

Influence of COVID-19 on the Macedonian VSD/VET system and the E4E@MK project

Проект на:



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC

Имплементиран од:



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СТОПАНСКА КОМОРА
НА МАКЕДОНИЈА
ECONOMIC CHAMBER
OF MACEDONIA

North Macedonia / Switzerland 30.06.2020

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Abbreviations

DPO	Disabled People's Organisation
E4E@MK	Education for Employment in North Macedonia
ECM	Economic Chamber of Macedonia
ESA	Employment Service Agency
GSI	Gender and Social Inclusion
HR	Human Resources
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VSD	Vocational Skills Development
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WHO	World Health Organization
ILO	International Labour Organization

1. COVID-19

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that a new corona virus was the cause of a respiratory illness in a cluster of people in Wuhan City, China. In March 2020, the WHO Secretary General declared a pandemic of COVID-19.

In February 2020, COVID-19 was confirmed to have reached North Macedonia. On 18 March, the President of North Macedonia declared a state of emergency for the entire territory of the country, initially for 30 days, which was later extended till end of May 2020. On 23 March, the government imposed a curfew applied in a differentiated manner according to the age group of the citizens. The curfew started to shorten progressively as of 8th of May but was partly reintroduced shortly after due to the increased cases of COVID-19 infection. On 26 June, all borders of North Macedonia were reopened for all passengers.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have a significant both short-term and mid-term influence on the behavior of the society, the development of the economy and thus on the formal Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the non-formal Vocational Skills Development (VSD) system in North Macedonia.

The document in hand aims to highlight the important challenges in this regard and to serve as basis for further development of the VSD/VET system in a post-COVID-19 period. The document shall serve as basis for discussions among the stakeholders in the VSD/VET system.

2. Society

The COVID-19 outbreak affects all segments of the Macedonian population. Increasing inequality, exclusion, and unemployment in the short and mid-term are foreseeable particularly for members of the most vulnerable groups - people living in poverty, older persons, youth, women, Roma or persons with disabilities. Although the government provides socio-economic support for everyone, without tailor-made measures, these groups are at high risk to be unable to access the minimum conditions for dignified life – be it social integration, health services, education, or employment.

According to the rapid assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses by ILO¹ the decline in working hours during the second quarter of 2020, is equivalent to the loss of 85.550 full-time jobs which corresponds to approximately 11% of the working population. This will impair the chances of the youth and marginalized groups to find a decent job, as they are already disproportionately unemployed and many of those who are employed have precarious work contracts or work in the informal sector, which aggravates their vulnerability. It is uncertain whether the COVID-19 crisis and the opening of the EU accession negotiations will have a significant influence on the migration of youth to Western Europe or EU in the near future.

The Macedonian society and economy are currently obliged to integrate an unknown number of citizens that are usually engaged as seasonal workers abroad. Many of them have been working abroad in economic sectors like hospitality, tourism, agriculture etc., sectors that may demand less employees in 2020 and the upcoming years due to the COVID-19 situation. However, this group can be considered as a chance to integrate qualified professionals with work experience into the Macedonian labour market.

The COVID-19 crisis and the related expected recession shows explicitly the importance of functioning public services like health, elderly care and children care, education as well as the need for improved public infrastructure and goods (electricity supply, water supply etc.) which may influence the occupations and the qualifications needed on the labour market.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_746124.pdf

Namely, the crisis may lead to an increased interest of the population for seeking “secure jobs” in the public sector which will in turn increase the pressure on the private sector to find sufficient (qualified) labour, as it is still small and evolving.

The COVID-19 crisis has launched a digitalization impetus in North Macedonia (and globally) that will last and pose challenges but will also provide new opportunities in the economy, the education and other spheres of the society. The main challenge in this regard is to ensure that all groups of the society will have access and will benefit from the digitalization process.

3. Economy

The negative impact on the economy caused by the crisis becomes even more evident as the time passes and the economic consequences are not favourable neither now, nor in the short term. Due to a significant decrease and disbalance both on the supply and the demand side, the economies faced severe shocks, and weakened the resistance of the economic entities.

While the demand for certain products and services dramatically increased (medical equipment, connection platforms, electronic payments, etc.), for others (tourism and catering, automotive industry, etc.), severely decreased. At the same time, the suppliers cannot satisfy the increased demand for required products and services. The transport sector faces serious difficulties due to the newly imposed national safety measures by each country, which shows the critical dependency from a globalized economy. Today’s production is too dependent on the transport and trade as the product requires parts produced in different countries. All these has and will further on influence the development of the Macedonian economy.

There are additional specificities that require strong commitment of all stakeholders to overcome the situation. As a small developing country, North Macedonia struggles with limited financial resources. With the existing high public debt, the possibilities for urgent economic measures aimed to support the companies / economy are very limited. The revenue side of the state budget will not be sufficient to satisfy the expenditure side requirements and certainly this situation leads to larger budget deficit than the initially planned. The population is not resistant to a financial crisis, having in mind already low levels of income in the former times. This situation may put again more citizens at risk of poverty. In addition, the stakeholders will refrain from purchase and investments, thus the economic growth will be negative, or in the best case remain at the same level.

As this crisis will be an extraordinary lesson for the economy and society, new ways of doing business need to be exploited with certainly high significance and impact of the digitalization within the new work reality.

4. VSD/VET

The pandemic disrupted the completion of the school year 2019/2020, with greatest effect on VET². Namely, all opportunities for learning skills through hands-on experience (either at the school premises or through practical training in companies/WBL) were made impossible due to government restrictions. Although the MoES and VET Centre have made calls to teachers to develop materials to be shared online on the EDUINO platform (initially developed and intended to serve students of pre-school and primary school age), the response for the latter is scarce, so the students follow the classes thanks to the measures individually organized measures by their schools, for which there is no official information yet (in terms of the effects). The partly limited

² Formal VET is understood as secondary education of two-year, three-year and four-year programmes, which is regulated by the state and implemented by the state in an increasing cooperation with the economy. Formal VET qualifies students for the labour market and the tertiary education level.

digital skills of the staff in the education sector are a challenge, along with the necessary equipment of both teaching staff and the households of the students.

The processes of establishing cooperation with the business sector have not been entirely stopped but are currently severely affected due to the economic difficulties of the companies, and the question of mere survival of many. Summer Practice is entirely cancelled for summer 2020, and currently solutions are being considered for its compensation. However, there is no indication that the business sector is being consulted in the process.

The pandemic has also significant negative impact on the non-formal VSD³ system. As it started abruptly, there was no sufficient time for a proper adjustment to the new situation. The obligations for compulsory health and safety measures additionally worsens the context of the still weak non-formal VSD system and the crises spilled on the surface are in fact the drawbacks that were neglected before. Challenges cannot be overcome by quick fixes and improvisation as in normal times.

The low level or inefficient investments in education in the past, supplemented with weak schooling infrastructure improper alignment of the non-formal VSD system and the labour market needs and insufficient digitalization in the education in general are among the challenges which require innovative measures in this difficult time.

After the initial shock imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak, the relevant institutions and the VSD providers started intensive discussions and as a result the coordination among them improved significantly. The Adult Education Center started to improve the communication with the VSD providers and started to adjust the processes within the institution to the new situation (electronic documents, online requests for verification etc.). The Employment Service Agency became proactive in informing and offering the services and measures to the unemployed people. They have been sharing the information through e-mails, SMS, calls etc.) or physically, by respecting specific protocols. In addition, the part of the measures focused on the companies was promoted by the associations (mostly e-mails). The currently visible interest (number of applications) in the measure shows that the promotion is well adapted.

The cooperation among the associations and regional ESA centers has been enhanced apparently, although happening through digital media. Although the first positive reactions are visible in the non-formal VSD sector, the system now has the task to define a strategy aimed at overcoming the challenges in the long run.

5. Key challenges related to COVID-19

The Macedonian economy has to specify its labour needs based on the economic development plans (occupations, qualifications, quantity)

The proper usage/spending of the financial resources will gain importance as the economic entities will face losses. Exact and timely market information/data are important in order to ensure effective and efficient expenditures with a positive outcome, regardless whether is it private or state funds. Such analysis based on the current market situation combined with private sector expectations will disclose the national economic perspective for the future. This has to become a repetitive ongoing process approved by all private and institutional stakeholders and during the time of crisis should be done even more frequently, rather than annually. Moreover, the process should be inclusive and consensual, including realistic prospect for progress. The economic

³ Non-formal VSD refers to the development of certain skills of youth and adults by VSD providers, which can be NGOs, companies, VET schools, business associations or any other entity which has the capacities to increase the employability and support the employment of the participants i.e. the learners.

development plan/model is a basis for proper planning of the needed skills, competences and qualifications in order to adapt the schooling systems to respond to the market needs. Futuristic vision is of a paramount importance but should address realistic development potential.

The economic sectors are differently affected by the COVID-19 crisis. While some more digital and office-based sectors (e.g. finance, management) could continue their work to a large extent, others like manufacturing or food processing have to adapt their working environment substantially. This highlights the need for continually updated economic development plans at the level of economic sectors. The related professional associations have to strengthen their function as bridge between the companies and responsible VSD/VET institutions. In addition to the cooperation on national level, a strengthened regional cooperation between the private sector and the VSD/VET providers will provide the needed security to the private sector in terms of qualified labour, which in turn is crucial for them to invest in their business.

The formal VET and non-formal VSD system are challenged to better align with labour market and society needs

In consequence of COVID-19, a prioritization of economic sectors that turned out to be undeveloped or lacked qualified staff (e.g. health, public transport) should be made by the government. An improved coordination of the VSD/VET supporting measures provided by the different ministries will stimulate and steer non-formal VSD offers towards qualifications of high national priority. The Ministries, jointly with the local self-government units and the private sector have to promote VET, not only in general, but specific required occupations in the regions according to the labour market needs.

VET schools need the flexibility to quickly adapt the curricula and the teaching programmes to the developments of the labour market. VET school programmes for occupations with decreasing labour demand may be merged or replaced by programmes for emerging occupations.

Economic chambers and sector associations have to further strengthen their cooperation with ESA and VSD providers in order to jointly create VSD offers with a high employment or further qualification potential. This also includes the reintegration of people that have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis.

The public and the private sector have to increase the investments in VSD/VET in order to overcome the COVID-19 consequences and strengthen economy in the long run

The measures along with coordinated implementation of fiscal and monetary policies that were introduced to support the health system, to prevent people from losing jobs, to save the companies and to facilitate a sustainable recovery, have to be further considered.

Fiscal and monetary policies must plan further support to employment and social protection, which is strongly connected with the investment in labour market oriented VSD/VET. Given the specific challenges of the labour market in the light of COVID-19, opening a discussion on state incentive policies / measures (for businesses, VET schools, etc.) to include VSD/VET systems in the context of the new situation is very important.

The government and the responsible ministries have to invest in training and employment programmes that can be an effective response to the crisis and after the crisis, especially if such programmes are adapted to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 or acquire newly required skills emerged from the pandemic. Such policies can ensure that the necessary investments in upgrading the workers' skills are made to facilitate re-employment or relocation in the sectors that are expanding as a result of the pandemic (e.g. health, food, transport, communication).

Public employment programmes can address various multi-sectoral needs (such as health protection and care) in different enterprises training/education providers, the companies, the community infrastructure.

Building a mid and long-term strategy/plan for strengthening future resilience of the formal VET and non-formal VSD system is very important.

In the time of economic decline and increased survival struggles, companies / employers need system support to maintain their role in VET through Work-Based Learning

With the conclusions that the education process disruption will have consequences on the development of the human capital⁴, both medium and long term, it is of utmost importance that the business community does not neglect their role in its developing, as it may exacerbate the consequences to be rather long-term, impacting levels of productivity and causing acute lack of suitable workforce in the future. Involvement of the business sector in building skills among youth needs to be maintained, and incentives for encouraging their involvement should be considered during their economic recovery period.

In such disruptive times it is difficult to forecast development of the businesses, and hence forecast skills and HR – which is often the primary motivator to get involved in VET. This implies that participation in WBL in the current educational model needs to be stimulated (e.g. promoting good examples, targeted incentives and support measures for companies and VET schools, additional measures for specific sectors). The stimulating support model may also contribute to mitigate poaching risks and address lack of sectoral social responsibility beyond the crisis period.

The educational system must always have in view that the feasibility of WBL depends on the committed participation of the employers, who need to clearly understand their interest and benefits in investing. A strategy is needed to provide clarity on the development of the VET system, especially concerning the introduction of a dual approach, so that appropriate measures are devised for supporting employers in the WBL portion of the current educational model, and for employers involved in a dual approach.

Decisions about education recovery plans that include compensation of missed WBL periods due to COVID-19 (and other reasons) need to be made in consultation with the business community considering feasibility of proposed solution(s).

Potential mid and long-term impacts of COVID-19 need to be reflected in future financing models of formal VET and non-formal VSD

Education needs support to prevent a “lost generation” of students in VET. COVID-19 and post COVID-19 influence on the economy can impact on family’s capacity to support children’s education. Public education financing can have long-term effects on student outcomes, so financing the areas that have the greatest need have to be increased (formula funding that prioritizes the most vulnerable, additional block grants, conditional or unconditional cash transfers to families, support/release the families from costs for the school/company for practical learning and WBL).

The crisis has pushed the educational systems for use of online learning and ICT. The government and the MoES will need to devote the necessary finances to evaluate and to embed these innovations into the system (hardware and software used for online learning in VET schools and at home).

For the mid-term functioning of VET, the costs have to be calculated and financial recourses have to be ensured for safety conditions in the VET schools (safety equipment and materials, smaller groups of students in classrooms, flexible student schedules and teachers for theoretical learning and practical training, etc.). Additional recourses are needed for crisis management, coordination, planning, logistics and infection control in VET schools.

The current situation calls for a more effective and efficient allocation of the resources for VET and VSD based on labour market needs. The government has to make evidence-based decisions,

⁴ Regular Economic Report for Western Balkan, no 17, spring 2020, World Bank

taking into account the evaluations and the feedback from the business sector on the measures that helped to alleviate the COVID-19 impact.

The policies and the protocols aimed at protection of the workers during the pandemic need to cover specific requirements for protecting students in practical training as well. The implementation of these measures ("additional" costs for the students and mentors in companies) might require financial support for the companies.

Due to COVID-19, VET schools and companies engaged in PPP need to adapt the practical training (training programmes, teaching/learning methodology, assessments, safety requirements, etc.) in order to guarantee quality alternating VET

In order to reduce the current uncertainty, the responsible institutions should consider organizing a training and information sharing system for stakeholders (parents, students, mentors, companies, etc.) to get acquainted with the new safety and hygiene requirements in VSD/VET.

MoES jointly with the business sector have to establish a formal committee/advisory group (composed of experts from different stakeholders) that will be responsible for monitoring, analysing and proposing day to day policy measures and changes to address the current and a mid-term challenges of COVID-19 impact on all kind of practical training in VET.

The Law on VET, the bylaws, the various concepts and strategies etc. have to explicitly provide the needed flexibility to VET schools and employers in terms of how to apply WBL and the assessment thereof, in light of the newly imposed situation. This will mitigate the fact that students enter the labour market with less WBL experience than planned/needed. Therefore, the system needs to determine the minimum hours of practical training necessary to guarantee quality of the acquired qualification (number of hours and level of quality achieved before the graduation). These processes have to involve the private sector to ensure ownership and commitment.

The scenarios for practical training need to be adjusted until the pandemic is over – rethinking ways of grouping students (teacher-student and mentor-student ratios), safety requirements and protocols, and ensuring effective communication channels for information exchange between teachers and companies' mentors in all steps of the training process (preparation, realization, assessment).

If it is not safe or appropriate for the students to continue in a company setting, consideration should be given to different alternatives. The feasibility of realizing WBL remotely has to be reconsidered and whether this could be replicated/be a suitable replacement for the WBL done in the company (in terms of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria). Additional support and supervision of students should also be established to evaluate possibilities of the continuation of WBL activities (either within in the company, or via an alternative arrangement). Any alternative arrangements should consider the needs of the students, including any additional need for support or resources while maintaining the academic standards and quality.

VET teachers need immediate systemic support to respond to the new challenges (e.g. digitalization) and to keep up with the developments in the sector they teach

The digitalization in education implies embedding online learning into the curriculum/modular training development; quality assurance and quality control of the same; and new tools and methodologies to be put in place. This requires supporting teachers' professional development to become facilitators of distant learning, to utilize online learning platforms, to enhance their digital skills, as well as enabling mechanisms to keep them updated in the field they are teaching in (where cooperation with the business sector is again necessary).

Teacher development has to go into the direction of enabling them to create and apply own contents, methods etc. and not only following guidelines and acting upon pre-prepared materials.

Their teaching approach needs to support the development of a flexible future workforce, i.e. youth that is apt at using ICT for learning, has a problem-solving attitude, interpersonal skills etc. Suitable mechanisms that stimulate and acknowledge teachers' efforts in this regard need to be put in place. This will create a certain competition between teachers and thus result in an improved teaching quality.

The tendency towards blended learning urges that the achievement of learning results by the end of the qualification requires careful selection of learning materials and tools, as well as adopting a teaching/learning methodology that reflects the working reality for which the students are being qualified.

VSD providers have to adapt their offers to the modified labour market needs while considering the decreased purchasing power, requalification needs of redundant workers or emerging trends

It is difficult to predict with accuracy the labour market trends in the future, but certain trends are already apparent. Namely, the people's purchasing power will decrease in general. The essential needs (food, utilities, rent, mortgage etc.) will have precedence over the personal development. So, it is expected that the personal investments in non-formal VSD will decrease as well. On the other side, the loss of jobs will increase the need for requalification of the newly unemployed people, leading to increased demand for non-formal VSD. The main challenge is who will bear the costs for the requalification trainings, and in this sense a strong cooperation between the state and the business sector is needed. All the available financing mechanisms, both provided by the state and the private sector, should support the (repetitive) labour market insertion process.

It is obvious that the crisis will change to a certain degree our way we live and work. The increased use of telemedicine, online shopping or virtual management meetings are just an example of such new behaviours. This requires new/improved competences and skills from employees and job seekers, which in turn creates new opportunities for VSD providers. That is why it is crucial to strengthen the cooperation between employers and VSD providers for the latter to be able to align their offers to the modified labour market needs. On the other hand, potential supporting measures (e.g. Operational Plan) have to become much more performance-based in order to create a sustainable and demand-based VSD sector instead of the current one that is highly dependent on the financial support of the state and international donors.

Investments in digitalization and up-to-date technologies in VSD/VET need a clear strategy that takes into account the prospects of the economic sectors and the related occupations

Quality VSD/VET can only be reached through considerable investments in digitalization and up-to-date technologies. This is a permanent, cost-intensive process that requires good cooperation between the state and the private sector and a transparent investment strategy.

Following the approach of the Regional VET Centres (IPA II), investments in digitalization and up-to-date training technologies⁵ of VET schools should be driven by the economic and employment perspectives in the different regions of the country. The most sustainable way to finance and maintain up-to-date training technologies in the long-term is a target-oriented cooperation between municipalities, VET schools and companies from the same region.

Increased training possibilities for students in well-equipped companies (WBL) will allow the VET schools (the state) to focus their investments on up-to-date training technologies that are appropriate for the students to acquire basic practical skills. The companies are keen to contribute

⁵ Technology / equipment that has the main purpose of training students

to such technologies in VET schools if they see a direct benefit for their themselves. This may either be a benefit to improve the skills of the school graduates as their future employees, a marketing investment targeting the students as their future clients, or an act of social responsibility image management.

Active labour marker policies (e.g. Operational Plan) need adapted/additional measures to serve the different target groups like youth, long-term unemployed, redundant workers, seasonal workers, women etc.

An increased flexibility of the measures within the Operational Plan has been recommended by the international experts on several occasions. This flexibility will enable quicker response to the labour market needs, especially in unfavourable situation, as we are now. The strict and rigid definition, pertinent to the training measures, will not provide significant positive outcomes on the labour market. Currently, due to COVID-19 crisis, the usage of the funds allocated for the Operational Plan is at low level, which supplemented by the slow response to the market needs does not provide significant added value on the market. The state and the private stakeholders need to find a proper balance between flexibility and rigidity of the active labour market measures, having in mind the different target groups.

In addition, policies and measures need to adapt to the labour market developments. Here, international experiences can be used to support the process towards creation of more effective and efficient labour market measures.

Additional measures are needed aimed at improving the inclusiveness of marginalized groups in VSD/VET and the labour market

Due to the emerged circumstances caused by COVID-19, the inclusiveness of the VSD/VET provision and the labour market in relation to marginalized groups has become even more challenging. On one hand, these groups are at higher risk to contract the virus, and on the other hand they are also more affected in missing out different opportunities in relation to VSD/VET and the labour market. Therefore, it is very important for the government and other relevant system actors to support marginalized groups by integrating them on equity basis in all supporting measures they offer for dealing with COVID-19, and also by designing special measures that target the needs of the marginalized groups in particular.

In short-term, prior to contributing to the inclusiveness of VSD/VET or the labour market, they should ensure the safety of the marginalized and vulnerable groups in relation to COVID-19 by providing them access to hygiene products and educating them how to prevent exposure to the virus. Similarly, they should design aid measures both in terms of financial security and health safety, including measures for mental health support, which in times like this becomes essential. In the meantime, the educational institutions and the private sector should not exclude marginalized groups from their mitigation plans in their efforts to adapt to the current situation.

Non-formal VSD providers should inform and include them in online trainings, online individual or group coaching or other safe arrangements for VSD provision. In similar direction, VET schools should ensure that students from marginalized groups do not lag behind in comparison with other students. In both cases, access to digital devices is crucial. Therefore, setting the infrastructure/prerequisites for inclusiveness is vital.

Employers that can adapt their operations to this situation should ensure that all of their employees including those with disabilities are fully empowered/enabled to work both in the company and remotely. In doing so, they should be vigilant as teleworking may have unintended consequences in different aspects – productivity, quality control, mental health and alike. Finally, the question on how to deal with post-COVID-19 consequences on marginalised and vulnerable

groups becomes even more important considering the fact that many people that were previously living on the edge of will most probably fall in the marginalized groups due to the loss of their jobs or any other support they have been using but has been stopped during the pandemic. Based on the Government's recommendations, employers were required to release from work employees who are parents of children up to the age of 10, and this was done mostly by women, although the measure did not restrict the gender. This may have negative influence on future trends of women employment. These questions require wholistic approach and consideration by the government, the business organisations, the DPOs, NGOs, the donors and by all other system actors that should be proactive and join their efforts in supporting those that are in need of a helping hand.

Parents/youth must be intensively informed that VET is an equally safe career path as general education

VET is still not perceived as a viable career option both by students and their parents, who have a great impact on their choice over secondary education. This is due to several reasons, chief among which is the fact that both groups are not well informed on the labour market needs, secondary VET options and the career opportunities that follow afterwards. This lack of information is also supported by the perception that VET schools have low quality teaching and infrastructure. COVID-19 can even more exacerbate this perception because of the "health safety" reasons and current response of the learning in VET (VET students have to learn in two different places: school and company, so the general education that is offered only in schools can be seen as safer and proactive in giving solutions).

Therefore, system actors such as MoES, VET Center, VET schools and the private sector should join their efforts in making the benefits of secondary VET more visible, and in improving the quality of the latter, especially by creating and utilising favourable conditions for building practical skills both in school and in real working environments, i.e. companies. In this regard, during the pandemic itself, the VET Center, supported by E4E@MK, created a Guideline through VET Qualifications and disseminated it through different digital channels aiming to outreach students and their parents. It is a very significant step forward in informing partners/youth about different VET qualifications, but it is not expected to influence the parents' decision on choosing VET rather than general secondary education. This initiative is also supported by individual promotional efforts of few VET schools for attracting students, usually through social media. Similarly, the National VSD Campaign that was launched last year intensified its activities in promoting VET, given that June is the month when enrolment in secondary education happens. Promoting VET this year was severely impeded by the outbreak, but future considerations would need to consider joint promotional efforts with the business sector, as in 2019.

Furthermore, VET attractiveness can be strengthened with using occupations and profiles related to services that are not affected and remain a necessity for a functioning and healthy society even during a pandemic (such as: agriculture and food production, processing and delivery, electricity production and maintenance, water supply, child and older persons care, construction etc.)

6. Conclusion

Considering the emphasis on practical skills development and the relation with the private sector thereto, both formal VET and non-formal VSD are more influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic than general education. In North Macedonia, the crisis revealed the missing investments in infrastructure, human resources development, practical training, decentralization processes, marked orientation, digitalization etc. which have consequently resulted in a fragile VSD/VET system that barely meets the expectations of the students learners or the expectations of the

employers in finding a workforce employee and is therefore recognized as second option to general education.

Nevertheless, COVID-19 is a fact and has therefore to be considered as a real challenge that needs to be addressed. E4E@MK project is convinced that the recently started move towards a more labour market-oriented and inclusive VSD/VET system with a stronger engagement of the private sector and a higher emphasis of the development of the practical skills has to remain, as this is the only promising option to provide qualified staff needed for the development of the Macedonian economy and hence to create employment opportunities for the people in the country especially those from the marginalized groups. Adaptations as mentioned in the chapters above have to be introduced in all state and private actors involved in VSD/VET based on a jointly defined strategy.

Although the international partners will continue to support North Macedonia in this direction, it is the Macedonian Government and the Macedonian economy which have to steer the development of VSD/VET in the interest of its population and general socio-economic welfare.

7. External feedback to the report

The external feedback to the report has been provided by project partners/state institutions responsible for development of vocational education and training. The feedback in this section is presented in its original form (as submitted) and highlights the fact that all relevant stakeholders have the same or similar contemplations regarding the influence of COVID-19 on the Macedonian VSD/VET system and the E4E@MK project:

“Although in the previous school year a Summer Practice Guideline was prepared and its application was piloted, due to COVID – 19 pandemic, a decision was made to postpone the implementation of the summer practice in the secondary vocational education for the academic year of 2019/2020. Instructions for the implementation of the summer practice have been adopted and accordingly, the summer practice will be carried out during the next school year - before the start of the second semester i.e. by end of January 2021. However, no decision has been made on how the summer practice will be implemented if the pandemic continues”

“The capacities of the actual school companies, school workshops and training laboratories in the vocational schools should be strengthened. It is especially important to ensure the acquisition of skills within the integrated curricula for technical education, but also for those students who, for any reason, will not be able to practice at the companies/employers”.

“To support the teachers in the vocational education, it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of the Vocational Education and Training Center. As a competent institution for the development of vocational education and training, in order to harmonize the needs with the modern technological and social development, the strengthening of its capacities will contribute to several types of support for teachers in their professional development”.

“A significant step has been made to inform partners/young people about the various qualifications within the vocational education and training, but in order to have a greater impact on the decision of the parents to influence their children towards vocational education, the promotion of the vocational education should be strengthened in the future. Such promotion should be carried out through direct meetings between the representatives of primary schools, parents and students”

“Companies should show initiative and should restructure certain sectors. The situation shows that many of the working tasks of a company can be performed outside the company i.e. by working from home (especially administrative work). An analysis is needed to determine what savings are generated by the company when the employee works from home (transport, food, electricity savings, etc.), while avoiding to look for solutions in reducing the workforce”.

„The digitalization has shown that there is a degree of digital illiteracy. Instead of institutions being dependent on Zoom, Kudoway and similar platforms, there should be a state-level communication platform. Second, the teaching staff showed insufficient competence for this type of work in combination with insufficient IT equipment (both at institutional and individual level) in the country for this method of working. Third, a large proportion of students accepted distance learning as a release from the constraints of the everyday continuous learning, with a small number receiving help by their parents, who in this situation appear as tutors to the children”.

„We should look into the perspectives and identify solutions and models for abandoning the centralized education system while developing a collaborative principle of work”.