

WLP - Case story 5 - Estonia

**Exploring the prospects for regional cooperation
with a focus on workplace learning**
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*Case stories for the Leonardo da Vinci project
Work & Learning Partners
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Introductory remarks

The 'case stories' consist of a series of presentations that have been prepared for the Leonardo da Vinci project 'Workplace learning partnerships (WLP)'. This presentation focuses on the analyses that have been produced by the Estonian research partners of the WLP project .

Within the WLP project it was not possible to base the Estonian contribution on well-grounded piloting with partnerships or learning arrangements. Instead, there was a need to undertake preparatory studies. However, these studies did not lead to a clear 'case story' that would link the training-related interests of the industries to related responses of the training providers. Instead, the Estonian research partners have been in the middle of two-track communication with the enterprises (with interest on European industrial cases) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools (with an interest on school-related developments).

Therefore, the Estonian case story can be seen as a search for a common ground on which the different interests in Estonia and diverse impulses from European or international cooperation can be linked to a proper piloting agenda.

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WLP - Case story 5 - Estonia - Section 1

In the WLP project the Estonian research partners were cooperating with the branch organisation of the mechatronic industries.

The key enterprises of the mechatronic branch are concentrated to the southern Estonia. This could be seen as a natural starting point for regional partnership cooperation with the VET colleges of the said area.

However, there is a tendency that Estonian companies are being merged to foreign companies or are becoming linked to trans-national supply chains.

At this moment it is not clear what kind of implications such 'internationalisation' will have on Estonian companies. On the one hand this refers to policies for staff development and on the other hand to openness for regional cooperation.

Section 1.0.

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WLP - Case story 5 - Estonia - Section 1

Commentary space 1

Although the regional concentration could provide a basis for partnership development there are several obstacles:

- Companies are not ready to share information with their competitors.
- The products of the companies do not overlap in such a way that they would have natural synergies.
- Companies consider that their own internal training has a sufficiently high quality and has to be given the first priority.

Commentary space 1

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Section 1.1.

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Commentary space 2

The prospects for developing partnership-based cooperation are not only depending on the mutual relations between the companies but are also related to the role of the regional VET schools. In this respect the enterprises do not expect much:

- VET schools are seen as preparatory steps to working life, not as active partners in developing workplace learning.
- Skilled workers could support VET schools as associate teachers but they do not have the formal (pedagogic) competences that are required of vocational teachers.
- VET schools try to profile themselves as full-time education providers. The introduction of new models for apprentice training is still at an early stage.

Commentary space 2

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Section 1.2.

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Commentary space 3

The development of training and learning at workplaces is being supported by several national and European projects. So far these have been launched by different initiators and it has been difficult to link their agendas to each other. The industrial actors have been most interested in the projects that have been promoting the training competences of industrial trainers. Other projects have been concerned as rather narrowly focused or as initiatives that have limited practical relevance. (This criticism is related to the hitherto experienced projects on e-Learning and e-Portfolios.) For these reasons it has been difficult to see the benefits from European cooperation.

Commentary space 3

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In the Estonian studies two regional VET schools in the southern Estonia have been mentioned as actual partners of the main industries and as potential partners of a regional network.

As elsewhere, the VET schools are compared with the academic track of the upper secondary education and with apprentice training (which is also provided by some of the mechatronic companies). Thirdly, the VET schools have to comply with the government policies that require certain minimum standards of teachers' domain-specific and pedagogic competences.

Regarding the role of workplace learning within VET curricula, this appears to be an unsettled issue. On the one hand there is some local cooperation. On the other hand there are clear gaps in mutual expectation.

Section 2.0.

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WLP - Case story 5 - Estonia - Section 2

Commentary space 1

VET schools have been used to some forms of cooperation with enterprises that are perceived as unproblematic:

- Representatives of industry are used as experts in curriculum development at the national and local level. This has helped to overcome some gaps in training.
- Trainees of VET schools are getting placements and/or apprentice training opportunities at the local enterprises. The employment prospects have been good.
- Representatives of industry have been welcomed as guest lecturers in VET schools (although both sides see the formal and economic limits to this cooperation).

Commentary space 1

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Section 2.1.

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Commentary space 2

The progress from existing ad hoc partnerships to a more long-term -oriented patterns of partnership cooperation does arise from concepts and models but needs to be based on practical benefits and interests. In this respect the analyses emphasise more the difficulties of school curricula and teacher education to take into account newer developments (e.g. the needs for blended competence profiles that cross current boundaries). Likewise, the VET schools are perceived as outsiders in matters that are crucial for industrial training (e.g. the quality systems and certificates).

Commentary space 2

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Commentary space 3

At present the VET schools are not that strongly supported by European projects and the national initiatives do not seem to reach the issues of workplace learning. From this perspective comparisons between the Estonian situation and the Slovenian micro-piloting activities were considered helpful. In the long run it seems that the Estonian VET schools have to get more keenly involved into apprentice training, into continuing vocational training and into the promotion of web-supported learning. All these aspects have been taken on board in the national priorities for developing VET provisions.

Commentary space 3

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Concluding remarks

In the light of the above it appears that the Estonian contribution to the WLP project did not lead to one coherent 'case story' or to parallel 'case stories' that would meet each other at certain point. Instead, the discussions on workplace learning from the perspective of enterprises and VET schools have not reached a common ground.

From this point of view the role of the Estonian partners in the WLP project has been characterised by the need to mediate between the gaps in their national discussion and between the gaps in the European discussion.

However, through participation in the European cooperation project the Estonian partners have been observing how different initiatives have been promoted in the WLP project or alongside the project. Also, it has been possible to learn how slowly some innovative ideas find their way forward into practical measures.

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