

1. Introduction

Considering the financial crisis that has severely affected national and international economies since 2008, it is unthinkable that two sectors that are strategic for social and economic development – education/training and employment – can continue to reason as they have always done, as if this crisis never happened. As a consequence, a first level of problems and reflections emerges from the redefinition of the core institutional and organizational structures of these two “worlds”, the world of education and training and the world of employment and production, which have become increasingly separated over the years, to the point of becoming alternatives, to a certain extent. In the last few decades, in fact, the population has aged, with workers that are becoming older and older, with scarce possibilities of being replaced, and an increasingly drastic drop in youth employment, accompanied by a rise in the school dropout rate. On the other hand, the market crisis has negatively affected the investment strategies of many businesses in various European countries, triggering chain reactions leading to their downgrading or closing down. In other words, in periods of great crisis all countries suffer a certain degree of economic contraction, although the extent of the contraction is directly proportional to the solidity of a system within which the level of qualification, and of skills in general, has always been a critical success factor for enterprises and job seekers alike.

The data provided by Cedefop, and other research centres investigating this phenomenon in one way or another, show how people with higher qualifications are more likely to find a job and (in some countries at least) to earn more than people with low or no qualifications at all.

Therefore, in consideration of the fact that, in times of economic crisis, underqualified people become more vulnerable and are pushed to the fringe of the job market, where they may remain for a longer period of time or even indefinitely, the major stakeholders involved – i.e. the institutions responsible for teaching skills (schools and vocational training establishments first and foremost) and the partners that will exploit those skills (enterprises) – should commit themselves to further improve their collaboration and engage in joint projects, with the aim of both ensuring the “early” employment of job seekers, without affecting their opportunity to learn, to the best of their abilities, the competences that are essential for their fellow citizens, and enhancing the quality of the enterprises’ production, in a virtuous circle of continuous strengthening and improvement. Gregory Bateson is credited with saying that “the rate of learning must equal or exceed the rate of innovation/change”, whereby learning is considered the most significant strategic lever for improving and deepening knowledge. No change can take place without new knowledge, which entails that learning should not be viewed as a task, but as an approach to life, lacking which life can become hard and marginalising, in some cases even changing the destiny of a community. Joseph Realin (2008) claims that over the centuries we have somehow been conditioned “to a classroom model that separates theory from practice, making learning impractical, irrelevant and boring (...); but what if we make our work site a perfectly acceptable location for learning?”. This is the very solution proposed by an approach whereby learning is placed at the heart of work, known as Work-Based Learning (WBL).

1.1 SWORD, the Project

Based on these reflections, we have become convinced that the transition from school and training to work is a key element for achieving the integration of young people into production scenarios consistently with the needs of enterprises, especially small and medium enterprises, providing fuller professional skills for better tackling the changes and innovations under way. Skill gaps are a problem throughout Europe for young people leaving the school and training stage.



This is precisely what the SWORD project (the acronym of School and Work related Dual system) is all about. The SWORD project is one of the strategic objectives of the 15th legislature of the Autonomous Province of Trento, the promoter of the project, and its aims, in a nutshell, are:

- to develop the school-training-work process in order to structurally narrowing the gap between school, higher training and research and work, by introducing students during their training to knowledge about the workplace and about work-based learning;
- to help young people find jobs within an economic environment that requires their training.

The SWORD project is therefore one of the possible levers for accomplishing this institutional responsibility, because it can offer:

- a comparative analysis of the dual model and the various types of school-to-work transition, both existing or expected in the various contexts involved by the project;
- an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved (vocational training schools, enterprises, intermediate partners) and their possible evolution;
- a proposed innovative and viable model in terms of approaches, actions, paths, practices and tools;
- the launching of the model according to various types of approach suitable for the different contexts;
- a manual containing recommendations and guidelines for implementing the model, i.e. for creating the conditions and activating the services needed to the purpose of developing effective school-to-work transition paths in the different regional contexts.

SWORD, in fact, **focuses on the mechanisms governing the transition from (primarily) technical and vocational education and training paths to employment**, with a view to assisting the educational systems in directing their activities towards delivering an adequate response to the demand, by enterprises, for professionally qualified workers and to the regional development strategies and prospects.

The dual system is a key feature, at European level, of the transition from school to work: many countries, in fact, are committed to rethinking/reorganising their educational and training paths with a view to adapting the dual system to the local situation and, generally speaking, to value work-based learning, by more or less gradually introducing its core elements into the educational systems.

Therefore, the SWORD project aims to attentively examine the dual learning model, in order to:

- promote a “new and shared approach” to dual learning;
- support the partners who have already implemented the model in overcoming the existing criticalities;
- assist the partners desiring to adopt the model by offering them possible solutions to overcome or avoid the existing criticalities, as far as possible.



Lastly, the aim of the project is to identify, for the future, a transnational dual learning model for school-to-work transition capable of supporting EU-wide mobility processes.

1.2 The project Partners

Regarding the SWORD project partnership, innovative solutions are being developed by the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, the Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) and the area of Gdansk, where TNOiK is taking part in the ongoing process of rethinking the local VET model. In particular, the Autonomous Province of Trento (PAT) is engaged in systematising the first activities regarding:

- training (with the introduction in its training programmes, on a permanent basis, of an apprenticeship scheme for professional qualifications and diplomas; the organisation of support measures for promoting employment; an integrated system of curriculum-based apprenticeships, summer traineeship programmes and guidance and training schemes);
- more in general, the identification of local specialist poles, combining training processes and production processes in smart specialisation sectors (mechatronics, agrifood, energy and environment, quality of life and the full range of ICT), within which to build proximity networks linking technical education, vocational education and training, advanced professional training, universities, research centres and enterprises involved.

The partners in the countries where dual learning is operational - Arbeit und Leben, Hamburg, as well as BFI Oberösterreich and, in Italy, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano - have long since launched, together with other local stakeholders, a reflection on the existing criticalities, in particular with regard to school-to-work transition, highlighting inter alia the drop in the number of young people choosing this path. Based on these needs and the attempts to build an overall approach to the "school/training-to-work" transition, the SWORD project's mission is to identify a shared transition model, focusing on improving the experiences regarding the interlacement between classroom education and workplace training, to develop professional skills suited to innovative workplace and research environments and applied according to the cultural and socio-economic traits of the partners.

Below is a brief presentation of the SWORD project Partners:

- "Dipartimento della Conoscenza" (Department of Knowledge): this is the body set up by the Autonomous Province of Trento dealing with education, university and research, and it is the lead partner of the project;
- "Arbeit und Leben Hamburg", an organisation managed by the German trade union federation and the Volkshochschulen, focusing on adult education and mobility;
- "Berufsförderungsinstitut Oberösterreich (BFI OOE)", an institution for developing vocational training in Upper Austria, which directs its activities to combining the new labour market needs with the training opportunities, with a special focus on disadvantaged young people;
- "Towarzystwo Naukowe Organizacji i Kierownictwa (TNOiK)", a non-governmental and non-profit organisation that develops and promotes vocational training management to foster the country's economy;
- "Direzione Centrale Lavoro, Formazione, Istruzione, Pari Opportunità, Politiche giovanili e Ricerca" (General Department for Labour, Vocational Training, Education, Equal Opportunities, Youth Policies and Research) of the Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, which directs the region's educational and labour system;

"Intendenza Scolastica per le scuole in lingua Italiana" (Italian-language School Superintendency) of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, which deals with the Italian-language schools in the region.

2. The comparative analysis

After this overview of the underlying features of the SWORD project, the next step is a comparative analysis of the experiences acquired in this field by the partner countries and regions/provinces.

This has led to the production of the first report of the SWORD project - called Intellectual Output 1 - developed according to the objectives outlined and shared at project design stage.

The comparative analysis is a useful tool for defining the **“reference background” against which the subsequent stages of the project will be developed**, within which the actions for achieving an (even transnationally) applicable integrated approach to work-based learning will be modelled and tested.

The report is based on the comparative analysis of the documents (regional reports) developed by the project partners that describe, according to a common framework, the single VET systems and school-to-work transition processes, including any forms of duality and alternance deemed useful for further developing the project (see Chapter 3).

The analysis came up against the difficulty of obtaining comparable evidence due to the presence of differently organised educational systems and different legislative frameworks and regulations, that cannot be compared in full.

Each system we analysed has its own specific "coupling/mix" of some characteristic elements taken from the dual system which have been blended with the existing education and training system. This practice, which appears at first glance reductive - given the complexity of the consolidated dual system, is instead probably the only way to gradually implement the dual system in different local contexts (as pointed out by the conclusions of the work of Prof. Dr. Dieter Euler 2013¹).

Despite the substantial differences between the country cases, our comparative analysis showed that:

- in countries where the dual model has not been developed yet, the education and training system has paid little attention to the school-to-work transition, or has not yet produced adequate results;
- SWORD starts from the consideration that even in countries with a well established dual system, there are critical issues concerning in particular in the relationship between the VET systems and processes regarding work-related interaction;
- one of the most critical issues in countries with an established dual system concerns the role of vocational training schools, in relation to the preparation and management of the school-to-work transition (e.g. transferable vocational education and relevant social skill development as part of an Individualized Education Plan);
- a further critical element is the involvement of schools and training bodies in the transition activities (to avoid the risk of losing the balance between educational purpose and the needs expressed by companies or their intermediary bodies;

¹ Prof. Dr. Dieter Euler, *Germany's dual vocational training system: a model for other countries? A study commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, 2013*