BLUE KEP PROJECT

Recommendations and Lessons Learnt

The BLUE KEP project represents an innovative action supporting the implementation of the Blue economy value chain in Italy and Croatia. Such sector embodies one of the most relevant socio-economic potential assets for the development of Adriatic region. Nevertheless, present obstacles hinder, related to the regulatory framework of mutual recognition of competences, diplomas and professional paths, and lack of both technical skills and innovation. Therefore, BLUE KEP aims at enhancing the framework conditions for innovation, contributing to the implementation of both education and productive sectors of the countries, fostering the cooperation and the integration of the systems related to the blue economy.

The goal was strengthening integration of education systems in the cross-border area through the harmonization of the technical education systems pushing for an integrated educational and professional framework, exchanging good practices among different education systems and providing students conditions for a valuable educational and professional experience, preparing them as the future specialized labour force for regional blue economy companies and helping to overcome the enterprises’ skills gap and skills shortages. This, in a wider context favouring brains circulation and labour market circulation within the programme area, in line with specific EUSAIR Pillar 1 Blue Growth entailing the creation of regional network of knowledge.

Notwithstanding the Croatian implementation of the education acquis communautaire and the Bologna process that harmonises secondary and higher education systems in Europe, differences still linger between the educational systems of Italy and Croatia. Distinctions are even more evident in the case of specific curricula as those for secondary technical maritime and nautical schools, as proved during project activities, even if both countries are characterized by the presence of secondary schools historically traditional for the area. Nevertheless, this has implied in the project the implementation of an important preparatory phase of development and networking works, mutual sharing of best practices on the didactic methods and the schools’ programs to align specific experiences and knowledge, favouring the conditions for bringing the parts closer together. Such confrontation has been supported in a crucial way by national education experts from universities and regional public administrations, allowing a clear characterization of common grounds from which to implement activities. The action was carried out through a teachers’ workshop and a series of meetings between representative of schools held in the Autumn 2018 during which were exposed the implementation of the school activities and of school-year educational curricula for students in technical maritime and nautical schools.

BLUE KEP goal was to lay down the premises to define short common curricula with a high technical maritime and nautical sector-oriented gradient, to be tested during the students’ mobility, as basic ground to common/shared methods and tools for assessing and recognizing skills both at education and professional level. Schools and teachers were fully involved into work, to better individuate features of each education system, so as to proceed with a first step towards a desirable harmonization of schools’ programs. This activity clearly explicated the different approaches and methods adopted by schools, obliging them to face a practical confrontation and take on shared educational solutions. Practically, shared arguments of the education modules (e.g. navigation, mechanical engineering, ship electrical installations) were chosen from the schools’ curricula enabling a comparison of the approach in different school subjects.

In such framework, the EU ECVET instrument creates the conditions for transfer, recognition and accumulation of their assessed learning outcomes, to achieve a qualification or to take part in lifelong learning, to be applied to all VET qualifications. The System concretely allows learners to accumulate, transfer and use their learning in units as these units are achieved. This enables building a qualification at learners’ own pace from learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in their own country and abroad. The system is based on units of learning outcomes as part of qualifications that can be assessed and validated.

It offers a framework for making learners more mobile and qualifications more portable, laying down principles and technical specifications and making use of existing national legislation and regulations. It applies to VET (vocational education and training) qualifications at all levels of the European qualifications’ framework. (cit. CEDEFOP).

The consequent issue of relevance in project activities was to offer to selected students from accredited schools the opportunity to take part to a mobility program. In this way, we both had the occasion to test the soundness and effectiveness of the education modules drafted by schools and the chance to give to the students to experiment a mobility experience in hosting country including an in-class cycle and an internship period in different companies performing in maritime and nautical sectors selected by hosting schools, allowing the acquisition of transversal competences. A personal training and professional experience and occasion of intercultural exchange with students from other countries similar to those offered by Erasmus+ European programs for mobility.

Such experience turned out to be of innovative value for the Croatian schools, where the internship in company opportunity is scarcely used, where still prevails the utilization of school laboratories and structures to bring students closer to the labour market after their graduation diploma, instead of involving in cooperation forms the same economic/productive operators, that have all the interests to assess and contribute to form an already skilled and competent workforce. All the more so in the case of nautical and maritime technical institutes that should be considered as a catalyst for innovation and new ideas.

In the light of project’s achievements and based on the evaluation of project’s implementation, the BLUE KEP team would like to share some policy recommendations addressed to public authorities, stakeholders from the education sector, economic actors and businesses and any other interested party.

**Recommendation 1** – Favour a common action between schools facing the need for innovation and **overcoming differences in schools’ curricula**, starting from topics that characterise the Adriatic socio-historic and economic common background.

**Recommendation 2** – Favour the mutual **recognition of competences** and diplomas.

**Recommendation 3** – Further stimulate **cross-border mobility programmes for students and teachers** that enrich personal and cultural development and provide an added value to education and training paths.

**Recommendation 4** – Favour the **development of professional skills** as defined in the educational and cultural course of study, by **promoting a joint development of synergies and knowledge transfer between the business and the education sector** through the implementation of the school-work alternation method.

**RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED**

**Recommendation 1** – Favour a common action between schools facing the need for innovation and **overcoming differences in schools’ curricula**, starting from topics that characterise the Adriatic socio-historic and economic common background.

A common educational course will need to identify specific **education/technical objectives** objectives for each professional profile and a set of competences (skills) to implement knowledge, aptitudes and practical/applicative skills (know-how). Cross-sectoral **soft (key) competences** will be included, namely: the ability to work in a multidisciplinary team, to interact with colleagues and other professionals, to work with defined degrees of autonomy and to fit quickly into work environments; inter-disciplinary and linguistic knowledge within the specific area of competence and for the exchange of general information; and adequate skills and tools for communication and information management. Such shared implementation of soft (key) skills will effectively harmonise the approach, while improving students’ employability after completion of school studies.

The action will have to benefit from a strong support from the public sector and stakeholders aimed at a constant implementation of **school** **human resources**. By means of the **cooperation among schools and education systems**, teachers will compare their respective systems and identify similarities and differences in didactic tools and methods, ways of working and organising classes, while creating the conditions for a truly inclusive education (through cooperative learning, problem-solving, peer tutoring, technological education) in the whole cross-border area.

Another suggestion is to encourage, since the early school years, the spreading of extra-curricular activities aimed at putting students in **contact with economic fabric of the territory**,the business and production sectors, in order to better prepare them for experiencing internship in companies and to ease their future employment choices.

**Recommendation 2** – Favour the mutual **recognition of competences** and diplomas.

In line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and by referring to the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), the BLUE KEP project defined and tested specific international education modules that were recognised and adopted by the involved schools. As proven by the results of this activity, there is ample room for continuing along this path and for widening the range of competences and curricula that can be recognised transnationally, thus strengthening the harmonisation of education systems in the cross-border area while enhancing student’s employability.

The establishment of a dialogue with the competent Italian and Croatian policy-makers in charge of education and training at both national and regional (on Italy) levels will be key to stimulate a change in the regulatory framework for the **recognition of credits and courses developed transnationally** and to allow the acquired awareness to lead to expected objectives.

A first step would be to involve the Italian and Croatian national education ministries that were exposed to project’s main results with specific reference to the solution adopted within the BLUE KEP for the recognition of the competences acquired by students during the accomplished school-work alternation experience.

**Recommendation 3** – Further stimulate **cross-border mobility programmes for students and teachers** that enrich personal and cultural development and provide an added value to education and training paths.

According to the BLUE KEP experience, mobility programmes allow teacher to implement their teaching competence in a comparative perspective and strengthens students’ awareness of different education and professional training contexts. An added value is represented by the possibility to define, apply and offer a transversal skills approach, that besides stimulating intercultural awareness and increasing students’ employability potential, also includes digital and linguistic skills boosting.

Cross-border mobility programmes will need to be designed based on existing EU instruments and by relying on already active bilateral relations between between national and local level authorities and schools.

**Recommendation 4** – Favour the **development of professional skills** as defined in the educational and cultural course of study, by **promoting a joint development of synergies and knowledge transfer between the business and the education sector** through the implementation of the school-work alternation method.

This will add up to school’s education offer and enhance students’ motivations to accomplish their studies. It will inspire them into discovering their personal vocations and interests, enriching their knowledge with the acquisition of skills learnt on the field. At the same time, the business and production sectors of both Italy and Croatia will benefit from the availability of a mobile and better trained workforce.