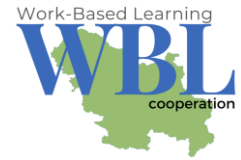




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**Project: BALKAN WBL COOPERATION**  
THEMATIC AREA: Cooperation with the business  
General report

WP 3 – Balkan WBL Cooperation recommendations development

Lead partner: Municipality of Reșița City

Partners involved: MEF, MCEC, IEK Delta, NAVET

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## 1. Introduction

This report summarizes the findings provided by the research framework focused on improving the cooperation between VET institutions (such as vocational schools and training centers) and companies in the context of work-based learning. The aim is to analyze the existing collaboration mechanisms between VET institutions and businesses, assess their effectiveness, and examine the roles and cooperation among relevant local, regional, and national institutions responsible for VET governance.

The research seeks to evaluate current collaboration methods between VET institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders. It also aims to identify key challenges in cooperation, such as communication barriers, lack of mutual trust, and unclear roles. Lastly, the research aims to gather insights from stakeholders to better understand how partnerships function and how they can be improved to ensure more effective skills alignment and smoother transitions from education to the workforce.

The research aims also to generate actionable insights that will lead to the continuous improvement of WBL, making it more responsive to the future needs of both local and global economies, according to the general project objectives, to increase business participation in WBL apprenticeship programs and to improve the quality of cooperation between VET institutions and companies.

Based on the active work of the expert teams from the four countries, specific recommendations have been formulated to address the identified challenges related to the following thematic areas: Partnership models and governance structures, Communication and coordination mechanisms, Mentorship and supervision, Legal framework and policy support for WBL cooperation.



## 2. Cooperation with the business – present situation

### *Bulgaria*

The cooperation between vocational education and training institutions and businesses in the context of work-based learning has been analysed through a dedicated survey and the responses reflect a broad range of experiences and perspectives, offering a detailed look at how WBL functions in practice.

The findings highlight existing collaboration practices, the role of national, regional, and local institutions, and the effectiveness of current policies in sustaining productive WBL partnerships. A major concern raised by stakeholders is the uneven engagement of businesses in WBL programs, with many citing administrative complexity, unclear expectations, and financial constraints as barriers to participation. Employers often struggle with rigid contractual obligations and limited flexibility in training structures. Additionally, while the legal framework provides a strong foundation, its implementation remains inconsistent, and many businesses find it difficult to navigate available incentives and support mechanisms.

Concerning the communication and coordination between VET institutions and businesses, some partnerships operate with structured reporting and regular meetings, while others rely on informal exchanges, leading to misalignment in training expectations.

Similarly, the role of mentors in student supervision varies, with some companies investing in structured mentorship while others provide only minimal support due to lack of training, time constraints, or unclear responsibilities.

### *Greece*

The Work Based Learning (WBL) scheme in Greece is an innovative educational initiative designed to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical experience. Targeted primarily at students and young professionals, the program aims to enhance employability by providing hands-on training in real workplace settings. Participants gain valuable skills and insights into their chosen fields, fostering a smoother transition from education to employment. By collaborating with various industries, the WBL scheme also supports economic growth and addresses the needs of the labor market, promoting a more skilled and adaptable workforce.

The initiative typically involves partnerships between educational institutions and businesses, facilitating internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of experiential learning. This collaboration not only helps students apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts but also enables employers to identify and nurture potential talent. As a result, many companies are now more inclined to invest in training programs, recognizing the value of a skilled workforce that meets their specific needs.

Despite its potential, the WBL scheme in Greece still faces several challenges. One significant hurdle is the varying levels of engagement from different sectors.



While industries such as technology and tourism have embraced work-based learning, other sectors may be less involved, limiting opportunities for students.

Additionally, the scheme's implementation can vary widely across regions, with urban areas often having more resources and connections than rural regions.

Furthermore, there is a need for stronger frameworks to support the effective implementation of WBL.

In conclusion, while the Work Based Learning scheme in Greece shows promise as a transformative approach to education and workforce development, it requires ongoing commitment and collaboration among all stakeholders. By addressing existing challenges and fostering a culture of practical learning, Greece can enhance its workforce's skills and adaptability, ultimately contributing to economic recovery and growth in the years to come.

### *North Macedonia*

All relevant institutions and organizations in North Macedonia agree that strengthening cooperation between schools and the business community is vital for building an educational system compatible with labor market needs.

This collaboration is essential to ensure that VET students acquire the appropriate competencies that will be applicable in their future workplaces. Various areas and forms of cooperation between schools and the business community are recognized and promoted in the country<sup>1</sup>, with a special emphasis on cooperation for the quality implementation of practical training with employers. The companies are involved in several workplace training models: ferial practice, practical training, work-based learning, dual education, and special qualification programs through non-formal education.

As a result of the increased cooperation between educational institutions and companies in 2022/23 academic year: 90% of IVET and TVET students completed ferial practice, 97% of TVET and dual programs students completed WBL in companies, and 40 adult participants took part in certified vocational qualification training. By December 2024, a total of 1,248 trained mentors in 187 companies have been certified for practical student training<sup>2</sup>.

### *Romania*

Cooperation with the business environment is regulated by specific laws and methodologies within “The multilevel Governance Scheme”, covering the local, county, regional and national level, with specific tools developed and expected to be implemented in effective cooperation. Among the main current challenges identified we recognize:

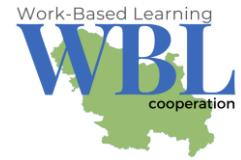
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<sup>1</sup> [www.e4e.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Priracnik-FORMI-NA-SORABOTKA-MK-najFINAL-za-web.pdf](http://www.e4e.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Priracnik-FORMI-NA-SORABOTKA-MK-najFINAL-za-web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://praksa.mchamber.mk>



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There is a need for new specializations in accordance with the current and future requirements of the labor market.

WBL is facing a strong decrease in the school population, doubled by the decrease in pupils' interest and motivation.

How to ensure the harmonization between the national standards and LM relevant skills? How to support the VET students with disadvantaged social backgrounds and low level of basic skills?

The level of salaries is below what is necessary for a decent life, but the skill requirements are higher than the capacities of the enrolled students. Incentives are not enough in periods of great labor crisis.

*The WBL schemes implemented in our partner countries are generally considered particularly important to ensure the relevance of the training in relation to the current and future requirements of employers.*

*Complex development processes of these schemes took place in each partner country, considering the local specifics. Mechanisms, specific and sufficiently complex tools have been developed to cover the variety of local requirements and contexts, but it is this complexity that generates challenges and obstacles in implementation stages that become cumbersome and difficult to manage within a partnership between entities that are very different in terms of operation and collaboration.*



### 3. Partnership models and governance structures

#### *Bulgaria*

The Bulgarian legal framework, including the and the Ordinance on Dual Education, provides a solid foundation for WBL partnerships. These documents define the roles of different stakeholders, ensuring standardization and legal protection for all parties.

Formal agreements between VET institutions and employers regulate collaboration between the education system and businesses expecting the alignment of curricula with industry needs, active involvement of employers in dual VET by providing training facilities, appointing mentors, and maintaining safe working conditions.

Companies initiate partnerships through a written request to a VET institution's principal/director and the formal agreement clearly defines shared roles.

Survey responses from VET schools, employers, and training centres reveal mixed practical experiences. Most VET institutions initiate collaborations, though few companies take the first step. Third-party organizations, such as chambers of commerce, sometimes assist, but their role is inconsistent. Some businesses help develop curricula, but many limit their role to workplace training.

#### *Greece*

In Greece, the existing partnership models emphasize mutual benefits and shared goals and responsibilities ensuring the collaboration between Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and companies in Work Based Learning (WBL) programs. The formal agreements clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of each partner, while VET institutions focus on developing curricula that align with both educational standards and industry needs, the companies provide practical training opportunities and insights into current labor market trends. Even if the responsibilities are defined distinctly for the actors, each of them must provide input for all areas of cooperation such as curriculum development, students placement, students evaluation etc. VET institutions ensure that programs meet national education standards and industry requirements but input from businesses is vital; they help shape the curriculum by identifying specific skills and competencies that are in demand. Another example concerns student placements, where companies are responsible for providing real-world training environments, but VET institutions facilitate the placement process and monitor student progress.

Effective governance promotes shared responsibility and transparency between VET institutions and businesses, through advisory boards with representative composition, open communication and collaboration supported by guidelines and regular reporting, allowing parties to hold each other accountable.



Stakeholder feedback indicates that while existing governance structures are functional, they often lack the necessary flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to evolving industry needs and educational standards.

Formal agreements like MoUs and contracts are often used to govern partnerships between companies and VET institutions but can be too rigid, limiting flexibility. Informal agreements and personal networks also play a role in successful collaborations, creating a duality that can lead to inconsistencies and misunderstandings in partnership management.

Stakeholders propose several recommendations for creating more flexible, transparent, and sustainable governance structures, by establishing regular forums for dialogue between VET institutions and businesses to promote open communication, alignment with partners goals, to share best practices and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Mechanisms for regular review and adaptation of the formal agreements need to be developed, together with clauses that allow for periodic assessments of the partnership's effectiveness and adjustments to the curriculum or training processes as needed.

The stakeholder representation in decision-making processes is crucial by involving a broader range of voices—such as student representatives, industry experts, and local community members, thus promoting a more inclusive governance structure.

#### *North Macedonia*

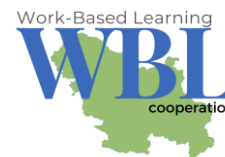
The partnership for work-based learning in the dual model (in which the depth and quality of partnership and cooperation between schools and companies are greater), is formalized through a memorandum of cooperation signed between the VET institution and the company, specifying the duration of cooperation, the type and level of collaboration, and the number of students involved. In the regular VET model, cooperation is formalized through a tripartite agreement (between the school, employer, and parent/guardian/ student). These documents define the rights and obligations of the school/center, the company, and the students/participants. Current regulations (including various guidelines and instructions) are considered important in enabling smooth direct communication and cooperation with institutions, however the processes are complex and sometimes discouraging.

The educational institutions most frequently select companies through informal meetings, personal contacts and recommendations, less through market research and networking with local businesses, and least often through programs and initiatives from official state and local institutions or business sector organizations. Companies are selected according to their alignment with students' interests and the training programs/profiles offered by the educational institution, the company's size and reputation (large foreign companies are preferred), and proximity to the school. The most common initiator of cooperation and partnership is the school or training center, and one-third of all respondents stated that the initiative is mutual. The primary motivation to





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participate in WBL for half of the companies is to improve their corporate social responsibility and reputation, while other half aim to enhance the skills of potential future employees.

More than 70% of all respondents' rate both formal and informal communication between the mentor, teacher, and WBL coordinator as excellent, while communication on management level is rated as good or somewhat good.

Further improvements are needed for several challenges: lack of time and resources on the company's side, unclear expectations from both parties, disagreements regarding the terms of cooperation, and the absence of formal regulations providing guidelines on role distribution and responsibilities, lack of predefined standards for cooperation, and there is a need for additional subsidies for companies.

### *Romania*

The existing formalized partnership structure of the Local Social Partnership Development Committee (CLDPS) created at the county level has an advisory role for defining enrollment rates for VET to harmonize the demand of the business environment and the supply of schools. Having a consultative role, it can express different perspectives which, however, will not be put into practice in a guaranteed way. CLDPS has corresponding structures at the regional level and at the level of VET schools, also with an (only) advisory role.

According to the current methodologies, employers are the ones who initiate the partnerships, but there are still situations where this role is assumed by the school, which identifies local companies with a suitable profile and the local authorities can have an impactful role by assuming a mediator role between the actors.

The three actors have different levels and forms of involvement and slightly different interests, and companies consider the list of qualifications in the NQF are not adapted to current needs, and to an even lesser extent we can talk about adaptation to future needs.

Several interventions have been made for partnership capacity building, but these project-based developments do not ensure predictability and/or sustainability.

*The partnership structures and mechanisms created in each of the partner countries show that for the very complex WBL challenges solutions can only be developed through the involvement of all parties, namely the school, companies and authorities.*

*Regarding the implementation of these mechanisms, it is observed that the initiative is very often based on previous experiences and personal relationships, and the actors manifest themselves in these collaborations considering their immediate priorities and less the long-term objectives of vocational training.*

*Suggestions are mentioned for a more formal and detailed regulation of the partnerships and at the same time the need for more flexibility of the mechanisms is expressed.*



#### 4. Communication and coordination mechanisms

##### *Bulgaria*

The Ordinance on Dual Education is regulatory framework providing the basis for communication and coordination between vocational education and training institutions and businesses in work-based learning. It sets general expectations for collaboration, requiring employers to participate in training coordination and quality assurance but beyond the initial agreement and the teacher-methodologist's role definition does not explicitly detail the frequency or nature of communication between VET actors, lacks detailed guidance on maintaining active and ongoing communication and coordination throughout the partnership.

Survey analysis reveals considerable variation in how VET institutions and businesses communicate, from existing well-established collaboration practices to informal and inconsistent exchanges.

Meetings are the most common communication tool with a large range of schedules, but they are insufficient to ensure smooth collaboration; where structured communication exists, cooperation between VET institutions and businesses is more effective.

The use of digital tools for communication and information sharing, such as online platforms for reporting, feedback, and resource sharing, should be expanded.

Both VET institutions and businesses should appoint dedicated coordinators to oversee the partnership, facilitate communication, and resolve any issues that may arise. Additionally, enhanced training and support for teacher-methodologists should equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively manage the partnership.

##### *Greece*

Currently, VET institutions work closely with companies to facilitate Work Based Learning (WBL) opportunities, including internships and apprenticeships.

Effective collaboration relies on formal communication mechanisms. Many partnerships utilize regular meetings, both in-person and virtual, to discuss progress, challenges, and strategies for improvement.

Reporting systems are often implemented to track student performance and gather insights on the overall partnership experience.

Many VET institutions have built strong relationships with local businesses, enabling students to gain valuable work experience while simultaneously helping companies meet their workforce needs.

The enthusiasm and dedication of educators and industry professionals are often cited as vital components contributing to the success of these programs.



The level of responsiveness and quality of communication between stakeholders varies significantly, while some partnerships benefit from proactive communication and regular updates, others struggle with infrequent interactions and unclear expectations.

Stakeholders have identified several areas for improvement and solutions in cooperation practices:

Many report that communication can be sporadic or unclear, leading to misunderstandings regarding roles, expectations, and timelines. This lack of clarity often compromises the effectiveness of partnerships and results in missed opportunities for students.

Implementing digital tools for communication and project management can streamline interactions and facilitate real-time updates on student progress and training needs.

Platforms that allow for shared documents, schedules, and feedback can create a more cohesive approach to partnership management.

Appointing dedicated coordinators within both VET institutions and businesses can help maintain consistent and effective communication and they would serve as primary points of contact, bridging gaps and fostering a culture of collaboration.

Stakeholders suggest structured meetings, whether in person or virtual—to be held periodically to assess the effectiveness of the partnership, being a platform for discussing challenges, celebrating successes, and making necessary adjustments to programs or processes.

Another barrier to effective collaboration is the lack of mutual trust between partners or biased communication, where the priorities of one partner may overshadow those of the other. Building trust requires a commitment from both sides to engage transparently and collaboratively, reinforcing the belief that both partners are invested in the success of their students.

Cultivating a culture of open dialogue and feedback is essential for improving the frequency and quality of interactions between VET institutions and businesses, ultimately leading to more successful partnerships.

By addressing these challenges and implementing the proposed recommendations, the collaboration between VET institutions and businesses can be significantly improved, ultimately benefiting students.

### *North Macedonia*

Communication for the implementation of Work-Based Learning (WBL) occurs at several levels, involving a large variety of people with different responsibilities and with different cultures of collaboration. This complexity requires specific communication methods and skills from the leading partners, and continuous adaptation to the changing contexts by involving the management level, the partner WBL coordinators, teachers, mentors etc. The communication methods and cooperation between the mentor and teacher are part of the mentor training, while



the teachers are informed by the VETC and the school WBL coordinator, and it is described in a series of documents.

This research shows that formal agreements between educational institutions and companies are somewhat effective but often require additional communication for clarification caused by insufficient clarity of guidelines and regulations, increased administrative burdens, and frequent changes and inconsistent implementation of policies. Some schools face limited staff capacity and commitment for partnerships management or insufficient engagement from the companies.

Both partners are looking to improve their cooperation, primarily through regular meetings for feedback at the teacher-coordinator-mentor and through other activities and events to provide incentives and/or recognition for their partnerships as well as joint events, workshops, and competitions.

Despite the differences between the working styles of the partners there is a common understanding concerning the need and the possibility to improve communication and coordination between educational institutions and companies. From a process perspective, improvements suggest the use of digital tools; sharing feedback at least once a month; reciprocal visits of teachers and mentors to the company and school, including allocating part of the mentors' working hours at the school and teachers' working hours in the company; as well as joint training and seminars for teachers and mentors. From the perspective of content or areas of cooperation, improvements are needed in curricula development to align with industry needs; selecting and adapting quality work placements for work-based learning; applying for and financing joint projects; evaluating and updating partnership agreements; and aligning expectations with the available and required resources.

### *Romania*

Employers' expectation is that the school will "provide them" with motivated students - with a willingness for continuous professional and personal development, with strong basic skills, good attendance and openness.

The school expects employers to provide the professional training component, the practical part, without requesting changes in the existing contents, to offer scholarships and benefit packages to motivate students, to ensure the necessary raw materials and equipment necessary for training, including support from the tutor.

To harmonize these expectations, to address them together instead of complaining about the lack of minimum requirements is in fact the goal of real communication, and which has as a precondition mutual knowledge between partners and mutual respect based on effective communication.

The annual calendar of joint actions needs to be further adapted to address the most urgent identified needs with solutions based on a more efficient communication:



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Defining through negotiation the offer of qualifications, with the best possible response to the requests for needs defined by employers.

Promoting the offer of qualifications and attracting the most interested candidates and supporting them to choose a path suitable to their personal aspirations but also with the opportunity of a decent job for which they can have the right skills.

Selection and distribution of students registered with employers for internships.

Implementation of training programs lasting 3-4 years, providing progress feedback to students. Revising, updating contents, adapting training methods to the requirements dictated by the set of desirable skills.

Assessment and certification of the skills acquired by students, their relevance in relation to employment requirements and the chance of a decent job that provides the needs of a young person for an independent life.

Distribution of students and the related mechanisms defined together with employers, especially with the partners included in WBL.

Changing the procedure for enrolling and assigning students, with the involvement of employers in promoting the requirements and the offer, to attract the most suitable aspirants to the training.

For a structured dialogue and negotiation of interests, CDL development is a very good tool, which is not exploited to its potential. Support would be needed to increase efficiency.

The essential role of the communication culture is equally recognised by all partners, but the expected solutions are different.

The existing regulatory frameworks are a necessity but also an obstacle for a smooth communication. While the partners express the need to better formalize and add details to the mechanisms, they also stress on the need to increase the flexibility of the processes.

There is a common understanding and general agreement on the duplication of formal communication schemes with actions and tools that ensure the flexible component of processes. Among various solutions we find proposals to use digital platforms and streamed meetings, working on the culture of cooperation, further building mutual trust and ensure that the involved persons are motivated, dedicated and professional.

There is a common need to further develop the processes of students' progress track and feedback.



## 5. Mentorship and supervision

### *Bulgaria*

The survey reveals significant differences in how mentorship is implemented across companies, because of lack formal training, or unclear expectations and time constraints as obstacles in providing effective mentorship.

Collaboration between VET institutions and businesses in monitoring student progress is inconsistent, including schools actively engaged with companies through site visits and discussions with mentors while others rely on informal feedback without systematic tracking.

For relevant improvement the revision of the mentor training program is proposed, together with regular training sessions, ongoing guidance, and access to resources, would strengthen mentors' ability to assist students. Clearly defining mentor roles and expectations within company agreements would also enhance accountability.

Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms for mentors, involving both VET institutions and students, would help identify areas for improvement and provide targeted support. Closer collaboration between businesses and VET institutions in student progress monitoring is also needed. A standardized reporting system with regular assessments and structured feedback sessions would ensure students receive consistent guidance. Schools should take a more proactive role by offering training workshops and establishing clear communication channels to address any issues that arise.

### *Greece*

In work-based learning (WBL) programs, mentorship and supervision are crucial for ensuring that students receive quality guidance as they transition from academic environments to real-world work settings.

Effective collaboration between businesses and Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions is essential, as both parties aim to create a supportive framework for apprentices.

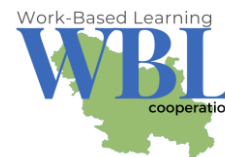
Mentorship is crucial for student growth during practical training. Effective mentors offer guidance, industry insights, and emotional support, helping students transition smoothly to professional environments and boosting their confidence and career readiness.

The effectiveness of mentorship varies considerably across WBL programs, expressing the need for clearer structures and expectations surrounding mentorship roles.

Challenges to effective mentorship include time limitations, infrequent interactions with students, and a lack of clarity around mentor responsibilities. These issues result in inconsistent feedback and hinder the overall learning experience. To improve mentorship programs, stakeholders suggest structured training for mentors focusing on best practices, communication, and student progress assessment.



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Implementing feedback mechanisms that allow students to assess their mentorship relationships can help identify areas for improvement, empowers students but also provides mentors with valuable insights into their mentoring effectiveness.

Establishing clear guidelines and expectations for mentors can foster more consistent and effective mentorship experiences.

Collaborative planning meetings involving both VET institutions and businesses can ensure that mentors are well-informed about students' learning goals and that they receive ongoing support from educational partners.

### *North Macedonia*

In North Macedonia, the work-based learning (WBL) process in companies is led by a mentor who undergone the mentor training program (3 modules and 50 hours) developed by the Vocational Education and Training Center (VETC) and approved by the Minister of Education and Science, while the Chamber of Commerce conducts the training in cooperation with the VETC.

The mentor and the teacher have defined roles and responsibilities to ensure high-quality WBL, outlined in the WBL Concept Document for North Macedonia. They together develop a WBL Plan and Program, prepare students for workplace safety regulations and protective measures, select and adapt documents/forms<sup>3</sup> for tracking and recording the WBL process, maintain documentation, and monitor/evaluate student progress.

The biggest challenges faced by mentors include not having enough time to dedicate to students due to their other workplace responsibilities and insufficient cooperation and support from schools and too many students for mentorship. The research respondents consider that mentors need periodic formal re-training by the relevant institution/organization, or chamber, as well as greater support from the schools they collaborate with.

Research results emphasize that educational institutions and companies should collaborate on ensuring and achieving high-quality practical training is the selection and placement of students for WBL (only 14% of companies take part in selecting students for WBL, the rest simply receive information or a list of selected students). The schools identify students suitable for WBL in a particular company based on the academic performance and student interests, the student's preferences, company requirements for specific job positions, and the proximity of the company to the student's residence. The student placement in job positions is carried out by company employees.

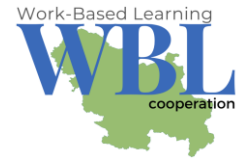
### *Romania*

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<sup>3</sup> The templates and tools for recording, monitoring, and evaluation are publicly available on the VETC website.



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The supervision of students during internships by tutors from companies is also regulated by the framework contract, followed by the development and assumption of individual contracts for each student.

The management of legal documents related to mentoring have become a significant overload, especially for the small companies.

Practice tutors are selected based on their professional ability, and have the task of ensuring compliance with these commitments, but in many situations' workplace activities are not correlated with pedagogical annexes, student progress is not correlated with industrial processes and the employer's urgent and essential work tasks.

One of the most important challenges faced by tutors is "training key competencies, more than specific ones.

Many students with multiple disadvantaged social backgrounds, for whom the monthly scholarship is not an attraction but a necessary resource for survival, progress is often found weak, and the lack of motivation to learn is followed by giving up the job offered after graduation.

In each of the partner countries, mentoring is considered crucial and necessary for a successful WBL.

Companies designate as mentors people with a specific professional profile, who can also benefit from additional empowerment programs specific to the requirements of this position. However, the conditions for an impactful activity are not always ensured and establishing clear guidelines and expectations for mentors can foster more consistent and effective mentorship experiences.

Companies could have a more active involvement in the selection of young people for internships. Mentor empowerment programs can be recommended as examples to be multiplied in the partner countries.

To implement feedback mechanisms is recommended to allow students to assess their mentorship relationships, to identify areas for improvement and also provides mentors with valuable insights into their mentoring effectiveness.





## 6. Legal framework and policy support for WBL cooperation

### *Bulgaria*

The VET Act, the Ordinance on Dual Education, the Labour Code, and various national policies establish the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. These regulations mandate formal agreements between VET institutions and employers, ensuring a structured partnership in delivering work-based training. The Labour Code<sup>4</sup> defines the legal status of students in dual education, specifying employment conditions, rights, and obligations, which play a crucial role in ensuring student protection and compliance with labour standards.

Government support for WBL is primarily administered through national and regional policies, with the Labour Code further reinforcing employer obligations related to working conditions, remuneration, and student safety. The Ministry of Education and Science plays a central role in overseeing the dual education system, developing curricula, and ensuring compliance with training standards.

Survey responses highlight gaps in policy support that discourage business participation in WBL, like excessive administrative requirements, rigid contractual obligations, unclear financial support mechanisms, and a lack of targeted incentives as barriers to engagement.

The involvement of local authorities varies, with some municipalities actively supporting partnerships, while others lack dedicated policies or resources to facilitate collaboration between businesses and VET institutions.

Existing policy measures include financial incentives (predominantly through external funding such as project initiatives), such as subsidies for businesses that participate in WBL programs. Tax incentives and funding mechanisms are available, but many companies report difficulties in accessing these resources due to bureaucratic hurdles.

More transparent and flexible funding mechanisms, including direct grants and tax reliefs, could encourage greater employer participation. Strengthening collaboration between national, regional, and local authorities would ensure that policies are effectively implemented and tailored to the needs of different sectors.

Allowing greater flexibility in partnership agreements and streamlining reporting requirements would make it easier for businesses to engage in WBL programs.

### *Greece*

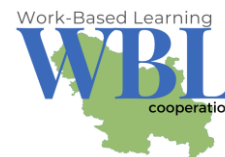
In Greece, legal frameworks and policies govern the cooperation between VET institutions and businesses, defining roles, responsibilities, and training quality standards. These policies often include funding initiatives to reduce financial burdens for companies involved in WBL programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Labour Code, Art. 230, para. 6



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Policymakers at national, regional, and local levels create support structures to encourage business engagement in WBL. They promote vocational education and raise awareness about practical training to foster collaboration between education and industry. Despite these efforts, stakeholders note that areas of improvement remain. SMEs find compliance with complex regulations burdensome, and the lack of attractive incentives discourages investment, leading to fewer practical training opportunities for students. Stakeholders suggest simplifying regulations, reducing paperwork, and offering financial incentives like tax breaks and grants for SMEs. Formalized agreements promoting joint decision-making and shared accountability can strengthen partnerships to meet both industry and educational goals.

These improvements will create relevant benefits for students and will strengthen the capacity of businesses to contribute effectively to a more skilled and adaptable workforce.

### *North Macedonia*

Vocational education and training (VET) in the Republic of North Macedonia is regulated by a specific law on VET which introduces and defines - dual education, practical education, work-based learning (WBL), and internship programs, including provisions for cooperation among key stakeholders. The framework for collaboration between schools and companies is described in the 'Concept for WBL', 'Standard for conducting practical training of students at employers', 'Standard for professional and other staff for the implementation of practical training at employers'. By September 2025 the preparation of bylaws is foreseen in the new Law on VET and the new Law on Adult Education for a more precise implementation description. Many guidelines, instructions, and manuals developed within various project activities that have been used by some schools, adult training centers and companies, provide a solid foundation for drafting the bylaws.

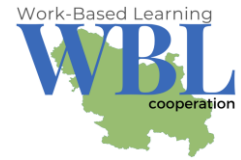
At the local level, municipalities play a role in establishing and strengthening cooperation between businesses and education, as well as in implementing the dual education model. Municipalities participate in promoting business needs, and some of them conduct assessments of workforce demand in companies and their readiness to accept students.

Educational institutions and companies still do not receive financial support specifically for WBL from national, regional, or local institutions. However, some educational institutions and companies receive support in the form of equipment or training funded by international donors and partner companies. Students, on the other hand, have the right to apply for and receive scholarships from the state, and according to the new VET law, they will also receive compensation from the companies in dual education programs.

Based on the increased interest of schools in enrolling students and the continuous rise in the number of companies participating in accepting students, it can be concluded that the current legal framework is favorable for establishing and supporting sustainable partnerships.



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The support from central or local authorities to strengthen collaboration between educational institutions and companies is confirmed, and visible by the accelerated improvement or introduction of new educational programs, encouragement of joint participation in projects for equipment or machinery, teacher and mentor training, and the promotion of WBL and dual education.

The Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Crafts are actively involved in supporting the quality of WBL within their capacities and competencies. They communicate directly with the partners and consider that the obstacles that may discourage companies from participating in WBL, can be easily overcome, by: simplifying administrative procedures and providing subsidies to companies that accept students through public funds, grants, and support programs for developing workshops or providing equipment.

### *Romania*

The existing legislative framework covers all aspects but the review and adaptation of the mechanisms is an urgent task.

It is particularly appreciated that important steps have been taken in the sense of decentralizing WBL-related decisions, but decision-making at the county level is only formally based on a consultation.

In the last decade, there have been different types of policy support and partnership capacity building, but they were "project based" without continuity, without the sustainability of piloted processes.

Large companies, having much more substantial resources for managing facilities and overcoming bureaucratic obstacles, are at a clear advantage over small ones.

Although there is a package of incentives in favor of companies, they are not known by the actors.

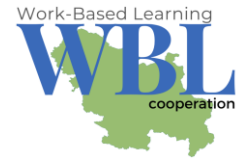
The employers also financially support the students through the monthly payment of professional scholarships, plus a variety of motivational packages granted by employers.

Obviously, the amount of scholarships granted by economic operators, together with those granted from public funds and other possible incentives granted by economic operators and the public authorities involved, may be indexed in the situation of the existence of sufficient resources to ensure their sustainability.

Substantial support for scholarships during the training period should be extended for another 3 years if the student remains with the same employer.



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*In all four partner countries it can be easily observed that steps have been taken towards an adequate regulation of policy support, and that there is a clear awareness of the need for permanent review and adaptation of regulations to conditions that are rapidly and continuously changing.*

*The distribution of roles at central, regional and local levels ensures a more consistent involvement of local partners and they are ready to be more involved in decision-making processes in accordance with their increased organizational capacities.*

*There is a need expressed by all partners to simplify bureaucratic procedures, to address with more flexibility the different needs of large companies and SMSs, and to harmonize collaboration with partners with very varied internal procedures; dedicated support is necessary to empower stakeholders regarding the management of these inter-institutional partnerships.*



## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

### ***Country specific conclusions and recommendations***

#### *Bulgaria*

- Provide option for mentor training to be conducted online to optimize mentor time away from the enterprise. The possibility should be added as an additional module in the Train the Trainer program.
- At present, training of trainers is not allowed to be carried out by the employer itself, who is the most interested, although often large companies have solid expertise to carry out training.
- It is urgent to ensure electronic circulation of information on the organization and implementation of the dual training system, which would ensure transparency and visibility of data and results.
- To provide incentives (tax breaks, etc.) for employers who partner in a dual training system, who provide a workplace for practical training for persons from vulnerable groups.
- To establish mechanisms and incentives for employers from small and medium-sized businesses in small settlements that provide real jobs for students in a dual training system.
- To clearly define the role today of the public database of employers, maintained by the Ministry of Economy and Industry.
- To give business access through publicly available reports to analyses of the quality and implementation of the trained graduates in the dual form to date.
- To introduce incentives for employers who have provided a permanent employment contract to graduates in the dual form after the formal end of the training.
- To bind the ordinance to the long-awaited regulation on quality assurance in vocational education and training.
- To establish a mechanism for business to participate in determining the specialties for which the admission plan is to be prepared at the regional level.
- To provide methodological support for smaller companies that do not have administrative capacity.
- Possibility of including trainees in experience exchange programs abroad, to upgrade skills and abilities in the given professional field. (when the company has offices in other EU countries).

#### *Greece*

- In conclusion, while the current governance models and partnership frameworks for Work Based Learning (WBL) in Greece show promise, there are substantial opportunities for improvement. Strengthening collaboration between Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and businesses is essential for enhancing student outcomes and boosting the broader economy.
- Greece's cooperation practices show strengths but need improved communication and coordination between VET institutions and businesses. Regular meetings and feedback



sessions can create more effective WBL partnerships, benefiting students, employers, and the economy. Mentorship and supervision are essential in VET-WBL programs, though challenges still exist. Structured training for mentors and regular evaluations can boost effectiveness. Closer collaboration between VET institutions and businesses will better prepare mentors, leading to improved student outcomes and a workforce ready for the job market. Existing legal frameworks support WBL but contain gaps that slow collaboration. Addressing regulatory burdens and providing financial incentives, such as tax breaks for businesses, could create a more supportive environment and encourage greater participation. Additionally, formal agreements between VET institutions and businesses can strengthen partnerships, ensuring that both parties are aligned in their objectives.

#### *North Macedonia*

- Finalizing the legal framework: It is necessary to adopt the bylaws quickly and effectively to ensure clear and precise implementation of the new Law's. This regulation should include sufficient flexibility to allow for rapid adjustments and changes in line with labor market needs.
- Strengthening cooperation between schools and companies with: joint projects and training for the development of new programs, modern learning methods and support, effective student management; creating collaboration platforms for sharing information and experiences; exchanging information, sharing best practices, and solving challenges on annual meetings or mini conferences at the regional or sectoral level involving mentors, teachers, and company representatives; utilizing digital tools to support collaboration and the mentoring process (e.g., learning platforms, video conferencing).
- Support for mentors: reducing their workload to allow sufficient time for mentoring; financial and non-financial incentives through appropriate rewards for their work; establishing a network/organization of mentors to exchange experiences and provide support.
- Improvement of the student selection and placement process using multiple criteria for student selection, such as academic performance, interests, abilities, and potential, with company involvement to ensure alignment of student profiles with the specific job roles and company needs. In addition to the formal tripartite agreement, teachers and mentors should develop an individual mentoring plan for each student or group of students (based on the job role), defining specific goals, activities, and monitoring/evaluation criteria.
- Enhancing government support and motivating companies and schools: providing stable financial resources to support work-based learning (subsidies for companies, grants for schools, and programs for infrastructure development); simplifying administrative processes, by offering pre-designed templates and support for their preparation; ensuring continuous consultancy support for schools and companies in the WBL implementation; public recognition for partnerships that achieve excellent results in work-based learning.



### *Romania*

- We are facing an existing contradiction: the employers are looking for a workforce with special high-level skills, doubled by adaptability and skill to learn and openness to constant innovation but most students demonstrate an extremely low level of basic skills insufficient to build on their relevant technical skills.
- There are different mechanisms experienced over time to support and structure cooperation between employers and VET schools and in Romania local authorities are interested in involvement, to support the local economy through the right workforce.
- Collaboration mechanisms are sometimes over-regulated.
- The operation of these mechanisms is strongly influenced by periods of economic crisis or boom, which have the immediate effect of withdrawal or urgent demand from employers.
- Regarding the provision of support through mentoring, it should be noted the discrepancy between the capacity and resources that an employer with greater potential can allocate, in relation to small and medium-sized companies.
- The existence of several specific "project based" interventions were usually reduced to those defined as "target group" without having sustainability.

### ***General conclusions and recommendations***

#### **Partnership models and governance structures**

General conclusion: There are challenges in the school-business cooperation in all 4 countries.

The existing contractual regulation of the partnership is appreciated as beneficial, but over-regulation becomes an obstacle as it does not allow sufficient flexibility in implementation.

Despite the contractual regulations, they fail to ensure in real time answer of the VET provision to the employer's needs.

Recommendation: The partnership regulations should not only encourage distributed roles and responsibilities but should offer real participation in decision making processes.

#### **Bulgaria:**

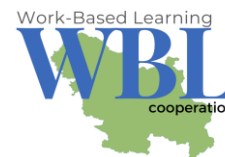
Recommendation: The existing framework for cooperation needs to be transformed in one more flexible, by allowing periodic reviews and adaptations for a shared understanding of the roles, for a better communication and adaptation to changes.

#### **Greece:**

Partnerships emphasize mutual benefits and common goals for companies and VET institutions, informal agreements and relationships play crucial role in successful collaborations. This 'duality considered' an inconsistency but is a signal for the need to make the rules more adaptable and flexible.



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Recommendation: Stakeholder representation could be improved in decision making process by involving a broader range of voices – students, industry experts for a more inclusive governance structure.

### **North Macedonia**

The Memorandum of cooperation establish clear requirements, contracts are well defined but too rigid and sometimes do not include all the necessary details (eg training standards, financial responsibilities).

Recommendation: Memorandum of cooperation should be more specific and include financial responsibilities training standards and other more detailed provisions.

### **Romania**

Employers are expected to initiate requests for the necessary qualifications, but in reality mainly the schools are the ones who actively seek partners and convince specific partners for cooperation. Most partnerships are created projects based, which affects the sustainability and predictability of collaborations.

Recommendation: Local authorities can have an impactful role, beyond the mandatory attributions, including the resources attractions from EU funds.

### **Communication and coordination mechanisms**

General Conclusions: Each country has a system of coordinators (teachers, practice tutors/mentors) who play an essential role in facilitating communication and implementation of educational programs in companies, but the expectation exceed their real capacities.

The ineffective communication between schools and employers, as a common challenge, often leads to misunderstandings and inconsistent implementation of WBL programs.

Some partners ask for a more detailed regulation of the communication process (with the risk to become too bureaucratic) others propose specific support to enable the actors for better communication and to create for them real interest.

A more complex bureaucratic scheme does not supply the lack of skills and competencies for efficient communication, among partners with different organisational culture.

Recommendation: Using digital platforms and tools seems to be a hope for solving existing communications challenges.

### **Bulgaria**

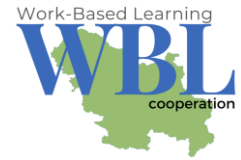
Recommendations: Regular meetings should be mandated at least once per quarter, including streamline communication.

Standardized reporting mechanisms should be used to mark the student's progress, including the use of online platforms to track student's progress. Trainings for Communication skills development should be carried out for all actors in WBL.





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### **Greece**

The quality of communication varies significantly between stakeholders. Lack of mutual trust between parties, can affect collaboration – miscommunication or unmet expectations can threaten this trust.

Recommendations: The culture of open dialogue and feedback should be cultivated, being essential for the success of the partnership. Other suggestions for improvement include regular feedback sessions and using digital platforms, that allow shared documents, schedules and feedback, streamline interactions to manage partnerships.

### **North Macedonia**

Communication takes place at several levels and formally is planned twice a year or four times per year between different actors.

The WBL coordinator has a very complex profile, and plays a key role also in communication.

Recommendation: Communication and coordination could be improved by mutual visits between teachers and mentors, as well as digitization to provide feedback once a month and to analyse progress.

### **Romania**

A frequent problem is the lack of active involvement of employers in the selection of students for internships.

The highly specific vocabulary for VET, different from the usual language of companies usually causes difficulties/ barriers in communication and leads to formalism.

Recommendation: All partners in WBL should harmonise their specific interests, otherwise the communication will be blocked.

### **Mentorship and supervision**

General conclusions: All countries recognize the essential role of mentors in the training of students and in their transition to the labor market. Common challenges in implementing mentoring were:

Mentors have to divide their responsibilities between production and guidance of students.

Insufficient training of mentors in terms of pedagogical skills.

Differences between large companies (who can afford dedicated training spaces and mentors) and small companies (who have limited resources).

Mentor training programs exist in Bulgaria and Macedonia, but they need to be updated and improved.

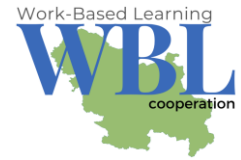
In Romania and Greece, the training of mentors is not standardized at the national level.

Mentors very often are expected to find solutions for systemic problems - e.g. to prepare a skilled worker from a student with poor entry skills, poorly motivated, coming from a difficult social

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environment and without consistent aspirations, having a curriculum unrelated to the tasks of the workplace and possibly having other job-related tasks outside of supervising students.

Recommendation: There is a need for specific courses for mentors to develop their communication, assessment and training skills. Mechanisms for additional support of mentors /financial and non-financial/ should be introduced.

### **Bulgaria**

Recommendation: There is a need to update the training program for mentors and establish a standardized system for evaluating student progress. The responsibilities of mentors, teacher methodologists and other staff involved in the implementation of the WBL partnership should be harmonised.

### **Greece**

Mentor training is considered essential, and companies receive support from schools through guides and workshops. Training programs focuses on coaching skills and understanding educational objectives.

Evaluation of students' progress happens by regular check-ins, feedback sessions and performance assessment.

There is a great profile of a mentor: who facilitate students' growth and skills acquisition, provide guidance, industry insights and emotional support helping students transition from school to professional environment with an impact on students' confidence and readiness to enter the labor-world.

### **North Macedonia**

Mentoring is regulated by official documents, WBL Concept Document for North Macedonia, but mentors rarely use self-assessment and feedback forms. Mentors must follow a 50-hour training program, with 3 modules.

Recommendation: The cooperation between schools and companies is to be improved and additional support is needed in order to help overcome the challenges with mentors' overload and lack of financial rewards.

### **Romania**

Mentoring becomes a significant overload especially for SMMs.

Mentors have the main task to ensure that students will acquire work-related skills, but not always these skills are covered by the standards. entors are facing the challenge to work with students without a proper level of basic skills

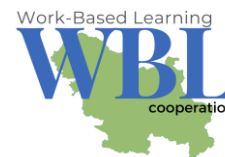
Recommendation: Special trainings for mentors should be introduced to overcome these challenges.

## **Legal framework and policy support for WBL cooperation**

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General conclusions: All four countries have clear regulations on VET and WBL based on partnerships between educational institutions and companies. Everywhere ministries of education and local authorities play an important role in the development and monitoring of WBL programmes. All countries mention that the forms of financial support for companies are insufficient.

Recommendation: Policy support for WBL should offer additional counselling to municipalities and companies including SMEs for more active inclusion.

### **Bulgaria**

Recommendations: A single database should be created including all companies, professions and number of students in WBL, publicly accessible and the bureaucracy should be reduced. Methodological support should be provided for SMEs with low administrative capacity.

### **Greece**

Despite the existence of clear regulations, many companies find the existing system difficult to use.

Many companies, especially SMEs find the regulations too complex and time consuming. The existing financial support is insufficient to counterbalance the cost of mentoring and training. Recommendation: Establishing policies that promote JOINT decision making and shared accountability to meet the industry need and fulfil educational objectives.

### **North Macedonia**

The concrete cooperation within the partnership could be supported by municipalities, at local level, also promoting business needs and increase their readiness to accept students.

The state does not provide direct subsidies for cooperation, only equipment through international donations.

Recommendation: Administrative procedures should be simplified and subsidies for companies which accept students should be provided.

### **Romania**

Government support for WBL development and partnership building processes was "project-based", without sustainability after the end of the projects.

Partnerships maintained with a consultative role demotivates them and leads the partnerships to a superficial, formal functioning.

Large companies manage to access funds and overcome bureaucratic barriers, while small ones are at a disadvantage.

Recommendation: To extend student scholarships for 3 years after employment.