

# **Bringing mobility in vocational education and training to the light.**

## **1. Mobility projects in VET.**

Organizing international projects for VET learners is somewhat challenging. Whereas universities have widely developed institutional networks responsible for international cooperation, vocational schools, educational centres and training companies are, in reality, left behind in the labyrinth of bureaucratic and legal provisions as well as endless paper work that awaits the VET establishments on the strenuous way of acquiring funds and other means of support.

Initiatives aiming at fostering education and training in the European Union (EU), such as mobility programmes, are funded by the European Commission (EC). At the moment, funding for these kinds of projects can be obtained from the ERASMUS FOR ALL programme, the new EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for the years 2014 to 2020. With this strategic initiative focusing on developing skills and mobility of human capital, EC aims to increase access to the employment market and to foster competitiveness in the EU. From 2014 it is the Erasmus+ educational programme that also provides funding for traineeships abroad in the VET sector. Erasmus+ is a new educational fund defined by the Europe 2020 strategy which combines all the previously existing educational funding programmes like Leonardo da Vinci.

Abroad placements for VET learners can be normally launched on the basis of projects. Unlike in the academic environment, vocational schools or training companies are only on a small scale the initiators of mobility projects. Exchange programmes are launched most of the time by chambers of crafts and industry, national education agencies or non-governmental organizations which then engage schools and enterprises in their activities.

### **Wherein lies the problem?**

Organizing stays abroad for trainees and vocational students is a challenging undertaking. Public information and funding for international exchange opportunities are the key problems when it comes to launching mobility programmes in VET. “First, training stays abroad are still not widely known to many VET establishments as well as trainees, and that there are funds for these kind of purposes”, says Julika Ullrich from the Central Agency for Continuing Vocational Education and Training in the Skilled Crafts (ZWH). Until recently mobility in vocational education has been an orphan child of the education sector in the whole EU. Thus there is a lot to be done in this respect.

On the other hand, given the existing needs and the potential and the importance of VET , the financial means devoted to this purpose are by far inadequate. In comparison with

higher education, funding for VET projects is disproportionately lower<sup>1</sup>. 19 billion EUR designated for ERASMUS FOR ALL projects is a remarkable effort made by the EC and an important sign that EU attributes a high priority to investing in education and training. In fact, two-thirds of this new budget has been allocated to learning mobility. Nevertheless, there are some flaws of this budgetary plan, as pointed out by the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (UEAPME)<sup>2</sup>.

First and foremost, the ERASMUS FOR ALL budget lacks clear budgetary solutions devoted specifically to VET. Secondly, it does not include apprentices as a separate target group of the new strategy. This is not a promising sign if we consider the budgetary situation so far. In practice, a huge amount of VET actors are inevitably forced to renounce their projects in the application process because at the end *“only a little above 25% of the applications get accepted and financed as that is what the funding pool allows for”*, says Joanna Kosakowska from the Polish Craft Association (ZRP).

Speaking about the verification procedures of projects leads us to the second major obstacle VET actors face in their efforts to launch mobility initiatives. It is the know-how that is required for a mobility programme to be successful. The reality is harsh - the financing and funding opportunities are reserved for those who know how to secure them. In order to

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<sup>1</sup> There are 30,000 VET establishments around the EU which already adapted the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and could be involved in EU-wide mobility programmes compared with 4,000 academic institutions that have participated so far in the Erasmus programme.

<sup>2</sup> UEAPME Position Paper: UEAPME position on ERASMUS FOR ALL: The EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport 2014-2020: [http://www.ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/120130\\_pp\\_ERASMUS\\_FOR\\_ALL.pdf](http://www.ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/120130_pp_ERASMUS_FOR_ALL.pdf), 12.09.2014.

apply for funding candidates have to normally go through a long and difficult bureaucratic process which requires time, manpower and special knowledge. Kosakowska emphasize that especially *“micro and medium-sized businesses are not able to spare the time and the resources to prepare such projects”*.

VET actors do not simply dispose of sufficient means to be able to launch and finalize exchange programmes independently. Organizing placements abroad, apart from all the bureaucratic requirements, implies active networking with other European VET establishments interested in a mobility exchange. This, in fact, is another obstacle for many schools and companies as the search for suitable establishments represents an additional work load for them. That is why having partners with sufficient administrative and financial means is an essential element of planning mobility programmes in VET.

Unfortunately, many initiatives fail at the very beginning due to lack of support and sufficient information. In practice, launching traineeships abroad for VET learners lies in the responsibility of chambers, state education agencies or non-profit actors with more resources. However, the extent to which most organizations can be involved in such projects is small considering their usual responsibilities and the resources that are required for mobility programmes.

### **Organizing stays abroad in practice.**

For example, the Artemisszió Foundation, a Hungarian public profit organization from Budapest, organizes a mobility project every year for only 24 apprentices from socially disadvantaged families. This is what the foundation can allow itself considering its capacities. *“We want to do this really well and that is what we are able to do next to our other projects. We have to select the participants, prepare them every time and take care of them through the whole process, and there is a lot of organizational work involved in it too”*, says Edina Tarján, a project manager from Artemisszió.

The involvement of public interest organizations, such as Artemisszió, is crucial for promoting mobility in VET for two reasons. On the one hand, in vocational schooling and training stays abroad are normally part of a reward system for high performers. That means that a number of learners and apprentices do not obtain a chance for having the abroad experience and NGOs often target the disadvantaged ones.

Secondly, although mobility programmes for VET students are becoming more and more popular, it is still a drop in the ocean. As long as organization of an international exchange continues to be an additional responsibility of a teacher or the headmaster, who do it out of their good will and personal interest, often in their free time, there is little room for improvement. Tarján points out that in Hungary *“the institution of a mobility coach is still a novelty, only a few schools fill this position”*, and in this regard, Hungary is not an island in the European VET environment.

Mobility in VET is also a challenge in Poland, although a lot has been done so far in this respect. Polish VET, truly an orphan child of the systemic change after the fall of communism, has been struggling for public and institutional recognition in the first place. *“There is still lack of basic, systematic VET counselling, not mentioning the organization of international exchanges”*, says Kosakowska from ZRP. Nevertheless, there is a positive development in dealing with mobility programmes in Poland. They have been recognized as a means of increasing excellence and there are more and more efforts made to foster VET education through international exchanges. This is true not only for Poland. In times of the changing demographic and economic environment it is of high importance to increase attractiveness of traditional training, and *“vocational training stays abroad are a major way to attract motivated youth as trainees”*, underlines Prof. Dr Hans Heinrich Driftmann, the President of the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK)<sup>3</sup>.

Germany is a trendsetter in the practice-oriented dual training and can be also considered as a role model as far as mobility counselling is concerned. Thanks to the efforts of the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK), the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH) and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) Germany has today nationwide network *“Training without Borders”*. In local crafts chambers and chambers of industry and commerce, over 35 mobility coaches provide advice and information to training companies, trainees and also young skilled workers. They give

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers coaching network promotes cross-border mobility. Interim review of the programme *“Training without Borders”*: [http://www.esf.de/portal/generator/18128/property=data/2012\\_04\\_05\\_interim\\_review.pdf](http://www.esf.de/portal/generator/18128/property=data/2012_04_05_interim_review.pdf), 14.09.2014.

administrative and organisational support in launching and carrying out stays abroad. This network of mobility coaches does important educational and advocacy work for mobility in VET. In four years, Germany managed to increase the number of apprentices participating in traineeships abroad by 2 percent due to the efforts of the chamber's mobility network. *"In 2013 4 percent of apprentices accomplished a vocational training stay abroad and the new government's coalition agreement aims at 10 percent in 2020"*, states Julika Ullrich from the Central Agency for Continuing Vocational Education and Training in the Skilled Crafts (ZWH). *"Training without Borders"* is a great achievement not only on a national scale in Germany. It is certainly an ambitious and unprecedented project which could be launched and further developed Europe-wide in order to foster vocational education through mobility.

## **2. Let's talk about VET and mobility.**

Overall, learning through stays abroad in VET is becoming more and more popular, but there are more efforts required to promote this issue to a broader audience. Much more attention of media, science and the political scene across Europe is required in order to make mobility to an attractive and realistic goal.

Above all, in the light of the current demographic situation, the general perception of VET and traditional occupation has to change. In Poland, for instance, *"we can see that there is a growing demand for vocational training and education because in a while the old generation of skilled crafts professionals will not be existent and we will have a huge gap on the job*

*market”, stresses Kosakowska, “and that is why we need an honest and objective account of all the traditional vocations and trades we encounter every day and which are crucial for all of us”.*

Economic and social advantages of international mobility should be emphasized even more clearly. *“Mobility in VET impacts not only the employment market but it also contributes to the social integration of Europe”*, adds Ullrich. In times of growing cooperation between EU countries when foreign language skills and intercultural competencies of personnel in various economy branches are increasingly in demand, stays abroad for training purposes should, undoubtedly, be given high priority.

As already pointed out earlier in this article, international exchange programmes have the potential to make VET as well as traditional trades and occupations more attractive and desirable. However, the existing information structures in regards to exchange opportunities are not sufficient. Clearly, media has an important contribution to make and its role in this regard cannot be underestimated. As far as raising awareness among training businesses is concerned, media could contribute by highlighting good practice examples and the economic advantages arising from close economic cooperation within the EU. It is crucial that training enterprises become familiar with the idea of sending apprentices abroad and, of course, hosting learners from other European countries. Since, as Ullrich points out, *“companies are ultimately the decision makers when we talk about making stays abroad in VET possible”*.

Furthermore, there is a need for a more vivid debate about the challenges and the potential for improvement as far as international mobility in VET is concerned. Kosakowska, stresses that *„we have to carefully look at the formal and organizational requirements that are required for mobility projects in VET and what can be done to simplify them, because this is what causes a barrier and disaffects potential project authors, especially small enterprises”*.

Such a debate is inevitable to highlight another major problem of VET establishments willing to promote and practice mobility – the funding. VET sector needs strong advocates and a lot more attention of Europe’s committed decision makers in order to become much more visible and desirable. Without a doubt, media offer an excellent platform for this purpose.

### **Excursus**

For more information on the German VET system and its structural problems please listen to the interview with Mr Christian Sperle, the Spokesman for Vocational Education and Training at the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH) in Berlin.

[http://perspectives.blog.hu/2014/10/01/the\\_german\\_vet\\_system\\_and\\_its\\_structural\\_problems](http://perspectives.blog.hu/2014/10/01/the_german_vet_system_and_its_structural_problems)

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