



National Report for Slovenia on Trade Unions and University Lifelong Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Social partnership in Slovenia is not yet developed to the same extent as in some other EU member states. There are too few partnership institutions where social partners can participate in the implementation and financing phase on an equal basis with public funds, and there are areas where involvement of one partner is either too formally structured or underdeveloped. One such area is the trade union involvement in the area of education.

Employers associations and trade unions are some of the partners involved in a social dialogue with the state in the area of vocational and technical education. This is also defined by the Vocational and Technical Education Act. The social dialogue should operate at all levels as a mechanism of this social partnership – national, regional, local, sectoral and entrepreneurial. Social partners are involved in organisations in the field of vocational and technical education and training. Trade union representatives participate in a number of committees and commissions. Vocational and technical education is also defined in trade union programmes and congress resolutions. As such it is understood as a component element of the right to work, which has to be assured by the state for all of its working age population. The emphasis is not only on work but also on education, employment, selection of work places, the possibility of permanent training and promotion, humanisation of work and working conditions.

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE AT SECTORAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

The highest level of social dialogue is formally articulated by the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Slovenia (RS), composed of representatives of social, economic, technical and local interests. At least four representatives of the Chambers and four from Trade Unions are among them. The highest co-operative bodies amongst social partners do

not deal with vocational education, which is rarely the subject of discussion in the Economic and Social Council.

Social partners operate in all the main technical and working Vocational Education and Training (VET) bodies at national and regional level. At the national level the Council of Experts of the RS for Vocational and Technical Education and the Council of Experts of the RS for Adult Education (AE) have been nominated by the government. These are the two highest technical bodies for basic vocational and technical education and training and adult education.

Slovenian legislation, mainly the Organisation and Funding of Education Act (OJ RS No. 12/96) has left the adoption of basic technical and systemic decisions to the Council of Experts for Vocational Education and Training (VET), and partly also to the Council of Experts for General Education and to the Council of Experts for Adult Education. This “triplicity” has in some cases resulted in a number of conflicts, and it has prolonged and rendered difficult the final process of reaching decisions, but generally such connection is essential.

The Council of Experts for VET has a lot of competence, which can be summarised as: (OJ RS No. 12/96, Article 26)

- to define catalogues of knowledge and exams for technical – theoretical subjects and for masters, foreman’s and manager’s exams;
- to define the range and content of education carried out in lower and secondary vocational education in employer organisations;
- to define the organisation of educational programmes’ implementation (e.g. delivery throughout the year or periodically);
- to define the content of a mid-term exam;
- to identify equal educational standards of adult educational programmes in areas where it is competent for the preparation of the catalogues of knowledge;
- to approve text-books and teaching requisites for technical – theoretical subjects;
- to propose educational programmes of vocational or technical education;

Some of the key and final decisions are still left to the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) and Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs (MoLFSA) but key professional decisions are undoubtedly still made by the Council of Experts for VET. The influence of social partners regarding its structure is ensured, and so if it is not put into effect properly the reason can only be a lack of interest.

The influence of social partners on key decisions, which sometimes is only indirect but not unimportant, can also be provided via the Council of the Centre of the RS for Vocational Education and Training (composed of representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Chamber of Crafts, MoES and MoLFSA), where they are represented (except trade unions) and they co-create annual work plans, systematisation and financial plans.

The responsibility of trade unions in vocational and technical education and training is defined as well. According to the Vocational and Technical Education Act, their main task as the representatives of employees is to prevent violation of apprentices’ rights, apprentices’ contracts and collective agreements. Trade unions propose their representatives in examination commissions of vocational and technical schools (for the theoretical part) and in Chambers examination commissions (for the practical part). Trade unions’ legally regulated responsibilities are limited to being a partner in the procedure of identification and certification of national vocational qualifications in the certification system. They independently organise and implement the education of trade union activists.

The most important element in the creation of vocational and technical education policy is the basic influence of employers on educational needs, descriptions of occupation and occupational standards, and consequently on educational programmes at all levels up to higher technical education. Through this identification and articulation of educational needs employers have the opportunity to promote, form and develop informal ways of acquiring and confirming knowledge (the certification system in preparation).

Nevertheless, the social dialogue has already shown some concrete results in the area of VET. An important result of the social dialogue in this area is a provision for collecting funds specially intended for education of workers employed by private employers, which increases the importance of education. The funds, contributed by employers (1% gross wage of employees), are used by the so-called foundations, independent legal entities, focusing on co-financing of various types of education and training of employees (not employers). The basic objective of these foundations is to improve the educational structure for those employed as craftsmen, and acquisition of knowledge required by technological developments and the labour market. Employers and employees initiate the organisation of foundations. This is undoubtedly one of the most important ways of employers' co-operation in education and training of employed persons, with regard to work place requirements, labour market technology development and increasing workers' employability and flexibility. The cooperation between trade unions and universities, on the other hand, remains virtually non-existent.

Within the VET reform Phare programme (1995-97) of modernisation of the VET system, a proposal has been made about developing a model of social partnership in the area of vocational education and training at the regional level. Regional VET councils should perform the following activities:

- specification of tasks of social partners;
- identification of needs for a dual education system and reconciliation of various interests;
- finding solutions for practical training implemented by employers;
- human resource development and increasing economic competitiveness;
- integration of the education, training and labour markets while taking into account the strategy of regional economic development;
- defining the needs of adult education and training.

At the regional level, another example of social partnership is the establishment of Human Resource Development Funds (HRDF). Their main tasks are to prepare systematic education and training needs analyses and, in accordance with this, to adapt the development of modern, short and flexible training programmes to the needs of the region. HRDF co-operates with partner institutions and employers who provide it with current information about their needs and requirements regarding resources, knowledge and skills. HRDF receive funds from local representatives of social partners, from public tenders and international projects.

UNIVERSITIES WITHIN THE LIFELONG LEARNING (LLL) CONTEXT

At both institutional and national levels University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) has become a more frequent topic of discussion in Slovenia. Generally, one could estimate Lifelong Learning in Slovenia is less developed than in other countries but the situation is improving. Most often, ULLL is carried out in the form of part-time study which is primarily designed for students who study and work at the same time. These programmes are similar to full-time

study and are also assessed under the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Distance education is similar; it is organized by some faculties and carried out in various places across Slovenia. However, other programmes, carried out within the framework of the university system, are organized in the form of shorter training courses or seminars on a fixed subject for specific target groups and are mainly practically oriented. They are designed for people employed in companies who wish to develop or broaden their knowledge. These training courses are not assessed under the academic credit system (also known as non-credit-bearing courses). Universities and faculties are well aware of the importance of LLL, with many faculties establishing (at least formally) Lifelong Learning education centres.

CURRENT STATUS OF TRADE UNION INVOLVEMENT IN THE SPHERE OF EDUCATION AND LLL

Social partnership is formalised and structured in Slovenia. Although it is recognisable and evidences some positive effects, it still has not included the entire society at all levels. Perhaps too much energy is spent on formalisation and structuring at the general - national level, while too little emphasis is given to partnership relations in the area of education and training at the lowest company level - in a direct process with employers. Besides modest awareness and knowledge of problems and the process of social partnership, the additional reason could also be found in poorly trained individuals – both amongst employers and employees. As a result, a lot of attention, funds and energy will have to be given to education and training of all partners, which will improve the quality of partnership relations and strengthen the active role of all partners.

Trade unions are not aware of the importance of education in general; they acquire trained personnel and organise themselves while the funding of their activities is still not fully resolved. Their representatives rarely participate in the meetings of the Council of Experts of the RS for Vocational and Technical Education. Usually only one or two of their members are present. Trade unions also employ a small number of personnel, but nobody has a professional responsibility for vocational education. They are not present in the fieldwork where the abuse of apprentices can already be evidenced, although there is no official data on this. Legal foundations provide trade unions with facilities to solve problems in the area of apprenticeship, but they are unable to fully perform their task. Unfortunately, their highest bodies pay little attention to the role that employees should have in vocational education.

Trade union representatives participate in a number of committees and commissions. The majority of them work at the national, more systemic level, while the structure for participating social partners at regional and local levels is weak at the moment and will need to be strengthened in the future. Thus, co-operation depends more on the personal enthusiasm of individual trade union representatives. At the moment the trade unions do not have properly trained personnel, who would be able to participate in these bodies. There should also be a better connection with the labour market strategic goals, employment policy and its implementation programmes – from the state to the entrepreneurial level. Social dialogue should be formalised at all the above-mentioned levels.

In practice, trade unions are still not active enough in developing vocational and technical education or developing their relationships with universities and have only recently shown interest in strengthening their influence in this area. They still understand their role mostly in terms of the fight for higher wages, better working conditions and other issues directly related with employment and the socio-economic situation of workers. This is mostly the consequence of trade unions' internal staffing problems, which is closely related to the lack of financial resources (voluntary membership and unemployment).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the high level of general declarative agreement about the crucial role of education and training, however, further development of social partners' involvement in VET is needed at various levels, from decision-making, to financing and implementing VET.

It would probably be necessary to formalise relations between trade unions and within their organisations, at least with a strategy that would clearly define their role and purpose as well as complete tasks with key responsible bodies. It would be necessary to establish a certain working or professional body, which would take care of the co-ordination of activities in the area of vocational education – amongst trade unions and within them. Four bigger trade union confederations and a few smaller organisations, represent the employees in Slovenia at the moment, but on the other hand do not co-operate in the area of vocational education and training,. This is also one of the reasons for their weak and unrecognisable role. All the employees' representative organisations should therefore, regardless of their political orientation, try to understand the philosophy of VET as well as intervene actively in this area. The first condition for something like this is the already-mentioned education of certain Trade Union members, who when properly trained could fully perform the role of active partners. Education as the stimulation for development of social partnership in the area of vocational education and training should also include members of trade union organisations and not only those professionally linked individuals and managerial staff who are already overloaded with other activities and who already co-operate in different bodies. This, of course, requires plentiful funds that the trade unions are not capable of providing alone at the moment. It might be necessary to consider the possibility of acquiring some foreign financial support for this kind of education, as we already have experts in Slovenia, who are capable of providing such education.

Additional effort should also be invested in trying to slowly initiate changes in the mindset of the Trade Unions. The narrow focus on 'traditional' TU areas (wages, working conditions, industrial action and political activities) should be enriched with intrinsic logic of Lifelong Learning which represents one of the development options within the context of the *ageing knowledge society*. This new emerging context also poses a huge challenge for the existing mindset at university level. Population cohorts entering universities at the traditional student age are shrinking in Slovenia, and the supply of study programmes and institutions in higher and vocational education is increasing rapidly. Universities should therefore also be encouraged to address other 'non-traditional' target groups.