

Slovakia - new vocational education and training (VET) act adopted

In Slovakia, initial vocational education and training (IVET) faces difficulties in offering practical training corresponding to state-of-the-art developments in technology and working conditions.

Therefore, work-based learning components have been emphasised in policy and practice. Schools were encouraged to seek partnerships with companies for providing practical training adjusted to their needs and even offered in companies' own facilities. These school-company partnerships are gradually changing IVET, transforming the traditional school-based supply-driven system to a demand-driven work-based learning system.

In parallel, employers' representatives, particularly the automotive industry, required introduction of a 'dual system' inspired by German-speaking countries. After stormy debates and even controversies among employers' representatives themselves, this eventually led to a new Act on VET (No 61/2015 Coll.) adopted by parliament in March 2015.

Strengths of the new Act on VET:

1. The Ministry of Finance abandoned its long-term resistance to tax policies as instruments for intervention in social and educational policies:
 - incentives for enterprises providing practical training in their certified training facilities are tax deductible, thus the initial costs are reduced by 22%, which corresponds to corporate tax;
 - additional tax deductible incentives are offered on a per capita principle depending on hours of offered practical training: EUR 3 200 per trainee for 400 hours of practical training per year or EUR 1 600 per trainee for 200 hours of practical training per year;
 - remuneration for productive work that amounts to 50% to 100% of a minimum wage is also exempted from levies.
2. New 'apprentices' can receive a company stipend offering practical training based on a training contract, remuneration for their 'productive work' performed within practical training, and a motivation stipend from the State in cases of entering training identified as missing in the labour market. This corresponds to the following income:
 - company stipend can reach a maximum of four times the subsistence costs (currently EUR 361.68 monthly);
 - remuneration for productive work equals 50%-100% of minimum wage (currently EUR 1.09 to 2.18 per hour);
 - motivation stipend offered monthly in three levels equal to 65%, 45% and 25% of subsistence costs depending on student's learning performance with average mark limits 1.8, 2.4 and 3.0 (with 1 for the best and 5 for the worst learning performance); currently it corresponds to EUR 58.77 monthly for best performing students.

Weaknesses of the new act:

1. 'Slovak dual system trainees' have status of a student of secondary specialised school and not of a company employee, which can create tensions between schools and companies in organisation learning;
2. curricula of practical training have been developed by the State (State Institute of Vocational Education which was responsible for the criticised school-based practical

training curricula) as employers' representatives declared that companies and employers' representatives lack expertise. Thus, approving companies for providing practical training is only based on certification of their available facilities, equipment and training staff without assessing quality of a genuine training programme.

Recommendations for the future:

1. offering State-financed partnership grants for schools and companies to cover transformation costs and motivating schools to enter a cooperation model that is less stable than the current one based on institutional contracts between schools and companies;
2. creating quality assurance procedures for companies and graduates entering into the dual system;
3. creating an infrastructure supporting supply and demand of trainees and various quality programmes, including training of experts on employers' side enabling the world of work to take full responsibility for providing high-quality training programmes;
4. attracting trainees into the dual system. Mistrust of young people and their parents towards apprenticeship caused by labour market turbulences particularly in the 1990s must be overcome by offering generous incomes to apprentices and clear career progress opportunities. Slovakia still misses a flexible qualifications system that would offer apprentices in blue-collar professions advancement to an institutionalised 'master craftsman' qualification, non-university tertiary qualifications and recognition of results of non-formal and informal learning.

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