



IO1 Investigation Research Report: Executive summary

Prepared by Spectrum Research Centre (June 2021)

PROJECT TITLE:

WBL-Q: From EQAVET principles (building blocks) to real quality in WBL on business and company level - self-evaluation, audit and continuous improvement.

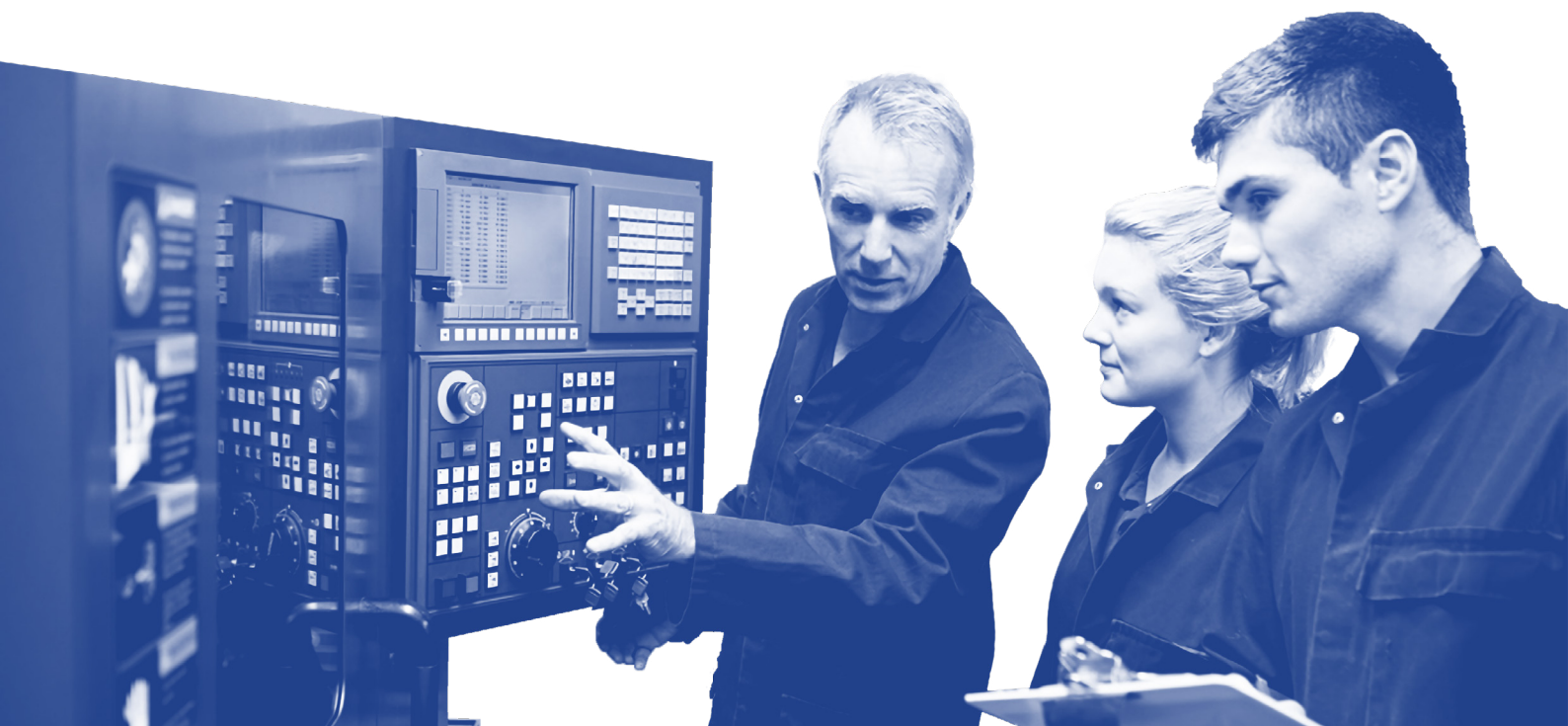
ACRONYM:

WBL-Q

PROJECT NUMBER:

2020-1-AT01-KA202-077966

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.
This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Contents

3	Introduction
3	Policy Context
3	iVET and cVET across Europe
5	What issues are faced?
5	Research Methodology
6	Interview Results
6	Table 1: Detailed Breakdown of the profile of Interviewees:
6	Main findings:
8	Survey Results: Weighted quality criteria list for measuring quality in WBL in companies
8	Table 2: Detailed Breakdown of the profile of respondents per country
9	Key considerations for Plan:
9	Key considerations for Do:
10	Key considerations for Check:
10	Key considerations for Act:
11	Deductions & Recommendations for the development of the self-evaluation and stress test tool, as well as the handbook for WBL responsible
13	Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

This document represents the first intellectual output produced under the Erasmus+ project “From EQAVET principles (building blocks) to real quality in WBL on business and company level – self-evaluation, audit and continuous improvement (WBL-Q)”.

The WBL-Q project aims to significantly contribute to the quality of Work-Based Learning processes (WBL) in businesses and companies across Europe by establishing a reliable, valid and relevant list of quality criteria indicators which can be used to significantly improve the quality of work-based learning processes in business and companies.

The WBL-Q project was financed by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ programme, and is implemented by seven European partners, namely:

1. Auxilium – Austria (Project Coordinator)
2. Wirtschaftskammer Steiermark - Austria
3. IHK-Projektgesellschaft - Germany
4. Start Development Foundation - Hungary
5. Spectrum Research Centre – Ireland
6. Gospodarska Zbornica Slovenije - Slovenia
7. Fondo Formacion Euskadi (FFE) – Spain

POLICY CONTEXT

Economic shocks including the global recession in 2009 and the current Coronavirus pandemic have fundamentally changed the face and shape of the education and training landscape across Europe. In light of these shocks, the workforce has been forced to become adaptive and agile overnight. Work-based learning is a crucial part of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system across Europe, providing learners with opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in a work-based setting.

IVET AND CVET ACROSS EUROPE

Initial Vocational Education and Training (iVET) is traditionally carried out by individuals before establishing a career. iVET is a popular option for young people aged between 15 – 19 years of age, with an estimated 50% of this age cohort participating in iVET annually. However, in recent years, there has been a change in attitude towards iVET from supporting individuals to develop their skills at an early age, to being considered the second-best option behind tertiary education and further studies. On the contrary, Continuous Vocational Education and Training (cVET) occurs once an individual has completed their education or has commenced their career and is typically active within the labour market. To ensure that workers have the skills required for the changing labour market needs, cVET offers opportunities for continuous professional development through reskilling or upskilling.

Vocational education and training is continuously evolving and adapting across Europe. Some of the most important elements in VET across Europe can be seen in the table below:

Austria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dual VET system operates with 110,000 learners commencing VET training annually. • Approximately 80% of VET training is provided in work-based settings • The Vocational Education and Training Act (1969) has established a legal basis and framework for VET. • Due to increased global competition and challenges, many organisations have been forced to stop their work-based learning offerings.
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dual VET system, which is chosen by 50% of young people in Germany. • Learning takes place at two venues – the company and the vocational school. This means that trainees/apprentices are employees and pupils/students at the same time (dual VET). • Expertise of teaching staff at the vocational school and of qualified and certified company-based trainers plays a major role in securing the quality of dual training. • VET provision is highly regulated through the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research in the Vocational Training Act (BBiG). • A final exam which is performed by the chambers completes the apprenticeship.
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2019 LXXX Act on Vocational Education and Training is driving change within VET provision. • The Vocational Training 4.0 strategy aims to introduce quality management systems using EQAVET principles. • Additional supports for those who participate in VET, in the form of monetary grants.
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a long-standing tradition of apprenticeships as a form of WBL in Ireland. • Only 2% of school-leavers pursue WBL as a route, with a total of 12,849 apprentices in 2017. • In 2020, the Irish government sought to radically change the perception of WBL by offering an additional 35,000 courses in further and higher education to support labour market needs and changes. • Monetary benefits were offered to organisations to incentivise taking on WBL learners in 2020 and 2021.

Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dual VET system in operation since 1996. • There are shared responsibilities for learning outcomes between the labour market, learners and education and training providers. • 50% of learning is provided in-company, and at least 40% being provided by the education and training provider. The balance is split between the two parties. • A catalogue for practical training and an apprenticeship plan supports in the planning and implementation of WBL.
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concept of WBL refers to the phase of practical training in the company that the student has to carry out after completing the VET studies: iVET and cVET (which includes dual training). • There are two main contracts (within cVET) which support the development of young people in Spain namely, the Learning and Training Contract and the Internship Contract. • Approximately 244,400 students involved in WBL in 2015, under these two contracts. • Controversy exists over the correct and proper use of these contracts. • In iVET the WBL provides learners with an internship with a duration of 400 hours.

WHAT ISSUES ARE FACED?

Although a myriad of options is available for learners in vocational education and training across Europe, the interpretation of what is high quality WBL is different in countries, regions, systems and businesses across Europe. It should be noted that several attempts have been made at publishing guidelines to develop and improve quality in WBL such as the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), however, gaps currently exist in the efforts to implement these guidelines into real life business realities and human resource management practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to significantly improve the quality of work-based learning processes in businesses and companies across Europe, consortium partners analysed one main research objective:

“To identify relevant and feasible quality criteria in work-based learning processes.”

Between December 2020 and March 2021, consortium members conducted both desk-based and field-based research, with the aim of identifying the current provision of VET across Europe. A series of telephone and online communication interviews were conducted, in addition to an online questionnaire, which were provided to stakeholders involved in WBL systems including: Business owners, HR professionals, WBL responsible persons, VET providers, VET tutors, and VET learners.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

In order to identify the relevant and feasible quality criteria required to support significant quality improvements in work-based learning processes in businesses and companies, a series of interviews were conducted by all partners in the WBL-Q project. A total of 31 stakeholders involved in work-based learning across Europe were contacted between December 2020 and January 2021, using traditional telephone methods and online communication tools. The majority of interviewees were either involved in the management of WBL, through being business owners, WBL responsible persons in organisations, or human resource officers, or, were learners participating in WBL. The distribution of the respondents can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: Detailed Breakdown of the profile of Interviewees:

	Business Owner / WBL Responsible / Human Resource Officer	Learner	WBL expert / VET professional / VET consultant	Head of VET	Head of Staff Development / Apprenticeships / Responsible for Training	Total
Austria	2	2	1	0	0	5
Germany	1	2	1	1	1	6
Hungary	2	2	1	0	0	5
Ireland	2	1	2	0	0	5
Spain	2	2	1	0	0	5
Slovenia	1	2	1	0	1	5
Total	10	11	7	1	2	31

MAIN FINDINGS:

The interviews highlighted a range of challenges that are seen within the provision of WBL procedures at present, in areas including communication; connection; incentives; investment and recruitment.

Across the board, interviewees highlighted that obstacles are faced by organisations in the recruitment of suitable WBL learners. Often, there is little communication between WBL learners, WBL providers and VET institutions which can result in a skills-mismatch occurring and companies receiving inexperienced and/or ineffective candidates. This is often coupled with an image problem attributed to VET and work-based learning which currently exists across Europe, as it is often considered to be a 'second-chance' option rather than an opportunity for growth and development that is as highly appreciated as tertiary education. To address these challenges, interviewees highlighted that an improved connection and relationship is required between vocational schools and the company providing the WBL placement which could provide opportunities for improving learners' performance through various performance matrices.



To further add to the challenges faced by companies in implementing WBL, intergenerational concerns were highlighted by interviewees. Due to the different generational cohorts within companies, barriers are faced in terms of learning and communication styles and practices between older workers and younger WBL candidates. This issue is further exacerbated by the significant variations in the quality management systems which are in place within companies and organisations, with larger organisations potentially managing the WBL system better than smaller private enterprises.

To overcome the challenges and obstacles that are currently present, there is a pressing need to heavily invest in WBL, especially in making it more attractive to companies to get involved in. Interviewees suggested that through investment or financial incentives, companies would be more willing to participate in WBL programmes and offer placements. Additional measures such as incentivising continuous professional development for all stakeholders, including VET professionals and in-company personnel, could result in companies being more willing to participate as these stakeholders would have the required skills and knowledge to successfully deliver WBL programmes.

To conclude, all interviewees were informed that *“as part of the project, we are developing an online tool to assist stakeholders in the WBL process to manage the WBL process”*. Although some reservations were expressed with regards to the adoption rate of the WBL-Q tool, it was viewed as a positive development and a step in the right direction to address the gaps in WBL quality management systems.

SURVEY RESULTS:

Weighted quality criteria list for measuring quality in WBL in companies

To support the development of an online self-assessment tool to be used to measure the quality of WBL systems in companies and organisations, the WBL-Q consortium developed a questionnaire using two benchmark frameworks namely the ISO standard for Quality Management and the EQAVET Building Blocks. The questionnaire merged the ISO elements of Plan, Do, Check and Act, with five elements of the EQAVET Building Blocks; Management Culture and Leadership; Quality Management; Supporting Staff and Learners; Self-Assessment; and Involvement of Stakeholders.

The questionnaire consisted of 51 questions and enabled the WBL-Q consortium to collect an invaluable input into the key quality indicators upon which the self-assessment tool should be designed, and the opinion of relevant stakeholders on the assignment of a relevant weighting to the indicators based on their experiences of work-based learning practices. The WBL-Q Online questionnaire was completed by 300 respondents across six European countries. The table below indicates the distribution of responses per partner country:

Country	Business Owners (etc)	VET Providers	Learners
Austria	42	6	4
Germany	23	9	15
Hungary	28	9	11
Ireland	26	15	9
Slovenia	31	16	4
Spain	19	28	5
Total	169	83	48

Table 2: Detailed Breakdown of the profile of respondents per country.

The questionnaire was divided into four main sections; Plan, Do, Check and Act, with 12 core indicators identified as being important for the design of the self-assessment tool.

Key considerations for Plan:

The PLAN section presented a series of potential quality indicators that could be used to measure the contribution of Management Culture & Leadership and Quality Management to WBL. The three most important indicators that were highlighted by respondents to the questionnaire include **(1)** *“Commitment to WBL at senior level (statement of intent)”* – 158 responses; **(2)** *“Roles, responsibilities and authority are clearly defined”* - 132 responses; and **(3)** *“Resources allocated to facilitate WBL”* - 115 votes.

These results show that there is an urgent and pressing need for senior management to commit to their responsibility as providers of WBL in organisations. There is an onus on senior management to ensure that WBL is firmly embedded in the policies and strategic objectives of companies and valued as a resource for talent management. Although challenges exist at present as the roles, responsibilities and authority are ill-defined, resources must be directed towards the overall facilitation of WBL within companies.

Key Indicators for Do:

The DO section presented a series of potential quality indicators that could be used to measure the contribution of Supporting Staff and Learners to WBL. The three most important indicators that were highlighted by respondents to the questionnaire include **(1)** *“Occupational Health and Safety requirements are established”* – 174 responses, **(2)** *“WBL supervisors are trained and experienced”* – 173 responses; and **(3)** *“Exposure to real-life work experiences during the WBL”* – 156 responses.

The role of supporting staff and learners in the WBL process cannot be underestimated, especially in the current economic climate in which we find ourselves. Since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, health and safety has been at the forefront of consideration by companies, this coupled with existing legal requirements for workplace safety, it is not a surprise that the most important indicator in this dimension is to ensure that Health and Safety standards are established. In addition to these concerns, by offering CPD training opportunities to staff, occupational risks can be mitigated against.

Key Indicators for Check:

The Check section presented a series of potential quality indicators that could be used to measure the contribution of Self-assessment to WBL. The three most important indicators in this section were **(1)** *“Internal communication and feedback loops are established”* – 135 responses; **(2)** *“Satisfaction levels are monitored and measured regularly either for company, learner and VET Institution”* – 126 responses, and; **(3)** *“Improvement opportunities are determined and actioned”* - 122 responses.

As highlighted in the interviews, communication continues to be a challenge within WBL processes. Ineffective communication protocols within companies at present are hampering the ability to provide feedback both internally, and externally. With this in mind, it is imperative that deliverables are decided upon in order to allow both the learner and the WBL provider to self-examine their own abilities in order to continue to deliver high-quality and highly effective work-based learning placements and experiences.

Key Indicators for Act:

The final dimension in the WBL-Q questionnaire was “Act”, which presented a series of potential quality indicators that could be used to measure the contribution of Involving Stakeholders to WBL. The three most important indicators in this section were **(1)** *“Structured communication in place between company and VET provider - feedback, problem solving, etc.”* 135 responses; **(2)** *“Relationship between Company and VET Provider established”* - 131 responses, and; **(3)** *“Improvement opportunities determined and actioned”* - 113 responses.

In order to continue to provide high-quality and reputable WBL across Europe, these results similarly highlight the importance of building and maintaining rapport and communication with all stakeholders involved in WBL. Through successful communication, it is endeavoured that improvement opportunities can be identified, determined and actioned. It is the aim of the WBL-Q Self-Assessment Tool to substantially assist in this process.

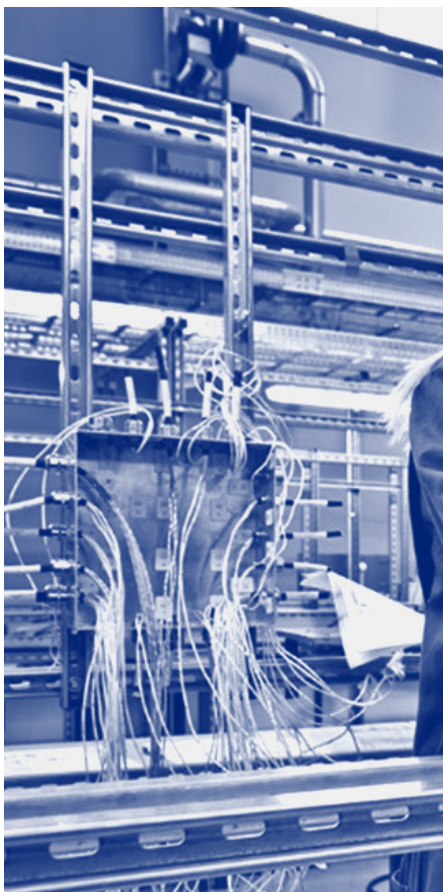


DEDUCTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-EVALUATION AND STRESS TEST TOOL, AS WELL AS THE HANDBOOK FOR WBL RESPONSIBLE

The main findings in the research undertaken by the WBL-Q consortium highlight that, overall, there are many similarities in terms of the tool that should be used to assess the quality of work-based learning practices in companies and organisations. Interviewees and research participants from all partner countries strongly agree that the tool should be made available both online and offline, especially in Ireland as there are challenges presented for those working in rural areas trying to access high quality broadband. This was represented in 66% of respondents across all countries voting in favour of having the tool both online and offline. The second most popular answer with 83 responses (27%) was online version only. The least favourite result provided by questionnaire respondents was offline version online, with 10 responses.

Additionally, the results from the questionnaire highlighted that partners would like to see common elements in the self-assessment tool, including:

- operating as a mobile application
- having customisation capability
- the ability for users to be able to download their results
- the ability for users to be able to receive specific recommendations from the app.



The least favourite elements highlighted were the ranking system, a function for collaboration and providing results.

In order to ensure sustainable use of the self-evaluation and stress test tool, the research conducted recommended that the WBL-Q tool should not require additional time, investment or resources from companies. This element was reinforced throughout the completed interviews also. It is important to consider that companies may not use this tool unless there was mandatory participation, therefore, the benefits of the tool may need to be “sold” robustly to them. Early adopters and the use of testimonials will be needed to support the exploitation of the tool into the future. However, of utmost importance is to ensure that the content within the tool is relevant to the typical HR processes within companies, easy to use, applicable to all companies (irrespective of size or sector) and compliant with GDPR.

Throughout the interviews, the issue of successful matching between companies and candidates arose frequently. To examine the companies’ ability to succeed in future endeavours, it would be interesting to include a section where companies could upload a biographical piece on their organisation in order to successfully attract candidates to their company.

To meet the demands of the workplace, interviewees highlighted a concern that mentors and apprentices were not aware of each other’s schedules. Occupational diaries should be made available through this online tool. Furthermore, this issue extended to mentors being unaware of the duties and tasks of the apprentice. A section containing useful documentation such as employment contracts which are provided by companies in most countries in this research would be helpful to alleviate some of these concerns. A final section which is country specific should direct mentors to opportunities for continuous professional development.



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To ensure high standards and quality within WBL across Europe, that is standardised and accessible to all, all partner countries identified that the aims of the WBL-Q project are extremely relevant and much needed.

Three core aspects were identified through the research that need to be taken into account if we are to work towards securing quality WBL opportunities for young people and iVET learners. Firstly, it was recognised through the research that there is a pressing and ongoing need across all partner countries, that within companies there needs to be a commitment to WBL practices at senior management level. The self-assessment tool proposed by the WBL-Q project consortium was seen as a potentially valuable mechanism in which this can be accomplished, if adopted and used within companies.

Secondly, WBL mentors and supervisors must be well-trained and motivated in order to ensure that they can deliver high-quality training opportunities to learners in iVET and apprenticeships. Intergenerational concerns within the labour market will need to be addressed by WBL providers to ensure that young, tech savvy learners are supported and mentored throughout their placements.

And finally, it is imperative for hosting companies and organisations across Europe to be provided with a learner profile, such as through curriculum vitae, in order to correctly match them to the position and to assign tasks and duties within their skill set that contribute to the companies. Structured interviews and regular meetings with learners when they are in-house will improve the overall quality of WBL practices.

In addition to the WBL-Q Stress Tool, the project consortium will also develop an accompanying WBL-Q Handbook for the WBL professionals and HR managers to support the implementation of the tool and to ensure quality in work-based learning with a focus on self-evaluation and continuous improvement. The content of this handbook will take note of the recommendations of this research process and design a resource that will comprise the following chapters:

1. Introduction to WBL in a European VET arena
2. Quality assurance in WBL - why and how
3. Grasping quality - quality criteria for work-based learning
4. Identifying gaps and potential in in-company WBL processes
5. Self-evaluation and stress test for WBL
6. Case studies and practical examples from the business world
7. Documents, checklists and further reading about quality management and assurance in WBL and beyond