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THEMATIC AREA: Attractiveness of WBL

General report

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Introduction

1.1. Project Context and Objectives

The "BALKAN WBL COOPERATION" project is a collaborative initiative funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union, bringing together key stakeholders from Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, and Romania. The project's overarching goal is to enhance the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of Work-Based Learning (WBL) systems across the Balkan region. By fostering transnational cooperation, the project seeks to identify shared challenges, exchange best practices, and develop evidence-based recommendations to support systemic reforms in vocational education and training (VET).

1.2. Scope and Methodology of the Report

This document synthesizes and provides a comparative analysis of the attractiveness of WBL in the four partner countries. Its findings are derived from expert insights and findings from comprehensive national research conducted between March and June, which included a mixed-methods approach of surveys, structured interviews, and group discussions. The research engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives from: 22 vocational schools, 14 employers, 4 VET centers, and 15 policymakers in Bulgaria; 32 vocational schools, 17 employers, 8 VET centers, and 7 policymakers in North Macedonia; and contributions from 12 VET schools, 18 WBL partner companies, and 14 policymakers in Romania, alongside detailed analysis from Greece. This multi-stakeholder approach ensures a holistic perspective on the current state of WBL attractiveness.

The report aims to offer a comparative analysis that highlights common regional trends, as well as specifics of each country. The goal is to collect insights that can provide information to national and regional policies aimed at making VET including WBL a more attractive, valued, and effective pathway for learners and a more cost-beneficial investment for employers.

1.3. Key Dimensions of WBL Attractiveness

The concept of WBL "attractiveness" is multilayered, and for the purpose of this research and report, it is reviewed by four key, interconnected dimensions.

1. **Access and Participation:** This dimension examines the extent to which WBL is accessible to all learners, regardless of their geographic location, socio-economic background, gender, or learning abilities. It assesses both the formal availability of WBL placements and the practical barriers that hinder participation.
2. **Supply and Demand Alignment:** This dimension focuses on the attractiveness and relevance of the WBL programs through its connection to business innovations, modern technologies and



new occupations/ profiles needed in companies. It analyses, programs implementation in companies, the quality of practical training, and the degree to which WBL equips learners with the skills and competencies demanded by employers.

3. **Governance and Policies:** This explores the role of national and regional governance structures, legislative frameworks, and policy measures in shaping the WBL setting. It assesses how policies related to funding, quality assurance, and stakeholder coordination influence the overall attractiveness for both learners and companies.
4. **Promotion and Image:** This dimension Identify official strategies and public policies supporting the promotion of WBL and roles of different stakeholders in advertising WBL, as well as the financial mechanisms used to support promotional campaigns. It analyses the effectiveness of promotional activities, communication strategies, and career guidance in building a positive and accurate image of WBL as a valuable career pathway.

By examining these four dimensions in a comparative context, this report provides a comprehensive foundation for the strategic recommendations.

2. Access and Participation in WBL

Bulgaria

In recent years, Bulgaria witnessed to a formal expansion of WBL, primarily through the dual education model. However, this expansion has not translated into uniform access across the country. A significant geographic disparity persists, with urban centers and economically developed regions offering a broader range of occupations and a higher number of placements, while rural and remote areas face chronic shortages. This geographical unevenness seriously limits opportunities for students outside big cities.

The inclusiveness of the Bulgarian WBL system remains a significant point of concern. Targeted outreach to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes is mostly absent, resulting in a stark segregation where boys choose technical professions and STEM-related occupations, while girls gravitate towards service and healthcare sectors. Furthermore, the system lacks a structured support model for students with learning difficulties or those from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds. While some VET schools make ad-hoc individual adjustments, there is no systematic approach. Companies, for their part, express limited readiness to accommodate learners requiring special support, often mentioning a lack of resources, expertise, and clear guidance as primary constraints.

Flexibility in schedule for WBL provision is another area of weakness. Most of placements are rigidly tied to the standard academic calendar, with little room for alternative formats like block placements, weekend training, or hybrid models that combine online learning with in-company practice. This lack of



flexibility makes WBL less accessible for non-traditional learners and fails to adapt to the operational needs of many businesses.

Greece

Greece has established a robust and detailed legislative framework to regulate WBL access through various institutional pathways, including EPAL (Vocational Lyceums), EPAS (Vocational Apprenticeship Schools), and SAEK (Post-secondary VET Institutes). National strategies and investments under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) have explicitly aimed to promote inclusiveness and expand access for vulnerable groups.

Despite this strong policy foundation, significant structural and operational barriers persist. One of the most cited challenges is the inflexibility of program schedules, which makes participation difficult for working adults or individuals with family responsibilities. Powerful disincentives are the administrative burden and costs associated with WBL participation, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While there is a growing interest from learners, the supply of high-quality placements remains insufficient to meet demand, especially in high-growth sectors.

Data from the Adult Education Survey reveals that while overall participation shows a slight upward trend, significant disparities remain. Women and low-income learners continue to be under-represented, indicating that current inclusive measures are not yet sufficient to overcome deep-seated societal and economic barriers. Stakeholders from VET providers and businesses alike strongly recommend the strengthening of local and regional cooperation networks to better match supply and demand, alongside the development of more flexible, hybrid learning models and increased financial support for paid internships.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia stands out with a demonstrably positive trend in VET enrolment. In the 2024/2025 academic year, students in vocational education constitute two-thirds of the total secondary school population, a significant increase from 55% five years prior. This growth, particularly since the introduction of dual VET, indicates a rising perception of VET attractiveness. The new VET Law reinforces this by prescribing inclusiveness, with specific articles dedicated to ensuring access for students with special educational needs (SEN) and those who have not completed primary education.

The state actively supports this trend through targeted measures, such as providing scholarships for students in dual classes, in-demand occupations, and Roma students. Projects focused on social inclusion further aim to improve access for individuals from diverse ethnic groups and those with special needs.



However, despite these positive developments, challenges persist. A critical bottleneck is the difficulty in securing enough WBL placements across all economic sectors. Although cooperation with businesses is excellent in some areas, it is lacking in others, which is why practical training is organized for those students in school premises, rather than in companies. Stakeholders across the board—schools, training centers, and policymakers—recommend the introduction of targeted subsidies and other forms of tangible support for companies that offer placements, especially to students from marginalized groups. This is seen as a crucial next step to the operationalization of the legal framework of inclusiveness into practical reality.

Romania

Romania's system guarantees theoretical access to continued education for every student after completing the eighth grade. However, this formal guarantee is not followed by real and effective participation. The country struggles with one of the highest early school leaving rates in the European Union (16.8% compared to the EU average of 9.3%). This means a significant portion of the target youth population leaves the education system before they can even access upper-secondary VET and WBL.

For those who do continue, participation is often hindered by powerful socio-economic factors. Respondents identified the lack of financial means to pursue a vocational pathway, often without the guarantee of a decent job, as a primary constraint. Limited geographical mobility and financial constraints prevent students from accessing a wider range of qualifications offered in other regions. Although the official nomenclature lists over 130 qualifications, in practice, students are often limited to a small selection that is geographically close to them.

The concept of inclusiveness in Romania, as highlighted by stakeholders, needs to be broadened. It should not be restricted to students with formally recognized special educational needs but must also encompass the large cohort of students from difficult social backgrounds, rural areas, and those with poor academic results. For these students, simple access is not enough; dedicated tools and processes, including remedial support and motivational preparation, are required to ensure meaningful participation.

Common challenges

While the national contexts vary, a clear set of common challenges regarding WBL access and participation emerges across these four countries in the Balkan region. The most prominent issue is the gap between policy and practice. All four countries have legislative frameworks and policies aimed at offering inclusive education and WBL, yet structural barriers consistently undermine their effectiveness.



Regional disparities are a universal problem, with learners in rural and economically weaker areas facing significantly fewer opportunities than their urban parts. This creates a system of unequal access that reinforces existing social and economic gaps.

Inclusiveness for vulnerable groups remains a major hurdle. Despite formal commitments, systematic, well-resourced support for learners with disabilities, those from low-income families, or those challenging gender norms in their career choices is mainly absent. Companies are often unprepared or unwilling to provide the necessary additional support without targeted incentives, guidance, and other support mechanisms.

Non-flexibility of WBL models is another shared weakness. The traditional school year-calendar-bound approach to WBL placements is not appropriate to the needs of a diverse learner population and the operational realities of modern businesses. There is a clear need in all countries for more flexible, hybrid, and modular approaches to WBL practical realization, as well as education-business networking mechanisms on local and regional level.

Finally, **financial barriers** are a serious constraint for both learners and companies. For students, the costs associated with transport, accommodation, and materials can be expensive. For SMEs, the administrative and resource costs of hosting learners often outweigh the perceived benefits. Addressing these financial disincentives through targeted subsidies, scholarships, and support schemes is essential for unlocking the full potential of WBL participation across the region.

3. WBL Supply and Demand

The core value of WBL is its ability to bridge the gap between education and work. Its attractiveness is therefore fundamentally dependent on the perceived relevance of the skills and knowledge it provides. This chapter analyses the offer of the programs and qualifications by VET institutions from the leans of their modernization and attractiveness from one side to attract the students and from other side to attract the companies and to respond to business sector demand.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has undertaken national reforms aimed at better connecting VET curricula with the needs of the labor market. The establishment of 20 Sectoral Skills Councils in 2024 is a significant policy development intended to play a key role in updating the list of VET professions and ensuring that training content reflects current industry trends. The Ordinance on Dual Education legally obliges companies to participate in curriculum planning.



However, research findings reveal a substantial gap between these policy intentions and the reality on the ground. Employer involvement in curriculum development is often described as "superficial" and "a formality." Many employers report that the training programs their WBL students follow do not adequately reflect the technological changes, digital tools, and specific work processes used in their companies. VET institutions point out rigid formal procedures for updating training content, so the programs are rarely revised in direct response to specific company input.

Over the last five years, there has been a moderate increase in the number of companies engaging in WBL. However, this growth has been more quantitative than qualitative. Many new companies joined WBL programs due to short-term incentives, such as project funding or reputational benefits, rather than a long-term strategic commitment to training future employees. This occasional engagement means that there is no sustainable feedback mechanism to drive curriculum relevance, and as a result, many programs are not upgraded and aligned appropriately with technological and business advances.

Greece

Greece has significantly expanded its WBL offerings through reforms embedded in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the VET Strategic Plan, which are programs designed to respond to the growing demand for skilled technical profiles in strategic sectors like digital technologies, the green economy, and advanced manufacturing.

Despite these efforts, a persistent misalignment between training provision and labor market needs remains, particularly in fast-changing, high-demand fields. Experts attribute this to two main factors: the lack of systematic, real-time mechanisms to diagnose emerging skills needs, and the limited participation of enterprises—especially SMEs in the design and evaluation of vocational training programs.

The quality and relevance of WBL realization in companies are also different. Stakeholders from VET institutions report that while some enterprises provide structured mentorship and meaningful learning environments, others offer little more than routine or marginal tasks. This reduces learner motivation and weakens the effectiveness of the program. Student motivation is further affected by the perception that WBL offers less stable job opportunities and lower wages compared to traditional academic routes, particularly in sectors where temporary contracts or informal employment are common. From the employers' perspective, administrative complexity and uncertainty regarding their responsibilities influence negative on their motivation to deeper engagement.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the alignment of supply and demand appears most effective within the dual education model. The attractiveness of these programs is directly linked to their connection with specific



occupations that are in high demand by companies. The continuous increase in the number of schools and companies cooperating in dual VET (from 8 schools and 16 companies in 2020/21 to 66 schools and 600 companies in 2024/25) is strong evidence of this growing alignment.

A key feature of the Macedonian VET system is its flexibility; WBL programs can be revised upon the request of chambers of commerce, companies, or schools, allowing for quicker adaptation to modern technologies and processes; Dual WBL programs are developed jointly by school and partner company. Furthermore, the professional development of teachers in the past two years are often conducted within companies, which contributes to a better linkage between theoretical content and practical skills.

However, challenges remain. Policymakers and educators point to a lack of modern equipment in educational institutions as a significant barrier to teaching up-to-date skills. Companies, while generally satisfied, note that students could be even better prepared. Two-thirds of surveyed companies recommend that educational institutions strengthen career guidance and provide more specific pre-WBL orientation to better align student expectations with the realities of the work environment. There is also no systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the results of WBL, such as tracking graduate employment rates, which would provide valuable data for further improvements.

Romania

Romania's VET system is designed to be demand-based, meaning that programs should theoretically be developed in direct response to requests from companies. The Locally Developed Curriculum (LDC) is a key instrument that allows for this flexibility, enabling employers to have new and relevant competencies delivered to students without waiting for national standards to be updated.

However, a stark "participation paradox" exists. Research from Cedefop shows that in 2022, only 8.4% of recent VET graduates in Romania had undertaken work experience as part of their education, which is dramatically lower than the EU's 60% target. This extremely low participation rate suggests that, despite its demand-based design, the WBL system has very low relevance to labor market needs in practice. This contributes significantly to the limited attractiveness of VET pathways.

Stakeholders identify a "significant gap" between the responsiveness of companies to change, and the sincere "institutional inertia" presented by schools and the education system. While companies are eager to co-design training, they often face a rigid and slow-moving educational bureaucracy. Furthermore, serious communication barriers exist, stemming from the different organizational cultures and vocabularies of the economic and educational sectors. The practical component of existing training programs is widely considered "extremely limited" in developing the real-world skills graduates need.

Common challenges



Across the region, ensuring that WBL supply meets labor market demand is the cornerstone of its attractiveness, yet it remains a central and complex challenge.

Curriculum agility: A common thread is the struggle to maintain programs' relevance in the face of rapid technological change. While North Macedonia's dual system demonstrates the benefits of a more flexible, employer-driven approach in WBL programs preparation, the other countries are hampered by rigid, centralized procedures for curriculum updates. The involvement of employers is often a "tick-box" exercise rather than a real co-design process.

Quality of placements: The quality and substance of the in-company training experience are highly inconsistent. The region lacks a unified system for defining, monitoring, and evaluating the quality of WBL placements. This leads to a situation where some students receive excellent mentorship and practical experience, while others are left with ordinary tasks and activities that offer little practical value.

The SME challenge: Small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the largest percentage of the region's economies, are under-represented in WBL partnerships. They often lack the administrative capacity, resources, and awareness to engage effectively. Without targeted support and simplified procedures, WBL will continue to be dominated by large companies, limiting the diversity of opportunities available. This is especially important for the craft sector.

Need for Better Data: There is a systemic lack of robust data on WBL outcomes. None of the countries have a comprehensive system for tracking graduate employment, career progression, or employer satisfaction. This absence of evidence makes it difficult to prove the value of WBL, identify the best practices, and make the case for increased investment, in that way hindering its attractiveness.

4. Governance and policies for enhancing WBL attractiveness

The attractiveness of WBL is not just a matter of perception but is shaped by the governance structures and policies that support it. Effective governance can create an enabling environment that fosters trust, reduces administrative burdens, and ensures quality, in that way making WBL a more appealing choice for learners/candidates and for employers. Here are described some of the governance models and key policies in the four countries and their impact on WBL attractiveness.

Bulgaria

In recent years, Bulgaria has implemented several policy measures aimed at strengthening the governance of dual education. A key has been the state's decision to fully cover the social and health insurance contributions for students in WBL. This policy was designed to directly support one of the



financial barriers for employers and, by reducing their payroll costs, motivate them to either increase student compensation or invest more in training conditions. Despite such positive steps, stakeholders, particularly employers, report that the practical benefits of these policies are often limited by unclear procedures and persistent administrative burdens.

A major weakness in the governance framework is the fragmentation of employer incentives. Financial support for companies participating in WBL is frequently tied to temporary, project-based funding, often co-financed by the EU. This creates a lack of predictability and sustainability, and it discourages the businesses, especially SMEs.

Bulgaria lacks a comprehensive and integrated national system for monitoring the quality of WBL. The Ministry of Education and schools collect data on enrolments and placements, but this is quantitative. There are no systematic mechanisms for tracking qualitative indicators, such as satisfaction among employers and learners, or the long-term impact of WBL on graduates' employability. This makes it difficult to identify and scale up good practices, address shortcomings, and build a compelling, evidence-based case for the value of dual education.

Greece

Greece's governance framework for WBL is built on a strong regulatory foundation, primarily articulated through the National System of Vocational Education and Training (ESEEK). The system establishes clear responsibilities for key actors, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, the Public Employment Service (DYPA), and the certification body EOPPEP. Strategic documents like the National Lifelong Learning Plan and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) have set ambitious targets for modernizing VET and increasing business participation.

The primary governance challenge in Greece is not a lack of regulation but a deficit in implementation and coordination. Stakeholders point to the fragmentation and overlapping roles among the key national actors, which leads to a lack of strategic alignment and slow responsiveness to regional labor market needs. This is compounded by weak local governance structures; regional and local authorities, including chambers of commerce and local VET councils, have to be empowered to play a more active and effective role in planning and coordinating WBL initiatives.

While some data on learner and employer satisfaction is collected, it is not systematically aggregated or used for program design, funding decisions, or policy adjustments. This lack of data-driven feedback hinders improvement and the ability to build trust in the system. To enhance attractiveness, stakeholders strongly recommend streamlining administrative procedures for company participation, increasing the predictability of funding, and, most importantly, decentralizing governance to regional actors who are closer to the specific needs of their local economies.



North Macedonia

North Macedonia has recently undertaken a significant modernization of its legislative framework with the new Law on Vocational education and training, effective from January 2025. This law introduces several novelties specifically designed to enhance WBL attractiveness. These include a mandated increase in the volume of practical education within formal VET, the formal embedding of the dual education concept in the VET system, the introduction of a dedicated WBL coordinator in every school, and the establishment of formal career counselling services. These legislative changes are fundamental and aim to make WBL more relevant, better organized, and more appealing to students. Quality monitoring mechanisms, such as a WBL self-evaluation tool for schools, have been introduced. Yet these changes are still in their initial stages.

However, the effectiveness of this modernized governance framework will depend on overcoming several implementation challenges. Policymakers and stakeholders acknowledge that while elements of a monitoring and evaluation system exist, they are not yet fully implemented and do not cover all the actors. Key weaknesses in the current state system for monitoring and quality control include a lack of adequate human and material resources, limited mechanisms for generating and using feedback for improvement, inconsistent monitoring practices across different regions, and the involvement of multiple institutions with overlapping competencies. To truly boost attractiveness, the next crucial governance step will be to develop and fully implement a centralized, data-driven WBL monitoring, evaluation, and feedback system, led by a single designated body with clear roles and responsibilities.

Romania

Romania has a decentralized governance system for anticipating future skills needs. It relies on a network of Regional Education Action Plans (REAPs), Local Education Action Plans (LEAPs), and School Action Plans (SAPs). This structure is intended to involve a different stakeholder, including employers, trade unions, and civil society organizations—and align training programs with local and regional labor market demands.

A notable and growing trend in Romanian WBL governance is the increasing involvement of Local Administrative Units (municipalities) in all stages of process management as a key in facilitating collaboration between local companies and schools. The credibility of local elected officials, such as mayors and local councils, can be effectively leveraged to promote WBL and encourage both student and employer participation. Further, there are significant investments in the development of dual campuses, which require consortia that include municipalities, schools, universities, and local companies.

Despite this move towards decentralization, an important governance-related challenge to attractiveness persists. Stakeholders argue that the decision to follow a WBL pathway is made at the age



of 14, which is often too early for learners to have sufficient self-awareness and clearly defined career aspirations. This contributes to the perception of WBL as a less attractive path compared to general education. It is therefore recommended to build professional skills upon a stronger foundation of general education, completed after compulsory schooling, which would include both solid basic skills and a substantial practical component.

Common challenges

Across the Balkan region, it is evident that effective governance is a critical lever for enhancing WBL attractiveness. While all four countries have established legal and policy frameworks, their impact is consistently undermined by implementation gaps and systemic weaknesses.

Fragmentation vs. coordination: A central theme is the tension between centralized control and the need for local responsiveness. In Greece and Bulgaria, fragmented national governance and inconsistent regional support create confusion and inefficiency. Conversely, Romania and North Macedonia are moving towards more decentralized models that empower local actors, a trend seen as highly positive for increasing relevance and engagement. The key challenge is to achieve a balance: a system that is nationally coherent but locally adaptable.

The monitoring and evaluation deficit: A critical governance failure across all countries is the absence of robust, comprehensive, and systematic monitoring and evaluation systems for WBL. Data collection is often sporadic, focused on quantitative inputs (enrolments) rather than qualitative outcomes (satisfaction, employability), and is rarely used to inform policy. Without credible data, it is impossible to demonstrate the value of WBL, build trust, or drive continuous improvement. Establishing such data-driven feedback loops is a top-priority governance reform needed to increase attractiveness.

Simplifying bureaucracy and incentives: Employers in all four countries, particularly SMEs, are deterred by complex administrative procedures and unpredictable, often project-based, incentive schemes. Effective governance must focus on creating a more business-friendly environment for WBL. This includes streamlining bureaucracy, simplifying application processes, and establishing clear, stable, and easily accessible financial incentives for companies that invest in training the future workforce.

5. Promotion of WBL

The attractiveness of Work-Based Learning is actively raised through communication, promotion, and the shaping of public perception. Even the most well-designed WBL system will fail to attract students and employers if it is poorly understood or carries a negative image. This section analyses the strategies, activities, and challenges related to the promotion of WBL in the four countries, examining their effectiveness in building a positive image and driving demand.



Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the promotion of dual education has gained significant political and institutional attention in recent years. National strategies and large-scale, publicly funded projects have aimed to raise awareness and improve the image of WBL among students, families, and companies. These efforts have resulted in hundreds of school-level campaigns, career guidance activities, and a substantial online presence.

However, a closer analysis reveals that these promotional activities are inconsistent by their fragmentation and lack of sustainability. Many communication efforts are financed through temporary, project-based funding. When a project ends, the promotional activities often cease, leaving a communication vacuum. There is no dedicated, recurring national budget for WBL promotion, which prevents the development of a long-term, strategic communication plan.

This project-based approach leads to a lack of coordination across various levels and actors. The Ministry, local education authorities, schools, and employer associations do not operate under a structured, cooperative framework for promotion. The burden of explaining the benefits of WBL often falls entirely on individual schools, which typically lack the resources and expertise to run effective communication campaigns. Companies, in turn, rarely take an active role in promoting the model beyond their direct engagement with partner schools. As a result, despite years of initiatives, the dual education model is still not sufficiently recognizable or understood by its key target audiences, particularly parents and adult learners.

Greece

The promotion of WBL in Greece is characterized by its integration into broader education and employment strategies rather than being driven by a dedicated, focused national campaign. While documents like the Strategic Plan for VET and the NRRP include actions aimed at raising awareness and improving the social perception of VET, there is no unified, coherent strategy that is focused solely on WBL visibility.

At the institutional level, public VET providers frequently organize orientation events, open days, and employer-student networking initiatives. However, these efforts are typically isolated, event-based, and without national coordination or long-term funding. They often rely on temporary funding streams and especially have limited outreach in rural or disadvantaged areas.

Digital outreach and communication activities are not sufficiently developed. Most promotional initiatives are limited to basic website updates or periodic social media posts by individual schools. There is a shortage of centralized efforts to create modern, learner-oriented, and sector-specific promotional content. Furthermore, there is no single, recognizable national brand or platform for WBL promotion



that could unify stakeholders and provide standardized, easily accessible information across regions. Stakeholders from all sectors emphasize that funding for promotional activities is insufficient, sporadic and linked to temporary projects, which implies a lack of strategic planning and weak institutional capacity for effective information dissemination.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia has made efforts to systematically promote VET and WBL through initiatives like the national campaign "Learn Smart - Work Vocationally", the development of digital VET portal, and regular regional and local fairs. These campaigns, often conducted as a partnership between the Ministry of Education and Science, the VET Centre, and chambers of commerce, aim to advance secondary VET by strengthening cooperation with the business community, schools and local self-governments.

Despite these positive initiatives, research findings indicate a significant gap in reaching a new generation students (eight and nine grades in primary schools). A 2024 study revealed that 58% of ninth-grade primary school students had either never heard of dual education or did not know what it was. This points to a critical failure in communicating key information to the primary target audience at the crucial moment of career choice. The information that does reach students often comes directly from schools, suggesting that national campaigns are not penetrating effectively.

In this research, respondents from all categories identify jointly organized fairs for education and career in an "open-day" format as the most effective promotional tool. However, they also state that they lack the funds to organize such events on a continuous basis, as they have so far been financially supported mainly by the donor community through projects. A particularly concerning finding is the belief among a significant minority of schools (20%) and companies (18%) that promotional activities are unnecessary because WBL is a mandatory component of VET. This mindset represents a major barrier to proactively building the attractiveness of the system.

Romania

The promotion of WBL in Romania is plagued by two interconnected problems: a severe image crisis and the use of ineffective promotional methods. The public perception of the VET path is negative; it is widely seen as a "last chance" option intended for low-performing or marginalized students. This perception is reinforced by the fact that students with poor basic competencies are able to complete their compulsory education through the VET track, which negatively influences its attractiveness and undermines its potential to be a pathway to a successful career.

This image problem is intensified by a stark discrepancy between the promotional methods used and the expectations of the target audience. VET schools continue to rely on traditional, and ineffective, methods



such as distributing printed promotional materials, inviting entrepreneurs to parent meetings, and participating in educational fairs. In contrast, employers alike express a clear preference for more innovative, credible, and accessible methods, such as strategic use of social media, high-visibility online events, engagement with respected public figures and successful alumni.

This mismatch means that even when schools are actively promoting WBL, their messages are not resonating with young people. The challenge in Romania is therefore not just to promote WBL, but to first fundamentally rebrand it. This requires a paradigm shift away from outdated, school-centric communication towards a modern, digitally-savvy, and employer-endorsed promotional strategy.

Common challenges

The promotion of WBL emerges as a systemic weakness across all countries. Despite varying levels of effort, no country has yet developed a truly effective, sustainable, and coordinated strategy to build the attractiveness of WBL.

Fragmentation and lack of sustainability: The most prevalent issue is the reliance on fragmented, short-term, and project-based promotional activities. This approach prevents the development of a coherent, long-term national narrative around the value of WBL. Without a dedicated and regular national budget for promotion, efforts will remain sporadic and insufficient.

The negative image of VET: Still, in all countries, but most acutely in Romania, WBL's attractiveness is influenced by the negative societal perception of vocational education as a "second option" option. Promotional efforts often fail to directly confront and change this narrative. A successful strategy must be built on authentic success stories, clear evidence of employment outcomes, and the strong endorsement of credible employers.

Outdated methods: With the partial exception of North Macedonia, promotional methods are often traditional and fail to engage a youth audience that is predominantly digital-native. There is a critical need to shift from passive, information-dumping approaches (brochures, formal presentations) to dynamic, interactive engagement through digital platforms, social media, peer-to-peer testimonials, and "live" experiences like open days and hands-on workshops.

The passive role of employers: While employers are the most credible promoters of WBL, they are often passive participants in communication efforts. A key strategic shift required across all four countries is to move employers from being merely the *subject* of promotion to being the *agents* of promotion, actively marketing career opportunities and telling their own stories about the value of WBL.

6. Conclusions and recommendations



6.1. Country-specific recommendations

Bulgaria

- Institutionalize and sustain WBL promotion. Move away from the current project-based model of promotion. The Bulgarian government should allocate a dedicated, recurring national budget for a continuous, multi-year communication campaign for dual education. This campaign must be professionally managed, utilize modern communication channels (digital media, social influencers, peer testimonials), and be co-designed with employer associations to ensure its messages are credible and impactful.
- Mandate and professionalize career guidance. To combat the issue of uninformed choices, career guidance should be made a mandatory and integral part of the lower-secondary education curriculum. This should go beyond simple information campaigns to include professional diagnostics, career counselling, and direct exposure to various professions, ensuring students and parents understand the real value and opportunities of dual VET before making educational decisions.
- Develop a comprehensive graduate tracking system. Establish a national digital system for tracking the career progression of dual VET graduates. This system should monitor key indicators such as employment rates, time-to-employment, salary levels, and further education pathways. The data can be crucial for quality assurance, for creating a public rating system of VET providers to drive competition and quality, and for providing concrete evidence of the model's success to attract future learners.
- Foster flexible WBL models and inclusive practices. Actively pilot and promote more flexible training formats, such as block placements, weekend training, and hybrid delivery models, especially in rural areas to expand access. Simultaneously, develop a clear support package (including financial incentives and expert guidance) for companies to encourage them to host and effectively support learners with disabilities or from other vulnerable backgrounds.

Greece

- Empower regional governance structures. Decentralize the governance of WBL by legally empowering regional and local authorities, including regional VET councils and chambers of commerce. These bodies should be given clear mandates and the necessary resources to plan, coordinate, and oversee WBL initiatives in their territories, ensuring better alignment with local labor market needs and fostering stronger public-private partnerships.
- Launch a unified national WBL brand and digital hub. Develop and launch a single, recognizable national brand for Work-Based Learning. This should be supported by a central, state-funded digital promotion hub that serves as a one-stop-shop for students, parents, and employers. The



platform should provide standardized information, success stories, interactive tools, and a centralized database of available placements.

- Streamline bureaucracy and enhance SME incentives. Undertake a comprehensive review and simplification of all administrative procedures related to company participation in WBL. Create a clear, easily accessible, and attractive package of financial and non-financial incentives specifically designed for SMEs, such as tax credits for mentorship costs, simplified application processes, and support for developing in-house training capacity.
- Integrate WBL promotion into skills forecasting. Ensure that promotional campaigns are strategically linked to national skills anticipation and forecasting mechanisms. Campaigns should actively highlight WBL pathways leading to careers in high-growth, high-demand sectors (e.g., green tech, digital services), thereby positioning WBL not just as an educational choice, but as a smart investment in a future-proof career.

North Macedonia

- Fully operationalize the national M&E system. Prioritize the full implementation of a centralized, data-driven Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system for WBL. This system must be led by a designated central body with a clear mandate to systematically collect and analyze comprehensive data on WBL effectiveness (including skill acquisition, employment rates, and employer satisfaction) and to use this evidence to drive continuous policy and curriculum improvement.
- Systematize and fund "experience-based" promotion. Institutionalize and provide consistent state funding for the most effective promotional activities identified by stakeholders: joint school-company "experience open days" and targeted outreach campaigns. These events should be interactive, hands-on, and tailored to local contexts, with a strong focus on providing "live" exposure to real work environments to counter the lack of awareness, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.
- Strengthen pre-WBL orientation and career guidance. Mandate and develop a standardized, comprehensive pre-WBL orientation program for all VET students, to be delivered jointly by schools and participating companies. This program must go beyond general counselling to include specific preparation on company culture, technologies, and expected professional conduct, directly addressing the need expressed by companies for better-prepared candidates.
- Introduce targeted subsidies for inclusive placements. To build on the positive prescribed policies of inclusiveness, introduce a clear and well-publicized scheme of targeted subsidies or tax incentives for companies that offer high-quality WBL placements to students from marginalized groups (e.g., students with disabilities, from low socio-economic backgrounds, or in non-traditional gender roles).

Romania



- Lead a paradigm shift to employer-led promotion. Rethink the promotion of WBL by shifting the primary responsibility from schools to employers. The government should support and incentivize employer consortia and sectoral associations to lead promotional campaigns that market specific, attractive career opportunities, with the WBL pathway being the means to access them. This reframes the choice for students from "which school?" to "which career?".
- Address the foundational skills and image crisis. Tackle the negative image of VET head-on by implementing systemic reforms at the lower-secondary level to improve the basic skills (literacy, numeracy, digital skills) of students entering the VET track. A stronger academic foundation will improve the quality of VET outcomes and, over time, challenge the public perception of VET as an inferior path.
- Modernize communication channels. Launch a national initiative to support VET schools and their partners in adopting modern, digitally-focused promotional methods. This could include providing training, developing shared digital assets, and creating platforms that facilitate engagement with young people through social media, video testimonials, online events, and collaboration with credible public figures and industry leaders.
- Foster school-company communication skills. Develop and fund joint training programs for school managers and company representatives focused on improving cross-sectoral communication and collaboration skills. Addressing the identified "communication gap" is an essential precondition for building the trust and mutual understanding needed for effective partnerships in both training delivery and promotion.

6.2. General conclusions and recommendations

Beyond country-specific actions, the comparative analysis shows systemic challenges that require a coordinated, strategic response across the four countries.

- A. The attractiveness of WBL is currently hampered because it is promoted as an *educational product* by schools, which often suffer from a poor public image. Its true value, however, lies in its promise of *employability*, and the most credible promoters of this promise are employers.

Recommendation: All countries should strategically transition towards an "employer-pull" model of WBL attractiveness. This involves creating policy frameworks that encourage and empower employers to take the lead in defining, offering, and promoting career pathways. The role of the state should shift from being the primary service provider to being a facilitator of strong, sustainable public-private partnerships. This means incentivizing companies not just to offer placements, but to actively market them as the first step in a long-term, attractive career.

- B. The lack of a sustained, coherent, and positive national narrative around WBL is a universal weakness. Public perception is often shaped by outdated stereotypes and a



lack of information, leading to WBL being seen as a "plan two" rather than a smart "plan one".

Recommendation: Develop and invest in long-term, professional national branding and communication strategies for VET and WBL. These strategies must be: built on the authentic success stories of graduates and the strong endorsement of reputable employers; using modern, digital channels to deliver tailored messages to students, parents, and employers; supported by stable, long-term public funding, not just temporary projects; and implemented through a collaborative effort involving ministries, educational institutions, social partners, and the private sector.

- C. The attractiveness of WBL is determined by the quality and accessibility of the experience itself. Across the region, rigidity, inequity, and a lack of data-driven quality control undermine its potential.

Recommendation: Implement a package of interconnected systemic reforms focused on: promoting modularization of curricula and diverse delivery models (hybrid, block-release) to meet the needs of a wider range of learners and businesses; designing and funding clear, targeted support mechanisms to remove financial and structural barriers for disadvantaged learners and the SMEs that can host them; establishing robust, data-driven M&E systems that track the entire WBL path—from participation and skill acquisition to long-term employment outcomes (this data are tool for proving value, modeling continuous improvement, and building trust in Work-Based Learning as a basis of economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the Balkan region).