

BRIDGES

Improving Work-based Learning Through Employer links

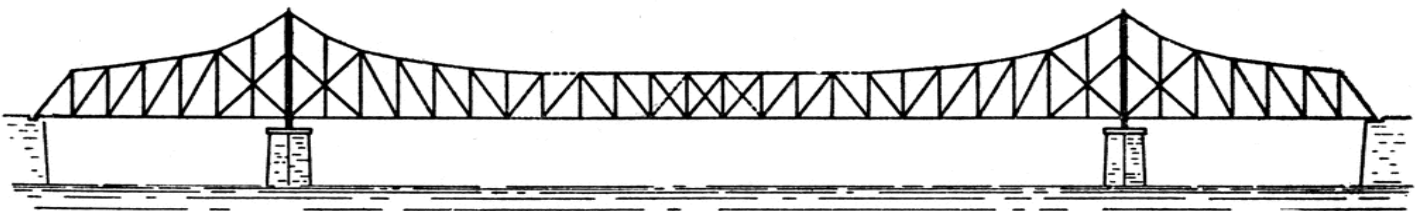
BRIDGES?

BRIDGES WBL- Improving work-based learning through employer links

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O1 BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework

developed by: Mindshift Talent Advisory



Center for Social
Innovation



Centrum Wspierania
Edukacji
i Przedsiębiorczości



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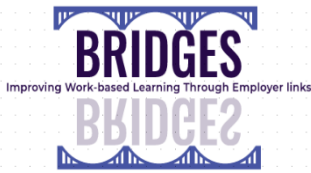


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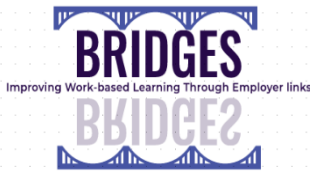
FOREWORD

In the current global context of complex economic challenges, industry recovery and workforce development, increasing attention is being given to the strategic imperative for effective employer engagement by providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET). As global economies emerge from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, skills and vocational training will be central to the economic recovery strategies across Europe, as governments and industry leaders recognise the transformative potential that VET programmes can deliver across regional jurisdictions. Collaboration and co-design between industry and VET providers will be of critical importance for both the quality of professional and technical education, and for ensuring future employees have the requisite skills for the world of work.

It is therefore imperative for VET providers to build and maintain effective strategic alignment with employers through collaboration, co-innovation and co-investment. This is critical for both the quality of education and to ensure that future employees have the requisite skills for the future of work. Enabling collaboration with and across the employer engagement ecosystem, will drive forward and deliver a differentiated solution, enabling the sustainment of added value over time. Collaboration must transition from fragmented partners working in silos to collaborative relationships across multiple channels and at scale.

Co-innovation must effectively address critical and emerging employer needs and achieving the strategic goals of the VET Provider and Employer partnership. Transformational change is therefore critical, as the ability to innovate is a top criterion for employers when choosing a VET provider partner, followed by provider capacity and capability. The willingness to invest is a key criterion when employers are choosing a VET provider partner. Therefore, co-ordinating investment between partners to ensure alignment on how best to target investments for co-innovation and achieve strategic outcomes.

As concluded by a recent study from the EC, there exists several constraining factors to successful VET-Employer cooperation across Europe, and in particular in BRIDGES' participating countries (North Ireland, England, Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Poland and Cyprus), including: a lack of effective dialogue between industry, providers and government; cost constraints to support



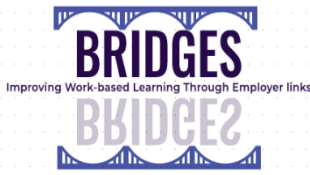
investment in vocational training; lack of information about benefits of VET; and restricted participation due to a lower attractiveness of VET in comparison to alternative pathways. In response, BRIDGES' partners have collaborated on this cross-jurisdiction project to share strategic insight and to scope and develop a bespoke framework, blended CPD programme and digital resources to support VET providers and professionals in improving WBL through effective employer engagement.

The BRIDGES partnership presents this methodologic framework as part of a strategic partnership for a VET project entitled "BRIDGES – Improving work-based learning through employers links". This project is funded by the Erasmus+ programme, and provides a bespoke framework, a blended continuing professional development programme, and digital resources to support VET providers in improving work-based learning provision through effective employer engagement, and thus promoting the excellence and attractiveness of VET and WBL pathways for key stakeholders. The project delivers a compact framework to help VET providers fully realise the value of strategic, long-term, and sustainable cooperation with employers. This is achieved through a 4-level pathway:

1. Building educational capacity
2. Co-designing curricula and career pathways
3. Leading and networking
4. Enhancing internationalisation

The BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework comprises a pathway of 4-level for employer engagement, each level representing a higher degree of engagement and deeper integration of employers in VET providers' activities to provide a methodical and practical strategic and implementable framework for engagement. The report and the framework set out the rationale for the imperative to orchestrate an ecosystem of co-innovation, collaboration and co-investment to create the conditions that support effective employer engagement in VET. In addition, the report states the requirement for partners to forge a pathway for innovation and growth and help to shape and deliver increased VET Provider-Employer capacity and capability. Finally, the report determines that VET Providers must create a meaningful employer partner strategy at the strategic core, supported by leadership capacity, capability and expertise to deliver effective employer engagement.

Aidan Sloane, Interim Director of Development & Infrastructure – Belfast Met



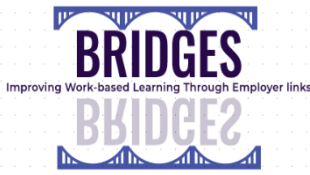
INTRODUCTION

This methodologic framework is developed as part of a strategic partnership for vocational education and training (VET) project entitled “BRIDGES – Improving work-based learning through employers links”. Funded by the Erasmus+ programme, this project aims at providing a bespoke framework, a blended continuing professional development programme, and digital resources to support VET providers in improving work-based learning (WBL) through effective employer engagement, and thus promoting the excellence and attractiveness of VET and WBL paths among employers, young people, their families, and society.

To design this framework, all the participating organisations – Belfast Metropolitan College (Northern Ireland), the City Of Dublin Education And Training Board (Ireland), Internationaler Bund (Germany), Mindshift Talent Advisory (Portugal), Evolve Global Solutions (England), Instituto para el Fomento del Desarrollo y la Formacion (Spain), Center for Social Innovation (Cyprus), and Stowarzyszenie Centrum Wspierania Edukacji i Przedsiębiorczosci (Poland) – worked closely with their Local Experts Groups (i.e., VET managers and professionals, employers, associated partners, relevant stakeholders, and partners’ staff) to conduct a mapping of existing practices.

We looked for best examples of employer engagement aiming at identifying models and practices, challenges, opportunities, success factors, and national trends and contributing to the definition of what qualities should be considered in engaged relationships with employers. There are several useful practices available in all the eight targeted countries – the BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework specifically benchmarks a set of local practices¹, and draws on and synthesises them to provide a compact framework to help VET providers fully realise the value of strategic, long-term, and sustainable cooperation with employers. This is done through a 4-level pathway.

¹ Northern Ireland Work Based Learning Strategic Working Group (North Ireland); Further Education & Training in Health Care in the Dublin region (Ireland); Pre-Vocational Training (Germany); ATEC – Training Academy (Portugal); Hertford Regional College – Modern Construction (England); NH Hotels (Spain); Human Resource Development Authority (Cyprus); Danmar Computers (Poland)



Thus, this framework addresses the needs of the partners' organisations and presents a working model of effective employer engagement and strategies for boosting and sustaining lasting VET-business win-win cooperation. It aims at helping VET providers to develop an effective employer engagement internal policy and agenda. To reach this aim, it is critical to upskill VET managers and professionals with competences in areas such as: how to boost employer engagement; how to manage the relationship with employers; and how to keep them engaged and build sustainable cooperation.

The BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework offers practical guidance for its implementation, examples of local employer engagement models/practices, and success factors for each one of the four levels:

1. Building educational capacity
2. Co-designing curricula and career pathways
3. Leading and networking
4. Enhancing internationalisation

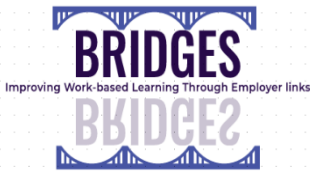
While directed to VET-employers, it is relevant to other educational practitioners – technical education, school education, adult education, higher education – employment services and other stakeholders, such as social partners.

VALUE PROPOSITION

The value proposition of the BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework presented below² intends to make this framework attractive to VET providers, and any stakeholders. It takes into consideration their profile – the desired wants, the latent needs, and fears of changing. And offers a value map of the framework around its benefits, features and implementation experience.



² Adapted from www.peterithomson.com/2013/11/value-proposition-canvas [retrieved 01.07.2021]



EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

BRIDGES' partners recognise that strong employer engagement is vital in today's economic climate. The current COVID-19 pandemic, slow economic recovery, rapid transformations in technology, emerging mismatches between employer needs and worker skills, among others, make business and VET partnerships critical. However, starting such connections and guaranteeing their prosperity is a long path.

Employer engagement is more than convening employers that meet with VET representatives periodically, or a one-off project of contract training with a single employer, though both activities can be valuable to employers, VET providers, and learners. These activities are necessary but limiting if the goal is the development of curricula, pathways, skill sets, and credentials that align with real labour market needs and result in job placement and career success for both VET learners and employers. To accomplish this, VET professionals need to upskill and take a more active approach in relating to employers.

Actively approach employers as strategic partners means looking beyond the immediate needs of a VET provision and seeking ways to make local employers or industries more competitive. This means to explain to the employers the benefits of WBL, over an extended period, in a manner that builds trust and ongoing opportunities through mutual interests' cooperation and leads to mutually successful outcomes. Doing so requires communicating with a 'listening' rather than an "inquiring" attitude, i.e., less "How would you be able to help us?" and more "What are your needs? How might we help in addressing your challenges?"

To help us better understand participating countries' contexts and drawn a bespoke BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework, a mapping survey was implemented involving a total of 43 members of the Local Experts Groups, intending to acquire an outer perspective and to gather significant input on three key dimensions of effective employer engagement:

1

opportunities *Why should employers support VET providers and work-based learning?*

The benefits of WBL for the VET community are well known, still there is less research focusing on why employers should support WBL. While some employers recognise the added value of WBL, others do not, which suggests that more needs to be done to demonstrate these benefits. According to our poll of experts, any VET-business cooperation undoubtedly produces the following benefits for the employers:

- **Recruitment strategy** – it is widely consensual that WBL provide employers with the opportunity to identify potential new talent or to know well future employees prior to hiring them, contributing to implement a HR matching system
- **Staff development** – WBL drives career development, in that staff members may be provided with the opportunity to mentor a less experienced team member; this will bring additional benefits related with staff motivation and well-being
- **Skills anticipation and matching** – by participating in WBL programmes, businesses can embrace own talent development strategies by giving their current employees opportunities to upskill and reskill, ensuring that the competences are aligned with their specific industry and market needs
- **Action towards Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8** – the 2030 Agenda is demanding all businesses to contribute, and WBL contributes to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (goal 4) and promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (goal 8)
- **Corporate responsibility** – through WBL employers can strengthen the regional workforce and local business climate, ‘giving back’ to their industry and community
- **Technologic development** – WBL provides access to new thinking, research, ideas, and technology, encouraging companies to incorporate innovation and new processes

- **Multi-generational workforce** – WBL helps to build an intergenerational workplace by providing the structure, support, and training that people need to succeed and work in teams made up of individuals who bring a diversity of backgrounds, perspectives, and innovative ideas
- **Networking** – by establishing fruitful relationship with VET providers, companies can have the opportunity not only to collaborate on other projects and initiatives but also to be a reference point
- **Employer branding** – WBL contributes to build the market’s perception of a company and earn a reputation for being a great place to work, as employees are more loyal to employers that give them opportunities and invest in their future

2 challenges

What are the main barriers and constraints faced by employers?

Notwithstanding these advantages of WBL to employers, there remain challenges. Mapping different barriers and constraints faced by employers, our experts found the following to be the ones that most often put VET-business partnerships at risk:

- Lack of effective **dialogue** between business, VET providers and government and understanding about the opportunities, requirements, and formalities of the WBL programmes
- Lack of **time or interest** to invest in necessary structures to accommodate WBL programmes
- **Prejudices** about participants (e.g., disadvantaged learners)
- Differing **expectations** about the outcomes and benefits for the involved parties
- Lack of available and competent **staff** to provide tutoring and coping with participants who might need substantial support
- Changing the organisational culture and **working practices**
- Insufficient ownership of real **needs of businesses** (e.g., profile’ mismatch, lack of participants)

- Lower attractiveness of VET, at least when compared with other educational paths

3

profile

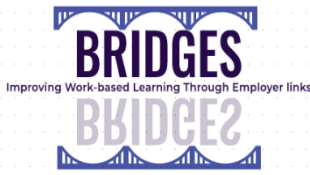
What qualities should be considered in a VET-business relationship?

The extent to which these factors might affect or not the involvement of employers in WBL programmes differs. Regardless, such challenges can be overcome and perceptions changed. The key for a higher degree of engagement and deeper integration of employers in VET provision lies in nurturing a positive relationship.

Trust and communication are the two fundamental principles for creating any lasting business relationship. Certainly, by promoting effective communication and a trustworthy cooperation VET professionals are ensuring that employers are more engaged to improve WBL in a meaningful manner. According to our Local Experts Groups, these two principles shape the philosophy of any VET-business relationship which is blueprinted also by the following inter alia qualities:

- **Commitment** — the extent to which each involved parties believes and feels that the VET-business relationship is worth spending time and energy to nurture and sustain
- **Comprehensive** — the extent to which employers are engaged in different aspects and activities ranging from mapping labour market need and career paths to curricula design, WBL placement or internationalisation advocacy
- **Continuous** — a long-term VET-business is actively built and cultivated, in opposite with an isolated, occasional, or short-term partnership based on timely needs
- **Empathic** — both VET providers and employers feels and acts constructively toward the other because they have positive expectations about the relationship

- **Empowering** — a relationships that challenges and motivates employers to develop and assume (co)leadership roles in curricula development and other WBL-related initiatives
- **Strategic** — employers are approached in the context of specific plans, opportunities, and objectives, rather than on a spot basis, when the VET provider needs something
- **Reciprocal** — both VET providers and employers provide benefits to each other because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future
- **Rigorous** — the extent to which the employers are engaged substantively and meaningfully, promoting an in-depth dialogue about, for example, specific skill sets, long-term labour market needs and the strengths and weaknesses of VET programmes in meeting them
- **Timely** — potential business partners are approached at the outset of a VET programme, rather than near the end
- **Valuable** — both VET providers and employers mutually solve problems, take decisions, and create value, connecting the demand side (employers) with the supply side (VET)
- **Wide-ranging** — VET-business relationships should be diverse and involve a large number of employers, rather than relying on few of usual partners



THE METHODOLOGIC FRAMEWORK

Collaborating with employers is vital for VET providers – particularly in dual education programmes. Just as employers need VET providers to have workforce with the right skills and qualifications, VET providers need employers to get the skills right, design relevant and up-to-date curricula and place learners and graduates. Despite, none of those functions are as critical as getting the VET-business relationship right. For BRIDGES’ participating organisations, this means working with employers in a variety of settings and activities, over an extended period, in a manner that builds trust through mutual interests’ cooperation and leads to mutually successful outcomes.

Engaging employers produces a range of benefits at every stage of the VET programmes, especially in the design and implementation of WBL paths. Efficient employer engagement is also vital in today’s complex and changing global context. Slow economic recovery, COVID-19 pandemic, digital and green transformations, higher-skill and qualifications requirements, and skills mismatches make business and VET partnerships even more crucial. But initiating such relationships and ensuring their success and sustainability is far from simple.

For VET programmes to succeed, it is essential to understand the nature of the skills and occupations demanded by the labour market and prepare well learners for high-value qualifications in those sectors of activity. Doing so, requires building VET-business win-win relationships. Indeed, cooperation between VET providers and employers is very important for both the quality of education and for making sure future employees have the skills which labour market needs.

Approaching employers as high-impact partners means looking beyond the immediate needs of VET providers and curricula and seeking ways to make local/regional employers and/or industries competitive. It requires building ongoing opportunities for problem-solving and curricula development. To do so VET managers and professionals need to take a more active approach and build excellence in employer engagement.

The BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework comprises a pathway of 4-level for employer engagement, each level representing a higher degree of engagement and deeper integration of employers in VET providers’ activities.

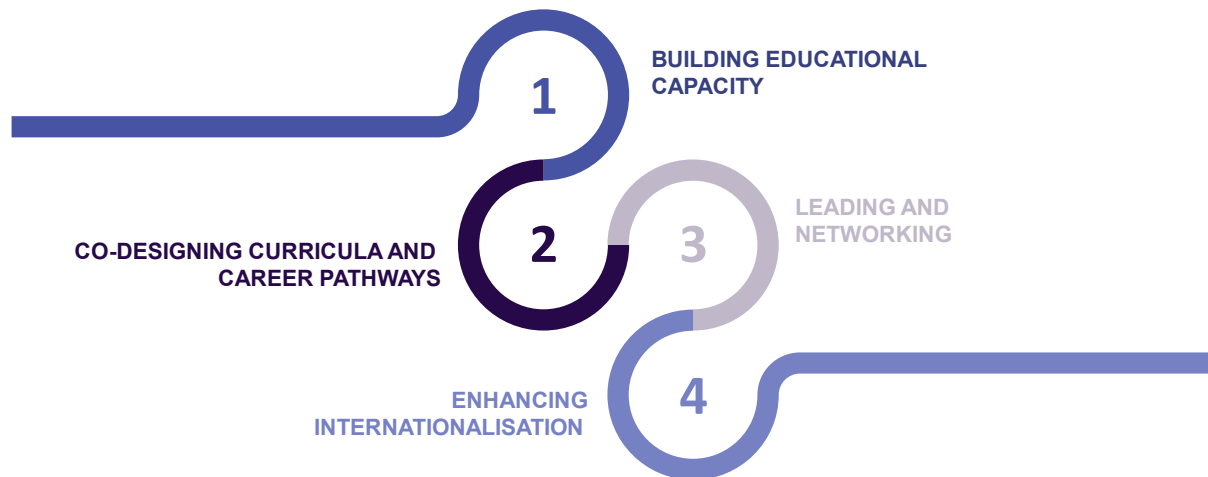


Figure 1: BRIDGES Employer Engagement Path

This methodologic framework helps to see the VET-business relationship – and the many activities supporting it – as a continuous path of levels and actions of engagement. Activities described at the first level are important to establish a trustfully and credible relationship, and therefore are the basis to develop more practices in the following levels. At these higher levels, employer engagement becomes increasingly central to VET providers’ strategy.

Next are described in detail each one of the four levels of the BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework. For each level, it is presented an introductory general theoretical background with relevant information that can be used in any VET-employer relationship. In addition, one example per each partner country is detailed in each of the four levels, providing specific good practices/success factors that are already taking place between VET providers and employers in each country participating in BRIDGES project.

LEVEL 1: BUILDING EDUCATIONAL CAPACITY

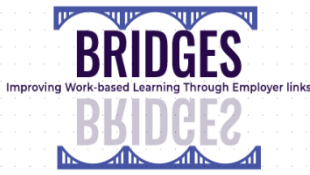


Advise employers on the dynamics of labour demand, and the need to strengthen VET curricula, and facilitate instruction, knowledge and skills acquisition and assessment, supported by technology-enhanced learning

At this initial level of engagement, VET providers and employers are starting a new relationship. VET providers initiate contact with employers to understand their hiring or training needs, competences required for specific jobs, and the dynamics of labour market supply and demand. The aim is to strengthen VET programmes, ensuring proper instruction and relevant skills acquisition, but also call employers to advise on, loan or even donate resources (e.g., technology) to support hands-on learning.

The employers' consultation can take the form of interviews or surveys of businesses in a sector or region; or direct contacts with individual businesses. More formally, employers can be invited to participate in strategic meetings or be represented on advisory boards of VET programmes. By involving a group of employers, VET providers can obtain an industry-wide perspective and generate tacit knowledge that may not emerge from bilateral contacts, as employers can engage and share with each other. Continuous relationships with employers help to fine-tune or adapt VET curricula or learning pathways designed to current labour market conditions.

In this way VET providers not only collect key information that complements the labour market data from public or private studies, as well as they can advise employers on these "real time" sources of aid, and thus help them to better understand regional and sectoral issues. Presenting findings to employers not



only enhances their knowledge but it is also a way to obtain their validation or corrections, and consequently it also helps to anchor and build a reciprocal relationship. Providing data also shows to employers that VET providers are prepared for an enriched and rigorous discussion, offering value to the employer.

At this first level, building educational capacity also requires a deeper engagement, as both VET providers and employers are gaining know-how and capacity to innovate on WBL strategies, placement services, and career pathway programmes. For employers, the biggest advantage certainly is to support VET providers and their learners' training and career in identifying, interviewing, and hiring potential employees who successfully complete a VET path or are finalising their WBL experience. After hiring former learners, employers can also rely on VET providers to coach and support retention and career advancement corporate programme.

Summarising, the following activities can help to establish a trustfully and credible VET-business relationship:

- Meet the employers at their own place
- Use a variety of methods to collect information from employers (e.g., individual interviews, focus groups, online surveys, presentations)
- Promote joint meetings of employers, planning time to network and discuss non-taskforce topics of interest to participants, such as digital transformation or green economy
- Work with employers to develop different formats of WBL, placement services, and career pathway programmes (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, production workshops, on-the-job training, job shadowing, job site tours, guest speakers, mock interviews, assess and screen candidates)

Next are presented examples of other activities that are already taking place in the eight partner countries of BRIDGES project regarding building educational capacity between VET providers and employers.

Northern Ireland Work Based Learning Strategic Working Group – NORTHERN IRELAND	
Web n/a	
<p><i>Development of a strong, responsive, and successful FE sector in NI aligned to employer needs and the needs of citizens across Northern Ireland, including best practices.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This partnership works across the wide stakeholders' groups of the six further education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland (NI) to enhance the skills and education attainment levels in the country ○ It includes a capacity building programme in NI to deliver training and education meeting the needs of the economy ○ There is a focus on securing on-the-job training and learning, coaching, mentoring, assessment, review, and feedback
Further Education & Training in Health Care in the Dublin Region – REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	
www.cdetb.ie	
<p><i>Response to the education and training needs of young people and adults to gain qualifications and work experience needed to enter or remain in the health care sector, to facilitate alternative routes for entry to higher education programmes, and to respond to Ireland's changing demographic</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This training responds to Ireland's changing demographic where increasing demand for Health Care workers is being driven by Ireland's ageing population ○ The programmes consider the needs of the labour market and are developed under European Qualification Framework levels 4 and 5 ○ The promotion of Pre-Nursing and Health Care Programmes is done by course providers through school visits/presentations, open days, social media, career fairs and through FE channels
Pre-Vocational Training – GERMANY	
www.arbeitsagentur.de/bildung/ausbildung/berufsvorbereitende-bildungsmassnahme	
<p><i>Provision of professional guidance for learners to help them develop solid skills and make knowledge-based career decisions, bringing together potential employers and employees.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To help youngsters make solid decisions on their career choices, this training tests their skills and assesses their performance ○ It consists of a four phases process: skills assessment, try out phase up to one month in workshop environment, company-based work, and transition to preferred/adequate initial vocational training ○ Individual tailor-made tutoring and approaches according to learners' needs on vocational and social skills are implemented
ATEC Training Academy – PORTUGAL	
www.atec.pt	
<p><i>Enhancement of the growth of people and companies by bringing together a competent and ambitious team with innovative methodologies, advanced technologies and differentiating solutions.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ATEC training academy works according to the client's needs with maximum flexibility and respect for the client's DNA ○ It predominantly offers practice-oriented VET courses aligned with labour market needs, combined with activities that promote soft skills, and also including participation in competitions ○ It promotes open days to the community, schools, families, and teachers, namely the "Career Day & Open Day" and the "Clarification Sessions"

Hertford Regional College - Modern Construction Partnership: Brickwork – ENGLAND www.hrc.ac.uk	
<p><i>Hertford Regional College established an industry-based partnership with construction employers/contractors, local public sector stakeholders and brickwork trade bodies to ensure the co-development and delivery of vocational training opportunities for the construction/built environment sector.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The partnership operates on a flexible/open model to ensure the inclusion/addition of new partners aligned to local, regional, and national planning, economic profiling, and employment opportunities ○ The collaboration via direct contact with employers allows offering industry relevant training to enter the sector, through apprenticeships ○ Collaboration also provides sponsorship for cutting edge resources, opens new market opportunities, and supports existing working force updating/upskilling including at higher technical levels
NH Hotel Group as WBL Providers – SPAIN www.nh-hotels.com/corporate/responsible-and-sustainable-company/communities/employability-programmes	
<p><i>In 2012, the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport invited NH Hotel Group, one of the largest hotel chains in Spain and Europe, to be one of the pilot companies in the tourism sector for the implementation of VET in the modality of WBL in the community of Madrid.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The tutors in the hotels are trained so they can deliver a solid training base to their learners ○ The company's dedication and commitment are translated, among others, into constant communication – at least once a week – with the hotel tutors and the training centres ○ The company feeds the training centres with up-to-date information about the needs of the sector.
Human Resource Development Authority – CYPRUS www.hrdauth.org.cy	
<p><i>The Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA), founded in 1974, is managed by a 13 Board of Directors, involving representatives of the Government, employers, and trade unions. The HRDA creates the prerequisites for planned and systematic training and development of the human potential of Cyprus at all levels and areas.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HRDA conducts research in four different areas: trends and forecasts of employment and training needs; analysis of systems; VET infrastructures and specialised human resources studies; and review and evaluation of HRDA activities ○ Based on its research, which continuously identifies demands and needs in the economy, training programmes for employed and unemployed are designed ○ The training programmes offered are subsidised by the HRDA and are provided by trainers or organisations certified by the HRDA
Danmar Computers – POLAND https://danmar-computers.com.pl	
<p><i>Danmar Computers is a private company operating in the field of Information Technologies. It promotes life-long education in this field by developing modern web and mobile applications that are used for educational purposes. Danmar assures equal access to education for everyone with the use of technology.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Danmar educational capacity is built by tailoring the topics of the projects and the trainings to the needs of target groups in the region where it is located ○ Danmar cooperates with different public and private institutions to assure the development of quality resources ○ Market research for European projects is done by R&D staff, responding to employers' expectations

LEVEL 2: CO-DESIGNING CURRICULA AND CAREER PATHWAYS



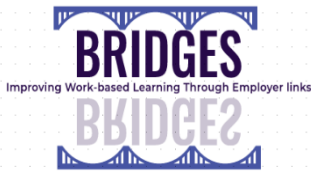
Engage employers in mapping career profiles and developing or modifying VET curricula and/or job profiles

After VET providers and employers have carried out sharing activities demonstrating the value they can add to each other, they gain credibility before each other and build the trust required to establish a working relationship.

In this second phase, VET providers can and must engage employers in mapping career profiles according to the needs, trends, and forecasts of the respective employers' business sectors, as well as develop or modify VET courses' curricula.

For VET providers, the benefits are that employers can provide continuous advice and support on developing standards for training programmes, as well as contribute to the definition of new qualifications that follow market needs and allow relevant professional development.

Putting together the analysis of labour data and the inputs provided by employers on their needs, the baseline for the development of career profiles and pathways in VET curricula is established. Employers are essential in the contextualisation of the curriculum to reflect the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary in the workplace. They are also essential for the detailed definition of all the responsibilities and tasks that an employee is required to perform for each specific job. Another useful role for the employers is to identify skills gaps, including in the scope of soft skills.



The establishment of strong working ties between VET providers and employers during the curricula design process provides many other advantages, such as: the standardisation of courses; the certification recognised by the industry; and cross-employer transferability.

Some additional recommendations for VET centres during the co-designing curricula and career pathways phase are:

- Work with employers to review and adjust existing courses or develop new courses that meet, beside local and regional enterprise's needs, national and Government standards regarding job policies
- Ask employers for real workplace materials, scenarios, and examples to help contextualise the guidance provided by trainers at the training centres
- Require employers to determine the certification that they value for each career

Next are presented other illustrative approaches that are already taking place in the eight partner countries of BRIDGES project regarding co-designing curricula and career pathways between VET providers and employers.

Northern Ireland Work Based Learning Strategic Working Group – NORTHERN IRELAND	
<u>Web a/a</u>	
<p><i>The group develops proactively flexible and responsive curricula that is aligned to the needs of NI economic success and the needs of industry.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The partnership approach between employers and colleges improves the opportunities and progression of all young people to work ○ It also defines market demand and future sector development, which continuously influence the curricula development and WBL curricula planning process ○ Besides vocational skills, the Group considers in the curricula the development of transversal skills to ensure that learners acquire interpersonal skills required in the workplace, contributing for higher levels of employability
Further Education & Training in Health Care in the Dublin Region – REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	
<u>www.cdetb.ie</u>	
<p><i>Through five colleges, FET provides education and training for learners in preparation for employment or higher education in Health Care. Irish strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020 - SOLAS advocates the development of co-construction models between FET and employers to maximise the use of existing educational capability and resources.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ FET in Health Care develops theoretical and practical vocational and soft skills ○ It includes work placements in Health Care settings, such as hospitals and nursing homes ○ Health Care partners facilitate an Induction Programme for work experience and set standards to enter the profession ○ Placement coordinators communicate with work mentors to get feedback on curricula content relevance ○ Career guidance is available for all learners through workshops with Health Care partners
Pre-Vocational Training – GERMANY	
<u>www.arbeitsagentur.de/bildung/ausbildung/berufsvorbereitende-bildungsmassnahme</u>	
<p><i>The project assesses learners' skills and knowledge individually, identifying their strengths and elaborating pathways towards a successful career choice</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The project lays on individual interests and on an initial competences assessment. Both help defining pathways with knowledge and skills to further develop, including vocational and social skills, that lead to a qualification ○ Career guidance is done through the participation in work-based projects, work placements and practical try-outs ○ Early school leavers can obtain a degree equalling secondary school education ○ Measures for a smooth transition into training or employment are implemented
ATEC Training Academy – PORTUGAL	
<u>www.atec.pt</u>	
<p><i>ATEC works to provide to its clients a suitable answer to their needs by: i) questioning and verifying what the client does today; ii) identifying what the client intends to do tomorrow; iii) providing the tools that the client needs to successfully reach the set goals.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Together with its clients, ATEC anticipates skills needs of key-sectors of Portuguese economy and continuously develops new qualifications (like in 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016) based on in-demand skills ○ It ensures the development of both technical and soft skills to ensure a greater employability and professional integration of youngsters ○ ATEC training courses have registered an employability rate of 93% ○ In the alumni area for ATEC trainees and former trainees' s they can access job offers

Hertford Regional College - Modern Construction Partnership: Brickwork – ENGLAND www.hrc.ac.uk	
<p><i>HRC works with employers to engage them in the design, development, and delivery of industry fit for purpose relevant technical programmes that are responsive to the needs of employers and support planned recruitment and workforce upskilling strategies – levelling up the UK economy via a Destination Curriculum Model that supports employers and learners to see studies as a passport to their future.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaboration between HRC and employers provides learners with access to ‘real time’ hands on experiences and the opportunity to understand and question how classroom curriculum is applied in the work context, supporting rapid progress and the attainment of the industry standard skills that employers value ○ Collaboration enables the identification of opportunities for work experience and industry placements for learners and enables existing employer staff to engage with the future workforce
NH Hotel Group as WBL Providers – SPAIN www.nh-hotels.com/corporate/responsible-and-sustainable-company/communities/employability-programmes	
<p><i>The aim of the initiative is to promote a doubly beneficial system: the company obtains a workforce qualified to its needs; the learners can see in loco the reality of the sector and, therefore, develop their capacity to better respond and adapt themselves to the specific tasks of their jobs.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The curriculum is adapted to the specific needs of the hotel sector and the company, such as the knowledge of English and German languages and interpersonal skills that are not included in the official curriculum ○ After only some months of theoretical training, the learners spend a whole year at the company to give them solid practical competences, keeping regular contact with the school. This period allows both employer and learners to understand if there is adaptation to the job ○ This programme allows providing to the sector highly professionalised individuals in less time
Human Resource Development Authority – CYPRUS www.hrdauth.org.cy	
<p><i>The HRDA only offers programmes by certified providers which are required to submit a comprehensive proposal to be allowed to offer training. The designed programmes are based on the current employment and training needs across all sectors in Cyprus.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HRDA conducts research to forecast demand in different sectors and occupations in Cyprus from data made available by employers ○ The VET courses curricula are then developed or adapted considering current market trends and training needs ○ This allows to define solid career profiles that learners can opt from
Danmar Computers – POLAND https://danmar-computers.com.pl	
<p><i>Danmar develops courses and implements projects considering the needs of the market, the requirements of employers and the expectations of future employees.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Danmar contributes to the definition of training programmes curricula in terms of learning outcomes described as knowledge, skills, and attitudes ○ This is done after national and international research on the needs of different target groups and on the latest and best practices from all over Europe ○ Danmar creates educational materials based in technology: e-learning and m-learning platforms; serious games; applications; quizzes; videos; e-books; etc.

LEVEL 3: LEADING AND NETWORKING



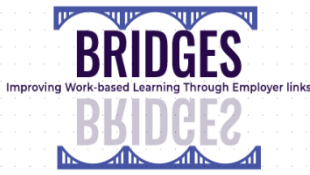
Build (multi)-VET, employers and stakeholders' partnerships that transform local, regional and/or national workforce systems, boost the growth of targeted industries or sectors and lobbying

As VET providers and employers start establishing partnerships, they start addressing specific economic sectors and they can extend their influence on other VET organisations, enterprises and stakeholders acting in the same or similar sectors, to sustain a wider and stronger local, regional and/or national training and economic development, focused on job and business creation as the final goal.

There are numerous ways how VET providers and employers can engage. Organisations can use their own means to establish partnerships or can benefit from Government programmes, such as programmes that bring business associations and individual employers into collaboration, and from which VET providers can also take advantage from.

Other stakeholders that can be engaged are public workforce systems; non-profit organisations; community-based service providers; economic development authorities; universities and other relevant education and training providers. The wider the network of relevant partners is, the more successful it tends to be due to the different perspectives and ideas each can contribute with.

The basis for networking is always to find common points that serve the interests of the VET providers and the interests of employers/other stakeholders simultaneously. This allows that the activities of the engaged parts are more



effective, and that the community is better served by this integration. This also guarantees that investments in education and training are aligned with investments in the workforce development.

Decision making processes in the networks can take several forms, such as roundtables with representatives (directors, coordinators, etc.) of the VET centres and of the employer organisations. These meetings can serve different purposes:

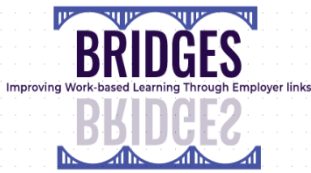
- Identify which professional areas have shortage of entry level staff or skills needs of current staff needing to be reskilled/upskilled
- Identify which areas have a high turnover and understand if it can be reduced by investing in vocational training and work-based learning
- Decide how investments in work-based learning are made
- Develop training programmes
- Align training among VET providers and other training providers such as secondary schools and postsecondary training providers
- Set how trainees are allocated among employer organisations

It is crucial that the consortiums set action plans considering the topics they approach in each meeting and that the needs of all involved parts are considered in them.

To maintain successful long-term networks, it is necessary continuous communication - it supports a positive participation in which commitment is built and the same vision is shared. This will guarantee a higher success of learners during theoretical and practical training, and that employers are provided qualified workers meeting their needs.

Organisations from different regions can work together, even uniting public and private funding, to support the alignment of VET programmes with the common needs of different regions.

The stage in which employers are most involved is when a company or association assumes leadership for workforce development initiatives or partnerships. In this stage, taking the lead on employees' development, they can bring their combined resources, expertise, and influence in solving labour issues



related to training in a sustainable way. If a partnership is really interested in regional development, it helps to reduce trust barriers that often inhibit employers to share information and collaborate effectively. For VET partners and other education and training providers, these partnerships help to ensure that curricula respond to employers' needs.

Some additional recommendations for leading partnerships are:

- Establish a formal structure and a memorandum of agreement to manage the partnership
- Promote the sharing of best practices of participants
- Keep a basis of permanent organisations to support cooperation with other stakeholders that can enter/exit the partnership
- Allow partnerships to grow, develop and adapt to the ever-changing environment of the economic sector and to the consequent labour demands
- Map VET providers in the area, their training offer, and resources, helping employers understand how they can support their workforce development;
- Evaluate the impact of partnerships and encourage constant improvement. Collect data on the progress and results of participants, analyse them and ask employers' feedback once they hire participants after WBL. This way, the return on investment for all parties is assessed.

Next are presented concrete procedures that are taking place in the eight partner countries of BRIDGES project regarding leading and networking among VET providers, employers, and stakeholders.

Northern Ireland Work Based Learning Strategic Working Group – NORTHERN IRELAND

[Web n/a](#)

The partnership approach between employers and colleges improves the opportunities and progression of all young people to work.

- The working group strategically reviews its employer base and identify key areas for: (i) market development; (ii) product development; (iii) product diversification.
- It implements a region wide engagement and communication plan in relation to strategic employer engagement to promote WBL.
- It ensures communication is open between its employer engagement, sales and business development teams and relevant parties: (i) curriculum teams (ii) commercial teams (iii) marketing teams.

Further Education & Training in Health Care in the Dublin Region – REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

www.cdetb.ie

Providers are strategically located near the major Nursing Hospitals and Health Care centres in the Dublin region with good access to work experience opportunities for learners. Learners from outside Dublin can access work placements in their local areas. Colleges have built partnerships with Health Care providers/employers in many regions outside Dublin.

- Career guidance staff and colleges/centres have links with 3rd level colleges on student progression and employment.
- Protocols with work placement providers/employers are well established and provide feedback and curricular support to colleges/centres.
- Strategic links are established with professionals in the Health Care profession.
- Quality assurance forms are in place to measure student progress, feedback, and satisfaction with programmes
- Alumni are consulted and can contribute to curricular development

Pre-Vocational Training – GERMANY

www.arbeitsagentur.de/bildung/ausbildung/berufsvorbereitende-bildungsmassnahme

The project is closely linked to job centres, employment offices, numerous companies, and enterprises, as well as different chambers – Commerce and industry/craftsmanship – as the certifying vocational training body in Germany.

- It established and approved long term partnerships with job centres and employment offices
- There is a large, approved network and working relation with companies, public bodies, social partners, and schools
- There is a trustful relationship with the different chambers
- Strategic partnerships with various vocational education providers are set

ATEC Training Academy – PORTUGAL

www.atec.pt

ATEC is strategically located close to Volkswagen Autoeuropa, in Palmela, near Lisbon, and also in Oporto. In 2012, in response to training needs of regional industrial clusters, ATEC decentralised its training operations and started developing local Technology Specialisation Courses in Aveiro, Braga, São João da Madeira and Viseu. In 2014, it reached Sines, where major oil companies are located.

- ATEC develops strategic partnerships with universities and polytechnics for the provision of credits equivalence for trainees who intend to continue their studies
- It establishes protocols with different stakeholders – companies, public bodies, social partners, and educational providers
- It promotes corporate responsibility's programmes to fight early school drop-out, like the "You matter" programme, financed by Volkswagen Workers' Foundation
- Measuring companies' satisfaction, 85% recommend it

Hertford Regional College - Modern Construction Partnership: Brickwork – ENGLAND	
www.hrc.ac.uk	
<i>HRC is situated on the UK Innovation Corridor, a pioneering region connecting London to Cambridge. The corridor is a major growth area for built environment projects with significant industrial and residential build taking place. The employer-led industry-based partnership links directly to HRC's Destination Curriculum Model and objectives for reforming and updating construction practices to improve competitiveness.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Networking helps in identifying and addressing skills gaps, responding to sector priorities, supporting local, regional, and national education objectives, and helping employers to access motivated and skilful future employees. ○ The partnership allows employers to take part in the skills system and share best practice ○ Collaboration provides employers with the opportunity to secure industry recognition and encourage FE ○ Networking builds greater opportunity for the voice of employers and stakeholders to be heard by key sector bodies / trade organisations / funding bodies and UK Government Departments.
NH Hotel Group as WBL Providers – SPAIN	
www.nh-hotels.com/corporate/responsible-and-sustainable-company/communities/employability-programmes	
<i>NH Hotels actively participate in local Government initiatives where they are established. For example, leading the pilot of companies in the tourism sector for the implementation of Dual Vocational Training in Madrid, and subsequently in Valencia and Catalonia.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NH Hotels in Madrid led the pilot of companies in the tourism sector for the implementation of Dual Vocational Training in the city, taking an active role in supporting the development of human resources in the sector ○ The wide experience of work-based learning in the hotel sector has prompted the public administration to review the regulations concerning the recruitment of people in this area
Human Resource Development Authority – CYPRUS	
www.hrdauth.org.cy	
<i>The HRDA has developed and uses a variety of means to inform, educate, and keep a relation with businesses, their partners and the general public on their role and mission.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HRDA has a strong communication strategy that is applied continuously to attract more organisations/people into its activities ○ HRDA sponsors events, has presence in the mass media, publishes informative leaflets and implements awareness campaigns to broaden its visibility to stakeholders and to society in general ○ Additionally, it collaborates with several services and organisations across Cyprus, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education, as well as employers' and employees' syndicates and unions
Danmar Computers – POLAND	
https://danmar-computers.com.pl	
<i>Danmar organises and participates in many networking and educational events. It exchanges know-how and researches employers' needs. Thanks to that, it created a network of institutions that support raising the quality of education and that are willing to use the results of Danmar Computers' work.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Danmar participates in IT clusters ○ It has created groups of specialists from complimentary backgrounds who support the digital learning process ○ Cooperation is done, for example, with universities in the region, as well as with public authorities, to improve its outcomes and engage more people ○ Danmar also organises conferences and networking events to disseminate their action and widen their network

LEVEL 4: ENHANCING INTERNATIONALISATION



Advice VET providers and employers for the strategic planning of WBL international cooperation

Strategic partnerships involving international VET providers and employers of different sizes, geographical areas and sectors can positively contribute to the improvement of the three previous levels. The provision of inputs of partners with different perspectives resulting from their different realities can potentially be adopted by other partners or converged with them. They can bring into discussions “new” ways of building educational capacity, co-designing curricula and career pathways or how to network and lead.

The current labour market is globalised and changing rapidly. Due to that, it needs a skilled workforce that is continuously developing its competences to prosper and is more and more able to work abroad. Developing international cooperation regarding work-based learning contributes to support this need. Organisations need to understand the benefits of collaborating at an operational level for all involved parties, address common challenges and define coordinated strategies to pursue common goals.

This cooperation and mobility can be helpful in different ways. For example, some European countries have high unemployment rates, especially youth unemployment. International VET-employer cooperation can supply new skilled young professionals to a globally aware workforce, increasing countries competitiveness or making this competent workforce able to work abroad. For that, it is utmost important that curricula and qualifications are defined together and recognised among cooperating countries.

The starting point for each VET organisation considering working on employer engagement at an international level must be to set itself the goals it aims to reach with the internationalisation of its activities. They must consider topics such as:

- Which changes will it introduce in their internal organisation?
- What will be the impact for trainers and learners in practice?
- Which geographical areas/kind of organisations are important to work with, and why?
- In which sectors should investment be done considering future labour needs, which arrangements will be needed?
- How the curricula will need to be developed/adapted or what will be assessed abroad?

After reflecting on these topics, a detailed action plan must be defined.

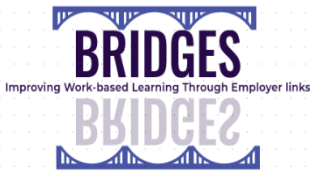
Establishing links with organisations abroad can be done using different approaches, e.g.:

- Creation/participation in international activities, such as conferences and seminars, that promote employer engagement in education and training. That is the case of the International Conference on Employer Engagement, which 6th edition took place online in July 2021 under the motto “Preparing young people for the Future”. Many current challenges can be the theme of such activities, like, for example, “How WBL has been approached during COVID-19 pandemic?”
- Development of international communities of practices, focused on specific sectors, to serve as an ongoing sharing and learning venue to provide inspiration for VET providers and employers. In a community of practice, partners can share goals, interests, problems and how they approach them. The digital means can contribute for the successful implementation of an international community of practice – which is also one of the outcomes of BRIDGES project. Being digital, it allows more participation, more opportunities and easier access to stakeholders.

- Joining already existing networks, in which many stakeholders can be reached. Some potential networks that can be relevant for international VET-employer engagement are:
 - EfVET, the European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, that facilitates networking among professionals to bring up connections between businesses, VET, and researchers;
 - EUproVET, a platform for VET providers that aims at providing the labour market with skilled and qualified workforce;
 - EVBB, the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training, which objective is the qualitative improvement of VET in Europe;
 - CEDEFOP, that contributes to the development of VET policies and their implementation;
 - The International RC2020 College Group, a not-for-profit network of colleges that discusses global issues so that learners benefit from better learning opportunities.
- Cooperate through funded projects between VET providers and employers, that thus have the opportunity to know better each other and set plans regarding the mobility of VET learners. The participation in training activities and in dissemination and exploitation activities in the projects allow stakeholders having access to projects' results, hopefully creating new synergies and cooperation.

All the mentioned means can open ways for work-based learning across different countries. Learners and staff must be prepared for international mobility before it happens, learning agreements should be firmed and accommodation should be organised. Once at the WBL premises and during the mobility, learners must be guided and supported.

International cooperation between VET providers and employers allow to upskill VET professionals on effective employer engagement across Europe – that is the main aim of BRIDGES CPD programme – building a European dimension of employer engagement and boosting VET-business cooperation involving WBL international paths. Consequently, it promotes the increase of mobility for VET learners in Europe to work in a variety of settings and activities, making sure



future employees have the international competences which global labour market needs. The excellence and attractiveness of VET and WBL international paths is expected to spread among employers, young people, their families, and society in general. Ideally, as an ultimate aim, international partnerships can seek to influence policies related to education and training and employer engagement at an international level.

The world of work is changing at different paces in different countries. All the visions provided by partners from different countries may be taken into consideration so they can support each other and get ready the best way possible for new challenges related to work-based learning they might approach.

Finally, it is important to evaluate results to improve the quality of cooperation. This should be done by regularly monitoring the implementation of the partnerships, using quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess progress in direction to the goals, getting feedback from participants, controlling the number of people involved and analysing any other relevant mobility data.

Next are presented other examples of measures that are taking place in the eight partner countries of BRIDGES project regarding enhancing internationalisation among VET providers, employers, and stakeholders.

Northern Ireland Work Based Learning Strategic Working Group – NORTHERN IRELAND	
Web n/a	
<p><i>To maximise the opportunity to promote the further education sector overseas in line with the internationalisation strand of FE means success with international employers.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The group engage with employers on an international basis in the context of workforce development planning with a view to maintain long-term strategic relationships ○ It works in partnership with international agencies and partners to facilitate FDI and associated WBL workforce development solutions for international employers
Further Education & Training in Health Care in the Dublin Region – REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	
www.cdetb.ie	
<p><i>WBL is integral to all programmes. Learners undertake practical on-the-job training in Ireland or in other European countries through KA1 mobilities funded by ERASMUS+ programme. Innovation and change management in education benefits from exploration of best practice at national and international levels through Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnerships.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participation in Erasmus+ programme benefits learners' soft skills and broadens their cultural/linguistic experience. ○ Participation also facilitates teachers and managers in sharing, capturing, and modifying models of good practice and in creating opportunities for professional development ○ Fostering the quality, transparency, and recognition of learning outcomes of mobility periods abroad is done using European tools and instruments ○ The board continues to contribute to the creation of the European Education Area by building the capacity of FET/VET providers to carry out high quality mobility projects within and outside Europe
Pre-Vocational Training – GERMANY	
www.arbeitsagentur.de/bildung/ausbildung/berufsvorbereitende-bildungsmassnahme	
<p><i>More and more learners with migrant background are entering the project. Training staff and learners can participate in VET mobility programmes. In addition to that, the project provides linguistic and cultural support and applies inclusive measures.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The programme allows the participation in multi-national VET mobility programmes ○ Development of individual linguistic approaches to support integration and enhance employability of migrant learners are provided ○ Training and presentations about international trade and business models are frequently made
ATEC Training Academy – PORTUGAL	
www.atec.pt	
<p><i>ATEC offers its trainees the opportunity to undertake practical on-the-job training partially or full in host companies located in other European Union countries, through participation in mobility programmes funded by Erasmus+. These activities contribute to the development of various skills, such as technical, technological, linguistic, and cultural, helping to facilitate trainees' career development and entry into the labour market abroad.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ATEC provides technical training in Portuguese-speaking countries, like Angola and Mozambique ○ ATEC participates in international consortia for the development of projects to anticipate the needs of the Portuguese and European markets at the level of training in various technical and technological areas, and also for the sharing of new learning methods and technologies

Hertford Regional College - Modern Construction Partnership: Brickwork – ENGLAND	
www.hrc.ac.uk	
<p><i>HRC and its partners provides ambitious, purposeful skills development aligned with international occupational standards. Whilst opportunities for international projects have been restrictive, the partnership has enabled domestic learner exchange and shared training that increases learners' global competences and entry into employment within the sector, including abroad.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaboration in the provision of technical programmes aligned with international occupational standards better places HRC and its partners for engagement with international schemes and projects ○ Collaboration with British Council and in Erasmus+ projects are pro-actively explored. These projects enable HRC to bring a global skills perspective to its learners
NH Hotel Group as WBL Providers – SPAIN	
www.nh-hotels.com/corporate/responsible-and-sustainable-company/communities/employability-programmes	
<p><i>NH Hotels has a global presence and encourages the exchange of learners from countries where it is present, such as between European Union and America.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NH is an example of a company that has learned from its destination countries, importing to Spain – the multinational's country of origin – successful practices used in the chain in Germany ○ As a global hotel chain, dual VET learners can do their internships in several countries in Europe or in other countries in the world where the chain is present, where they learn how to work in different cultural backgrounds
Human Resource Development Authority – CYPRUS	
www.hrdauth.org.cy	
<p><i>The HRDA regularly seeks cooperation and exchange of experiences with other European and international organisations and networks in the field of training and development of human resources.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The HRDA often represents Cyprus in conferences and official meetings at EU level. ○ The CEO of HRDA is one of the two official government representatives in the Group of General Directors of Bodies responsible for vocational training (DGTV) group.
Danmar Computers – POLAND	
https://danmar-computers.com.pl	
<p><i>Enhancing internationalisation at Danmar Computers consists mainly in using the best European teaching methods and introducing them to the local community to create the most beneficial educational environment for the local people. This happens through the participation in European funded projects, where Danmar also contributes with its experience and in which its staff can improve their skills.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Danmar promotes European best practices to the local community through the participation in European funded projects ○ It also creates learning paths to increase internationalisation of training offers it is involved in ○ This enables people to obtain the skills and knowledge necessary to find employment, including abroad, considering that many of the offered trainings are designed considering recognition tools in European countries

TRENDS ON WBL AND EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

The BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework offers practical guidance for its implementation, examples of local employer engagement models/practices, and success factors for each one of the four levels:

1. Building educational capacity
2. Co-designing curricula and career pathways
3. Leading and networking
4. Enhancing internationalisation

In addition, and to ensure an effective implementation of the framework in any country, it is recommended to take into consideration also the current country's trends on WBL and employer engagement, as these developments can be relevant to tailor the framework to specific contexts. Below, are summarised the main trends – regarding policies, SDGs, digital transformation, and post-COVID - identified by the Local Experts Groups on participating countries of the BRIDGES project - Northern Ireland, Ireland, Germany, Portugal, England, Spain, Cyprus, and Poland.

A special focus is put on trends on digital transformation post COVID-19 as digitalisation has taken a sudden leap across sectors since the beginning of the pandemic, and in the sphere of education and training in particular. Governments all over the world have launched guidelines on the implementation of distance learning in a short period of time and teachers and learners had necessarily to improve their digital skills to be able to continue the teaching-learning process from distance.

As regards to VET sector and the involvement of employers and WBL practice, new trends have been launched. The COVID-19 pandemic has consequently increased the spirit of resilience towards adversities normally brought by digital transformation, opening new possibilities that continue to be explored in different ways, depending on the context and needs of each country. Concrete strategies to cope with COVID-19 challenges in BRIDGES' participating countries are suggested next.

NORTHERN IRELAND			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Northern Ireland Strategy for Further Education - directions for further education in NI, policy commitments, key milestones, and timescales • Training for Success - programme providing tools to find work, focusing on extra learning one may need. • Apprenticeships - training through apprenticeships to people aged 16 and over. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of evidence-based knowledge, innovations, technologies, and pathways to learners (SDG 4) • Accessible education for communities across NI and building social responsibility opportunities into the curriculum (SDG 8) • Work with the NI Dpt. of Justice to support the regional rehabilitation strategy, and deliver prison education (SDG16) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative Digital Manifesto providing guiding principles for decision making and the role of digital based on shared (i) vision, (ii) principles, (iii) and concepts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (i) Vision: digital by design • (ii) Principles: flexible, engaging, efficient, informed, controlled • (iii) Concepts: learner centric, inspirational, collaborative, universal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the proposed NI Department for Economy Interventions for Apprenticeship and Work-based Learning Recovery post Covid-19 • Lead on the WBL elements of the NI Department for Economy Covid-19 Economic Recovery Action Plan and will support the delivery of a highly skilled and agile workforce

IRELAND			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and training needs are identified by expert groups, research units, and other agencies • Successive talent shortage/difficult-to-fill vacancies surveys identify labour areas experiencing shortages • Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020, SOLAS identifies the need for a more balanced split in school-leaver destinations between FE and HE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to raise FE as a meaningful option for school leavers • Continue engaging stakeholders in developing FET courses in response to skills shortages, and providing flexibility and inclusiveness • contribute to the European Education Area by building FET/VET capacity to carry out high quality mobility projects within Europe and internationally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Digital Strategy 2013 and TEL Strategy 2019 (SOLAS/ETBI) focused successfully on building capacity in Technology Enhanced Learning across FET/VET • VET for the Future of Work: Ireland 2020, SOLAS focuses on Digital Transformation of FET • A focus is required to embrace blended and online experiences which the future FET learner will expect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020, SOLAS recognises post COVID recovery requiring targeted initiatives particularly around reskilling and upskilling opportunities • Modes and nature of learning will have to continue to adapt to a digital world. FET can now maximise the benefits of blended/online learning provision brought about by COVID

GERMANY			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dual vocational training is implemented on all levels • All VET organisations must be in line with EQAVET and EQF • There are many projects for the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of stable partnerships • Close cooperation among public bodies, authorities, companies, and educational institutions • Application of EQAVET and EQF • Dual VET system creates access to formal initial VET and supports employment • Individual and multi-angle approach for success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Germany's EU Presidency in 2020 addressed digitalisation in four priority areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - digital sovereignty - fight cybercrime - data to be used securely - Europe to be digital and closer to citizens • Based on the European Digitalisation Strategy, Germany initiated a Digitalisation pact for the educational sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes to enhance digital literacy of all generations and of educational staff are initiated • A post-COVID recovery plan is being discussed including several aspects: economy, social sector, education, and environment, based on several European initiatives, such as the Green Deal

PORTUGAL			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Portuguese National Reform Plan advocates the creation of conditions for at least 55% of secondary school learners to be on VET paths • Alignment of all VET schools with EQAVET • Portugal has recently created the national brand "Escolas Profissionais de Portugal" (VET schools of Portugal) under the umbrella of the Portuguese Association of VET schools (ANESPO) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2021, ANESPO committed to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - intensify contacts with authorities from PALOP countries to consider cooperative work and boost Erasmus+ Africa (SDG1) - turn VET courses more flexible and inclusive; - end discrimination to higher education access for VET learners; - guarantee equal access and financial support for youngsters from regions with lower VET offer (SDG4) - contact economic and social agents for the development of educational projects with VET schools, ensuring employment (SDG8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Portuguese Action Plan for Digital Transition has four key- measures focused on VET and WBL: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> digital education VET and requalification digital inclusion and literacy transfer of knowhow – partnerships between education providers and companies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2021, ANESPO committed to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maintain the Covid-19 Working Group, consisting of Pedagogical Directors of VET schools - carry out initiatives to enable VET schools to share experiences, contributing to strength responses and find solutions - continue the contacts with public authorities to ensure protection of VET schools' interests - require the definition of strategies to assess the socioeconomic needs of each region, to promote employment, social inclusion and combat early school leaving

ENGLAND			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2020, new T Level qualifications with 315h of industry WBL • In 2022, reformed Higher Technical Qualifications (levels 4 and 5) will start • 12 new institutes of technology created and 8 to launch • Apprenticeships were reformed with higher quality standards • Skills for Jobs white paper (2021) gives employers a central role in designing technical courses • A Development Fund to help colleges establish business centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequalities are addressed through a <i>Lifetime Skills Guarantee</i> that offers adults a level 3 qualification (2021) • From 2025, a <i>Lifelong Loan Entitlement</i> aims to make education more inclusive by allowing adults and young people to study more flexibly • Nationwide recruitment campaign for individuals to teach in VET, investment in high-quality professional development and creation of a workforce industry exchange programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The digital platform The Skills Toolkit offers free training to people who lack essential digital skills needed for life and work. • In 2020, the Government entitled adults who need essential digital skills for work to access digital skills qualifications for free • The Skills for Jobs white paper proposes the introduction of more module based, flexible digital learning • The reform of Higher Technical Qualifications will include the option to take a digital route 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Skills Toolkit was launched in response to the COVID pandemic to give people access to free, high-quality digital courses to help build skills, progress in work and boost career prospects. It has since expanded to include 62 additional courses. • The new £2.5 billion National Skills Fund's aim is to help get people working again post-COVID, as well as giving those in work the chance to train for higher-skilled, better-paid jobs. It includes the rollout of digital skills bootcamps

SPAIN			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2019, the Plan for the Modernisation of Vocational Training was created, highlighting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the accreditation of competences - 200,000 places in VET provision by 2023 - a single, flexible, and accessible VET system - new titles on Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, and Cybersecurity - entrepreneurship classrooms in 1850 VET centres • In 2021, the new VET Act to consolidate the VET system started to be draft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda for the digitisation of the agri-food and forestry sector and the rural environment (SDG1, SDG4, SDG8) • Strategic Plan for Equal Opportunities (PEIO) for women and men in employment (SDG1, SDG5, SDG8). • Just Transition Strategy, to optimise employment opportunities, with special attention to strategic sectors, and reactivation plans for disadvantaged areas (SDG4, SDG8, SDG13) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Spanish government is developing a Strategy for Digitalisation in VET • The connectivity plan for VET schools is being implemented • The development of digital competences of teachers and learners is promoted • A vocational module on digitisation will be incorporated into all VET degrees soon • The “Educa en Digital” programme boosts the technological change of education in Spain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of regulatory mechanisms to regulate vocational training through virtual means. • Creation of aid programmes to support disadvantaged young people, especially those without access to computers at home and without the option of studying online. • Greater access to vocational training for the unemployed is facilitated.

CYPRUS			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council of Ministers approved the Cyprus Qualification Framework (CyQF) in 2012 and the EQF in 2021 • CyQF enables the validation and comparability of qualifications and therefore the mobility of workers and learners. • The Human Resources Development Agency (HRDA) developed the system of vocational qualifications (SVQ) as part of the CyQF, with standards for VET qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department of Secondary Technical and Vocational Education (STVE) offers training to youngsters and adults defying skills mismatches and unemployment (SDG4). • VET programmes are offered to prisoners to help them reintegrating into society. (SDG4) • Gender Equality Committee in Employment and VET (SDG5). • Scheme for job placement of unemployed young tertiary education graduates (SDG8). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2012, the Digital Strategy for Cyprus was approved, including the education and training area and digital entrepreneurship • Cyprus' industrial strategy 2019-30 focuses on digital skills and digitalisation among others • New specialisations related to digital skills have been introduced in STVE • The Cyprus Digital Champion prepared a memorandum of collaboration to develop citizens' digital skills and train ICT professionals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HRDA prepared the Supplement of Policy Guides and Procedures "Utilization of distance learning methods in training programmes", applied since March 2020. • The HRDA promoted the use of e-learning by subsidised training providers. (HRDA, 2020). • In September 2020, the Education ministry submitted a proposal which amends existing regulations on primary and secondary education to explicitly include distance learning.

POLAND			
policies	SDGs	digital transformation	post-COVID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland developed a Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) in 2006, that was linked to the EQF in 2013 and integrated in the qualifications system in 2016. • The PQF additionally includes three degrees of learning outcomes descriptors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - universal descriptors, applying to all types of education; - specific descriptors, applying for VET and/or higher education; - subject area/discipline descriptors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of education, the SDGs in Poland focus on the implementation of Goal 4: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - global education: interrelations between people and events around the world - using good examples from around the world - improving key skills such as communication, creativity, and conflict management - supporting integration - developing open-minded attitudes among learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Polish priority regarding digital transformation is to widespread digital technologies, introduce them into classrooms and pride all schools with a high-speed network • Another priority is filling the gap in the ICT sector, increasing its innovation and combating digital exclusion • Secondary schools are being trained on how to use online resources and higher education on how to introduce digital education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid has enforced digitisation in public and private institutions • There is ongoing development to equip families with necessary IT tools and internet • Safe use of the Internet is promoted • Schools are being equipped with digital tools and teachers with skills to conduct online classes • Poland Strategy for Responsible Development foresees provision of broadband to all schools, especially in rural areas.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

VET-business cooperation and effective employer engagement can be seen as an ongoing challenge that must continuously adapt strategically to both parts - the needs of the VET providers and the local/regional/national and even international business context that defines global trends of the labour market.

To this happen, it is crucial to have qualified human resources and time. For VET providers this implies to upskill VET managers and professionals. However, from the point of view of employers, making their staff, resources, facilities and working time available for establishing relationships with VET and hosting learners at the workplace are not usually their priorities. Thus, it is crucial necessary to invest in this relationship, overcoming obstacles and involving employers in a way that is attractive to both parts.

This is precisely the aim of this framework: to provide a solid and holistic action-oriented methodology to guide any VET provider that needs to establish, manage, and/or improve an effective employer engagement internal policy and agenda.

It offers a 4-level pathway, with examples of different activities that can be implemented to nurture the VET-business relationship.

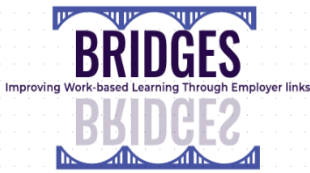
The more levels of engagement are established, the more benefits there are for the involved parties. However, it may not always be necessary to implement all the four levels, depending on each context and needs. What is utmost important is to engage employers in a strategic way, creating value for them, but also for the VET providers, through the development of concrete actions that are beneficial to both.

Some recommendations for establishing a win-win VET-business relationship are presented here:

- **Select the right partners** – it is necessary to do some initial research on relevant partners and define strategies adapted to each of them, as they are all different. It is important to define which industries are to be contacted, identify a focal person and who has the decision-making power in each company, whether or not the organisations have

experience of involvement with VET providers or what relationships they have with other stakeholders such as government institutions.

- **Create a team with representatives of companies with different functions** – each employer engaged in VET must have some people involved in this relationship, such as representatives of human resources, workers, and staff with managerial positions. This contributes to having a broader view of the needs of the company, as well as preventing a single person from being overloaded with work. Furthermore, if someone leaves this VET work team at the company, someone else in this team can easily replace them, contributing to a better sustainability of the project.
- **Understand the business world** – it is essential to understand the focus of the employers, that is often more on producing goods or offering services that generate profit, rather than providing employment opportunities or contributing to the development of employees. Knowing the priorities of each side of the engagement will make it easier to calculate common goals that contribute to the success of both parties in the relationship.
- **Add value** – VET providers need to bring added value to the employers they engage with, such as the opportunity to contribute to a curriculum tailored to the needs of companies in terms of workers' knowledge and skills. In addition, VET providers must present a holistic vision of labour market trends in the areas in which companies operate and also relate them to the remaining business sector that surrounds them.
- **Nurture the relationship** – just like any other relationship, it is necessary to continually nurture the relationship between VET providers and employers. Therefore, for example, in addition to the initial step of contributing to the curriculum, it is important to be aware of the learners' progress at the workplace and if they demonstrate any competences' gaps, so possible improvements to the curricula can be made. Thus, the curricula are continuously adapted to the real needs of employers.

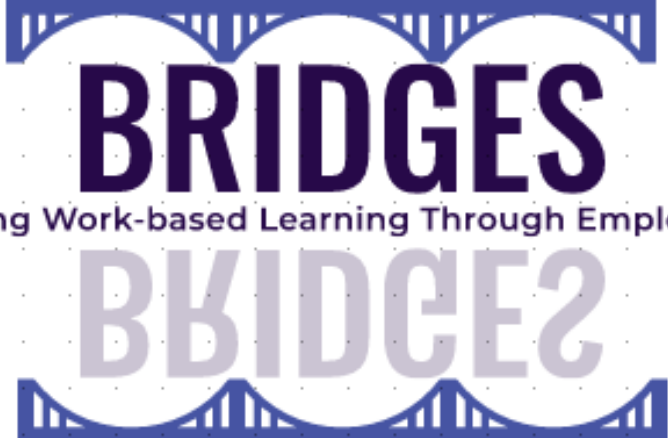


- **Disseminate this relationship to wider audiences** – explain how it contributes positively to all the parties involved, that can be seen as agents of change and models for individuals and for the local economic and social environment.
- **Develop a network** – through the engagement with some employers, you may be able to access new partners who are on their networks, including business or professional associations. VET providers can take this opportunity to expand their contacts, considering their needs and always aiming to improve the relationships between the VET system and employers, taking advantage of the best practices that each element in the network can contribute with.

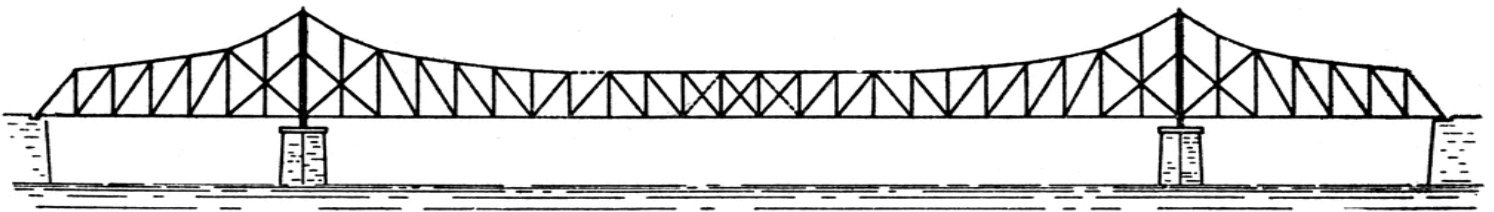
Finally, the BRIDGES Employer Engagement Framework is complemented by the:

- **BRIDGES Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Programme**, a blended training resource to help VET managers and professionals to develop their BRIDGES pathway and build excellence in employer engagement.
- **BRIDGES Digital Learning Resources and Community of Practice**, an online hub to provide open and instant access to all project contents, including infographics representing the 4-level of employer engagement, the e-learning materials of the blended CPD programme and a set of good practice videos on employer engagement.

Together, these three resources offer to VET providers a complete solution for engaging employers in VET and managing efficiently their relationship with them through four different levels of interaction, which are not necessarily sequential or mandatory – they offer a vision of multiple opportunities and activities that can be implemented for win-win cooperation between VET providers and employers.



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