Teacher training for embedding life skills into vocational teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the results of the research conducted within the LIFE2 project in order to identify the need of vocational teachers and trainers on what would help them to embed life skills into their specialist subject teaching. The needs of employers and learners, in terms of life skills required for increasing the employment prospects, and the opinions of the organisations working with disadvantaged young people were also considered for developing a training pack addressed to vocational teachers and trainers. The key recommendations from the research are focused on the following aspects: teachers and trainers’ needs for practical training; needs of learners as VET future professionals; support activities for teachers and trainers in their organisations.

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1. Introduction

The LIFE2 initiative, co-financed by the European Commission through the Leonardo da Vinci program, aims to help VET students to develop, during their professional training, life skills, self-esteem and the self-confidence needed in the workplace. In accordance with the EU strategy Europe 2020, Lisbon Strategy, and the Commission initiative New Skills for New Jobs, the project aims to help teachers to strengthen their links with employers and to create new opportunities of employment for VET students. The pilot training and the training pack produced were designed to help teachers to become learning facilitators and to reduce the school abandonment in VET system. On

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the long term, the desired outcome is to integrate the training pack in the national programs of initial or continuous VET teacher training.

Considering the key competences for lifelong learning described by EU Commission (COM, 2007) and the project objectives, LIFE2 uses the following key competences definitions, with a particular emphasis on increasing VET students employability: “numeracy - use of mathematics to solve a range of problems in everyday situations; literacy and communication - ability to express and interpret thoughts, feelings and facts in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and to interact linguistically in an appropriate way; information and communication technology (ICT): confident and critical use of technology, internet and electronic media; interpersonal - all forms of behavior that must be mastered, to be able to participate in an efficient and constructive way in work and social life and for effective interaction on a one-to-one basis or in groups/teams; use of foreign languages - broadly shares the main skill dimensions of literacy and communication but also calls for skills such as intercultural understanding; entrepreneurship: ability to induce changes in oneself and welcome, support and adapt to innovation brought about by external factors. This involves taking responsibility for one’s actions (positive or negative), developing a strategic vision, setting objectives and meeting them, and being motivated to succeed; job seeking: job market research, CV writing, interview and applications preparation; learning to learn: ability to organize and regulate one’s own learning, including manage one’s time effectively to solve problems, to acquire, process, evaluate and assimilate new knowledge and to apply new knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts” (LIFE 2 Synthesis Report, 2012).

National contexts in relation to embedding key competences in life skills into vocational teaching

As a response to the contemporary society challenges, the curricular reform of the secondary education aims to overcome the mono-disciplinary approaches and develop wider curricular areas in order to create an inclusive and relevant secondary curriculum. The interdisciplinary issues is the result of the transposition (objectification) of the general universal principle of the world unity – the integrality, in education. In Romania, at the upper secondary education level, VET has a modular organization and various possibilities of multi-level, inter- and trans-disciplinary curriculum integration. The modules of curriculum subjects go beyond traditional discipline organization, reflecting the orientation towards an “integrated approach considering the daily and professional life of individuals and social groups” (Birzea, 2010). In the context of social and economic changes and Romanian education reforms, the new roles and responsibilities of teachers require a new set of competences to be established and addressed through teacher training programs. This refers to: design and development of the school curriculum; design and implement cross-curricular activities; work in a multicultural learning environment; develop the partnership between school and community.

The key competences are part of national priorities of the Danish education system in all levels. Denmark was one of the first country in the world to make competence accounts. The key competences described refer to literacy, learning to learn, self-management, creativity and innovation, culture, environment, health, social relations, communication and democracy. In Portugal, the formal curriculum in VET secondary education includes a discipline called integration area, focused on subjects related to socio-cultural education. The trans-disciplinary approach of curriculum organization in secondary education is considered very important for student’s participation in the working life.

The Organic Education Law (LOE), approved by the Spanish Ministry of Education in November 2006, introduces a curriculum which describes minimum educational standards to students’ attainment of a number of basic competences essential for students to participate in working life, but also in social and civic life. The final selection of basic competences contained in the LOE curriculum is based on proposals made by the OECD DeSeCo Project (2005) and the European Union objectives for 2010 established by the European Commission in 2004.

In the National Curriculum for the United Kingdom the emphasis on life skills is focused on improving competences in English, Math, information and communication technology (ICT), job seeking and supporting apprenticeships. Regarding the post 16 teacher training, the minimum standards contain functional skills of literacy, language, numeracy and ICT. In skills areas such as ICT and Math, the continuous professional development (CPD) training for vocational teachers is supported by exemplary online platforms and specialist teachers in Math, English and English for speakers of other languages.
2. Research methodology

The objectives of the needs analysis were: to identify the European priorities regarding teaching life skills and the convergence with the national priorities and actions; to value the experience gained from other similar initiatives (lessons learned); to identify the needs of vocational teachers, learners and employers regarding life skills; to identify the current skills of VET teachers on teaching life skills; to identify the appropriate delivery models to suit the target groups. A questionnaire was administered to VET teachers and trainers in partner countries. The focus group discussions included learners in VET colleges. Employers’ opinions were collected by interview. The desk research was useful for presenting the national context in relation to embedding key competence in life skills into vocational teaching. The investigated population included 96 teachers and trainers from partner countries: United Kingdom (47,92%), Denmark (14,58%), Spain (13,54%), Romania (13,54%) and Portugal (10,42%).

3. Results

The questionnaire for teachers and trainers was self-administrated, on paper or using email-response. The majority of respondents work for vocational colleges (90%), with 1% working for private training organizations and 9% for a range of other organizations, including support institutions and specialized units. More than 90% of respondents are vocational teachers, while other respondents are practicing as trainer of teachers, specialist key skills teacher, manager or support teacher.

The results for the item no. 5. (In your experience, in which areas do you feel there is most need for learners to develop their life skills to improve their employment prospects? 5 = high need, 1= low need), reflect both, VET teachers and trainers’ opinions on the most important life skills for students’ employment in their professional area, and students’ learning needs.

Learning to learn, literacy and communication, and interpersonal are areas most needed to improve employment prospects, according to the respondents. Data presented in the figure 1 shows that the use of foreign languages, numeracy and entrepreneurship registered the lower scores.

Comparing data collected on partner countries and considering the country distribution of respondents, we conclude that the low score on the use of foreign languages can be related to the low need of British students for communication in foreign languages.

The respondents from Denmark, United Kingdom and Spain appreciated literacy and communication as the most needed area for learners to improve their employment prospects, while the respondents from Romania and Portugal mentioned learning to learn. Relatively high scores are registered in Portugal, Spain and Romania for entrepreneurship. Job seeking has relatively high scores in Romania, Portugal and United Kingdom. Both, entrepreneurship and job seeking, registered low score in Denmark. This can be explain by the fact that those life skills are well-represented in the National Curriculum of Denmark, according to the LIFE2 National Report.

The ranking of the key skills needed by learners in partner countries, based on the average of the scale values recorded for each life skills area, is placing on the first positions: literacy and communication, learning to learn and interpersonal skills.
In terms of life skills, the particular needs that should be taken into account for disadvantaged learners are: one to one support; resources ready at hand 24/7, background information; extra time to embed life skills.

**The integration of the life skills in the formal curriculum**

15% of respondents appreciated the extent to which life skills are integrated and explicitly specified in the formal curriculum of the teaching discipline by using high scores, while more than 70% of respondents used medium scores. It is important to mention that our initiative is based on the fact that the National Curriculum only provide a framework. The concrete development and further refinement of life skills in VET schools and subject curricula is carried out by individual teachers themselves, in the class.

The most favored life skills within the formal curriculum of the teaching discipline are literacy and communication for Danish, Romanian, British and Spanish respondents, ICT skills for Portuguese and Romanian respondents, interpersonal for British VET teachers and trainers, learning to learn for Danish, Spanish and Portuguese VET teachers and trainers, use of foreign languages for Danish respondents.

The results show that the main factors for supporting life skills development are: the involvement of teachers (50%), material and financial support (27%) and support for management (23%). Other factors mentioned by respondents are: teacher training, appropriate instructional time, speakers from vocational area, family support etc..

Regarding the organization of vocational teacher training in partner countries, the respondents mentioned university course and course at vocational college. British and Danish teachers and trainers also mentioned further education college as a vocational teacher training provider. VET teachers’ need for specific training in developing life skills within vocational learning was emphasized by 68% of respondents. The life skills addressed in the training programs vary across partner countries and upon the teaching specialty.

The experience exchange with professionals in similar or related institutions represents not only the most appropriate continuous professional development (CPD) activity for the teachers’ needs of professional development, but is also on the top of their preferences, beside the participation in face-to-face training programs. For Romanian respondents, on the first positions are participation at seminars and workshops, and involvement in international partnership in educations, while on the last positions are the face-to-face training programs and educational research and research within the vocational area.
Table 3. The ranking of teachers’ preferences for CPD activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuous Professional Development activities</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>PT</th>
<th>RO</th>
<th>UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face training programs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-learning and blended learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual study</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education research or research within the vocational areas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation at seminars or workshops</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchanging experience with professionals in similar or related institutions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in international partnership in education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The employers’ opinions on how can be improved the key competences of vocational learners are presented below. Regarding the key competence needed from employees, they mentioned as very important a positive attitude to their job. Other issues are: having a good grasp of language and numbers, and a familiarity with IT systems. Employers mentioned various key skills areas which vocational learners need to develop in order to improve their employment prospects, taking into account the professional domain and the organization’s objectives. Effective communication and team working were generally mentioned by respondents. Among other issues described by employers, we find useful to specify the psychological resilience - the ability of individuals to adapt to stress and adversity caused by relational problems, health problems, workplace or financial stressors.

The best way for these life skills to be delivered in school is teaching, and the most appropriate instructional methods are case study and role play. Teachers input can be supported by speakers from industry. In terms of entrepreneurship, the skills which employers feel should be developed refer to the key elements of being an entrepreneur, such as looking for new ways to save costs, identifying the new opportunities etc.. Employers found the concept of making strong links with local business excellent and very useful for improving the quality of the students’ experience and making them much more likely to find a satisfying job.

4. Discussions

The employers have positively appreciated the project initiative, considering the need for collaboration between VET schools and employers for making education more relevant to labor market needs and more responsive to learners’ needs. The employers’ contribution for developing the educational offer is related to increasing the employability prospects of VET future professionals. The professional experience of the employers is useful for both, identifying specific job-related competences and anticipating the future skills required on the global market place. The right mix of life skills should be analyzed in the framework of the permanent interaction between individuals, employers and the broader economic and social context. According to the report New skills for new jobs (COM, 2011), bringing education and employers closer together, the transition from school to the labor market and the continuing professional development during career are favored.

The opinions provided by teachers will be considered in the training pack especially for defining competences, selecting contents and choosing the appropriate delivery methods, in order to propose a flexible approach, susceptible to adjustments correlated to specific contexts. The respondents’ preferences for collaboration and exchanges experiences are active and relatively similar, according the research results, which allows us to presume that this project initiative will be sustainable on short and medium terms.

5. Conclusions

The outcomes of the desk research and need analysis reveal the importance of the teacher training for embedding life skills into the specialist subject teaching. While some life skills are taught by specialist teachers, in particular VET programs (e.g. ICT skills), others should be addressed in the current teaching of specialized subjects. Both,
teachers and learners should be aware of the life skills most needed for improving the employment prospects, and of their own learning needs and attitudes in terms of life skills. Practical training is needed to vocational teachers for raising self-confidence and providing individual support for disadvantaged learners, particularly related to communication, problem solving, literacy, attitude and resilience. The training program should be focused on helping teachers to develop learners’ positive attitudes to the job, entrepreneurship skills and job skills. Raising the learners’ autonomy and fostering the personal development require teacher training for developing self-management, study skills and self-assessment. Relevant methodological suggestions for learning tasks or students’ assessment could be very useful for teachers in order to develop learning to learn and interpersonal skills.

In terms of delivery and readiness it is recommended to involve experience teaching staff in VET curriculum design and to provide teachers with management support in terms of time and other resources. Exchange experience with professional form school and business and continuous updating with employer’s needs should be facilitated by conference, workshops, seminars, with the participation of relevant business representatives.

The initiative of designing and implementing the training pack for VET teachers and trainers in partner countries should take into consideration the specific qualification systems and local constraints and opportunities linked, for example, to local curriculum and schools’ culture. The successful implementation of the train the trainer program depends of the convergence between the LIFE2 products and VET policies and priorities.

References
