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WORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS AND SYLLABUSES**

Abstract. Article presents and discusses the introduction of work-based learning (WBL) in higher education in Croatia through analysis of national, university and faculty-level policy documents. A work-based orientation while developing study programmes occurred in the context of the education system's inefficiency when it comes to employment opportunities. The presented research attempts to understand how universities implement public and educational policy guidelines on work-based learning regarding study programmes and learning outcomes. To that end, we analysed strategic documents from a large university in the southern part of Croatia that served as an exemplar of the current state of work-based higher education in Croatia. We conducted reflexive thematic analysis of key strategic documents and syllabi to develop knowledge with respect to the implementation of WBL.

Keywords: Work-Based Learning, Educational Policy, Educational Strategies, Higher Education, Thematic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The current state of education policies is linked to the development of social capital as a precondition for economic growth and human capital accumulation (Bell 2020). The programmes offered by educational institutions and the population's academic level directly influence the workforce's employability and competitiveness (Bejaković 2006). Changes in the production system and labour

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market have placed higher education under increasing pressure to train employable graduates. Universities must transmit knowledge and abilities specific to each discipline or occupation and develop soft skills, meaning dispositions and attributes transferable to many occupational situations and areas (Cornalli 2018).

In Croatia, numerous research studies point out the lack of connection of educational programmes with the working environment, skills, and competencies for work/professions acquired during formal schooling, along with a lack of realistic aspirations and a tendency to idealise higher education due to the education system's inefficiency with regard to employment opportunities, characteristic for students in developing countries (Bartlett 2013; Bejaković 2006; Bohuš and Pavelić 2011; Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš 2015; Lavrič 2015).

A significant obstacle to the professional development of young people relates to differences in how work-based learning (WBL) is implemented among EU nations, which may be attributed to variations in educational cultures, a focus on specific subject areas, and a lack of quality assurance (Perusso and Wagenaar 2022).

Therefore, many vocational education students in Croatia aspire to complete the state matriculation and then enrol in higher education (Buzov et al. 2021), which potentially relates to the mismatch between the skills students acquire at the secondary school level and labour market demands (Bartlett 2013).

Appreciating the possibility of discussions on the nature of current European higher education policies, which are strongly biased globally in favour of the English-North American point of view (Fink-Hafner et al. 2022) while privileging the economic imperative, higher education institutions are emphasising generic and soft skills and thereby attempting to blur the lines between education and work (Lauder and Mayhew 2020). Such an orientation to developing higher education study programmes emerged following strong recommendations with respect to current and dynamic societal changes, especially the economy. These changes are mainly conditioned by the development of new technologies on one hand, and the high requirements regarding flexibility in a random environment on the other. In this context, numerous questions about the challenges of improving higher education, such as changes in strategies for developing university studies, can be directed to ensuring the link between the labour market and higher education to train graduates who are employable. For the last four decades, a key research topic in higher education has been the relationship between higher education and the world of work (Jung 2022). Further, a variety of funding options is available under European funds or other programmes that relate to WBL, career development, and graduate employability (Zielinski et al. 2020). Nevertheless, there is an ever wider 'gap' between graduates' skills and capabilities and the requirements and demands stemming from the work environment (Yunus and Li 2005) and linking learning to a close relationship with work (Costley 2007).

The employability of future graduates could also be understood according to the views of practitioners and academics on higher education (Fink-Hafner and

Dagen 2022). In 2020, Pažur Aničić and Divjak created a maturity model consisting of principles for designing higher education practices that support graduates at a high level of maturity in their early employment. Universities should develop skills specific to each discipline but also dispositions that can be transferred to many occupational situations and areas, especially since the contribution of an education system to society is expected in the form of skilled employees, entrepreneurs, and independent researchers (Orphanides 2012). Moreover, this primarily refers to already recognised skills that Croatian employers consider necessary and to which the education system should focus, such as openness and the ability to communicate in the work environment, as well as those that are especially valued for highly educated employees (Bejaković 2010; 2006). Common motivators shared by all stakeholders involved in work-integrated learning in Croatia include knowledge transfer, tying theory and practice together, allowing students to obtain practical experience, and enhancing students' employability (Pažur Aničić and Divjak 2022).

Work-based learning is defined in higher education as learning derived by undertaking paid or unpaid work (Garnett 2008). The understanding of WBL is linked to the means through which a discipline is delivered, not the field to be studied. Accordingly, WBL is not a subject for study – it is a learning mechanism (Gray 2001). There is no universally accepted definition of WBL, and the term work-integrated learning should also be considered in discussions on the relationship between higher education and the work environment. Work-integrated learning directly links learning activities to employability outcomes and requires external stakeholder involvement and actual practice. It is hence positioned to give students access to relevant professional practices (Zegwaard and Pretti 2023).

In addition, this opportunity connects with the trend of increasing numbers of universities that stress the career outcomes of their graduates and thus integrate working experience as part of their curriculum (Jung 2022) or as an extracurricular activity supporting lifelong learning. Conversely, it gives the university a unique opportunity to develop a new knowledge-based partnership (Garnett 2001). The main goal is to facilitate the chance for actual work experiences or to “learn for real” (Boud and Symes 2000). Remote work provides new opportunities for WBL. Nevertheless, it is vital to investigate possible obstacles and develop new implementation frameworks since remote conditions could hinder the development of critical WBL competencies (Perusso and Wagenaar 2023).

While the diverse educational traditions impact the variation in WBL implementation in higher education institutions across the EU, the majority of studies on WBL implementation in higher education focused on the business and STEM fields (Perusso and Wagenaar 2022). Lester and Costley (2010) describe WBL as a distinct field of activity within universities rather than purely a mode of learning within disciplinary or professional areas and as a field of study in its own right.

The principles of WBL implementation in the Croatian higher education context are close to this approach. Further, the assessment of WBL in Croatian higher education uses subject-specific criteria through work-based practice, which Costley and Armsby (2007) elaborated upon. Relevant WBL programmes are offered at both polytechnics and universities. University programmes provide knowledge and skills that prepare students for lifelong learning and the workplace. This process calls for partnerships on the level of university and potential teaching bases, as well as on the level of mentors from universities and at teaching bases.

This article presents a comprehensive case study of the University of Split, concentrating on analysis of its strategic documents. The described policies and strategies at the EU and national levels provide a broader context for the University's strategies. Despite following the same policies, each institution maintains its autonomy and distinctiveness (Flipse et al. 2024). This means the strategic and implementation documents of other universities in Croatia are distinct from those of the University of Split. All of the mentioned conditions, issues and expectations create research questions that are in the focus of the article. We attempt to understand how universities implement public and educational policy guidelines about WBL, study programmes, and learning outcomes. To accomplish this, we analysed strategic documents from a large university in southern Croatia and relevant strategies from colleges within the selected university. The analysed strategic documents and syllabuses of WBL courses exemplified the current state of work-based higher education in Croatia.¹

METHOD

In this study, we employed reflexive thematic analysis, where the six-phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2020) consists of familiarising oneself with the data, systematic coding, generating early ideas, evaluating and defining topics, and report writing. In this study, the researchers first developed basic knowledge of the subject matter before reading the strategic documents several times to achieve thorough comprehension. The researchers then categorised passages with similar meanings. Following that, the researchers developed several themes as presented in the findings.

Strategic Framework

The EU's higher education policy framework guides internationalisation processes that impact changes in European higher education (Dagen et al. 2019).

¹ Intending to connect science, education, and the profession, based on Articles 66, 78 and 79 of the Law on Scientific Activity and Higher Education of the Republic of Croatia (2013) and Science and Higher Education Strategy (universities have included the elective course "Professional practice in the teaching base" through teaching bases where the professional practice is carried out, and started with implementation in 2017 following an initiative of the Rectors' Council of Croatian Universities. In the same period, Centres for Career Planning and Development were established at all university colleges.

Higher Education Area (EHEA) policies provide the basis for further exploration of strategies developed and implemented on the national and university levels. Education and Training 2020 (European Council 2009) is a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. It offers standard working procedures with priority areas for each periodic work cycle, shared strategic objectives for Member States, and guidelines for accomplishing them. EUROPE 2020: Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission 2010) stresses concrete initiatives to support young people in finding work and employment and facing current challenges, especially for making education and training more relevant and better preparing students for the transition from education to the workplace. Gros and Roth (2012) suggest that while the Strategy emphasises the importance of investing in education, it would be considerably more valuable with a stronger focus on firm-specific training, design, and technology innovation.

The educational policy documents in Croatia follow the standards given by the European educational policy framework. The coherence of individual goals in different strategic documents changes from the formulation to the implementation phases, and a critical overview of the strategies should happen on a continuum (Baketa 2022). The Strategy of Education, Science and Technology entitled “New Colors of Knowledge” (MSE 2014) highlights the importance of lifelong learning for improving employability and enhancing the quality of life. The ultimate objective is to provide education and science that serves the interests of the whole of society while pursuing superior outcomes. Although a high-quality professional practice performance for many studies is a prerequisite for acquiring competencies and, thus, a requirement for the better employability of graduated students, i.e., their better preparation for the demands of future employers, it is indicative that some of the study programmes lack student practice and field teaching.

The rationale behind these guiding principles is that promoting WBL, including apprenticeships, can help young people transition from school to work, improve their employability, and reduce youth unemployment. The Strategy (MSE 2014) also provides a set of principles that should be considered while working towards the objectives mentioned above. These principles include implementing European cooperation in education and training from a lifelong learning perspective, whereby the open method of coordination (OMC) is used more effectively, and synergies are developed between the different sectors involved. European cooperation in education and training should be cross-sectoral and transparent, thereby affecting the related policy areas and all relevant stakeholders. It is necessary to review and disseminate the outcomes of the cooperation regularly.

The university and faculty centres for career management commonly support students in early career development and the transition to the labour market. These centres are established to support students during their studies and

create a link with employers to facilitate their entry and competitiveness in the labour market (Lulić et al. 2021). Today, general and professional knowledge are no longer sufficient for success since it is also necessary to develop transversal skills such as communication, entrepreneurship and the like. For this purpose, institutional career management centres organise educational activities such as workshops and lectures and offer the possibility of individual counselling related to careers, preparing for a job interview, or reviewing one's curriculum vitae. Connections with employers are established by organising various events like career days and teaching bases. Specific potential for the further development of these offices also lies with the use of EU funds, depending on the published tenders.

Analysed Documents

To understand how universities may implement public and educational policy guidelines on WBL, we analysed all University and faculty-level strategic and administrative documents related to WBL, study programmes, and learning outcomes.

The Strategy of the University of Split 2015–2020 (UNIST 2015) gives emphasis to establishing and developing teaching bases within strategic areas related to students and student standards, their participation, student activism, culture, sport, and broader social engagement. The second goal concentrates on designing and implementing lifelong learning programmes. The third strategic goal in the mentioned Strategy is to create a vast network of teaching bases in different organisations in which practice, science, art, and higher education are connected. Further, in the fourth strategic goal, the University promotes scientific research and creative work among young people and develops post-academic employment programmes with its partners for their students and later for other former students to reduce the number of unemployed, following this Strategy (UNIST 2015) and the Rulebook on additional professional practice at the University of Split (UNIST 2017). The colleges within the university have their rulebooks on teaching bases (FFST 2017; 2021) and create a syllabus for the elective course Professional Practice in Teaching Bases, offering it to students in the last year of bachelor or master studies outside the regular study programme.

This analysis included Tenders for selecting and implementing professional practice (FFST 2020; 2021; 2022) and focused on job descriptors. The findings indicate several key job descriptors that indicate developmental competencies. In addition to familiarisation with the vision and mission of the organisation and the staff, students' involvement varies according to the type of work organisation (e.g., non-governmental organisations, schools, and cultural institutions).

FINDINGS

According to the vision of the Strategy of the University of Split 2015–2020 (UNIST 2015) as concerns the link between the University and the community,

the primary task is to develop a vast network of teaching bases or organisations in which practice, science, art, and higher education are linked. In this sense, the plan is to cooperate with teaching bases to ensure possibilities for joint student projects. Strategic goals related to improving learning, studies, and student standards encompass developing an extensive network of teaching bases or organisations in which practice, science, art, and higher education are connected, including cooperation with teaching bases for assuring opportunities for joint student projects. The overriding emphasis in the Strategy is to conduct teaching, scientific research, and artistic and professional work on the principles of respect for control and quality assurance and EU standards. The same goal is transferred to all cooperating institutions, teaching bases, local communities and cities, and associated members of the business community while supporting students' early career development and transition to the labour market by encouraging lifelong learning and service learning. All of the mentioned highlights of *the Strategy* are priority areas that reflect the specific mission of higher education institutions and programmes focused on students and the employability of graduates, as is also foreseen by EURASHE's Ten Commitments for the European Higher Education Area in 2020 (Orphanides 2012). The mission of education and training has thus expanded. It refers to the response to the needs of the economy, which implies the need to improve skills for employability, which underscores delivering the right skills for employment, increasing the efficiency and inclusiveness of education and training institutions, and working collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders (European Commission 2012). While EU policy aims to support competent individuals who actively work to increase their employability, which will benefit the European economy, it also helps to construct the "risk society" as a structure that people must accept (Laalo et al. 2023).

Our stakeholders are teaching bases chosen within companies, non-governmental organisations, schools etc., following the fields of study of each college within the university, approved by the faculty councils, and based on the study quality committee's approval. According to the Rulebook on additional professional practice at the University of Split (UNIST 2017), this partnership approach implies a tripartite agreement between the teaching base, the college within the university, and the university to equally ensure academic standards and requirements of work tasks, based on the design of the course syllabus and the participation of the teaching base in assessment and evaluation. In this sense, two mentors implement and evaluate the professional practice, one from the teaching base and the other from the college. Concerning the final achievement of the student, the completed professional practice is presented as the elective course Professional Practice in Teaching Bases and assessed with an additional 5 ECTS points displayed in a diploma supplement. In addition, when attending this course, through 80 hours of relevant work in the teaching base, the student earns ten working days of work experience. The assessment of the single teaching base is administered at the end of the academic year for each college within the

University. It includes an overview of the potential for future student employment.

Alongside the University and college strategies and rulebooks, for this research we analysed the universal matrix of the syllabuses from a selected college that offers courses in humanities and social sciences (FFST 2020; 2021; 2022). As well as acquiring specific knowledge and skills in a concrete work environment for numerous study programmes at selected colleges, this optional course represents an encounter (for some of them, the first) with a real work environment during formal schooling. Further, the form of student involvement varies depending on the type of work organisation. For example, in non-governmental organisations student involvement in ongoing activities/projects is foreseen through preparing documentation for individual projects, implementing monitoring activities, holding workshops, or preparing promotional materials. In some cases, all of the above activities are accompanied by training. In elementary and secondary schools, teacher education or pedagogy students are typically involved in implementing new and innovative learning approaches, particularly related to implementing new technologies. Museums and galleries are the most common cultural institutions that accept students enrolled in professional practice courses. The students are usually working as assistant curators or preparing exhibitions. As guided by the requirements listed in the syllabuses and the students' reports, there are mandatory fields concerning the relationship of achieved outcomes and expected skills for their future professions, including the position of their profession within an institution (teaching base), developing abilities for professional communication with others within a working team, collaboration with the community etc. The listed competencies are written according to the expected learning outcomes in syllabuses.

When we talk about specific knowledge and skills, there is an obligation to announce an open competition for professional practice at the college level for individual study programmes every year (e.g., sociology, pedagogy, history of art, teacher education, preschool education) with job descriptions. The open competition is designed to enable practice appropriate to the future professional profile student, coordinated with the profile and activities of the teaching bases. Along with the general information about the status of the course, the tutors (mentors), and the type of instruction, the syllabus contains a course description (with its objectives, the enrolment requirements and entry competencies and learning outcomes needed, its content, format of instruction, a student's responsibilities and approach to screening student work, students' grading and quality assurance methods). After the presented review of the syllabus content, we focus on mapping the learning outcomes and assessment. The general course objectives are related to introducing students to specific practical conditions in the particular teaching base to independently identify and solve more straightforward practical problems in a real work environment. Expected learning outcomes are divided into two parts.

The first part is concerned with general course learning outcomes, related to: (1) the application of the knowledge and skills acquired during the undergraduate studies needed for independent observation and solving more straightforward concrete problems in a real work environment; and (2) the preparation of a report on professional practice and explanation of the tasks performed, including the attaching of relevant documentation. The second part includes individual learning outcomes that refer to competencies related to: (1) describing the structure of the chosen teaching base; (2) recognising the challenges posed by the work environment and explaining the processes of dealing with concrete challenges; (3) analysing concrete, practical situations based on current scientific sources; (4) monitoring, documenting and evaluating processes in the teaching base; (5) describing the problems arising from specific work tasks in the teaching base and explaining the processes of solving them; and (6) documenting personal practice and evaluate it using critical reflection.

This study's findings are comparable with the typical characteristics and aspects of WBL programmes as found and highlighted by Talbot et al. (2017). More specifically, the flexibility of the content is recognised, which is built according to the interests of the employer and the student, then the optimisation of time consumption and possibility of choosing the training location. Namely, to offer a broader range of teaching bases and jobs every academic year, the possibility of selecting professional practice as a course is also given as part of the undergraduate and graduate programmes, with working hours during the entire summer semester. Regarding learning outcomes, one can acquire specific generic competencies about taking the initiative, problem-solving, and collaborative work. Types of teaching include workshops, exercises, field teaching, independent assignments, multimedia, and mentoring.

Mentors from the teaching base, mentors from the college, and students descriptively evaluate the professional practice upon its completion. The mentor from the teaching base continuously monitors the student's presence, diligence and success in completing the work tasks. The professional practice course is evaluated with 5 ECTS points, while the work-based practice section is worth 3 ECTS points. The remaining 2 ECTS points are assigned for class attendance, literature research, consultations with mentors, preparation, and defence of a professional practice report. These criteria are general and completed and assessed depending on concrete work practice, similar to the assessment described by Costley and Armsby (2007).

DISCUSSION

Concerning the approach to learning and the position of the course, work-based learning is recognised as a transdisciplinary field that sits outside of subject frameworks and has its own set of norms and practices (Costley and Armsby 2007). The syllabus is therefore designed and offered separately from study programmes.

Namely, the teachers of the selected colleges within the university, due to the previously mentioned study programmes from various fields of the humanities and social sciences, are focused on selecting teaching bases among different schools, cultural institutions, public institutions, as well as in the field of public and private business and civil society. Other colleges within the university commonly neglect some of these institutions. This cooperation strengthens the humanities, arts, and social sciences. It potentially creates a productive environment for valorising research in these fields while helping universities fulfil their promise to enrich the community (Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010). Moreover, this mainly relates to the employability of their graduates due to recognition of their potential knowledge and position in the labour market. On top of the fact that such broad partnership cooperation confirms a common interest, recent research confirms this approach in creating social partners' network of employers as cooperation that can help with the development of hard and soft skills that allow students to understand the transformations of the world of work and to adapt to them accordingly. The cooperation is thus becoming multidimensional (Skiadas et al. 2021).²

In other words, following the fundamental principles and the fourth strategic goal of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training – Education and Training 2020 (European Council 2009), including civil society representatives and other stakeholders, expands the educational community. It develops synergy among different sectors of education and the wider academic community (European Council 2009). Universities are thus becoming an integral part of the supply chain of skills and innovation for business, which are ensured by intersectoral cooperation (Gibbs 2013). For the study programmes in the humanities and social sciences, the implementation of professional practice opened collaboration with previously mentioned partners, which brought beneficial partnerships between the university and various stakeholders in the community. These benefits are acknowledged through the opportunity of training students in company needs and as a source of staff recruitment (Ferrández-Berruero and Sánchez-Tarazaga 2020), informing university of academic development aspects that need to be revisited or expanded (Sivapalan 2016), and assuring collaboration essential to advancing university entrepreneurship (Kuchumova et al. 2023).

² These outcomes are also related to another programme implemented in parallel for post-academic employment at the University of Split and University of Zagreb (2015–2020), targeting interested students through summer schools modules focused on getting to know the entrepreneurial framework and way of thinking, then acquiring the skills of identification and analysis of business opportunities, as well as the basics of the legal framework for entrepreneurial ventures and operations.

CONCLUSION

In addition to relevant study programmes offered by polytechnics, university studies begin with training programmes that provide students with knowledge and skills to enable them to practise their professions and directly engage in work and the process of lifelong learning.

The current European higher education policies privilege the economic imperative and perceive education as an essential marketable good with a higher political profile (Harris 2011). In the context of the University of Split, WBL is perceived as a policy response to the policy problem, and the university is committed to providing students with all the skills to respond to contemporary societies and the workplace's ever-changing needs. Similarly to the findings presented in Cornalli's 2018 study, university-level programmes tend to emphasise soft skills such as personal attributes and interpersonal qualities such as communication, responsiveness and teamwork. A series of studies agrees that soft skills affect employability and achieving well-being and personal goals. This new phase directed higher education towards a reformulation of their mission and strategies to create more and better-educated graduates both through education and training on new competencies for new jobs within the framework of lifelong learning and through applied research, including new knowledge to be implemented through innovation (Orphanides 2012). Further, a message is sent to students at the beginning of their careers to develop appropriate soft skills to build their professional careers faster and more securely (Pavlović and Bušelić 2019). The new graduates are expected to perform technical tasks at work successfully, contribute to creating a positive and functional environment, and build their self-confidence.

While moving away from traditional learning methods in higher education, WBL complements and encircles studying. In the case of its positioning as an optional subject/elective course outside the study programme, it can be assumed that, after this initial phase, the same course will become an integral part of study programmes. More specifically, a WBL approach should become essential to higher education, not solely a supplementary activity (Basit et al. 2015).

While assessing WBL, the skills and knowledge in a work setting must be evaluated using a higher education academic discourse (Costley 2007). Research-based models should also be utilised for designing higher education practices that support the employability capacity of graduates (Pažur Ančić and Divjak 2020). In this sense, the possibility of expanding and revitalising the field of research in the sociology of education is emphasised with questions about the education of experts as a critical aspect of modernity, primarily including the process of institutional socialisation (Hallett and Gougherty 2018), which inevitably flows during this kind of WBL process.

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UČENJE NA DELOVNEM MESTU V VISOKOŠOLSKEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU: TEMATSKA ANALIZA STRATEŠKIH DOKUMENTOV IN UČNIH NAČRTOV

Povzetek. Članek predstavlja in obravnava uvajanje učenja na delovnem mestu (WBL) v visokošolsko izobraževanje na Hrvaškem skozi analizo nacionalnih, univerzitetnih in fakultetnih strateških dokumentov. Razvoj študijskih programov z vključevanjem elementov učenja ob delu je povezan s prepoznavanjem neučinkovitosti izobraževalnega sistema z vidika zaposlitvenih možnosti. Ta raziskava poskuša pokazati, kako univerze izvajajo smernice javne in izobraževalne politike o učenju na delovnem mestu v smislu študijskih programov in učnih rezultatov. Da bi dobili odgovor na to vprašanje, smo analizirali strateške dokumente velike univerze v južnem delu Hrvaške, ki je služila kot primer trenutnega stanja visokošolskega izobraževanja na Hrvaškem, ki temelji na delu. Za razvijanje znanja o izvajanju WBL smo uporabili reflektivno tematsko analizo ključnih strateških dokumentov in učnih načrtov.

Ključni pojmi: učenje na delovnem mestu, izobraževalna politika, izobraževalne strategije, visoko šolstvo, tematska analiza.