Chapter 14

Learning by Working: Examining Examples of Good Practice in Organizing Work Placements in Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT

Work placements can provide good opportunities for students to obtain meaningful learning and work experience. In Latvia, the quality of work placements varies and can lead to both excellent and dubious experience. The chapter aims at investigating how work placements can contribute to student development and how to organize work placements of high quality by exploring examples of good practice of organizing work placements in the companies in Latvia. The results indicate that the most important factor to ensure quality work placements is the interest and motivation of the companies which stems from their need for qualified workers, strategic goals, and sustainable working practices. Quality work placements include the following elements: selection of trainees, discussing the goals of and the program of work placement, assigning the supervisor, preparation for and implementation of work placement, as well as the evaluation. The chapter provides various examples and suggestions on how to improve the learning experience during work placements considering constructionism learning ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Seymour Papert (1928–2016), the developer of the constructionism learning theory, was convinced that learning is the most effective when learner experiences constructing a meaningful product (Papert, 1980). He based his theory on the idea that knowledge is experience that is acquired through interaction with the world, people and things. Knowledge is grounded in contexts, and shaped by uses (Ackermann, 2001). Papert’s constructionism was built on the Piaget’s (1896–1980) cognitive development theory and the idea that children learn best through discovery learning – doing and actively exploring. Based on the same principles, work placements in vocational education can provide excellent context for the
development and accumulation of knowledge relevant for the occupation and/or the study field. In reality, however, practices of the implementation of work placements vary, as well as their learning outcomes. In Latvia, improvements are needed both in terms of the availability of work placements and their quality.

Despite the fact that work placements can provide good opportunities for employers to attract qualified and motivated workers, majority of employers in Latvia do not provide work placements: only 19.3% of employers offered work placements as a means of finding qualified employees in Latvia in 2014 (Project and Quality Management Ltd., 2014, p. 131), and only 39% of employers were interested in offering work placements to students in the nearest time in 2017 (Klāsons, 2017, p. 8). Employers were not interested to provide work placements because they did not have time to train the trainees (44%), they did not have vacancies for work placements (30%), had not considered (20%), work placements were too expensive (18%), the trainees did not correspond to the requirements of the employers (14%), bureaucracy (11%) or they did not need the trainees (6%) (Klāsons & Spuriņš, 2015, p. 33). At the same time, employers in Latvia had long bemoaned the availability of qualified workforce and “work-readiness” of the graduate labour supply. 70% of employers report difficulty in finding skilled workers, and 85% of employers report difficulty in finding employees which they would rate as “good” (Līce, 2017).

The insufficient participation of companies in work placement provision created difficulty for students to find work placements and meet the requirements of the education programme. In Latvia, taking on a work placement is an obligatory requirement in vocational education, both at the secondary and higher education level. Sometimes educational institutions ensure work placements through co-operation agreements with employers, but, in most cases, students have to search for work placements themselves. While searching for work-placement, around 30% of students had to contact on average 2-5 different companies, but every fourth had to contact 6 or more companies (Klāsons & Spuriņš, 2015, p. 26). The lack of work placements is also regularly reported by the web-based portal prakse.lv which is the largest portal in Latvia for work placement advertisements.

Work placements can provide good opportunities for students to ensure their skills and self-development and enhance employability. In Latvia, however, this is not a case for all work placements. The quality of work placements may range from excellent learning experience leading to competitive work opportunity to low qualification work or just fulfilment of a formal requirement of vocational education programme. 10% of students admit that work placement didn’t provide them with any useful learning experience (Klāsons, 2017, p. 8). Some of the students, surveyed in 2014 about their experience of work placements, expressed their dissatisfaction with being used as a cheap labour, doing low-qualification works which did not require any skills, not being paid for their work, especially in the context of the need to cover travel and food expenses themselves (Klāsons & Spuriņš, 2015, p. 39).

The importance of work placements in the recruitment process is also questionable. Only 22% of companies in 2014 and 26% - in 2017 consider in the recruitment process whether the prospective employee has been a trainee before applying for a job. A previous work experience, at the same time, was a much more important factor (for 77% of companies in 2014 and 92% - in 2017), which points to the fact that the Latvian employers do not consider work placements an alternative to work experience (Klāsons, 2017, p. 4 - 5) and indicates the importance of quality of work placements to ensure their credibility in the labour market.

Various shortcomings in organising work placements in Latvia, as outlined above, might also contribute to the overall quality of education programmes and employability of graduates. According to the data of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, only 48% of secondary vocational education
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