

WORK EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS IN PART-TIME LEARNING SYSTEMS: EMPLOYERS' MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES

Author(s): *Katleen De Rick*

1. Abstract

The study was inspired by a perceived lack of work placements for students in dual vocational education, in general perceived as the lowest track of the Flemish educational system. Employers' motives and experiences need to be taken into account if one wants to give these students, many with a disadvantaged educational and social background, the opportunity to combine their training with work experience. These motives and experiences are the object of this study.

The study showed that the number of work placements for students can definitely be increased. In order to do this it is important first and foremost to make proper use of the potential in terms of work placements. This requires that supply and demand need to be reconciled. Secondly it is important to monitor the supply continuity of work placements. This can be achieved by providing support to employers on the one hand and to compensate them for their efforts, and on the other hand by creating the conditions which contribute to more successful work experiences. This essentially means that measures need to be concomitantly taken to improve the quality of the work experience and to monitor the quality of the training program. The government plays an important role in this frame, but providers of dual education as well as employers' organisations will also have to contribute to this.

Key words:

Dual vocational education; work experience; employers; apprenticeship; qualitative research; quantitative research

2. Study objectives

The study was inspired by a perceived lack of work placements for students in dual vocational education. In order to find ways of solving this problem we looked for factors that may explain the availability of work placements. The study was fuelled by the question of which costs and benefits were associated with the training of students for employers. Costs and benefits were not merely limited to the financial aspect. Costs such as time and effort invested in supervision and benefits such as the probability that the company can hire a good employee after a few years were also studied. By interpreting costs and benefits more broadly and by also delving into employers' motives and experiences this study has also established an interface with the quality of work experience.

The following questions were addressed in the study:

- What are the motives of employers to offer young people in dual systems work placement or not?
- What do employers invest in the training of young people?
- What are the benefits for employers when training young people?
- How do they experience this training?
- Which concerns of employers should be addressed in order to increase the supply in terms of work experience placements?

Clarification of key concepts

In Flanders there are two dual education systems: part-time education and the apprenticeship. Part-time education is a form of education whereby young people take classes two days a week in a Centre for Learning and Working and spend three days a week learning on the job with an employer. If the latter is not the case, then there are alternative programs which prepare young people for work experience by working on their motivation and personal development, on their work attitudes, social skills and competences. The apprenticeship is a system whereby young people attend school one day a week and work with an employer four days a week. Young people are only admitted to this system when they have been offered a contract by an employer. There are no alternatives in terms of work experience if the young person becomes unemployed.

3. Methods and data

The following data collection methods were used: a mail survey, interviews and focus groups. The target group for the mail survey was made up of employers in the profit sector, who offer work placements to students in dual vocational secondary education and to students in apprenticeships. We received 648 completed questionnaires (29% of the total number of questionnaires sent).

These data were then supplemented with data from interviews and focus groups. Respondents included employers in the profit sector; employers in the care and services sector; the social-cultural sector; the Flemish government and the local authorities. We also met with representatives from organisations that are also involved – at a higher level - in the creation of work placements and in supporting employers as well as cooperating with Centres for Learning and Working and Syntra (the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training).

Methodological explanation

Questions were asked about the following topics in the mail survey: characteristics of the company and the students in the company; reasons for training students; students' activities; supervision and guidance of students; results of and return on student training; financial costs and incentives.

During the interviews and focus group discussions we discussed the same themes on the whole but we mainly focused on employers' motives for training students, their experiences in terms of training part-time students, factors that are obstacles or contributors to successful work placements and measures which the Government could implement to increase the number of work placements.

4. Findings

4.1 Students in the company

Employers invest in student training, but the effort can still be optimised. The potential in terms of work experience placements has certainly not been optimised. In large companies this can be achieved by increasing the number of students that are concomitantly being trained in the company. In small and large companies this can be achieved by increasing the number of years during which an employer trains students. Next to this there are still a significant number of companies or organisations interested in offering work placements to part-time students but there is no inflow of students in these companies. Thus the following three problems need to be dealt with if one wishes to inspire a full-time commitment in more students in part-time education, preferably through employment:

- the problematic inflow of students in companies that are willing to train students;
- the fact that the potential in terms of work placements within a company is not fully used;
- the dropping out of employers after several years due to negative reasons (mainly attributed to the lack of proper work attitudes among students, and competence levels that are too low).

4.2 Motives for offering work experience placements

The future benefits (especially), and not the current benefits (in the form of a contribution to production) are important motives for employers to offer work placements to students. Employers emphasise the long-term return, namely the recruitment of a good employee. This is not evident given that employers have to work with a very difficult group of young people, a task which requires specific expertise and the necessary support. Other research findings demonstrate that these two aspects are problematic. Often employers are not always properly prepared to support young people and the reality is often at odds with their expectations. As a result of insufficient contact and cooperation with the training centre the required support is also often lacking. The qualitative research demonstrates clearly that employers also consider other motives than economic motives. Social motives were also mentioned: training students is seen as a way of taking one's social responsibility. It can also be a way of shaping the company's diversity policy.

4.3 Investment in guiding students

Employers who offer work placements to students are definitely willing to invest time in their education, but this also entails a major cost. In order to limit the financial costs for the employer one should focus on the cost of the guidance itself, rather on the wage cost per student. That does not mean there are no problems in terms of the wage cost per student; these will be dealt with in the next paragraph.

The compensation for, or at least some form of compensation, for the time spent on the student would be highly appreciated by employers and also is an expression of the appreciation for their efforts.

Other forms of investment in guidance are limited, which can be interpreted as not unequivocally positive. The positive aspect (from the employer's perspective) about limited contacts with the training centre, for example, means that the employer does not have to invest any time in these contacts. But there is a serious downside to this: firstly there are very few opportunities for gearing the training and the work experience towards one another. Secondly, there is the risk that problems or indications of potential problems will be reported too late, meaning that support

and remediation are also often too late in the game. These issues are ultimately detrimental to the quality of training, with consequences for both the employer and the student as well as the training centre.

The perception of the administrative burden associated with the employment of students shows that the subjective experience of time spent on these aspects is at least as important as the objective time spent on the training activities. Objectively speaking, the investment is not that significant, but subjectively it is experienced as very stressful. The administrative burdens should be eliminated wherever possible.

4.4 Financial costs and benefits

In terms of financial costs, the cost of guidance is the greatest cost. If the objective is to provide financial support to the employer then the guidance cost needs to be addressed. It is also important that students from one system are not competitors of students from the other system. An employer will always choose the cheapest system given the choice. At present this is the apprenticeship. If the aim is to give young people in dual education equal opportunities for a full-time job and to maximise the number of work placements then this competition element needs to be eliminated. Other costs (for equipment, medical exam, insurance) are not so great, but naturally they do increase the total cost, which at times can be high. That is why they should not be forgotten in a policy aimed at creating work placements. The financial incentives that are currently in place are not fully exploited by employers and are not proportionally divided among employers. The available resources need to be better spent.

4.5 Return of the training program

Training a student is not necessarily a profitable endeavour, on the contrary even. The risk of an unqualified outflow continues to be relatively high according to employers. Attention certainly needs to focus on the qualified outflow of students. Future benefits for the employer in terms of recruitment are most certainly not guaranteed. Possibly the desired result is not achieved through training or another employer may reap the benefit of the training program's efforts. The study results indicate, however, that employers certainly do not cite recruitment pro form as an important argument.

4.6 Appeal of the students for the company

The majority of the employers think that students can be interesting for the company, in spite of the problems in terms of the return. This could be interpreted as students being cheap labour for many employers, but this is not very plausible in the light of the other study results.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

5.1 Students in the company

The government can contribute by ensuring that employers are sufficiently encouraged and receive sufficient support in the following areas: a good preparation of the student for the work experience, good support (both financial and in terms of content) of the guidance of the student, high-quality training of the student in the training centre so that there is a bigger chance of a return of the work experience and simplification of the organisation of dual learning systems.

In addition the dual learning systems need to receive the right type of support at policy level so that they can meet the expectations in terms of the guidance and follow-up of students. Dual learning systems are expected to develop strategies themselves in order to establish a good network of employers who offer work experience placements and maintain good contacts with employers. At any rate the demand on behalf of employers for students should always be dealt with.

In some sectors, such as the government, provinces, cities and municipalities, the care industry and others the opportunities for offering students work placements are under-utilised. An important reason for this is that the regulations to which these bodies need to adhere prevent them from offering work placements to students. This obstacle needs to be removed as soon as possible. Employers' organisations and employers themselves can make efforts to publish their work placements in the right way. This can be achieved by contacting the regional training centres which offer the appropriate training program(s), by supplying clear information about the learning opportunities and perspectives of the work experience and by indicating what is expected of the student. Initiatives such as a database for internships and apprenticeships are not necessarily bad, but as demonstrated in this study and in previous studies (including Ruelens et al, 2003) personal contacts are crucial. To ensure that students sign up for work experience in companies which offer such programs but which are unable to find candidates and in order to deal with the problem of shortage professions, one option is to extend premiums for following a program which leads to a shortage profession to young people in dual learning systems.

5.2 Motives for offering work experience placements

The quality of the training offered in the dual learning systems, the guidance and follow-up are crucial in order to ensure an immediate and future return for the employer. The fact that dual learning and working is currently mainly considered as a safety net and the last option for many youngsters in the cascade system is very restrictive for the return of work placements. It could also become a full-fledged system which is chosen for its specific assets and qualities, by, for example, introducing alternating learning in technical and full-time vocational education.

The contrast between employers' expectations and the reality with which they are confronted also means that employers should be properly informed. This is an important task for the part-time systems in their contacts with employers, and particularly when preparing and monitoring the learning experience. This requires, among other things, that the position of employment or program counsellor is properly developed (see also Leens & De Rick, 2006). The position of the program counsellor in the apprenticeship also needs to be reviewed.

The chances of success also increase when more attention is paid to the quality of the guidance on the shopfloor. Levers for quality have already been studied in previous studies (see Ruelens et al., 2003; De Rick & Baert, 2006 among others) and various tools and methods to improve learning in the workplace are available. Qualitative learning experiences at any rate are the result of a responsibility which is borne by the counsellors at Centres for Learning and Working or Syntra and by the employers (Meijers, 2004; De Rick, 2005). In view of the fact that recruitment is an important motive, the training programs in dual learning systems really need to monitor trends in the labour market. Training for shortage professions should be encouraged and training centres need to respond to changes in the labour market in a flexible manner.

5.3 Investment in guiding students

It is important that the government compensates the time invested in training the student. Financial incentives could mainly focus on this aspect, rather than for example reducing the wage cost of the student (which is not perceived as problematic). It is also important that all the activities in the frame of the work placement (contracts, statutes, rules...) and which are an additional burden for the employer, be reviewed very critically and that all obstacles be removed. Finally employers can be given additional support by ensuring that the students that enter work placements are ready for the experience. Then the employers can invest time in things that really matter, such as transferring professional knowledge and professional competences.

At present a lot of investments are earmarked for preliminary projects and bridge projects aimed at sufficiently motivating young people who are not sufficiently mature for employment for a work placement and to teach them the appropriate attitudes. Such programs meet a real need, but it is important that the quality of these preliminary projects and bridge projects is monitored and that the results that are achieved with these programs are carefully examined. On the other hand one should not be too quick to judge a student as insufficiently motivated or not ready for employment. A lot depends on the context in which the youngster is placed. It is very important that there is a good match between the youngster and his work placement.

5.4 Financial costs and benefits

If the government wishes to provide a financial stimulus to employers then the time spent on the supervision and guidance should be used as a benchmark. Allowances, which also exist for other types of training, should be given to employers training students from dual learning systems to cover these additional costs. This needs to be harmonised. Greater transparency in the allowances to which an employer may be entitled and simpler application procedures are also highly recommended. It is important that the dual learning systems do not compete with one another to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to find a full-time work placement. This can be achieved by no longer offering certain courses (e.g., those in which the difference in wage cost is a significant factor) in the two systems or by harmonising the wage cost of the students across the two systems.

5.5 Return of the training program

The government could introduce protective measures for employers who train students in dual learning systems. This can be in the form of a non-competition clause after training or compensation for employers whose trainees subsequently leave. The employers' organisations can raise awareness among employers to not poach students from other employers who have recently invested in their training.

5.6 Appeal of the students for the company

The government can promote work placements for students in dual learning systems among employers. A realistic picture should be painted of what it means to train such students.

Full reference of study report(s) and or paper(s) and other key publications of the study summarised here

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