

“TRAM-WBL Engaging SMEs for Quality Transnational WBL experiences”

Project number: n° 2015-1-IT01-KA202-004735

INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT 1

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SMART TRANSNATIONAL WBL ECOSYSTEMS

WORKING GUIDELINES





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1. INTRODUCTION

This document contains the working guidelines for the development and implementation of Intellectual Output 1 RECOMMENDATION FOR SMART TRANSNATIONAL WBL ECOSYSTEMS.

The guidelines outline:

- ⇒ the methodological approach to be used to achieve the aims and objectives of the IO1 (contextual framework of the survey, desk-based research, qualitative methods of data collection, selection of case-studies, consultation with relevant stakeholders, etc.);
- ⇒ practical issues with regard to partners' responsibilities, communication and a timeline for the period of IO1 design and implementation.
- ⇒ Focus groups guiding questions;
- ⇒ Protocol for conducting an effective focus group;
- ⇒ Supporting documents and templates for data collection (from focus groups and case-studies) and reporting

1.1 The primary purpose of Intellectual Output 1

Intellectual Output 1 is mainly aimed at developing and evaluating an evidence-base to explore the extend of shared understandings within the tripartite relationship of **schools/VET providers, learners** and **employers** of key factors in creating and sustaining successful active, reflective **transnational WBL environments**.

By conducting a preliminary survey into each of the three contributing target groups (schools/VET providers, students/trainees and employers), the output aims to gain a deep understanding of the issues, incentives and barriers held by these three parties and to use this understanding to formulate a tri-partite approach to quality transnational WBL projects.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DESK-BASED SURVEY. METHODOLOGY

Given the paucity of previous body of research which addresses how support is provided by VET providers/schools for the critical role of the employer in facilitating the learning process in transnational WBL experiences, the survey is essentially an exploratory investigation that seeks to uncover insights, experiences, practices and perceptions.

The survey design should integrate analysis of evidences and should be based on two stages, leading to the construction of digital stories and the web-based guide.

Stage 1: This stage should contain a **context-setting literature review**, synthesizing researches, reports, case studies/good practices on VET providers/schools support for the employers' role in contributing to successful, active transnational WBL environments to identify models of effective practices.

It should be based on a combination of mixed methods of desk-based research drawing together and analyzing findings from primary and secondary sources (e.g. identification of literature to be consulted via general Internet indexed sources, databases, access to text of selected publication, working papers, research reports, etc.).

Stage 2: Focus groups are chosen as the most appropriate method for the survey, as they represent an effective research method by which various issues can be explored within a peer group setting.

During this stage, **three focus groups should be organized in each partner's country** aimed at **identifying different perspectives** on **support needs** to **enable employers** to **support learners in transnational WBL** most effectively as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to transnational WBL.

It should be noted that the aim of the O1 should not be a comparative study, rather each partner should provide sources of qualitative data to be analyzed for the identification of key themes.

Stage 1: Context-setting literature review

Some tips to outline literature review

At a macro-level, it is argued that transnational WBL contributes to a better qualified workforce and a more diversified culture all over Europe. It also improves the capacity to interact in a globalised world by fostering open-mindedness, adaptability and creativity of millions of European students.

Mobility equips students with a wide range of competences and skills which are increasingly valued by employers – from foreign languages and greater intercultural awareness, to open-mindedness and tolerance, curiosity and problem-solving skills, quick adaptability to change and an entrepreneurial mindset. Such skills and competences do not only serve the labour market and the wider European economy, but also contribute more broadly to developing active and engaged European citizens, contributing to a holistic education for Europe's youth.

In general, research shows that international learning mobility encourages the employability of students who feel more confident to search for jobs abroad and who consider obstacles for labour mobility less important than their non-mobile peers.

There is a considerable literature on support for learners in transnational WBL. Employers occupy a critical role in ensuring effective student support in successful active and reflective transnational WBL environments.

However, little research has been undertaken to identify best institutional practices in communication between institutions and employers to identify and ensure “employer support” for the learning experience in different WBL settings.

Against this background, TRAM-WBL survey, focusing more on support for employer engagement some key themes could be identified and investigated such as:

- ✓ Institutional national policies on WBL;
- ✓ Transnational work placement preparation;
- ✓ the interaction of tutors, employers and students in the creation of any profile of competences;
- ✓ employers' involvement in course design (meaningful feedback from employers) and employers' understanding about a course;

- ✓ employers taking an active and informed role in training and assessing students who are on placement; a need for training in assessment for tutor and work supervisors;
- ✓ issues of discontinuity of work occurring on the arrival and departure of a student;

Furthermore, **obstacles and constraints in the development of effective engagement**, identified by employers should be identified such as financial constraints (costs); credibility (demonstrable value to employer and employee); time (its availability); language barrier; student support in the workforce; lack of VET providers/schools flexibility and responsiveness (too slow, too static); complexity (complicated systems and bureaucracy), lack of relevance and outdated curricula, lack of a common language and understanding.

Also, the identification of specific models/practices of transnational WBL, in the form of case-studies, could help highlighting relevant topics still uncovered, illustrating past or current experiences to learn from.

Therefore, each partner should participate in the identification of theoretical background, identifying research papers, reports, handbooks and alike and also real practices to set the basis for further improvement.

Stage 2: Focus groups

Focus groups should involve the **three key actors of WBL**:

- **Learners** (at different levels and in different discipline areas) currently or already engaged in transnational WBL;
- **Teaching staff** who have responsibility for facilitating transnational WBL in a range of discipline areas
- **Employers** or **company tutors** from different sectors, size, settings (urban or rural) and diversity of workforce already involved in foreign learners' work placements.

The methodology foresees the organisation of 3 focus groups, as per 1 for each type of actor. The discussions with the learners, teaching staff and employer groups should address different aspects of the general theme of the survey from their specific perspectives:

- the learners focus groups should consider effective practice in terms of employer support for their learning abroad;
- the teaching staff focus group should identify the most effective ways employers can support transnational WBL learning;
- the employer focus group should concentrate on support required by employers from VET providers/schools to enable them to support learners in transnational WBL most effectively, as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to transnational WBL.

The focus groups should be conducted to explore the three different perspectives (employers, learners, teaching staff) on international WBL.

Proposals of key themes to be addressed are listed below:

1. EFFECTIVE EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Employer perspective

- Establishing a relationship with the VET provider/school
- Contribution to training programme design;
- Contribution to curriculum delivery and support of student learning

Learners perspectives

- Quality of supervision from the employer during the transnational WBL experience
- Formal and informal feedback
- Encouragement from employers, particularly in what is for them a new and unfamiliar environment

Teaching staff perspective

- Involvement of employers in promoting international WBL
- Access to potential host companies
- Ensuring students have appropriate skills for WBL
- Commitment and engagement of employer manager/supervisor with responsibility for students

2. EFFECTIVE VET PROVIDER/SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Employer perspective

- Students' core skills and competences for an transnational WBL experience (how the core skills are taught, role of the receiving VET provider/school mentor;
- VET providers/schools support to employers in managing transnational WBL

Learners perspectives

- Support provided by VET providers/schools in engaging students as well as in organizing and managing international WBL

Teaching staff perspective

- Appropriate support for host employers (provision of clear and concise information, dialogue with employers, etc.) in hosting learners for a transnational WBL experience

3. EFFECTIVE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Employer perspective

- Students' engagement in the WBL assessment and more effective cooperation between VET providers/schools in devising the assessment procedures during the experience;
- Ensuring that teaching staff have a greater knowledge and experience of the labour market/work places requirements outside the VET system

Learners perspectives

- Dedicated support by VET providers/schools during the WBL experience abroad
- Opportunities to learn from other cultural and working environments
- Students' feedback on their experience abroad

Teaching staff perspective

Students' engagement and orientation in transnational WBL opportunities

4. ENSURING COMMUNICATION

Employer perspective

Regular and systematic communication and working relationship with the VET provider/school about all aspects of WBL experience to ensure mutual understanding of all parties' needs (information on the main objectives of the training program, what schools and students are expecting from a transnational WBL experience, etc.)

Need of a shared languages between VET providers/school and employers

Learners perspectives

- Clarity of communication between VET provider/school and employer
- Communication within the host company

Teaching staff perspective

- Opportunities to communicate with potential host employers
- Employers not taking advantage of communication and information provided by vet providers/schools

5. **EXPLORING THE VALUE OF THE TRANSNATIONAL WBL EXPERIENCE** (value as learning development, for future employment, for the employer, etc.).

Intellectual Output 1 – final aim: to inform the construction of “digital stories” as part of the web-based guide for employers+

The essential of IO1 is mainly to provide inputs for IO2 and Io4 respectively aimed at:

- developing the guidelines for successfully engaging employers in transnational WBL programmes;
- introducing “digital stories¹ as innovative means of capturing stakeholders’ critical reflections (learners, host employers, teaching staff/VET professionals) on their WBL experiences and stimulating thinking about appropriate employer support for effective active transnational WBL environments. The foregoing methodological stages should, therefore, inform the construction of digital stories as part of a web-based guide for employers.

¹ The definition of a ‘typical’ digital story is a narrative of about 250-300 words (approximately two to three minutes in length) with between three and five still images that are used as enhancement. ‘The simplicity of the process, and the fact that the technology required is fairly basic and easy to use, means that the focus is on the story rather than the technology’

[ANNEX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW TEMPLATE](#)

TYPE OF SOURCE	AUTHOR	YEAR OF PUBLICATION	IDENTIFICATION AND IN DEPTH-ANALYSIS OF MODELS/PRACTICES	MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY/RESEARCH	COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

ANNEX 2: CASE-STUDY SUMMARY TEMPLATE (where applicable)

General information

Partner:	
Country:	

Information on the model/practice/

Description (short summary)	
Stages of development (Start/End date)	
Country/Region/City	
Contact person	

Main activities / methodology / tools	
Source of funding and resources used	
Target group	
Number of beneficiaries	
Key public/private actors involved	
Relevance (significance for the target group)	

[ANNEX 3: TIPS FOR ORGANIZING THE FOCUS GROUP](#)

Introduction

A focus group is a group interview, where a small number of participants are invited to discuss their opinions and experiences on specific topics/issues.

This method can be used to grasp a better understanding of a social context, to identify nuances of research setting that could impact upon the investigation, and to serve as a source for grounded theory application.

The person acting as moderator leads the interview ensuring that all participants are included in regular turn taking.

In TRAM-WBL Project the direct involvement of end-users and stakeholders in focus groups will constitute a direct link between project outputs and target groups.

Methodology

The first step in designing a focus group is to define and clarify the concepts that will be investigated. In other words, it is necessary to lay out a set of issues for the group to discuss. It is advisable to focus on a small number of broad concepts, but to examine them in detail.

The moderator administers a semi-structured question format for exploratory purposes. It is crucial to keep the questions as open as possible, in order to stimulate useful “trains of thoughts” among the participants without unnecessarily forcing them.

Generally, focus group takes place in a formal, prearranged setting, usually a room for 4-7 people sitting around a conference table. The focus group usually lasts about 1-2 hours. The room should include a video projector in case multi-modal clip are shown to stimulate discussion.

It is advisable to audio-tape the focus group for its entire duration, in order to be able to re-visit specific points later or, in the analysis of answers collected. In case, participants should give pre-interview consent to this and be offered the opportunity to read and agree to the content of any transcripts produced.

Their anonymity would be protected at all times and they would be informed that they can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

The moderator's role

Moderating a focus group might seem easy, but it requires careful preparation and group interaction skills. An effective focus group moderation must include sense of humor, flexibility, and keen memory. Additionally and most importantly, the critical ability is that of active listening. The goal is to collect concentrated discussions on topics of interest to the researcher, but the discussion of these topics may or may not feel natural to the participants.

Moderators create an open and tolerant atmosphere in which each person feels free to share her or his point of view. This can happen when participants see that the moderator is genuinely interested in learning as much as possible about their experiences and feelings and when a relaxed atmosphere has been both established and maintained between participants. The moderator's experience, competence, and style at facilitating group interaction and stake, or involvement, in the group's discussion likely affects the quality of the data collected.

In addition the moderator must be able to respond neutrally to the discussion as it unfolds. The moderator must provide an element of balance in the focus group by diplomatically shifting the conversation from the active talkers to those who have said less. It is a dangerous mistake

to assume that silent participants are agreeing or not thinking. If the moderator does not successfully solicit the opinions of less talkative participants, some valuable insights may be lost.

A successful focus group will need to follow some of the following steps and the principles outlined below:

- 1) Welcome, greeting of the participants and short round of presentations
- 2) Warm-up phase (about 10 minutes); the moderator:
 - a.-introduces him/herself and describes general topic
 - b.-explains the purpose of research in general terms (taking care not to suggest a specific direction) and obtains informed consent for using data and for recording (where applicable);
 - c.-informs the participants about the duration of the focus group (suggested approx.. 1 hour and 30 minutes);
 - d.-explains that there are no right or wrong answers, and that the aim of the researchers is only to gather everyone's opinions and beliefs, and not technical knowledge on the topic.
 - e.-reminds members that it is a collective and creative work (no critiques, but all can tell, without fear, all that comes to mind);
- 3) Participants' introductions.
- 4) Phase of discussion. The moderator and the assistant will take care that:
 - a.-all the aspects of the topic in the discussion track are treated;
 - b.-all actively participate (probing and stimulating them in an appropriate way);
 - c.-everything said during the discussion is recorded (on paper during the discussion, or through audio-video recording –in this last case it is necessary to obtain specific consent of participants before the beginning of the gathering-).
- 5) Concluding phase (about 10 minutes). The moderator concludes, summing up the points that emerged, and thanks the participants their attendance and cooperation.

Some basic recommendations for the moderator of the focus group are:

- a) to introduce each point to be discussed and give an opportunity to all the members to treat it;
- b) participants should discuss with each other and not with the moderator and the assistant(s);
- c) the moderator should not participate in the discussion, and should refrain from expressing opinions or personal evaluations, or (dis)agreement with the participants. The moderator must be neutral.

ANNEX 4: KEY THEMES FOR THE FOCUS GROUPS

General questions

- ✓ How have you been involved (as a student/employer/school/VET provider) in transnational work-based learning?
- ✓ What is your experience of transnational work-based learning?
- ✓ Examples of good experience and why
- ✓ Examples of bad experiences and why.



EMPLOYERS

- ***to enable them to most effectively support students in transnational WBL as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to WBL.***

- ➔ What links do you have with schools/VET providers in the context of transnational work-based learning? (individual staff links, services, etc.)
- ➔ What practical support are you expecting from schools/VET providers/other intermediary organisations when hosting a learner from abroad?
- ➔ If schools/VET providers/intermediary organisations could do one thing to help you or your organisation improve engagement with them, what would that be?
- ➔ How can schools/VET providers support you in preparing students in terms of “being able to do the job” during the work placement?
- ➔ What do you, as an employer, really value (and will therefore be willing to pay for from transnational WBL experience?).



LEARNERS

• to identify their perspectives on the most effective practice in terms of employer support for their learning during the transnational WBL experience

- What made the transnational work-based learning experience effective or ineffective for you?
- Why was your transnational work-based learning experience effective or ineffective in terms of employer support for your learning?
- From your first hand experience, what do you think were the most effective practices, in terms of employer support, for your learning in the workplace?
- In terms of improvement what would be the most effective practice in terms of employer support for your learning in the workplace? (enhancement of the experience abroad)
- What could your school/training center do to sufficiently equip you for work experience in a foreign country to meet the needs of employers in the work place?



TEACHING STAFF/VET PROFESSIONALS

• to identify the most effective ways that employers can support transnational WBL student learning

- What practical support could schools/VET providers provide to help employers in transnational WBL experience?
- How could employers be more fully engaged with schools/VET providers in the process of delivering transnational WBL?
- How could be employers effectively engaged in the assessment process?
- What support is given to employers to undertake assessment and ensure standards during transnational WBL?
- How could staff in schools/VET providers develop their awareness of transnational work

practices to support their students and the needs of employers?

- What support is required to prepare students before they begin a work experience abroad?
- What are the issues surrounding the funding of transnational WBL from your perspective?
- How do schools/VET providers provide feedback to employers about individual and generic student performance?
- How are communication pathways with employers established and maintained?

ANNEX 5: FOCUS GROUPS REPORT

FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Partner Organisation	
Focus group date	
Place	
Number of participants	
Moderator's Name	

Brief description of the participants

Relevant excerpts related to the main topics

Other comments

3. SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITES

Each participating partner will organize the activities included in this working guidelines at its own convenience, for a timely development of the focus groups. It should be noticed that the participation of third parties implies to adapt the scheduling to them and the attainment of the work plan does not entirely depend on the availability of partners themselves.

In any case, partners are called to meet their commitments by **February, 26th**, delivering the three types of annexes properly filled out (with regard to literature review, case-study and focus groups, respectively).

The overall document, compiling the information collected at every partner and country levels, will be issued on **March, 15th** by Fundación Metal Asturias as IO1 leading organization.