



# International conference Joint vision: Education for practical knowledge and skills

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The dual system of education as it exists in Germany should not be simply copy-pasted, but rather some of its elements should be selected and adapted to the Serbian context and economic situation. This was the conclusion drawn by the participants of the international conference *Joint Vision: Education for Practical Knowledge and Skills*, which was held in Belgrade on 20–21 September 2016. These elements of dual system are embedded in the cooperative model that has been implemented for several years now through the *Reform of Vocational Education and Training* project.

Both successes and challenges of this project were discussed in great detail at this conference, co-organised by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD), the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) on behalf of the German-Serbian Development Cooperation and the Serbian

Institute for the Improvement of Education. The conference was opened by the Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development, Mladen Šarčević, who stressed the fact that the VET reform is a priority for his ministry. According to him, the implementation of the cooperative training model would enable the reduction of youth unemployment as well as the improvement of living standards and status of teachers in Serbia.

The German Ambassador to Serbia, Axel Dittmann, said that the dual system proved its cost-effectiveness, having been the mainstay of German economy for many decades and added that vocational training should not be seen as an obstacle to successful career development and further professional advancement. As proof of this, Gojko Banović, the Head of the VET and Adult Education Centre of the Institute for the Improvement of Education, stated that according to Serbian legislation, at least 30% of






secondary education should comprise general subjects, which means that students attending three-year vocational programmes do not just focus on closely specialised technical subjects, but also acquire knowledge that allows them to later continue their education. Prof. Zoran Avramović, Ph.D., Director of the Institute for the Improvement of Education, is convinced that a well-balanced vocational school curriculum would allow youth in Serbia to pursue academic education as well as to find employment much more easily, as it is the case in Germany.

The cooperative training model is a combination of education in school and company-based practical training, where students are accompanied by instructors and taught how to operate sophisticated machines that their schools cannot afford to provide. Company-based practical training allows students to acquire not only professional competences, but also the so-called “soft skills” such as

workplace communication, teamwork, etc. Since this helps to increase their employability after finishing school, students with vocational school diplomas are able to get a job quickly, often in those companies where they underwent practical training. For instance, the first generation of students trained according to the cooperative model at the vocational school of the Serbian town of Pećinci was recruited immediately upon graduation by Robert Bosch Serbia, the company where they completed their practical training.

High employment potential may be the reason why interest in this type of education has been growing steadily over the years. Radovan Živković, Head of the MoESTD VET Group, stated that even though only 59 of a total of 228 profiles offered by Serbian secondary schools have been modernised, 43% of all secondary school students chose to attend one of those modernised programmes.



The conference *Joint Vision: Education for Practical Knowledge and Skills* summarised all VET reform results achieved so far and offered solutions to some operational problems encountered by its implementers. The conference provided an insight into the experiences of neighboring countries regarding the reform of VET, since experts and creators of education policies from these countries also took part in this event.

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# Mutual benefits for schools and companies

Ann-Kathrin Hentschel, Team Leader of the German Development Cooperation project *Reform of Vocational Education and Training in Serbia*, shared conclusions drawn from experiences gained so far by the project team in the process of modernising secondary vocational education in Serbia.

Hentschel said that schools were mostly satisfied with the involvement of companies they were cooperating with, while companies' expectations had been met in terms of being able to hire staff with the required competencies. She added that many companies wanted to deepen their collaboration with vocational schools, as well as to become involved in the process of drafting the curriculum and student examination. Furthermore, it appears that students trained according to the cooperative model have acquired knowledge faster than before.







Heinz-Dieter Harbers, senior representative of the *Sustainable Economic Development Sector*, confirmed that, once they realised the benefits of it, companies showed growing interest in investing in the training of future employees. To a request from the audience to comment on claims in the public that “dual education actually prepares youth for a subordinate position” and for jobs that Germans do not want to do, Harbers replied that 60% of all German youth underwent dual education, from which many were satisfied with their jobs and their earnings, while those who were dissatisfied simply continued their education. Given its positive impact on economic growth, elements of the dual system are currently being introduced in many countries around the world, while the implementation of some of its elements is being considered even by some highly industrialised countries like the United States.

Mirjana Kovačević, Director of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce’s Education Centre, believes that further implementation of the cooperative training model could help resolve shortages of adequately skilled human resources, a problem that has plagued Serbian economy for many years and due to which companies have wasted substantial time and resources on retraining new employees.

The participants agreed that in order to achieve this goal, the project should be expanded. Although about 1,300 businesses in Serbia have had some kind of cooperation with schools, this cooperation should not only be further promoted, but also properly regulated in legal terms in order to tap fully into its potential. Minister Šarčević announced amendments to systemic laws to allow further development of cooperative training.



# What next?

On the second day of the conference, the participants exchanged views and conclusions on how to improve vocational education in Serbia. It was advised that this endeavour should involve all stakeholders—businesses, the government and experts alike.

The issue of how to motivate companies towards greater involvement in education was given particular attention. Martin Knapp of the German-Serbian Chamber of Commerce does not believe the German practice of harsh taxation of companies that do not participate in the dual training system to be the best solution for Serbia. He rather suggests offering incentives to companies participating in cooperative training, such as discounted membership fees in the Serbian Chamber of Commerce or reduced taxes.

In addition to the German experience, other experiences in the VET reform implementation in the region were also presented. For instance, in Croatia, tools have been developed to gather information from small and micro enterprises on their needs for human resources. This model could also be suitable for Serbia since both countries' economies mostly rely on such enterprises, which are insufficiently represented in relevant statistics and analyses.

Apart from the main topic of the VET reform, there were other important topics discussed in working groups and covering issues pertaining to the improvement of education. The working group on “career guidance, counselling and entrepreneurship” discussed the importance of assisting students in their choice of future



occupation, as well as the importance of entrepreneurial education. The discussion was supported by the presentation of examples of successful students' companies that allowed the





development of entrepreneurial skills and the acquisition of valuable experience for the students' further career development.

The working group on “vocational education and training as a tool of social inclusion” discussed the still existing discrimination against Roma in Serbia in terms of education and employment. The cooperative training model can indeed contribute to enhancing the social situation of disadvantaged groups. This was illustrated by a Belgrade-based school of crafts that has initiated cooperation with companies on its own. As a result of this cooperation, last year, the school was able to secure employment for an entire batch of Roma students in a famous bakery chain in Belgrade.

The working group on the “application of legislative novelties in adult education” concluded

that the assessment of teaching quality is the main problem in that particular area of education and proposed to establish a list of external evaluation experts that should comprise experts in the specific area of training, e.g. the quality of teaching in the field of catering and hospitality should be evaluated by experts from that sector.

The conference *Joint Vision: Education for Practical Knowledge and Skills* summarised all VET reform results achieved so far and offered solutions to some operational problems encountered by its implementers. The active participation of the conference speakers and the audience demonstrated the level of importance that all stakeholders in society attach to the issue of building the education system's potential towards offering competences and skills that match companies' needs for skilled labour in order to increase the employability of young people.

