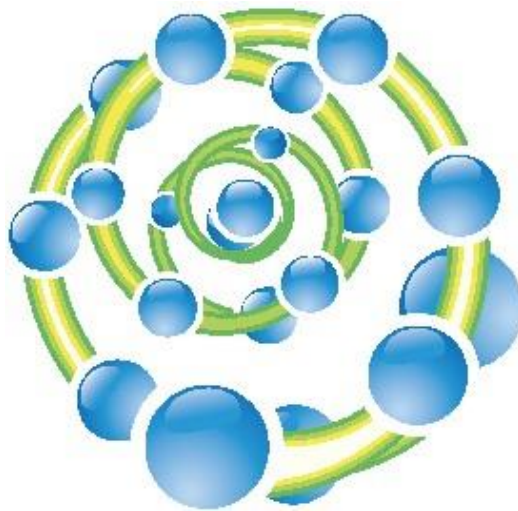


Innovation in VET

Poland



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A. Introduction

The 2012 vocational education reform, introduced by the Act of 19 August 2011 on amendments to the Education Act and other acts (Dz. U. Nr 205, poz. 1206), focused on the increasing attractiveness and adjustment of VET to the needs of the labour market. To be able to respond to the labour market needs the VET schools must not only follow the newest technological trends and reflect them in their curricula but also promote innovativeness of the teachers and students. This cannot be done without a close cooperation with local employers, branch organisations and research and development institutions. The amended Education Act has created an opportunity for a better cooperation between VET schools and enterprises. A requirement to receive the acceptance of the regional and district employment councils in order to launch a programme has been also introduced. A legal framework for the employers' participation in education process has been strengthened giving them the possibility to contribute to the curricula design process. Possibilities for the teachers' development and practical instruction in enterprises for students have been increased. The school headmasters have autonomy and are encouraged to sign agreements with employers, higher education institutions or branch organisations or to use EU funds (ESF, LLP or now Erasmus Plus) to make their educational offer up-to date and to respond to the local labour market needs. This is achieved through teachers' training, modernisation of school equipment including new technologies and innovations into the curricula, working on students social and intellectual competences preparing them for employers' expectations to gain not only qualified but also open-minded and innovative employees.

There are a lot of possibilities of such cooperation. The Human Capital Operational Programme Action 9.2 *Strengthening the attractiveness and quality of VET* was particularly devoted to projects focused on supporting the cooperation between VET schools and enterprises. The designers of the programme assumed that 50% of the Polish VET schools would be covered (3 000 schools), of which 75% (i.e. 2 250 schools) would conclude cooperation with employers in order to introduce development programmes. Those indicators were achieved by the end of 2013 when 3 612 VET schools and centres participated in projects and 2 476 concluded in various types of collaboration with employers.

Another important tool supporting innovativeness of VET schools was the Leonardo da Vinci Programme giving the school the opportunity to place students or teachers abroad or to participate in 'transfer of innovation' projects for partnerships with VET schools, HEIs and enterprises from the EU countries. In 2007-13, 22 155 students and 9 064 teachers have benefited from the mobility projects.

A good example of knowledge exchange platforms for creativity and innovation are sectorial and regional clusters. However, participation of VET providers in such clusters is not yet common and participation data are not centrally collected. There are some examples of good practices though e.g. the Pomeranian ICT cluster focused on easing the access to new knowledge and stimulating innovation in the ICT field, ensuring highly qualified human resources. The Pomeranian ICT cluster consists of over 100 companies and institutions including three VET providers and two higher education institutions. Another good example is the Cracow Life Science Cluster initiated by Jagiellonian University. It associates over 70 institutions including five HEIs and one complex of chemical secondary vocational schools.

B. Lubuskie-Brandenburg education cluster

The Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster (Klaster Edukacji Lubuskie-Brandenburgia) established in Gorzów Wielkopolski, is the first cross-border cluster bringing together the local government and the education system, entrepreneurs, higher education and R&D institutions, labour market entities, business services providers and private individuals. The partners represent various categories of entities involved in vocational education and training processes. The aim of the initiative is to develop and institutionalise a unique platform for communication; its task will be to identify, strengthen and transfer resources between the local community and the VET system, the regional economy, labour market institutions and the local government. These resources include: individuals, with their ambitions, aspirations, qualifications and competences; development concepts; school curricula; employment plans; funds; infrastructure, and cooperation opportunities.

The inspiration for the cluster development came from various collaboration projects undertaken in the city between different actors, e.g.:

- **Entrepreneurs, i.e. business-to-business.** One example is the Lubuskie Metal Cluster (Lubuski Klaster Metalowy) association, which brings together 25 enterprises in the metal sector to pursue a common promotion policy and exchange information about the available resources. Plans include the implementation of a common policy in the sphere of energy, the purchase of raw materials and the search of clients. The association occupies a top position in the ranking of the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (*Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości*).
- **Enterprises and business environment institutions.** This includes the Investor Services Centre (Biuro Obsługi Inwestorów) operated by the city authorities, which

assists entrepreneurs in their investment and solving problems processes associated with the use of the local institutional and social resources. A similar role is played by employer and business organisations, self-governing professional bodies (e.g. the Western Chamber of Commerce and Industry - Zachodnia Izba Przemysłowo-Handlowa, the Economic Parliament – Sejmik Gospodarczy), as well as personnel selection and job brokerage firms and companies offering business services in the sphere of finance, real property and law.

- **Labour market and VET.** Entrepreneurs from Gorzów Wielkopolski who wanted to hire qualified staff approached the relevant vocational schools not only hoping to find potential candidates, but also suggesting the desirable profiles of education or, more specifically, the skills and qualifications expected by them from the school leavers. In turn, vocational schools sought opportunities for establishing contacts with plants and enterprises where the school leavers could be employed and could contribute to the process of practical training for specific job positions.

An awareness of the mutual interrelationships between these areas of collaboration and the accompanying topics lay at the core of the decision to systematise efforts in this sphere. It was resolved that a new entity would be established from the interested parties, with the responsibility to initiate and reinforce such exchange processes. It was hoped that this would provide an opportunity for Gorzów Wielkopolski to become a city of professionals in a variety of sectors and at all levels of vocational education: from the basic vocational school up to engineering studies. The participants were of the opinion that close and regular collaboration between the local administration, the provincial board of education, vocational schools, the Vocational Training Centre (Centrum Kształcenia Zawodowego), higher education institutions, plants and establishments, as well as business environment institutions, could realistically be developed. It was assumed that such cooperation could produce synergies that would be beneficial for the entire local community.

The Education Cluster offers opportunities for an accurate and targeted planning of education and career paths in specialisations which will be in demand in Gorzów Wielkopolski and its environs in the coming years. Such training should be based on state-of-the-art technologies and work tools available at the local workplaces. In this way, enterprises investing in the development will gain access to modern human resources, such as school leavers and graduates prepared to take up work at specific positions.

Schools need to know how to organise practical vocational training and how many specialists with specific qualifications are likely to find employment in the city. Acquiring practical skills

should not be a dull abstraction but rather be linked to the actual requirements associated to the future job positions. In parallel, students and their parents need to know what occupations are likely to offer attractive and well-paying jobs in the region. It is necessary to fight the stereotyped opinion that vocational education is inferior to general education and that it hampers the development of young people.

Therefore, the mission of the Vocational Education Cluster is to provide support to the broadly understood VET sector so that it can better respond to the needs of the local labour market.

B.1. Background information

Gorzów Wielkopolski has a population of about 125 thousand and is one of the two regional capitals of the Lubuskie Province, bounded by Germany in the west and the strong Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) region in the east. It is a city with well-established industrial traditions. Following the systemic transition, the largest industrial plants were closed down, but Poland's EU accession and establishment of a special economic zone triggered the inflow of inward capital. As a result, Gorzów has been able to retain its industrial profile, although the role of the services sector is gradually increasing.

At the end of the noughties, the socio-economic situation of the city was close to ideal, with nearly 18 000 registered businesses, over 450 companies with foreign shareholdings, unemployment at 4%, and a number of bold municipal investment projects and a programme for monitoring the quality of life under way. On top of that, in 2007 the largest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) project was launched by a global leader in the production of LCD TV screens, which invested over USD 100 million in the city and created about 1 500 new jobs. Undoubtedly the city led the objective attractiveness rankings and was highly valued by its residents.

The year 2008 saw the onset of the global crisis, visible first in the financial sphere and later spreading to nearly all the economic sectors. The crisis reached Poland later, which gave to the policymakers time to develop preventive measures and initiatives to alleviate the consequences of the global downturn. Many actors, entities and experts from different political and economic backgrounds joined this discussion. The initiative to set up a cluster was proposed in reply to various opinions regarding the condition of the VET system and the way it matched the real labour market needs.

The local business people and entrepreneurs pointed to the negative consequences of the educational reform which in effect led to a degradation and decline of the vocational education. It was manifested by a reduction in the number of vocational schools and systemic 'programming' of education in general profiles. In a span of 12 years, the ties

between vocational education and the local industries were severed and the local school leavers are less and less equipped with the qualifications and skills required by potential employers. In consequence, employers have to offer on-the-job training for the new employees, which inevitably engages financial, material and staff resources of the employer and increases the labour costs. If the identified weaknesses in the cooperation between the VET system, the enterprise sector and the labour market are systemic in character, the situation is even more difficult since its negative consequences may affect the whole local community and its economy.

The performance of enterprises is measured by their economic success, competitive advantages and a continued market presence. Some of the competitiveness factors are external and arise from the overall labour market situation. Other factors, however, such as the availability and the relatively low cost of gaining well-qualified employees can be shaped by building good relations with the local environment.

The local government is responsible for the education, including VET. Nevertheless, VET is implemented within a complex system of personal, economic and administrative ties and linkages. Even though each of these subsystems aims to fulfil its own goals and objectives, they are all mutually dependent and interrelated. Therefore, improving the performance of every subsystem depends on the quality of the functional ties involved. At the same time, each of these subsystems has developed inherent development mechanisms which barely take into account the impact of external factors. For this reason, the evolution of the whole system not only requires that its individual components are developed but that far-reaching innovations are put in place in order to expand the scope of activities and responsibilities of each of the involved partners.

For vocational schools, this means successful enrolment of the interested candidates (which is of particular importance in a situation when the birth rate is decreasing), which justifies the maintenance of a given number of classes, teaching staff, financing from the city budget, etc. Students and their parents make informed decisions on what profile of education to pursue. According to them, VET is successful as graduates are likely to find an interesting and well-paid job.

For the local government or more broadly for the local community, it is a matter of priority to secure the desirable quality of life and create good conditions for conducting business activity. What is equally important though often neglected is the question of making rational spending on education, including VET. Efforts should be made to ensure that investments in vocational education are used first and foremost by the local community that has co-financed

them through taxes. In other words, it is a situation in which school leavers do not have to leave the city to find a job but they can be employed and pay taxes in the city where they were educated.

These links between the economic, educational, administrative and social systems have inspired many attempts to develop a viable cooperation. Good examples of such practices include the operation of the Business Council (Rada Biznesu) set up by the President of the Business College (Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu), the only private higher education institution in the city. The Council brought together the representatives of the city's largest plants, particularly the heads of HR divisions, who suggested desirable undergraduate and postgraduate courses so as the college could adapt its curricula to the employers' needs. One definite achievement was encouraging the practitioners from the Council to be involved in the teaching process.

Similar practices but on a smaller scale were pursued by some of the city's vocational schools and the Vocational Training Centre, which provided the workshops and facilities for the city's schools training students in the mechanical, electrical, construction and chemical sectors. Such practices were aimed to eliminate the gap that appeared after the closure of schools which during the era of the centrally-planned economy operated at the largest plants and functioned as the 'breeding ground' for the bulk of their future staff. Such an arrangement was inspired by the dual training system, now adopted in Germany, in which school provides instruction in general and vocational subjects and employers offer practical vocational training as well. However, there are fundamental systemic differences between Poland and Germany relating to such issues as for example to financing of practical training, obligatory employers' membership of chambers of commerce and industry which organise vocational internships, etc. Due to these differences, dual training in Poland has been practically reduced to crafts and trades which are gradually losing their labour market because of the ongoing, technological development processes.

In Gorzów, the local government was responsible to initiate and coordinate the discussion on the above mentioned ideas. This was not a random decision, but it was based on a broad and inclusive interpretation of the tasks of the administration enshrined in the applicable legislation, including the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and laws on the principles of development policy and the freedom of business activity and local government. In light of these regulations, the main role of the local government is to promote development and entrepreneurship, and to create ideal conditions for starting and pursuing a business activity.

The local government is also responsible for the implementation of some aspects of social policy and of the system of education at the primary and secondary level.

B.2. Implementation of the initiative

The first task to be jointly implemented is the project called '**An enterprising Gorzów. Solutions for the labour market and the school system.**' It was implemented by the city authorities, Business College, local vocational schools, county labour office, HR companies: Audit Doradztwo Personalne and Manpower Polska, and business environment organisations: the Western Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Zachodnia Izba Przemysłowo-Handlowa) and the Lubuskie Employer Organisation (Lubuska Organizacja Pracodawców).

The project was divided into thematic panels. The analytical panel carried out a survey of the needs and development plans of the local entrepreneurs and of the career aspirations and awareness level of the city's school and university students. The employee panel offered an analysis of the labour market situation and trends at national, regional and local levels, in addition to trends concerning the qualifications and expectations of potential employees. The employer panel developed proposals of systemic solutions and requests to be addressed to the local government and the education sector. The local development panel prepared an effective and efficient platform for the cooperation between institutions of the business sector, education system, local government and the labour market. The last, good practices panel, represented by the Mechanical Schools Complex (Zespół Szkół Mechanicznych), presented the achievements in the cooperation between the school and the local business, and their benefits. These activities were coordinated by the Investor Service Centre operated by the city authorities.

The project was implemented in the following stages:

- Conducting a survey of the city's entrepreneurs as part of the Centre for the Monitoring of the Quality of Life (a research programme carried out jointly by the city authorities and the Business College) with the aim to finding answers to the following important questions:
 - How do the city's businesses (large enterprises and SMEs) view their current situation and how they see their prospects in the next two years (continuing as a going concern, development or downsizing, human resources, new investment, etc.)?

- What assistance and systemic or *ad hoc* solutions do the entrepreneurs expect to receive from the local government during the economic crisis?
- What expectations and proposals do the entrepreneurs have vis-à-vis the education sector at the vocational, secondary and tertiary level? And what are the possibilities to adjust the training offer to the actual needs of the local labour market on the one hand, and on the other hand what are the possibilities to include the local enterprises in the training process?
- Analysis of the local labour market and its development trends, with a special emphasis on matching the demand and supply of job offers at the public and private job brokerage institutions.
- Analysis of young people's (i.e. students of the final years of vocational, secondary and tertiary schools) awareness, regarding the local labour market, the compliance of the selected educational profile with the employers' requirements, the preferences and the assessment of their chances to find employment in their trained occupation or trade and their expectations concerning work and their future employers.
- Organisation of a business conference in Gorzów Wielkopolski to present survey findings and offer a venue for discussion. Also to provide the entrepreneurs schools and local governments with an exchange of views and networking.
- As a result of the project, a viable platform for communication and cooperation between employers and schools in Gorzów Wielkopolski was established. The solutions developed as part of the project were successfully put in place. The project was divided into sectoral parts, in which workshops were organised to allow the collaboration between specific entrepreneurs from the Lubuskie Metal Cluster and selected schools to train their future employees. In this way, students were provided with an opportunity to undergo practical vocational training organised by the leaders in the respective sectors, with an option of being permanently hired by them.

In addition to the above, lobbying was initiated to promote educating young people in technical and vocational subjects at the tertiary level. This has led to the launching of a new course at the Department of Technology of the Jacob of Paradyż University of Applied Sciences in Gorzów Wielkopolski, Mechanical Engineering and Machine Construction. The aim of the project is to keep the graduates in the city and offer them opportunities for local career development. This is an ideal situation both from the perspective of the young potential professionals and their employers as well as of the local government institutions

that wish to reduce the level of unemployment in the region. Moreover, the project assumes that the labour market changes will continue to be monitored in a follow-up initiative undertaken as part of the Centre for the Monitoring of the Quality of Life.

The good results that came out of the first joint project offered an incentive for institutionalising the activities. The Western Economic Centre is a foundation set up to promote and support business initiatives and operates in Gorzów Wielkopolski. It also runs a business incubator which facilitates the establishment of start-ups in the local market. The Foundation decided to finance and coordinate the operation of the Vocational Education Cluster, which was incorporated into its project entitled 'Viadukt Innovativ'. This is a cross-border project, implemented in partnership between the Foundation and the Business and Innovation Centre GmbH in Frankfurt (Oder). The aim of the project is to support the cross-border cooperation and development of SME networks and research establishments in the Pro Europa Viadrina Euroregion. The project values EUR 691 000, which is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund as part of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland (Lubuskie) – Brandenburg 2007-13.

The Foundation prepared a letter of intent for the initiative of a Vocational Education Cluster which was signed by 27 signatories, including the local government, vocational schools and higher education institutions, the provincial board of education, Voluntary Peace Corps (Ochotniczy Hufiec Pracy), industrial plants, labour market agencies, business environment and training institutions from Poland and Germany. The offices of the Cluster are located at the Business College in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

In 2012, the first round of the Viadukt Innovativ project ended by concluding in an agreement establishing the first cross-border Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster with 39 partners from Poland and Germany as the founding members. In this round, the Cluster is managed by the German side, represented by IHK-Industrie und Handelskammer Projektgesellschaft Ostbrandenburg having its registered office in Frankfurt (Oder).

B.3. Results and an impact

The ongoing Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster project is followed up and continued in new areas. This helps strengthening the links between the collaborating entities and creating lasting positive synergies. The direct and indirect results of the cluster initiative obtained to date can be divided into a number of categories, including diagnostic, analytical and investment aspects as well as institution building.

B.3.1. Publications

As part of the Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster and the accompanying supplementary initiatives, a number of analyses have been carried out leading to the publication of studies and practical guidebooks (in the Polish language), including:

- *The labour market and education in Gorzów Wielkopolski and the global economic crisis*. Published in 2010 by the Business College, this paper analyses the nature of the local labour market, the economic situation of employers and its influence on the local labour market. It also investigates the impact of the global economic slowdown on the economic situation of the local entrepreneurs.
- *Diagnosis of VET needs in the northern part of the Lubuskie Province from the perspective of entrepreneurs* (2012, Business College). The study offers a multi-dimensional analysis of the situation of the enterprise sector in the region, in addition to an analysis of the needs and prospects of the local labour market.
- *A guide to occupations*. Published in 2011 by the city authorities and addressed to the local youth and their parents, this guidebook discusses the vocational profiles taught in the local schools. It outlines the nature of work associated with individual occupations and describes the local labour market in terms of specific sectors and occupations.
- *Vocational Education Cluster – an offer for entrepreneurs*. This publication, issued twice, is addressed to service companies and those from the polytechnic sector. It provides a description of the collaboration offer of the local vocational schools, their teaching staff and technical facilities, school curricula and cooperation prospects with the local enterprises.
- *Regional foresight – monitoring and forecasting of sectoral development directions in the northern part of the Lubuskie Province and human resources for the modern economy*. This was the major task completed. Its primary aim was to identify the sectors of the regional economy with the greatest development potential, which could become key branches for the development of Gorzów Wielkopolski, with a particular emphasis on the impact of their development on changes in the VET system both at secondary and at tertiary levels. The analysis also identified the barriers preventing such development and suggested measures which could be taken to optimise the activities. Finally, it indicated optional scenarios concerning the socio-economic situation.

B.3.2. Overcoming financial challenges

Even the best cooperation ties would not fulfil their purpose without co-financing that allows technological innovations to be implemented. In the case of VET, the fundamental problem is that it is permanently underfinanced, and as a result students learn their practical vocational skills using the machinery and equipment technologically obsolete and need repair. Such a situation has very little semblance to what leavers from technical and vocational schools are likely to encounter in their actual workplace.

Another pertinent problem is the weak research and development (R&D) system: it should draw on young scientists who first completed the local technical schools and then were qualified as engineers in technological universities. Students in the last years of their university courses and graduates should be involved in the teaching process. With the university support, they should be able to conduct their own research, while commercialisation of the research findings should be facilitated by institutions such as business incubators or accelerators and science and technology parks. Enterprises operating in the local and regional market should be both clients and beneficiaries of such innovations.

As part of the activities initiated within the Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster, concepts and sources of financing were developed for a number of investment projects with a view to achieving the above described situation. Some of these projects have already been completed, some are currently in an advanced implementation stage, while others, e.g. functional or architectural concepts, define the prospects for future implementations. The successfully completed investment projects include the modernisation and purchase of equipment for the practical training workshop at the Vocational Training Centre in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

The project involved the provision of four fully equipped workshops and labs with materials, CNC machines, welding, automation and control. The unique, innovative value of the project was the process whereby the laboratories and equipment were selected. The Regional Foresight analysis found that such branches as mechanics, electricity and automation will be of cardinal importance for the economic development of Gorzów Wielkopolski and its agglomeration. Entrepreneurs representing these sectors who declared expansion plans and increasing employment in the coming years were requested to name the desirable skills and qualifications that they would like school leavers, their potential employees, to have. As the next step, the technical and vocational schools in the city and the provincial board of education were asked to develop curricula which would allow students to gain such skills and to provide a list of school workshops and laboratories which would help implement these

curricula. Based on such a list, an application was developed under the Lubuskie Regional Operational Programme (EFRD), Measure 4.2 - Development and modernisation of the education infrastructure. The application was positively evaluated and awarded 85% co-financing, with the total value of the project estimated at EUR 1.1 million. In 2013, the first two facilities were opened, and the project was completed in 2014 with the launch of the remaining two workshops.

B.3.3. Institutional development

Integration and activation of the participants involved in the Education Cluster Lubuskie-Brandenburg Education Cluster provided the basis for the further development of a system of innovative linkages between VET, higher education, enterprises and employer organisations and the R&D sector. In this regard, the concept of a Science and Industrial Park became a flagship project for Gorzów Wielkopolski.

The concept rests on two main pillars: modern vocational education and training adapted to the needs of the local economy and implemented with the involvement of the local enterprises, and research and implementations for the industrial sector, targeted especially as SMEs.

The first of these pillars, VET, is the domain and responsibility of the local government. It is an area which by definition is not profitable and focuses on the social impact. On the other hand, activities undertaken as part of the second pillar are more business-oriented, being justified by the demand for the products and services developed in the process. Therefore, it was decided that the most effective formula to put the idea of a Science and Industrial Park to life will be to divide the activities among two entities which are legally autonomous but have close functional ties. These include the Gorzów Technology Centre (Gorzowski Ośrodek Technologiczny - GOT), a research and Implementation Company, and the Vocational Education Centre (Centrum Edukacji Zawodowej).

Following the agreement on the establishment of the Gorzów Technology Centre concluded on 14 March 2012 by the Municipality of Gorzów Wielkopolski, the Waste Recycling Plant (Zakład Utylizacji Odpadów), the Lubuskie Metal Cluster and the Business College in Gorzów Wielkopolski, a limited liability company was established - GOT PNP Sp. z o.o. The signatories to the agreement took up shares in this commercial company, and the memorandum of association for GOT PNP Sp. z o.o. was signed on 5 November 2013. This venture was incorporated into the Development Strategy of the Lubuskie Province. The main tasks of GOT include the search for and verification of innovative technologies, conducting

R&D work and commercialisation of innovative solutions through start-ups in which the company takes a stake.

Owing to the open formula in which GOT PNP Sp. z o.o. operates, all entities interested in investing in innovative and development projects will be invited to take up shares in the company. At the end of 2014, over a dozen entities had become shareholders in GOT PNP Sp. z o.o., including higher education and research institutions, enterprises and private individuals, and the company's capital totals nearly EUR 4 million. The full range of services offered to entrepreneurs by the Park is unparalleled in the region and offers an opportunity to generate a strong potential impact for the local economy. It is also anticipated that it will help increase the number of companies using state-of-the-art technologies. This in turn will facilitate the development of businesses based on new knowledge, started mainly by university students and graduates as well as academic staff. A number of projects have already been completed as part of GOT, including Eko-Innowacje, an innovation and implementation centre or the Young Inventors' Club (Klub Młodego Wynalazcy) in Stanowice near Gorzów Wielkopolski, with more Regional Operational Programme projects with a value totalling over EUR 4.2 million contracted for implementation.

The Vocational Education Centre has been designed as an institution offering modern technical education based on the facilities of the operating school complexes (electrical, mechanical and construction), in addition to the revamped Vocational Training Centre with its well-equipped workshops and labs. The Centre will be situated in the revitalised and redeveloped buildings of the former city hospital, which had for years been falling into ruins. The total cost of the investment, which is now in an advanced stage of work regarding the functional and architectural aspects, is estimated at about EUR 16 million. It will be financed under the Integrated Territorial Investments (Zintegrowane Inwestycje Terytorialne), a new development tool to be used in the 2014-20 Regional Operational Programme.

B.4. Challenges

Based on a five-year experience in the implementation of interdisciplinary projects spanning the spheres of education, including higher education, local government administration, business environment institutions, technical and service enterprises, labour market institutions and research institutes, a number of conclusions indicating the bottlenecks and problem areas of such collaboration can be proposed. Contrary to what might be instinctively expected, they are not predominantly economic in character (which does not mean however, that the issue of financing is of little concern), but are also related to organisational, personal and, above all, communication issues.

B.4.1. Competences

Every activity sector or industry branch relies on the operation of the entities involved, which ultimately boils down to the level of the people working there. These people have qualifications and competences which – in confrontation with the dynamically changing realities at hand and especially the challenges posed by innovation – need to be constantly updated and upgraded. This is a challenge not only for the system whereby such skills are developed, i.e. training or certification institutions, but above all for the individuals concerned. If the development of personal qualifications is to be driven by an inner need, and not be an inconvenience imposed by the external circumstances, the development challenges must be linked to the needs and ambitions that every engaged individual inherently has. The crucial lesson from these reflections can be summarised as follows: *if you want to win a person over to your idea and persuade them to make the effort to self-development, you must communicate with them in the language of their own benefits and gains.*

B.4.2. Organisational issues

Any entity, whether private or public, which has operated on the competitive market, has certainly developed specific adaptation and development mechanisms. A new collaboration between different sectors is innovative for the partners involved and requires them to respond to the challenges that go beyond their current competences, tap new resources, etc. The key to success is to profile the cooperation between different partners so that they have to modify and alter the areas of their activity as little as possible, and at the same time to allow the broadest possible ‘common denominator for innovations’ to be developed by the project participants.

B.4.3. Communication issues

This type of problems arises from the differences in the narration employed by individual partners. The sector-specific language of industry differs from the dialect used by the administration and the jargon of scientists, teachers or businesspeople. Quite naturally, each of the participating groups or categories of the partners differently defines the project, their role in it and the expected benefits to be obtained from its implementation. Therefore, it is necessary to reconcile various opinions and views, patiently explain individual concepts and the meanings they imply, and, first and foremost, try to gently overcome the natural barriers that force all participants to enclose themselves in a language that they feel most comfortable with. In this respect, the role of the coordinator is absolutely crucial as their task is to bring together all the main ideas and themes and to provide the partners with the

opportunity to exchange views, and then resources. In the projects initiated by Gorzów Wielkopolski, which draws on the concept of VET clusters, such role is performed by the local government. The local government also acts as the initiator and animator of the entire undertaking, which is particularly significant for the market partners who lack any surplus time or personnel to be engaged in innovative projects.

Conclusions

Innovations in VET are among the challenges of the present era and a necessary prerequisite that underpins the development of the local communities. The key lesson learnt from the VET projects implemented in Gorzów Wielkopolski is that the scope of such innovations goes far beyond the traditional training and educational institutions. Likewise, the enterprise sector, which is the natural recipient of the VET outcomes, it needs to become an active participant of these processes. The interactions open up an area for the activities of the local government, community organisations, private and public employment job brokerage agencies, and the employer and business support organisations.

Practice shows that where such cooperation, initiated and inspired in the early phase by a local government, survives the first critical stage of development, it may produce a new synergies at the grass-roots level.

On the one hand, the cooperation between VET schools and enterprises has not yet reached the satisfactory level assumed by the reform. As the monitoring of the reform that was carried out after a year of its functioning (in 2013) showed, the VET schools do not use all the potential of the project. Only 55% of the VET schools declare cooperation with employers. Apart from organisation of practical instruction or placements in enterprises, the most common form of this cooperation is consultations (one third of the schools) and the organisation of visits of students to the local enterprises (one fifth of the schools). Less than 20% of schools acquire training materials from employers and rarely (around 4%) do they cooperate in the design of curricula and the preparation of the educational offer. Employers hardly contribute to the increase of the school innovativeness. Schoolmasters and teachers do not appreciate the role of employers to increase the quality of educational process since they are not aware of the existing opportunities of such cooperation or simply do not know how to convince the employers that such cooperation is mutually beneficial.

On the other hand, a lot of employers, especially of SMEs are not interested in collaborating with VET schools. Among the main reasons they mention not sufficient knowledge about the

advantages of such cooperation, lack of financial incentives and legal regulations, lack of spare employees who could take care of such cooperation, lack of trainers etc.

It seems that district and local governments may initiate the partnerships for innovation. The activities of the Ministry of National Education and its subordinate units supporting VET in the next years may focus on training for the headmasters and teachers to raise their awareness of the importance and the opportunities for concluding partnerships for innovation. Moreover, the cooperation between ministries (responsible for education, science, labour and economy) is needed to work out solutions motivating employers, especially SMEs to collaborate with the VET sector.

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