

Study and analysis on the transversal competences of VET trainers/teachers and guidance professionals on the framework of the TrainVet4Jobs European project

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Abstract

In the framework of the project called Trainvet4Jobs, funded for the Leonardo Transfer of Innovation program with the support from European Commission, FUEIB have conducted a study on the needs that the VET trainers/teachers and guidance professionals must have on transversal competences, which are necessary to improve the trainee's employability. From a questionnaire designed and directed to these groups in six European countries (Spain, Greece, Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia and Italy), different dimensions has been analysed in this study: the importance that these professionals give to these skills; the way to improve them; and the principal obstacles, the barriers and difficulties in implementing the transversal competences. The analysis of the results have provided interesting conclusions, such as the identification and definition of the most priority and useful transversal competences for the development of the professional tasks, the means used to obtain these skills, and if these stakeholders are competent for their implementation.

Keywords: Transversal skills, VET professionals, training needs.

1. Introduction

TrainVet4Jobs (Supporting the role of VET professionals to improve the trainees' employability) is a European project implemented within the frame of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission. It comprises by a partnership of nine institutions from six EU countries (Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Netherlands and Spain), building upon solid relations among the partners and network-oriented approach.

The project aims at strengthening the capacity of VET trainers and professionals to identify, validate and teach better the transversal competences, targeting substantial enhancement of the employability of their trainees.

TrainVet4Jobs analyses the situation, as well as the design, and validate the training tools to facilitate the work of VET trainers and guidance professionals, focusing on those transversal competences that are crucial in improving the professional and personal development of the trainees and employees, and their employability.

The TrainVet4Jobs project has different general and principal objectives. Between others, it performs an analysis of existing systems of evaluation and recognition of competences in the participating countries, making a specific emphasis in the area of training the trainers in transversal competences, and sets the basis for the creation of a European network of experts in transversal competences. In addition, TrainVet4jobs has proposed the definition of a competence framework for training the trainers, the guidance of specialists and the evaluators of competences; and it has developed a training programme for the guidance professionals, trainers and evaluators.

The training programme is the most important objective and deliverable of this project. TrainVet4Jobs focuses clearly on 'Support to initial and continuous training of VET European teachers, trainers, tutors and VET institution managers' because it has detected in different studies that they have serious difficulties to guide, train and accompany the final users in the process. This problem has a direct impact on the labour market, both for trainers and guidance professionals and for job seekers. In this project, the partnership has designed, piloted and validated a system model as a means to promote the empowerment and improve trainees and workers employability potential. It delivers a training model countering this problem.

2. Methodology of the study

To ensure an adequate basis for the design of TrainVet4Jobs training model, a methodology has been designed using different stages to ensure 'checks and balances' and with multiple points of view. The research has four phases of study:

- A) Quantitative survey to collect primary data with closed questions conducted with VET trainers and guidance professionals in the six European countries, to produce results representative in the participating countries.
- B) Qualitative interviews with eight open questions proposed by partners to check the preliminary findings and to find useful insights on the exact needs of entrepreneurs, and how VET trainers and guidance professionals can help them to meet the identified needs.
- C) Desktop research, based on a clear research framework, using the results of the partners' meeting and the preliminary results of the quantitative research.
- D) The final phase is to analyse the outcomes of the desk research and qualitative interviews and relating them with the outcomes of the quantitative research. Interview findings were analysed then to provide useful insights into the exact needs of employers. In addition, we can analyse how VET trainers and guidance professionals can help them in meeting the identified needs.

This article focuses on the quantitative survey, the first phase. The objective of this study is to identify the exact requirements of VET trainers and guidance professionals regarding transversal skills and competencies in the target countries. Specifically, the survey has determined the needs that must have these target groups on transversal competences, which are necessary to improve the trainee’s employability. The primary data obtained through the quantitative survey have been also essential for preparing and developing the blended train-the-trainer course where these target groups have had better knowledge of the transversal skills and competences.

The quantitative survey is based on a tailor-made questionnaire with 20 closed questions (plus two open questions). FUEIB has developed the questionnaire with contributions by all partners who have participated in the TrainVet4Jobs project. For the survey, it has been defined in different dimensions of analysis and the categorical dimensions of the participants.

Concerning the dimensions of analysis, the survey took into account the following:

- Importance of the transversal competences and classification (ranking)
- Needs analysis and level of competency regarding the transversal competences
- How have they gained the competences (formal processes, informal processes and non-formal processes)?
- Main obstacles and barriers regarding the acquisition and implementation of transversal competences in their training activities
- Opportunities and capacity to improve the competency level of VET professionals

We also have considered the different categorical dimensions of the participants, because it is important for the study to be more complete as possible. Between others, we can indicate the gender, the experience (years of experience in VET); the VET sector (services, industry, health, etc.); type of VET institution in which they work (private, public or non profit); the dedication (full-time/part-time) and the qualifications (VET, higher education, secondary education).

Finally, the questionnaire includes questions on the transversal (cross) competences of the VET professionals. In this survey, we have proposed these competences divided into three categories (social, communication and operational/institutional):

Table 1. List of competences of the VET professionals

Social competences	Communication competences	Operational/instructional competences
Constructing management of feeling and solving conflicts	Communication in the mother tongue	Mathematics and Science and Technology
Identify the needs of others and empathy	Communication in foreign languages	Digital competency
Adaptability and flexibility	Negotiation	Information competence
		Learning to learn
		Critical thinking
		Creativity
Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship		Problem solving
Culture awareness and expression		Risk assessment
Teamwork		Decision making
Leadership		

Source: Based on KeyCoNet (2013), CEDEFOP (2013) and Misra (2011).

3. Main results of the study

The partnership of the Trainvet4Jobs project has collected 166 questionnaires of VET and guidance professionals from six countries (Spain, Netherlands, Italia, Estonia, Greece and Belgium). The basic profile of the respondents is a woman of 46 years old with postgraduate studies and preferably dedicated to the training activities. Nevertheless, an important number of persons are also dedicated to professional guidance for learners and graduates. The great majority have over 15 years of experience in VET and guidance, and their specialisation before they have engaged in VET activities, which have been mainly Education Studies.

The respondents work preferably in public institutions and have a full-time contract to teach, train or guide learners, in terms of dedication to the VET activities. In addition, the majority of the VET professionals teach skills and competences for a tertiary sector, because the economic and social areas in which they work are linked mainly to the tertiary sector (services, trading, financial and management between others).

In the study drafted, one key in the survey is the analysis of the proficiency of VET professionals regarding the skills and competences they use in their professional tasks (Figure 1). Proficiency means expertise, experience, mastery, professionalism and knowledge. For this question, the ranking of the answers goes from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

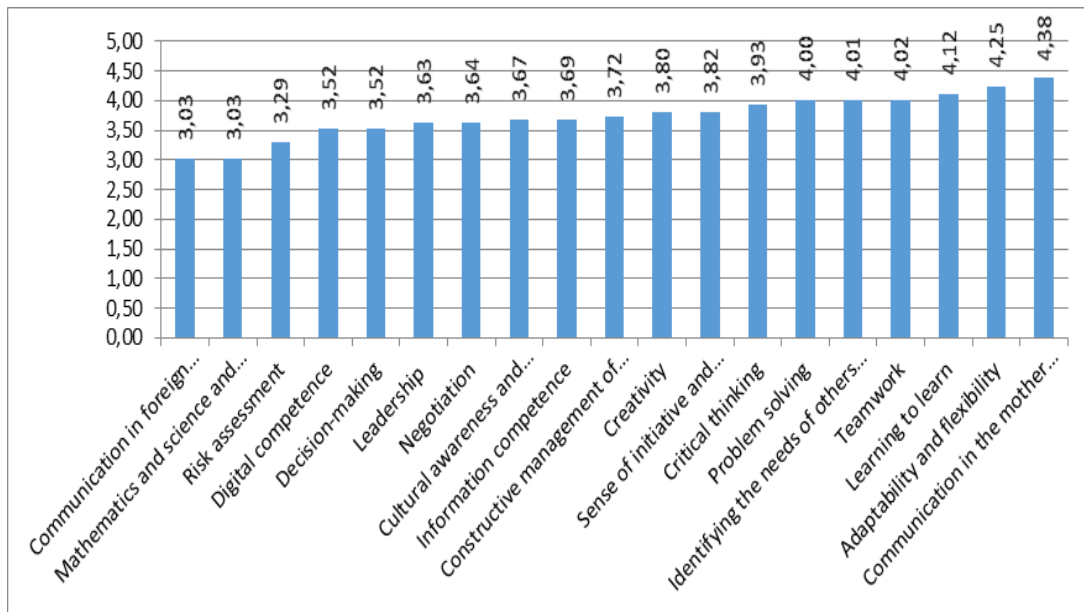


Figure 1. Proficiency as VET workers skills

We have listed the skills in the accompanying graph, ordered from lowest to highest proficiency.

The lowest proficiency for these actors is the *Communication in Foreign Languages*, one of the main problems that professionals have, due to the ignorance of the terminology in other languages. This fact makes difficult their professional dedication in other countries. In change, the highest is the *Communication in Mother Tongue*, a proficiency that is necessarily required to transmit the knowledge to the stakeholders.

Other high scores are (4 and beyond) the *Adaptability and Flexibility*, *Learning to Learn*, *Teamwork*, *Identifying needs of others and Empathy* and *Problem solving* in descending order. On the opposite side, we find the following skills with the lowest scores (3.0–3.5 average): *Mathematics and Science and Technology*, *Risk assessment*, *Digital Competence* and *Decision Making*.

The VET and guidance professionals have also indicated that some skills with the highest proficiency as *Teamwork; Learning to learn; Identifying needs of others and Empathy; Adaptability and Flexibility* and *Problem Solving* (in descendent order) which are the most necessary to perform their professional tasks. They believe that these competences are extremely important when developing their activities.

In addition, these competences listed above together with others, as the *Communication in Mother Tongue* and the *Information Competences*, are also skills that are easier to implement and use in VET activities. Their score is 3.2, and higher, with a rating between 1 (very difficult) and 5 (very easy). We can emphasise especially the *Communication in Mother Tongue* with the score of 4.2, the highest.

Some of the principal competences with the lowest proficiency as *Mathematics and Science and Technology, Risk Assessment* and *Communication in Foreign Languages* are under the score of 3, and therefore, they are the most difficult to implement and use, according to the answers of the VET teachers/trainers and guidance professionals.

In addition, the skills not important to improve for a professional exercise are *Mathematics and Science and Technology* and *Risk Assessment*. Their ranking is lower than 3.5, being 1, not important to all, and 5 extremely important. In another side of the scale, the competences with the highest proficiency and that are much needed to perform the professional tasks are valued as the most important. We can emphasise the *Identifying needs of others and Empathy*, the *Problem Solving* and the *Teamwork* with scores near or above to 4. In many of survey questions, the respondents have identified these skills as positive values in contrast to the previous ones.

The respondents are aware of the importance to train and improve their skills for their professional work. Three of out four respondents have followed courses and seminars to improve their competences. When we have asked them if the courses that they have attended are suitable and effective for their profession in VET, the level of satisfaction was good or very good with a percentage above 55%. A significant 19.9% has said that their experiences in courses/seminars for improvement of skills were very bad.

In general, VET workers have gained the skills preferably through a combination of two processes: formal processes in institutionalised contexts and non-formal and informal processes in non-institutionalised contexts. This answer suggests that the VET professionals acquire the skills in contexts that are non-institutionalised, but that they consider being necessary for their better learning. Nevertheless, we have to take into account that the informal processes of learning have no set objective, in terms of learning outcomes, and it is not intentional from the learner's side, although it is difficult to make a clear distinction between formal and informal learning as there is often a crossover between the two (McGivney, 1999).

In this regard, the VET professionals have identified the principal competences by ranking, according to priority and importance, and have judged what is most helpful for them as a VET teacher/trainer/educator to receive targeted education and training. According to the results of the study, the first and most useful competences are *Constructive Management of Feelings, Solving Conflicts* and *Others (awareness, decision-making, self-evaluation, use of tools and computer software, etc.)*. The VET workers have well appreciated by its usefulness of other skills such as the *Communication in Foreign Languages* and *Learning to Learn*.

The principal difficulties that VET professionals have indicated, when they try to implement their skills in VET activities, is quite diverse. In the study, we have grouped them in several main categories from the answers provided by them, until 14 categories. In addition, the questionnaire provided the opportunity for the respondents to make a ranking from highest to lowest difficulty.

Three categories predominate with a frequency much higher than the rest as the first rank. On the one hand, the category *others* was with 42.7% of the responses. The category *others* include different answers as *curriculum coherence; difficulty in adult's adaptation; difficulties in working in a team, poor digital competences, diverse mindsets, formalism of teaching practices* or *lack of motivation*. On the

other hand, the VET professionals have also noted that the main difficulties are the *lack of knowledge regarding foreign languages of the trainers and trainees* and the *lack of educational background in some areas*, with percentages above 10%. Again, the VET workers insist on problems related to a better knowledge of foreign languages, as well as the specific training in some areas.

Another of the key issues formulated to the respondents of the six European countries refers to their professional capacity. They have had to say if they think that the VET professionals are competent in general in the different transversal competences described in the questionnaire. The own professionals are those who have determined, based on its experience and perception, if the VET collective is competent or not in some of the most important competences. It is an important question because it determines whether the VET workers should improve their knowledge about skills, or is not necessary.

The survey reports that almost half of the respondents think that VET professionals are not competent in most competences described in the survey (Figure 2). This is quite indicative of the needs of the VET trainers/teachers/guidance professionals. When we compare with the issue of the proficiency, we find an apparent contradiction in the current question. In general, the VET professionals that have participated in the survey consider all skills above the average proficiency, but they express doubts about the general competence of the VET professionals as a whole.

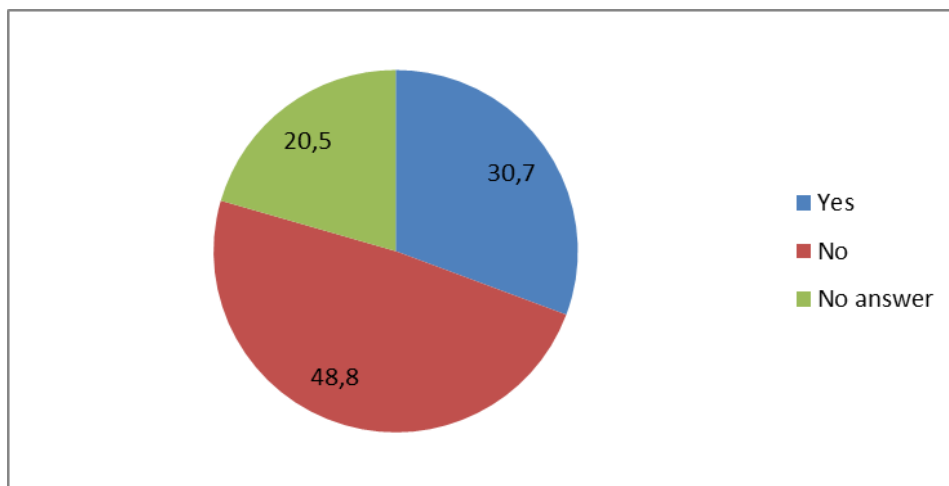


Figure 2. If VET professionals are competent in transversal competences

As a final question of the study, the respondents must have stated the main instruments used, when they have evaluated the student's competences as VET professionals. The answers have also been diverse and we have classified into four groups:

- A) Group work (structured and creative assignments, personal career plan, case study, project design, etc.).
- B) Self-assessment tools.
- C) Questionnaires (regarding evaluation emotions, adaptability & flexibility and creativity).
- D) An assessment centre using specific tools and individual interviews.

In any case, the methods and instruments described are not overlapped, since they are a combination of procedures. For example, a trainer usually evaluates many skills of students, mostly focused on critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and digital communication. He bases his evaluation on formal assessment (exams, exercises) and informal surveys during the learning activities.

4. Conclusions

This study that has been performed on more than 150 VET and guidance professionals of six European countries under the TrainVet4Jobs project, funded by the European Commission, has allowed better understanding of the most transversal competences that are used in their professional work, what are the most useful, the main difficulties in its implementation, and the highest and lowest proficiency. Furthermore, the respondents have answered other questions as for example, if they are competent in the skills described in the survey, the instruments they are using to assess the student's competences, or if they have followed courses and seminars to improve their skills.

Based on their answers, the VET teachers/trainers/guidance professionals give major importance to the following competences/skills (in descendent rank) for a professional exercise: Teamwork; Learning to Learn; Identifying needs of others and Empathy; Adaptability and Flexibility; and Problem Solving, which have the highest proficiency. Instead, the Mathematics, Science and Technology and Risk Assessment are the least important, the most difficult competences to implement and use, and have low proficiency. In addition, they contemplate the Communication in Foreign Languages a difficult competence to apply and learn. Nevertheless, it is one of the most useful competences for the VET professionals like Learning to Learn and Problem Solving. In any case, the VET workers have considered all skills above the average proficiency from VET professionals participating in the survey, but they express doubts about the general competence of the VET professionals as a whole.

Making a comparison between the proficiency, value, ease of implementation and the use of the different VET skills, and the importance to improve them, it is perceived that the highest valued skills are the same that need to be improved (except the Communication in Mother Tongue). This result only reinforces the idea that the VET professionals should continue training and gain experience in the transversal competences through the courses or other formal and non-informal systems in order to transmit the best values and the most necessary aspects to the students. Only when they improve the learning for all skills, not just the most valued, it will strengthen the VET education and the students.

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