capacity and openness of VET teachers towards becoming reflective practitioners and researchers themselves. The whole didactics of vocational subjects is often reduced to teaching students how to make machines work, how to fix them, or at least not to blame them if they do not work. Again, vocational didactics is situated somehow in the middle, between pedagogical and technological knowledge, though not able to sufficiently bring the two together, as this specific discipline is supposed or expected to do.

Beyond this, a whole new range of roles for teachers has begun to be articulated, bringing new responsibilities and demands for new competences, and configuring a new professional identity. The new roles or new perspectives that have an impact on vocational teacher functions include the teacher as:

- curriculum developer
- creator and facilitator of learning experiences
- healer and helper in post-conflict areas
- adviser
- adult trainer
- practical jobs trainer
- policymaker and policy process actor
- reflective practitioner, focused on the development of his or her own professional practice
- manager of change
- consultant
- team-worker.

But what does it mean to function as a VET teacher in all these new situations and with all these new demands? First, the new roles that relate to work in the school have had to be internalised and accepted by teachers in a very short period of time, many of them neither subject to deep discussion and analysis, nor supported by training and professional development activities. The new

curricular approaches (competence-based, modular, derived from occupational/professional standards and labour skills analysis), accompanied by the increasingly significant presence of school-based or locality-based curriculum components, have called for teachers themselves to contribute to the design and development of curricula, rather than only to the delivery. A new and modern curriculum is more demanding in terms of the management of the learning process and resources, and this has shifted teachers increasingly towards facilitation and coaching roles, and away from the being the 'knowledge keeper'.

Second, vocational schools in the region – mainly the pilot schools – have had to become more and more open towards the wider community and to act as resource centres, both for other schools and for other types of beneficiaries, such as adult learners and enterprises. Diversification of services has brought further pressure on teachers who are called upon to act in new and changed learning environments that have different learning aims and characteristics.

As numerous and important as these challenges and pressures for the teaching profession might be, how many of them are consistently addressed by teacher-education and teacher-training programmes? There is a need for deeper analysis of and profound changes in the training of VET teachers and trainers, which is still, in many respects, lagging behind not only general teacher training but also the other components of the reforms.

## 8.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The understanding of the new role for the VET system in modern society and the new visions of a completely updated pedagogy for VET, based on the new paradigm of learning, are fully shared by policymakers and experts in South Eastern Europe. However, as the analysis in this chapter has highlighted, the practicalities and realities around classroom, laboratory and workshop teaching present barriers for developing and implementing this new VET pedagogy in transition countries. The analysis has shown that the VET reform discussion cannot be reduced to a discussion on equipping teachers with new and modern competences. Of greater importance is the understanding that VET teachers are real people who bring their own values, traditions, frames of reference and predispositions for action into play in performing their professional roles.

The study of teacher identity has identified the prevalence of a specific type of ambivalence: the deep wish to be part of the process of modernisation and not to stand still, accompanied by a fear of losing one's feet in giving up the traditional ethics, belief systems and practices of the 'good teacher' of former times. This tension is not unique to teachers in South Eastern Europe: in many ways it is shared with teachers all over the world, but the scale of change is much more pervasive in post-socialist countries than elsewhere.

The fact that new concepts are not simply innocent words without deeper meaning for individuals is often overlooked. New concepts, to use a metaphor, often have an impact like that of an explosion in an individual's soul. Teachers' identities and their sense of having a vocation with a dedicated professional ethic are in conflict with many new phenomena: from teaching to learning (which is in reality a 180-degree reversal of the teacher's role); from the teacher as a professional to external quality control (which is converting the substance of learning into management principles); and from schools perceived as independent institutions for culture and learning towards principles of new public management (which is transforming education to quasi-commercial service

provision and making use of private sector management principles).

These developments present a serious challenge for the identity of vocational school teachers across South Eastern Europe. This chapter has presented only an initial analysis and has set out some cornerstones around this very necessary discussion. Teacher-training strategies will need to be designed so that they meet teachers where they stand – at the point where societal change processes meet this internalised identity. Only then can vocational teachers and trainers be brought back from the margins to take centre-stage once more.

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