

4. What is the Work Based Learning (WBL)?

Analysis of the experience and of the results regarding the modalities of “duality” present in the various local, cultural and socio-economic contexts of the SWORD Partners indicates the need to reflect on the meaning and importance of work based learning and on the various approaches available for improving it, and not only in terms of personal experience.

Although work based learning (WBL) is not a new concept, it remains a viable solution for the new learning and personal fulfilment needs in terms of employment too. It consists of a set of training practices of an experiential type that together develop school-learnt disciplinary skills and professional skills in an integrated school-enterprise learning environment (Seagraves et al., 1996). It is, therefore, an active and dynamic form of learning that “slowly unfolds in the course of a lifetime” (Wilson, 1997). The necessary integration between school and enterprise is noteworthy: Naylor (1997) states that WBL is part of a **triple approach** for the transition from school to workplace that also includes school based learning and the activities connecting one environment with the other, underlining, therefore, that it is not only and exclusively a learning approach that uses the workplace as a means for the transfer of knowledge. This statement is key to comprehending how work based learning is a methodological kind of support that transforms practice (within a real work environment) into learning and that also stems from the knowledge that is consolidated thanks to the work done in school. This means that the working action, if conducted in a critical and aware manner, becomes a source of knowledge. This form of learning is described by many authors as being more effective in engaging students and in involving them in a process of reflection on the action that accelerates learning. There is a certain variety among the terms used in Europe to define work based learning (WBL) that often is correlated to specific organisation forms. CEDEFOP substantially recognises three macro-categories according to the experiences: **Apprenticeship, Alternance training and Work-based learning**. These terms are often used as synonyms, and they are roughly similar, but still hold differences that are worthy of mention. In other words, based on a description used as a standard by CEDEFOP:

Apprenticeship basically consists in a long-term training alternating periods at the workplace and in an educational institution or a vocational training centre, by which the apprentice is contractually linked to the employer and receives remuneration (wage or allowance). The employer assumes responsibility for providing the apprentice with training leading to a specific occupation. The ILO (International Labour Organization)’s definition of apprenticeship also underlines that training must be based on a predefined training plan, is conducted at the employer’s business premises, leads to one of the qualifications institutionally recognised by competent authorities and is governed by a contract. After completing the programme, apprentices obtain a nationally recognised professional qualification.

Alternance training, is a generic term that includes all forms of education or training and traineeship/internship, combining periods in a school or training centre with periods at the workplace or in a centre set up to welcome internees or trainees (teaching companies, work activity simulation centres, etc.). The alternance between workplace training and school training can take place on a weekly, monthly or yearly basis. Depending on the country and rules for the application of this specific status, participants may be contractually linked to the employer and/or receive a remuneration, although this is not as binding as in the first case. In fact, the participants can be considered students without acquiring the specific status of ‘apprentice’.

Work-based learning regards the acquisition of knowledge and skills by carrying out – and reflecting on – tasks and activities in a professional context, either at the workplace (e.g.: alternance training) or in a vocational training institution. (Source: ICF International Report on Dual Education).

In any case, each of the foregoing cases includes the component of career development that exposes the learners to a variety of employment situations in an environment set up to accompany them and assist them in taking both contextual decisions regarding the work they are performing (with accurate training and supervision) and career decisions for a future prospect (with job guidance or similar).

What elements determine the success of WBL?

A document of the European Commission focusing on the indications for practices and policy pointers for work based learning underlines how this form of training is an exemplary win-win situation, therefore beneficial to each stakeholder involved:

- the **students/workers** develop and improve abilities and professional practices, build and reinforce the skills required to operate in a workplace at the best, including transversal ones such as communication, teamwork and problem solving, learn how to make more informed career choices, improve self-confidence, develop a more conscious intrinsic motivation, and acquire better chances of entering the labour market;
- the **employer** acquires a supply of increasingly qualified workers, can address skill gaps through tailor-made training of the apprentice/student, which in turn has a positive effect on recruitment and retention as well as improving company productivity and performance;
- the **education and training system** improves VET programmes and obtains better learning outcomes, which has a positive effect on the professional development of teachers and trainers, and reinforces cooperation with enterprises;
- the **social system** benefits from the virtuous cycle by which an increasingly younger and skilled workforce responds better to labour market needs and improves its outcomes in terms of social inclusion and the offering of equal opportunities. (Source: Work-Based Learning in Europe; Practices and Policy Pointers; European Commission – Education and Training; 2013).

4.1 The impact of WBL

A number of international institutions and contexts deal with collecting information by means of targeted and statistical surveys, periodically collected by each country, which make available important databases, thanks to which it is possible to relate a range of inputs, outputs and outcomes in the various fields (demographics, education, VET, healthcare, labour force and labour market); to name but a few: Eurostat, Cedefop, ILO, OECD, the learning curve (Pearson database developed by *The Economist*), European Social Survey, European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE). This enormous wealth of information is, of course, analysed, studied and monitored and, over the years, has produced a solid bibliographical reference base, which, although featuring a number of contradictions, nevertheless provides a broad-ranging and, indeed, far-reaching overview of the matter.

Based on a first review, it clearly emerges (with a certain degree of consensus) that:

- young people (15 – 24 years of age is the range taken into account by almost all the surveys in this field, and the first age group in the international databases, and it is used here because of its greater affinity with the consulted studies) with a primary or secondary school leaving certificate, or ESL (Early school leavers) preparing to enter the labour market, are a population at high risk of unemployment (Quintini et al. 2007, Righi e Sciulli 2012, Levels et al. 2014, Eurydice e CEDEFOP report 2014);

compared to the other populations, they are much more exposed to massive turnover, resulting in an increased risk of unemployment in adulthood.

Although no direct relation has been found between gross per capita income, a country's productivity level and the unemployment rate in wealthier countries, in less wealthy countries and at times of economic crisis youth unemployment is a particularly sensitive issue, and strongly rising, compared to adult unemployment (Verick 2011). Between 2008 and 2010, in the EU27 the unemployment rate of 15-24 year-olds increased from 5% to 21%, while it rose by only 2 percentage points in the 25 – 74 age group, from 6 to approx. 8% (EENEE report and Eurostat 2012 Report).

Young adults show weak skills in job hunting and can offer little or no work experience to an employer.

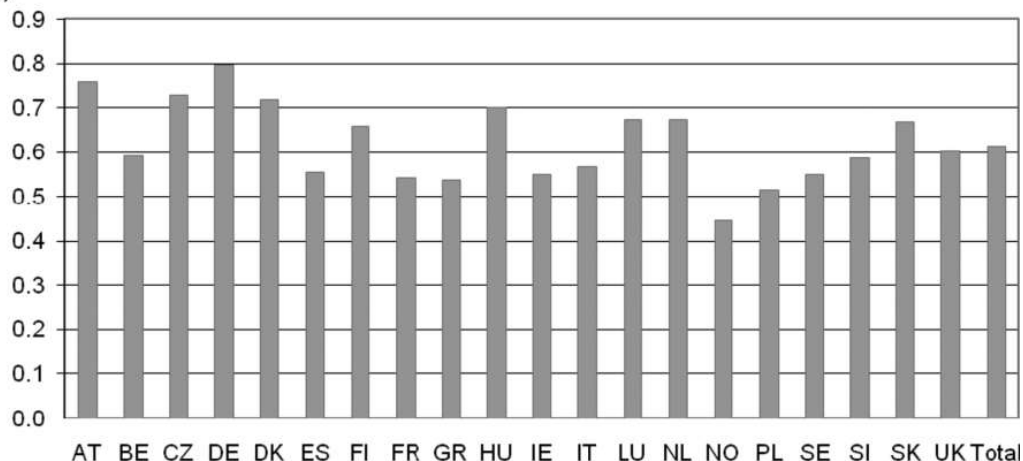
Although it seems that this fragility tends to diminish over the years, at present there is a higher risk of long-term unemployment for this age group and this has negative effects, even in the case of late employment, on the salary and, consequently, on one's working life (Gregg et al. 2005, European Social Survey 2014 data) and on social life in general (idleness, income support, welfare benefits, increased crime, alcohol, drug and gaming abuse, Bell et al. 2010).

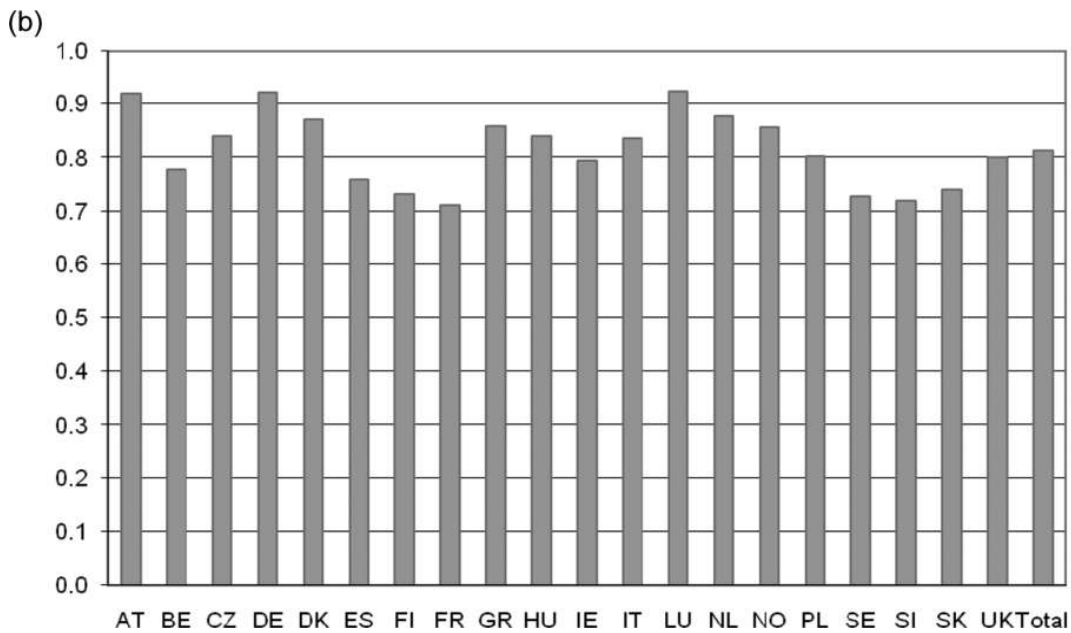
Based on these premises, and on the measures put into place by the various countries to oppose unemployment and facilitate school-to-work transition, the various consulted studies show how the dual system is one of the possible solutions that can be implemented, together with others, in order to oppose youth unemployment and inactivity.

If we consider the relationship between the educational systems in the various countries and the likelihood that a young person with a secondary school or VT diploma has of starting work with a job matching his or her educational qualifications (Vertical Match or VM), or of finding a first job that is consistent with the skills (Horizontal Match or HM) learnt at school (same field or sector), we can observe how, in many European countries, there are frequent mismatches with regard to both VM and HM, and over 25% of all workers in the OECD area (OECD, 2011) are "overeducated" (i.e. they have higher qualifications than are required for their job). The debate regarding mismatching is heated and there are many differing opinions, although the latest studies (Green, 2013; Quintini, 2011) have confirmed its existence and the fact that it has inevitable long-term consequences on individual careers.

The following two diagrams show the school-work matching variations with regard to both HM (diagram a) and VM (diagram b):

(a)





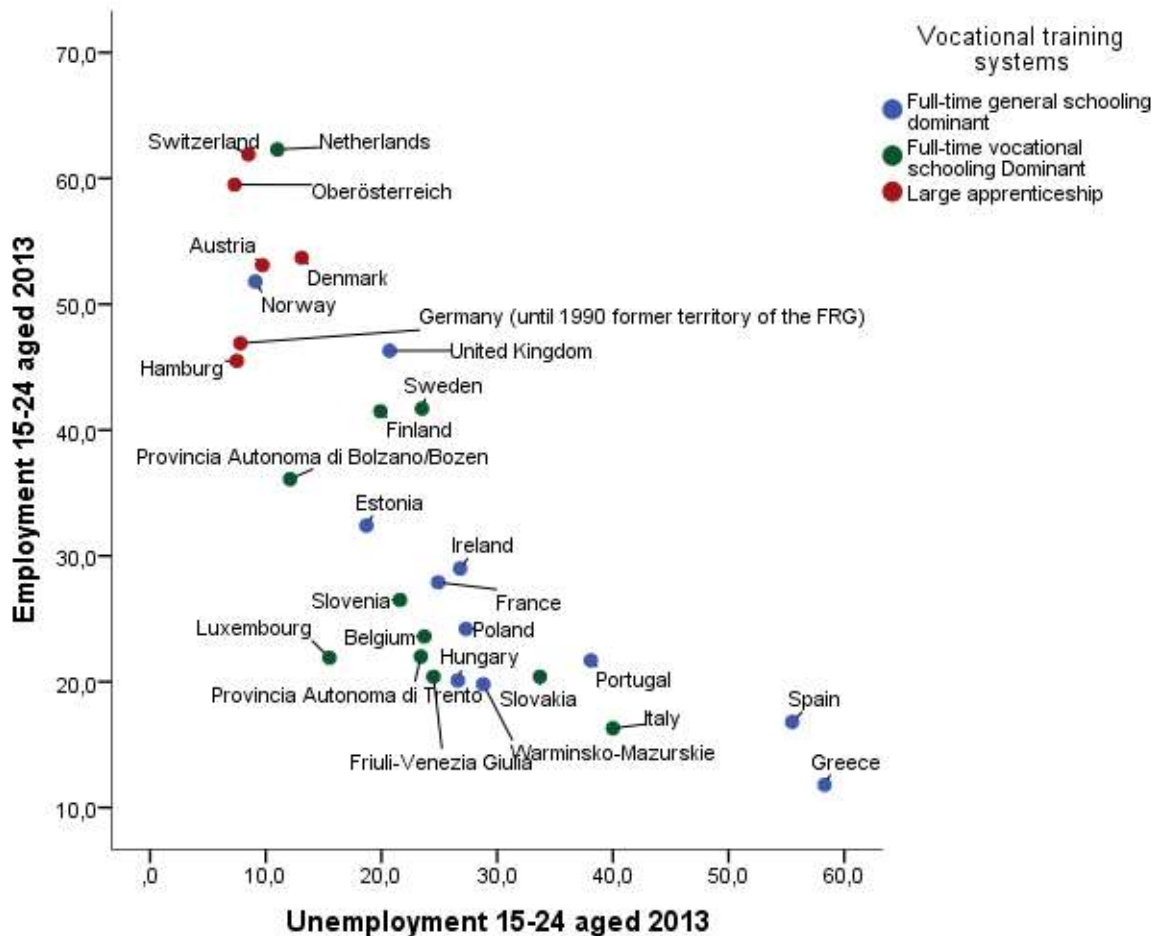
Source: Eurostat (2010)

It can be seen how, as concerns HM (diagram a), Norway has the lowest value and Germany the highest value. In the case of Germany, the value rises further to 96% for apprenticeship students (BIBB, Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2012). Immediately after Germany is Austria.

Although the values shown in diagram b tend to rise for all the countries examined, the proportion of VM remains clearly higher in the case of Germany and Austria, and Luxembourg as well, while France has the lowest value of the entire distribution.

The authors conclude by stating that the educational systems featuring a high degree of stratification and early career channelling are more likely to offer the possibility of finding a job that matches the level and qualifications attained. Stratification and channelling seem to reduce the uncertainty of the employer by offering a greater degree of clarity in the training paths and final competences; these aspects however, while facilitating a greater matching between training and work, seem to also reduce usability at local or national level, thus reducing *de facto* the possibility of mobility. These systems, Cavalli claims, tend to reproduce (or at least not disrupt) inequalities and to limit social mobility.

Many share the view that the intensity of youth unemployment is associated, in part, also to the training system: the higher the focus on a “school – work based” system, the lower the impact of unemployment in the age group considered here.



As shown in the diagram, there are considerable differences between the countries and regions in which a dual system is implemented and those in which such supportive systems do not exist. There are exceptions, of course, such as the Netherlands and Norway, which nevertheless seem to include a high percentage of dual system, although this is not entirely widespread. In the “full-time schools” systems, in which there is a marginal relationship of students with the world of labour, the impact of youth unemployment is much harder.

Another distinctive element of Germany and Denmark (the figures for Austria are not yet available) is the high probability, for young people, to find a permanent job, compared to Italy and Spain (Righi e Sciulli, 2012); moreover, we can also observe how young Danes employ about 24 months to complete the school-to-work transition and find a permanent job and German and Spanish youths need 31-33 months, where in Germany this time is employed (for over 65% of young people) in apprenticeship activities and in Spain in unemployment or temporary contracts. In Italy, last but not least, the low percentage of young people who enter a stable employment relationship employ 27 months, out of the 39 months spent in waiting on average, in unemployment, and only 5 months in temporary and occasional jobs (ibid.). Righi (2012) and Cavalli (2013) state that, although the likelihood of obtaining permanent employment is higher in Germany and Denmark, in these countries permanent employment can be found in the medium term, with regard to both the average waiting time for entering into an apprenticeship (the average age for entering an apprenticeship is 19 years) and the amount of time spent in temporary jobs, while in Italy and Spain the

excessive use of temporary contracts (following the labour market reform laws) does not achieve either the permanence or rooting of young people in the labour market.

The question as to whether the dual system is a success factor of the production system, or, on the contrary, whether it is the production system that drives the vocational training system towards success, a middle-of-the-road answer is generally given which contains, in itself, a large number of truths. What we see here is the strengthening of the idea that - in this field - the explanations are neither mono-causal nor unidirectional and deterministic. Many agree that, in any case, the dual system should foster (in order to effectively work) the conditions of an involvement of and undertaking of joint responsibility by the various stakeholders (training system, production system, institutions and interest groups), and not just require them as pre-conditions. These reasons lead to reconsider the set of variables that need to be reprocessed within each context, as models that work in a certain country may not function in other contexts.

Of course, there are scholars that highlight the criticalities of the dual system, which can in many instances be applied to the vocational training system too:

- qualifications tend to rapidly evolve in contemporary society;
- these systems are very often found to be ineffective with regard to the weaker VET population groups (for which, for example, Denmark has introduced customised forms of activation);
- they are very valid systems in the fields of crafts and industry, but there are no elements supporting the fact that they can be equally useful in the transition to a knowledge-based economy, which requires high “transversal” competences and flexible specialisations that dual training cannot guarantee;
- a certain reluctance - or even incapacity - can be observed, by enterprises, to forecast their human resources needs in the medium-to-long term, which discourages investments in training, especially in difficult periods, and in periods close to the same, where, generally speaking, no immediate recoveries are recorded;
- as concerns higher technical positions, even in the technical sector no career progression is reserved for internal personnel, as enterprises prefer to recruit workers with tertiary education (with the related risks of overeducation and overskilling);
- the excessive specialisation required in many sectors does not favour the mobility of workers from one sector to another, both because they may be forced out of the labour market in the case of economic upheavals or other turbulences and because it is generally hard to adapt to the fast-moving market changes (in Denmark, once again, the principle of *flexicurity* adopted there seems to work as a good antidote, while in Germany the decades-long partnership culture between enterprises and training has strengthened the conviction, within businesses, that they do not train workers only for themselves and their own needs, but potentially for the entire labour market);
- liberal economies do not benefit from dual systems (unlike cooperative economies). In these economies, there is a high risk of free riders, and training a worker practically means “handing over” that worker to the competition;

in other terms, the valorisation and promotion of the capacity to enter the world of labour cannot be limited to a single approach focusing on the job dimension or on social integration policies (which aim to improve the “employability” granted by a certain system), but they entail the modelling of the entire social environment, to the purpose of enhancing the inclusiveness of the system as a whole (Bonvin, 2009) - "This rationale consents the development of a concept of employability as a collective responsibility" (Zimmermann, 2006).

4.2 The case of Austria and Germany, success and transferability

We have observed, thanks to the wealth of detail and information contained in the reports, that well-structured dual systems play an important role in the success of integration into the labour market. In Austria and in Germany, there is a high rate of participation by young people in forms of apprenticeship; on the contrary, the youth unemployment rate is lower than in the UE-27 countries and, generally speaking, the waiting times for entering the world of labour do not feature any particular criticalities. The vocational education and training system of both countries offers different paths for qualification, career advancement and, in recent years, has tried to implement and strengthen the links with tertiary education. If we compare the rates of attainment of an educational or other qualification of these countries with the rest of Europe, it can be seen that they are higher in Austria and Germany. The Austrians seem to be particularly focused on developing specific measures for including disadvantaged persons, so that everybody may have an opportunity to learn a trade. There are specific measures integrating customised guarantees and support with coaching instruments; supra-company apprenticeships are adopted for those who have problems in finding a traineeship opportunity.

As highlighted in a study by GHK Consulting Ltd and CERGE-EI (2012), these programmes are costly and entail the risk of reducing the propensity by enterprises to provide apprenticeship training. Therefore, it is important that these transition paths only imply the adoption of special measures in a limited manner. In the case of Austria, the dual paths managed through the supra-company organisations seem to be a suitable solution for the lack of places for apprentices and show a good possibility of transition to the labour market for young people upon completion of their training path. What remains to be understood, in the more disadvantaged cases (the lower queues), is the definition of more effective support measures.

Another strong point seems to be the guidance system, which is increasingly important for helping young people make informed and conscious decisions.

With regard to career counselling, first and foremost, the German example of an enhanced vocational orientation such as the “Berufseinstiegsbegleitung” (SGB III) can also provide a useful contribution for the further development of a specific and specialist vocational orientation in the other partner countries. There is the need, in fact, to broaden the vocational orientation strategies and consulting services and to study the effectiveness of their outcomes. Coaching is a recent Austrian programme of considerable importance for the purposes of our project, having a number of similarities with the German experience of “Berufseinstiegsbegleitung”, and therefore deserves to be further investigated, especially with regard to its implementation, the professional skills involved, their training and the costs that these paths require.

4.3 Final remarks on WBL

While we can confirm that the European context is favourable to WBL because of the important role VET and education play in the transition towards a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, on the other hand, our analysis suggests that it is difficult to “photograph” the exact nature of WBL at the level of single partner country because of the continued evolution both within policies and practices. This is partly due to

the fact that WBL is closely related to various strategic elements (institutional, organizational solutions, specific trainer training, corporate culture, etc.), which are still far from being interconnected (especially in those regions where WBL is yet not consolidated). Any combination or interaction of the above-mentioned strategic elements, carried out in a multidisciplinary and multidimensional perspective, generates a distinct and more or less functional experience and approach to WBL.

This is why we can find a well-defined framework with a detailed level of description in each field of application in Germany and Austria. Whereas the framework is less defined in the Province of Bolzano and Trento or has still to be defined in the other partner regions where WBL is not yet part of the system. Even where WBL is a consolidated practice, there are some issues, which require further analysis and clarification such as:

WBL applied in the context of **higher education**,
the incidence of **costs** and / or financing of WBL.

A critical element for the analysis and benchmarking consists of the ambiguity of some key terms and the methodological complexity of the argument. We can summarize by saying that there is considerable variety in the legislative and regulatory frameworks regarding the development and implementation of WBL. Again we can find more complex legislative frameworks with more specific measures, which represent a clear point of reference for actors who are entitled to take part. If we compare our study with others studies, we can affirm that WBL is more widespread in countries where the legal framework acknowledges a certain degree of autonomy to higher education and vocational training bodies to develop and accredit training programs in relation to clear standards of achievement related to objectives and skills/competence centrally defined in liaison with other key stakeholders.

For organizations in the “start up phase” as our partners from the Autonomous Province of Trento, the Autonomous Province Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Poland, it is necessary to **further clarify the role of the unions, industry and chambers of commerce.**

Despite the conceptual differences in understanding WBL that emerges from the SWORD analysis and from similar studies carried out at European level (see the various studies on the subject), it becomes evident that in particular apprenticeship remains critical key element of the process (among the most critical factors we have to mention the **poor availability of companies to take part in apprenticeship schemes**), reducing **in this way the opportunities to make apprenticeship more successful.**

In addition, in order to get a clearer picture of the scale and scope of the outputs of WBL, the data collected by SWORD in regard to the different types of integrating young people in the labour market (for example, the nature of contracts, duration), we can see a high employability in Austria and Germany of students trained in the dual way. However the employability depends on an initial selection process that picks out excellent school leavers and “simply” leaves behind the weaker students who remain in school because they are not able to access the dual training system. The situation is completely the opposite in Trentino, Alto Adige where WBL is used in Italian-language schools, (but also the Friuli and Poland). Here WBL is specifically used to address weaker students and school drop-out. WBL used with this target-group can hardly guarantee the same levels of excellence as in Austria and Germany.

This is a critical aspect that emerges clearly from our SWORD benchmarking process and has to do with different “traditions” in the conceptualization of apprenticeship. The dual form of apprenticeship in northern Europe is a “strong” apprenticeship that strives for excellence, the professional apprenticeships in Italy at present, is conceptually “the last chance” to help young people who are weak at school in get into a (weak) labour market.

What varies in WBL models is the role of the external organization (e.g. employer or intermediary labour market organizations) and the student in the **planning process of learning activities** and the definition of standards of competence that are in line with the specifications of a given "job" and reflect exact company requirements. In Italy the design of curriculum and validation of skills has been conventionally in the hands of Vocational Training Bodies. The direct cooperation with companies and intermediary bodies clashes against the "conventional" ways of curriculum development. However in Germany, Austria, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano and Trento we can find regulations that support and favour cooperation partnerships between schools and enterprises for curriculum development activities. In the literature we can find other countries **using voluntary forms of collaboration** within which institutions often face considerable challenges to involve employers in the development of training programs (an example in this case is given by Poland and Autonomous Province of Trento).

A crucial first step in improving the flexibility of the institutions (both Vocational Training Bodies and Schools) could be the development of the **concept of "part-time" students** with a different status from "full-time" students (as required by the new Italian national regulations). Nevertheless in both cases, the part-time students (who work half-time) and full-time students should be able to achieve the same competence level. Furthermore flexibility is related to the ability to recognize what are the priorities within the learning process. Austria and Germany have made a great progress in this regard. The second project period will go more into this.

The development of WBL remains a challenge for the traditional - school based - models of VET. The Austrian and German Sword report clearly show that the implementation of the WBL is always associated with the quality assurance of education and skills required in the qualification and related standards. However, there is nothing like a unique model for the external quality assurance, even at European level we can find a variety of quality assurance as well as of WBL approaches.

The first common challenge the SWORD consortium has to face is the development of a shared model of open decision-making in which school increase their autonomy and together with other actors of the dual system jointly define - in a precise and detailed way - the priority learning needs that are also pertinent, smart, sustainable and inclusive. Final conclusions:

The strength of the German-Austrian model is the result of the linkage of four key conditions: 1) all institutional actors involved have the same importance (which increases also social acceptance of the dual system); 2) the responsibility of the employer to contribute to occupation; 3) the shared responsibility of competence certification; 4) a strong labour market regulation for every professional field.

The percentage of companies that contribute to WBL based training is a key indicator: the SWORD partner report confirm previous CEDEFOP study analysis, Austria, Germany together with Sweden and Finland are the countries with the highest numbers of enterprises that offer some kind of training whereas Italy, Poland together with Greece and Bulgaria are countries with the lowest contribution to training from the company side. In the Autonomous Province of Bozen and in Friuli-Venezia Giulia the contribution rises whereas in the Autonomous Province of Trento the involvement of companies remains a factor to be developed. Nevertheless due to the current changes in the Italian VET system WBL is getting more and more integrated into the system. An open question not only for SWORD refers to the cost that occurs for training companies. To increase the acceptance of WBL among companies it is necessary to further evidence that WBL is a different form of investment already used in other European countries although also the most "virtuous" countries have to register falling numbers.