

WORK BASED LEARNING IN THE INTER-REGIONAL AREA BETWEEN SLOVENIA AND NORTH-EASTERN ITALY

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Abstract: *This paper aims to investigate the development of Work based learning (WBL) programmes in higher and professional education in Slovenia and Italy. Albeit challenging the wrong assumption that WBL is the solution to the problem of youth unemployment, the paper evaluates the opportunity to develop exchange programmes of education mobility between Slovenia and North-Eastern Italian regions (such as Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto). Similar economic environments and shared cultural values in the cross-border area should stimulate the development of such programmes, which may be beneficial to young students not only in terms of future economic benefits (e.g. better positioning within the labour market) but also in terms of rising multicultural awareness and active citizenship.*

Keywords: *Work based learning, labour markets, education management, Slovenia, Italy*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last few years both Slovenia and Italy have adopted a number of significant reforms in order to modernize professional education and the higher educational system. For instance, in 2017 apprenticeship has been reintroduced in Slovenia as an educational option for young people that wish to learn the competences and skills for a job. Moreover, scholars argue that schools in Slovenia and elsewhere should better cooperate with local institutions, public and private companies (Vogrinc, 2006). Similarly, a substantial reform has been put forward by Italy in 2015 (referred to as ‘la Buona Scuola’) with an aim to bring the educational system and the economy closer. The reform has been viewed quite favourably in highly industrialized regions such as Veneto, where the ‘alternanza scuola-lavoro’ programmes brought encouraging results (Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per il Veneto, 2018).

In many European countries young people seem to face a more demanding job market and fewer opportunities than the previous generations (Green, 2017). Arguably, with the side-effects from the 2007/08 global financial crisis, followed by a crisis in the real economy as well as due to the unintended consequences of pension reforms in some European countries (Boeri et al., 2016), the transition from school to work is nowadays a demanding task for many young persons, particularly for those who lack any work experience. In order to solve the above-mentioned problem, one of the strategies adopted by a number of European governments is the Work based learning (WBL) strategy, namely an educational strategy aiming at increasing the employability of young people by enabling them to get real-life work experience.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the viability and usefulness of transnational WBL programmes in the interregional area between Slovenia and the provinces of the Northern Italian regions such as Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia. The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to essentially stimulate critical thinking with regards to the application of WBL programmes on a transnational level; on the other hand, to provide some useful arguments for those educators

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and policy makers who are putting their noble efforts in order to provide young people with both a sound education as well as with practical skills and thereby improving their opportunities to find a decent job.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To start with, it is important to define the concept of Work based learning. The European Commission defines WBL as ‘a fundamental aspect of vocational training’ helping learners to ‘acquire knowledge, skills and competences which are essential in working life’ (European Commission, 2013, 5). Scholars such as Raelin define WBL in contrast to conventional learning methodologies: while conventional learning methodologies tend to be theory-based classroom experiences relying on explicit knowledge, WBL is defined as a strategy in which ‘theory may be acquired in concert with practice’ (Raelin, 1997, 564). According to some experts, WBL is to be understood as an educational strategy for high school students, useful to prepare them for citizenship and work (Bailey et al., 2004). Finally, the European Training Foundation provides the following definition of WBL: it is a type of learning that occurs ‘when people do real work. This work can be paid or unpaid, but it must be real work that leads to the production of real goods and services’ (ETF, 2014, 3).

Despite some accounts highlighting the fact that countries with apprenticeship training and WBL educational schemes tend to have lower levels of unemployment (Wolter, 2012), one needs to be cautious in deriving conclusions: evidence about that is still scarce. Even more importantly, education is only one of the many variables that influence the job market and job opportunities of individuals. Due to the large number of factors influencing the levels of a country’s level of unemployment (Dore, 2005, 53), one can conclude that the idea to directly match low unemployment with educational programmes is simply misleading. Nevertheless, WBL could (and should) be modeled according to a number of important insights coming from labour economists who show the importance of encouraging young people to get some working experience early in their life in order to lower the risk of facing a hard time in the future.

Using data on Swedish youths graduating from vocational high schools in the recession years of 1991-1994, Nordstrom Skans (2011) shows the relationship between teenagers’ first labour market experience and subsequent performance in the labour market. With reference to a large German administrative data set for 1975-2004, Schmillen and Moeller (2012) observe that lifetime unemployment is unevenly distributed among the studied population: in particular, they find that, for men, pursuing a disadvantageous occupation early in the professional career leads to a significantly higher amount of lifetime unemployment. In addition to this, based on German employer–employee data that track around 700,000 individuals over a 24 years’ period, Schmillen and Umkehrer (2017) show that early career unemployment tends to increase the probability that unemployment is experienced by the same persons at a given time in the future.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research at the basis of the present paper was driven by the question of how to develop effective WBL programmes in the interregional area between Slovenia and North-East Italy. The methodology reflects the focus of the present paper on an interregional policy level. From this point of view, it is indeed different from other studies that apply a cross-national perspective in

order to assess WBL programmes or comparable educational strategies (e.g. Ryan, 2001). This choice is supported by the relative social and economic similarity of Slovenia and of both Italian regions located in the North-Eastern part of the country. In fact, it seems quite sensible to provide such a comparison rather than a comparison between the two countries, since they are quite different in terms of size, historical background etc.

Open-ended, partially structured interviews were conducted in order to obtain useful insights from respondents on the possibility to develop WBL programmes between Slovenia and North-East Italy in the years to come. Interviews with Slovene and Italian experts focusing on educational policies as well as with a number of managers serving at professionally oriented and technical schools were conducted between May and August 2018. Professionals working in education and professional institutes were asked to discuss their points of view on the feasibility of such programmes as well as on the strengths and weaknesses in this respect. Respondents and participants at the workshops can be classified into four main groups:

- managers at public schools and vocational or technical institutes,
- school teachers and tutors with a strong interest in WBL programmes,
- institutional representatives whose expertise is either in the field of education or in the field of youth employment policy,
- human resource managers serving structured enterprises with headquarters in either Northern Italy or in Slovenia.

The information collected by means of interviews helped me to obtain valuable insights on educational programmes and policies both in Slovenia and in Northern Italian regions. They also enabled me to make some observations which could be furtherly tested in future research. Additional feedbacks were obtained during a number of meetings and workshops attended by experts in education, tutors at school and tutors in enterprises. The meetings took place in fall 2018 as part of the “CB_WBL” Interreg project funded with an aim to enhance capacity building and cross-border governance. Common to most participants who attended the workshop was the strong interest in improving learning conditions, the quality of educational programmes and to help young people to better understand the job market in the interregional area with its changing requirements.

4. FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Respondents that participated to the interviews and attended workshops tend to agree on the fact that the educational systems characteristic for Slovenia and for Italy are becoming increasingly similar. This is perhaps due to the communitarian educational framework that encourages cooperation between institutions in different countries and stimulates exchange programmes for student mobility. Well-designed mobility schemes are particularly interesting for the interregional area between Slovenia and North-Eastern Italy. In this sense, opportunities in this area of reference appear to be quite promising.

Nevertheless, in order to develop effective WBL programmes between the two above-mentioned countries, a number of organizational resources and professional figures need to be granted by the schools and other key actors in WBL. In particular, respondents noted the lack of figures such as professional tutors (particularly in smaller enterprises), who are essential to help students in performing their tasks and monitor their progress at work. Also, stronger networks between institutions, enterprises and schools would help in developing high standards for professional mobility schemes and WBL programmes in this part of Europe. Participants at transnational

WBL programmes could benefit both economically (e.g. with better career opportunities in the future and a better placement in the job market) and in terms of gaining cross-cultural awareness, thus empowering their active citizenship.

All in all, one needs to be nevertheless very cautious when discussing educational strategies such as WBL. While they may favour a better understanding of the job market requirements among young people, one needs to pay attention so not to jump to the wrong conclusions: WBL and vocational training schemes are not themselves a solution to youth unemployment. Instead, the concern which has been expressed for WBL programs in countries such as England may be equally valid for Slovenia and Italy, unless educational and employment strategies are managed properly: WBL may ‘serve to promote an impoverished form of employability and reinforce the class-based divisions of labour’ (Simmons, 2009). If this was the case, the unintended consequences may be rather dramatic – something we do not want to witness.

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