

FROM UNIVERSITY TO LABOUR MARKET IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A STEP FORWARD IN WORK-BASED PLACEMENTS. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE UNILAB PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

University-business cooperation has in today's world a crucial role, covering multiple areas, such as applied research, joint education and professional development programmes, work-based learning for the students, and other spheres. The competences acquired by students at university are key for their future job satisfaction and payment level, which in turn influence very much the quality of life and the whole societal satisfaction, determining a profound impact on national economies.

The Erasmus+ project UniLab focuses on one of the domains of university-business cooperation: work-based practice for current students and work placement for recent graduates. This is one of the most demanding and challenging aspects of university-business cooperation in the Partner Countries involved in the project: Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan.

The challenges that these Partner Countries face in relation to work-based learning are manifold: insufficient career support services, poor practical placement guidance, uncertain employment perspectives, low involvement of Career Centres in the practical placement procedures, curricula that do not provide students with relevant professional competencies and university-business cooperation agreements that need to be improved.

UniLab aims to contribute to the modernisation of the higher education sector in Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia by converging with four European partners, who will share selected successful practices of work-based learning, and developing tools to enhance collaboration between enterprises and HEIs towards the increase of graduates' employability.

Based on a strong peer learning approach, the project will develop an efficient model of cooperation between universities and enterprises, including a set of resources, among which are a Prototype Education Model, a Prototype Model of extra-curricular activities, a Students' Portal and a Network Model of International University Students Career Centres.

By doing so, UniLab aims to impact on three main types of stakeholders:

- Universities (student, teaching and administrative levels)
- Business (private companies, retail, services, manufacturing, etc.)
- Governmental bodies (chambers of commerce, city organisations, professional labour communities, etc.)

Key words

University-business cooperation, work-based learning, practical placement, career support, peer-learning.

WORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Successful cooperation between the academia and business world is essential to ensure the effectiveness and satisfaction of the whole economy and society. In the wide landscape of university-enterprise collaboration, work-based learning (WBL) – intended here both as work-based learning during study programmes and graduate placement at the conclusion of studies - plays an especially important role.

The benefits of work-based learning are evident for all the actors involved. To higher education institutions (HEIs), work-based learning offers the opportunity to improve the professional dimension and relevance of the curricula and of the teaching methods; it helps to foster exchanges with the business world; it contributes to improve the employment prospects of higher education graduates. For the business world, work-based learning means having the possibility to give feed back to universities about the real needs and priorities of employers and the labour market; it gives the opportunity to train students in real tasks and eventually identify and recruit future employees, making the whole recruitment process less demanding in terms of time and resources. For higher education students and graduates, work-based learning means having the opportunity to receive academic teaching and practical training at the same time, better harmonizing theoretical and practical knowledge; it also helps them to build up experience in a real work environment and have more chances of employment. Finally, work-based learning can be a powerful tool by which public authorities can address the problem of unemployment – especially youth unemployment - generating more opportunities of employment for young and older students. By promoting a higher job satisfaction, a better quality of life is ensured for all individuals and the society as a whole.

The UniLab project moves from the above premises, with the aim to improve the model of cooperation between HEIs and businesses in relation to work-based learning in Russia (RU), Belarus (BY) and Azerbaijan (AZ).

The project, coordinated by the European University Continuing Education Network (eucen), is funded under the Erasmus+ Programme, KA2 Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education, and runs from January 2020 to January 2023. The consortium is composed of twelve partners, eleven of which are higher education institutions. Four of the partners are based in the European Union (Austria, Belgium, France, and Spain), while the rest are universities based in Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Work-based learning is one of the most demanding and challenging aspect of the university-business area in Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. The problems encountered in this area are manifold and have been identified in the initial project phase by the partners through desk research and consultations with stakeholders (mainly enterprises) conducted both online meeting and via a dedicated survey.

These are some of the key problems identified by the partner universities based in RU, BY and AZ:

- Poor practical placement guidance offered to students
- Career Centres not involved in practical placement procedures
- Career Support services not diversified enough
- Wide gap between university education (qualifications and skills obtained by the students) and the labour market needs

- Dissatisfaction among students with the quality of the preparation they receive in universities and sense of ill-preparedness
- Need to improve the agreements on university-business cooperation
- Uncertain employment perspectives for students
- Lack of follow-up system of student employment success
- Lack of information about good models existing abroad

Part of the above challenges correspond to similar problems faced in countries based in the European Union. However, the specificity of the problems experienced in Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan is strongly related to the common Soviet past of these countries, in which universities and labour market were closely linked through governmental programs that would secure obligatory work placement of graduates by the employers. When the Soviet Union collapsed, universities as well as enterprises became isolated from each other. This meant that universities stopped getting customized order on specialists either from the government or from the enterprises and were forced to establish education programs on their own.

THE PEER LEARNING COMPONENT

UniLab has a very strong Peer Learning component, which underlies the whole project, and which was introduced since the very beginning of the project.

According to this principle, the partner universities based in RU, BY and AZ collaborated in the writing of national reports on work-based learning (covering ongoing practices, legal limitations as well as the findings of a survey conducted with enterprises) and shared and compared these reports in the kick-off transnational event – the Barcelona Peer Learning Seminar, organised in March 2020. In the context of the same event, the EU partners – eucen, and the three EU-based universities - shared with the consortium selected models of work-based learning programmes that are currently running successfully. This was the starting point of discussion for the following project developments, which produced a SWOT analysis of current WBL systems in RU, BY, AZ, as well as a diagram (see *Figure 1* overleaf) useful to map out and identify potential moments of interventions for improving the existing WBL system.

Peer learning within UniLab is also facilitated and encouraged at national level through the establishment of dedicated Focus Discussion Groups. These are meant to be spaces where local/regional stakeholders (i.e., enterprises, other HEIs, associations, students, alumni, mentors/supervisors, etc.) meet each of the HEIs periodically, discuss the work carried out by UniLab and provide feedback on how to better adapt this work to the specific local/regional context and needs.

Finally, peer learning will be promoted via three Study Visits, each led by one of the European universities: the Barcelona School of Management of Universitat Pompeu Fabra (ES), IMC Fachhochschule Krems (AT) and Université Lille (FR). Each Study Visit develops around one key aspect of work-based learning, on which the partner universities in RU, BY and AZ need to work and make improvements.

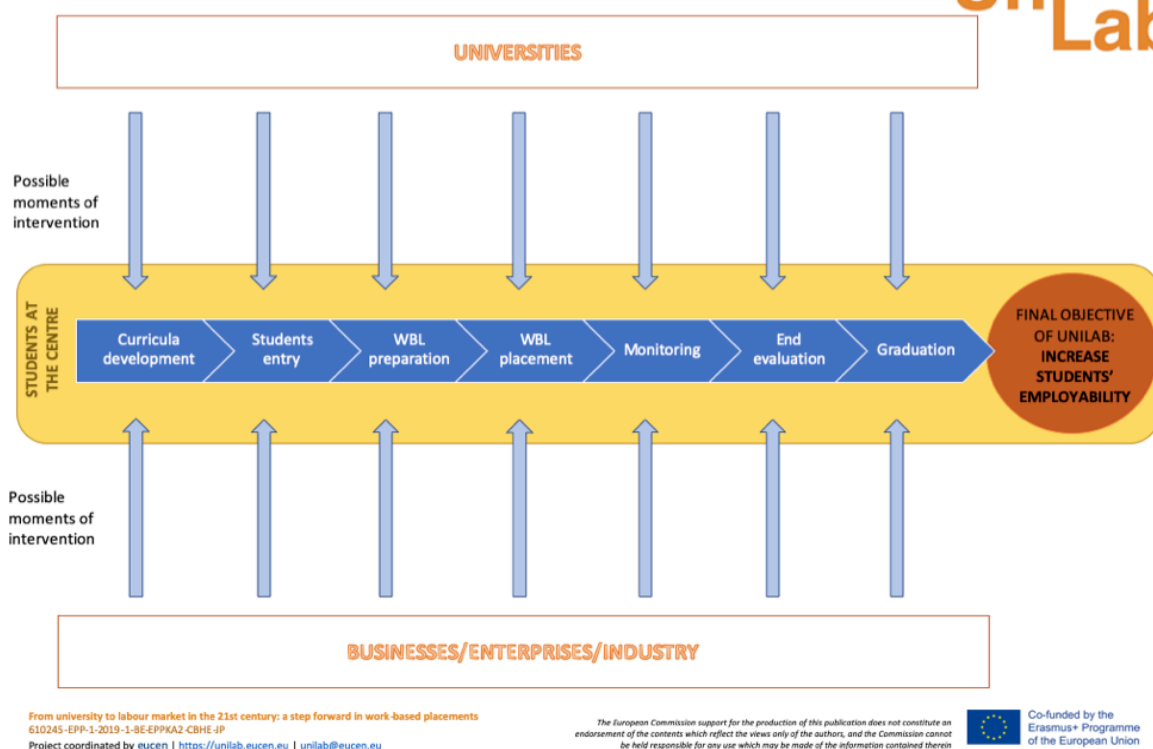


Figure 1: Guiding Diagram to identify potential interventions for improvement of a WBL system

RESOURCES FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING

UniLab will work on the development of a set of practical resources to support universities in RU, BY and AZ to modernize their current work-based learning practices. The development phases started with the first study visit, and follow as described below:

- I. The first development phase corresponds with the Study Visit organised by the School of Management of the University Pompeu Fabra and focuses on University-Business collaboration strategy development, with participation of different actors. The Study Visit will be followed by the elaboration of a) a strategic plan for developing existing or new collaborations in RU, BY and AZ and of (b) a model of University-Enterprise cooperation to improve existing ones.
- II. The following phase will consist of the development of a prototype of education programme model in accordance with requirements of the labour market, designed to meet the demands of specific employers (e.g., designing professional tailor-made programmes jointly with employer). This stage of the project will also see the development of a prototype set of extra curriculum activities that will be offered by Career Centres to support the development of skills students need to have a smooth transition from education to employment (self-branding, entrepreneurship, self-understanding, etc.).
- III. The subsequent phase, built around the Study Visit organised by the University of Applied Science of Krems, will focus on online tools for students/alumni. An internet-portal dedicated to Student Practical Placement will be launched, including documents, assessment tools, database of businesses, organisations, companies, university enterprise; agreements, forums, info for graduates' employability, videos (cases, interviews, etc.), advertisements, success stories, etc.

- IV. The final development phase will be inspired by the Study Visit organised by the University of Lille and will focus on practical arrangements of work-based learning, such as tools and methods to design WBL collaboration between business and academic practical arrangements for university-business collaboration. The UniLab consortium will work on the development of philosophy/principles/concept of modern/practical placement; on the development of standards, including quality criteria; and on the development of a tool set for practical WBL placements (digital portfolios, peer reviews, written reports, etc.).

One of the final and most ambitious objectives of UniLab is the development of a model Network of University Career Centres, which will enable better graduates' employment on local, regional, national, and international level. The model will include channels by which students can meet with potential employers, open lectures and workshops from the industry leaders and other experts enhancing the students career chances and meeting the academic and labour stakeholders. A 10-year Plan for full development and implementation will also be included.

UniLab will accompany its development work with a full set of activities and events designed to disseminate and valorise its results. Regular internal institutional information seminars will be organised, to present the project and ensure institutional support, multiplying the knowledge/expertise within the wider university community. In parallel, local and regional workshops will be organised at different stages to present the project to external stakeholders, in order to engage them in the project activities.

Towards the end of the project, in 2022, national exploitation conferences will be organised in Moscow, Minsk and Baku, to ensure awareness raising of external stakeholders, present the project results and resources and further multiply their adoption and implementation. Furthermore, a final, research-based International Conference will take place in Baku, in the same year.

CONCLUSION

UniLab aims to generate a strong impact both on the single partner institutions and on the partner countries involved. It will do this by building an efficient model of cooperation between higher education institutions and business and developing better schemes to answer the needs of both parties and of the learners. The latter must be considered the ones at the very centre of the whole work-based learning process. By improving work-based learning practices, the employability of students and graduates will improve, generating a broader social impact.

The UniLab consortium is aware that there is not a *one size fits all* plan: each country, and each institution within it, has its peculiarities in terms of needs, assets, and priorities. The opportunities of intervention and improvement of each single university may differ, based on the legislation in place in the country, on the institutional regulations governing the university, the local and regional context, the characteristics of the labour market, etc.

The diagram adopted by the consortium during the Peer Learning Seminar held in March 2020 (see *Figure 1*), illustrates the complete work-based learning path, from the beginning to the end (which is represented by student's employability). As the diagram shows, there are several moments in time, during the process, in which universities may be able or need to intervene to bring about changes and improvements. Based on the learning acquired through UniLab, each university in RU, BY and AZ will devise and direct its plan of action according to its specific situation, priorities and needs.

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