UniLab

Model of Quality Plan and Standards for Work-Based Learning

INTRODUCTION

The following quality plan is based on the quality assurance cycle that consists of planning, implementing, monitoring, assessing and improving Work-Based Learning (WBL) placements in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in partner countries (PC). Quality assurance is a major issue for HEIs in a challenging world, and requires a high level of competencies. In this context, based on the definition of principles for the implementation of WBL in the UniLab project, it will enhance the qualitative WBL placement for students. It will also help companies meet their recruitment needs, tackle the workforce shortage in specific sectors, and improve the HEI's reputation.

The HEI, as the provider of WBL placements/programmes, guarantees the implementation of the quality plan.

Our model is a PCI model based on **principles**, **criteria (or standards),** and **indicators[1].**

- The **UniLab principles and concepts**, as defined here
- **The indicators** are the conditions that need to be met to achieve high-quality WBL.
- **Proofs and supporting documents** mentioned in the quality plan are necessary for the **monitoring** process and/or assessment in order to improve WBL placements. They will be developed as **tools** (or as prototypes of tools) (D5.4).

This is a generic model, which can be adapted to fit any HEI in the PC countries. It offers a step-by-step guide to ensure that the model is transferred successfully to any institution.

The main steps of the development of the quality plan are:
- Identification of the main target groups: stakeholders, students, academic staff and companies
- Identification of the objectives which the HEI intends to reach with this quality plan
- Description of the activities implemented, the persons responsible for these activities, and the timetable for implementing them
- Evaluation and monitoring (both internal and external) of the process including a timetable, and assessment and evaluation tools (such as the proofs and supporting documents described with the indicators for monitoring)
- Preparation of a clear timetable for the improvement cycle
- Listing of standards (adapted to the HEI's needs)

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[1] References: Qaliopi French System Certification https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/guide-lecture-referentiel-qualite.pdf and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/D4.7-Framework-screen-TeSLA-2606.pdf

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

The UniLab project recommends that the institution selects the standards that are appropriate for the current state of development of their WBL provision. The staff in charge of the different activities then execute these, and through regular monitoring, quality assurance is guaranteed, generating recommendations to improve the system. The UniLab quality assurance model is a prototype that includes a set of actions developed by a group of experts, to match the principles and general regulations of WBL programmes. This model is not accredited by any external system.

The UniLab quality and standards set out here could however provide the basis for a future accreditation based on external evaluation.
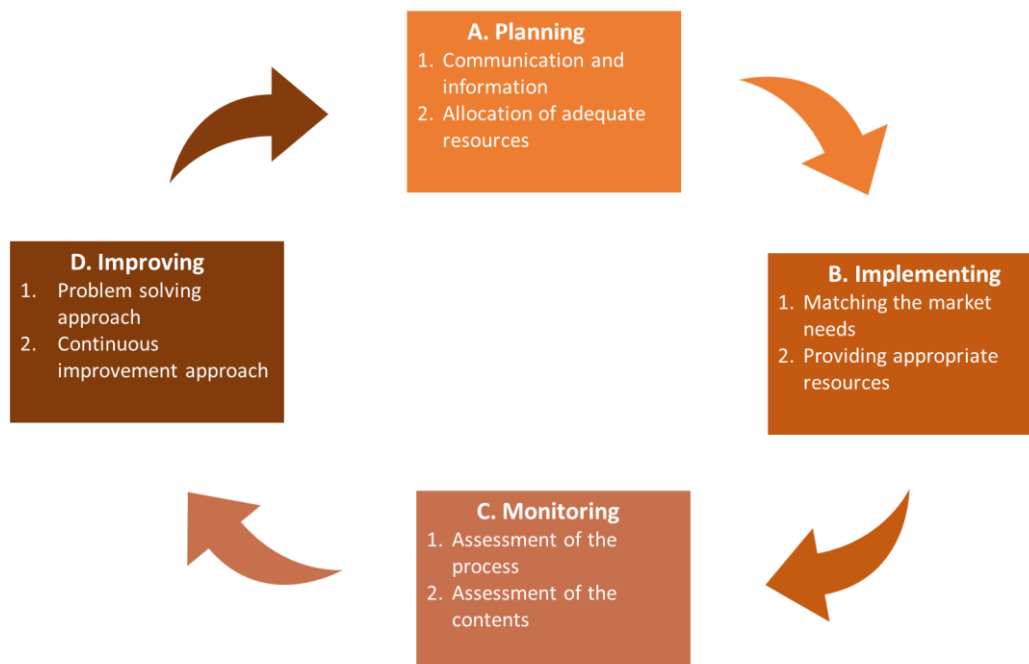

Fig 1 The improvement cycle of standards model

THE BENEFICIARIES OF THE QUALITY PLAN

The main aim of this quality plan is to guarantee a qualitative delivery of WBL programmes for beneficiaries. While the specific characteristics of beneficiaries will vary from HEI to HEI, they will broadly fall into the following categories:

- **Students:** The quality plan aims to ensure that WBL placements are organised and implemented to allow students to apply the theoretical learning they gained in their studies in the working environment. This requires WBL placements to be adapted to the HEI's curricula and vice versa. The quality plan also aims to ensure that students are provided with sufficient information about the various WBL placement options available to them, and with adequate support throughout their WBL placement, both from the side of the HEIs and the employers.

- **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):** HEIs are expected to benefit from implementing the various standards listed in the quality plan as it will enable them to collaborate more closely with companies, attract more high-calibre students, and develop standard procedures which can be implemented in a formalised manner across different WBL programmes. The quality plan will benefit different actors within HEIs in various ways. For example, if implemented correctly, the quality plan will support *academic staff* in understanding the needs of students and companies, and defining learning objectives and selecting pedagogies accordingly. The quality plan also foresees providing staff with the necessary training to supervise students throughout their WBL placement experience (see section below on "Tutors/Mentors". *Administrative staff* will also benefit from the quality plan, as it supports them in registering students on WBL and placements, responding to queries regarding WBL from students or companies, and maintaining an up-to-date database on companies and placement opportunities they provide. It will also guide them in adequately funding, monitoring and improving WBL and placements.

- **Companies:** The quality plan benefits companies who offer placements and WBL to students, or those interested in doing so. By providing HEIs with the tools to analyse companies' needs, it will ensure that WBL and placements are beneficial and relevant to companies and their activities, and that companies and HEIs are mutually supportive in implementing WBL. It specifically aims to provide designated staff (see the following section on "tutors/mentors") within companies with the training and resources they need to mentor students on placements, and to equip them with the learning, supervision and assessment tools they need to guide students in a way that benefits them as well as the company.

- **Tutors/Mentors:** In order to ensure that students transition successfully into and through their WBL placements, they are guided by "tutors", i.e. designated academic staff from the HEI, and "mentors", i.e. designated professional staff from the enterprise hosting the placement. Tutors'/mentors' work does not begin and end with the placement, but involves ensuring that both the student and their prospective workplace are prepared, that the contractual requirements are established and met, and that any challenges the student encounters during the placement are addressed in a timely and effective manner. Tutors/mentors are also tasked with undertaking regular periodical reviews and evaluations during the placement, and a final review and reflection at the end. This document, the annexed list of tools and supporting documents, offer guidance on all these activities, and on the training that mentors/tutors should undertake to complete them successfully.

- **Local authorities:** As potential intermediaries between HEIs, students and companies, local authorities can play an important role in implementing WBL and placements, and stand to benefit from the quality plan. In particular, the quality plan ensures that procedures for matching students with companies are standardised, that databases of companies and possible WBL opportunities are comprehensive and up-to-date, and that companies and HEIs communicate regularly to understand each others' needs.. As a result, local authorities can allocate funds (e.g. for scholarships, student bursaries or loans) more efficiently, match companies and students more effectively, and as a result strengthen the local industries and economy in the long term.

STANDARDS, MAIN INDICATORS AND TOOLS

A. Planning WBL programmes

Standard n°1: Communication and information provisions

Main indicators:

1.1 The HEI provides public, exhaustive and accessible information:
- Updated details on the curricula of WBL programmes (including contents, teaching and learning methodologies, evaluation processes, competences students are expected to acquire, possible career pathways graduates may pursue, programmes' relevance to the labour market needs in specific sectors, and opportunities for international mobility)
- Clear information on fees, relevant contacts and the registration process

1.2 The information provided promotes the WBL programmes by including:
- Details on results and efficiency (i.e. employment rates)
- Different levels of information according to the beneficiaries. However, the information is always based on common and public data about the WBL placements and programmes

1.3 The information also covers the following elements:
- Graduation rates for the WBL-based programmes
- Opportunities for the recognition and validation of previous experience (if a RPL system is in place in the PC countries)
- Employment rates after completing the WBL programme

Proofs and supporting documents may include leaflets, website, online events, forums, and reporting documents.

Useful Tool: The **digital portal** (relevant to indicators 1.1,1.2,1.3) is a one-stop shop where students, companies, and HEI staff members can access, share and update information on WBL programmes. It provides a platform for the different beneficiaries to interact with each other and to research, compare, and publicise WBL programmes and related opportunities.

Standard n°2: Developing human resources and allocating adequate funds

Main indicators:

2.1 The university mobilises and trains staff and experts by:

- Defining the competencies that are required among staff (internal/external) involved in the training offers and WBL programmes
- Providing pre-service and in-service training allowing staff to acquire said competencies
- Involving experts and professionals from the labour market in the learning design and teaching

2.2 The HEI ensures WBL programmes' sustainability by diversifying funds, drawing on:

- public and private sources
- scholarships offered by enterprises, and contributions from public funds at the regional or national level

Proofs and supporting documents may include staff qualifications, training plans, CVs, professional interviews, exchange of good practices, subcontracting of independent providers, proof of personal and professional continuing training of staff, leasing contracts for premises, invoices of equipment, agreements with funding organisations, proofs of funding sources

Useful Tool: The **training of tutors** (relevant to indicator 2.1) is aimed at tutors or mentors from within the HEIs or companies who are supervising students undertaking WBL placements. The goal of the training is to provide tutors/mentors with an understanding of the purpose and procedures of WBL and thus to support students in meeting the expectations of the HEI and the company, while also pursuing their own professional and academic development.

B. Implementing WBL programmes

Standard n°3: Matching of the WBL placement with the HEI curriculum and the labour market requirements

Main indicators:

3.1 The HEI analyses the needs of companies and students in order to:

- adapt the WBL programmes' contents and contexts to the objectives of the programme and the actors' needs
- take into account the funding available
- match the content of the WBL programmes with the requirements of the relevant qualifications, and in turn match these with the needs of the labour market

3.2 The university defines the contents, implements the programmes, and organizes services to ensure:

- the alignment of WBL programmes with the agreed learning objectives and the needs of all beneficiaries
- the adequate allocation of resources to the WBL programmes (including the provision of adequate administrative and academic spaces)

Proofs and supporting documents may include criteria of feasibility, proofs of co-constructive approach and dialogue with the labour market, adaptation of planning (placement/courses), timetables, pedagogical methods including blended learning, academic and administrative staff contacts, agreements (between universities and employers, and between students and employers), and diploma and qualification frameworks.

Useful Tool: **Agreements** (relevant to indicator 3.2) between HEIs and companies, students and companies, and students and HEIs aim to formalise the conditions of WBL placements and guarantee that all parties involved meet the requirements of the curriculum, the programme, and the qualification which the WBL placement forms part of. The agreements are also crucial in establishing the companies' expectations for the students undertaking WBL placements.

Standard n°4: Providing and updating appropriate and adequate materials and resources

Main indicators:

4.1 The HEI provides appropriate materials, tools and premises, which ensure:

- the alignment of WBL programmes with the agreed learning objectives and the needs of all beneficiaries
- the successful implementation of WBL placements in various locations (enterprises, universities, and other relevant sites). This requires the premises to be equipped with the necessary learning and teaching materials and tools, including those which support WBL students in their academic and professional development

4.2 The HEI guarantees that resources meet the requirements and conform to the relevant standards by:

- regularly checking and updating resources and materials, and ensuring that they are fully functional and fulfil the required services
- frequently reviewing the relevant standards to ensure that they are in line with the programme requirements

Proofs and supporting documents may include contracts, invoices for premises and conformity of documents, proof of checking of conformity and matching standards

Useful Tool: In addition to specifying the responsibilities of companies and students engaged in WBL placements (see Standard n°3), **agreements** (relevant to indicator 4.1) and supplementary **inventories** (relevant to indicator 4.2) hold HEIs accountable to the resources, materials and infrastructure they are committed to providing for WBL programmes. These serve to support students throughout their WBL placements, and to ensure students' WBL experience is sufficiently integrated into their study programme.

C. Monitoring WBL programmes

Standard n°5: Assessment of the implementation of the WBL programme

Main indicators

5.1 Students' learning on the WBL programme is documented, evaluated and assessed based on measurable objectives. This entails:

- defining learning objectives in the WBL programme curricula, and in the agreements with the different stakeholders, authorities, and companies for the whole programme
- undertaking assessments according to the needs of the students and other beneficiaries
- involving both the HEI and the company in the evaluation of students' performance

5.2 The HEI prepares assessments and evaluates the quality of the WBL placement based on:

- the tools implemented for the monitoring of the placement (by tutors and supervisors)
- indicators on the tasks that were performed, the goals that were reached and the skills that were acquired throughout the training programs and degree
- a consideration of all the elements of the WBL programme (i.e. business-university cooperation, funding, WBL design, research and promotion of WBL programs, the registration of students, validation, graduation, enquiries about job placements)

Proofs and supporting documents may include programme analysis, supervision/tutor reports, agreements, self-diagnostic tools, evaluations, learning diaries, periodical reviews, and monitoring notebooks

Useful Tool: **Leaning diaries**, kept by students throughout their placement, and **periodical reviews and evaluations**, in which students discuss their learning with their mentors/tutors (relevant to indicator 5.1) serve to document and assess students' progress over the course of the WBL placement. They should provide an accurate account of the students' activities within the company, how they relate to the curriculum of the study programme they are pursuing, and students' contributions to the companies' activities, based on which students can be assessed fairly and accurately. In addition, students should also create **portfolios** (relevant to indicator 5.1 and 5.2) based on their WBL placements, which showcase their academic and professional development. They can be used by students when applying for jobs or internships, but can also support HEIs in evaluating the quality of their WBL placements.

Standard n°6: Assessment of the content of WBL programmes

Main indicators

6.1 The HEIs apply the lessons learnt to their curricula and programme contents to better support students' development of competences for relevant jobs and sectors within the scope of WBL programmes. This involves:

- regularly reviewing the contents of their academic programmes to ensure that they provide students with a basic understanding of relevant sectors, and equip them with the necessary hard and soft skills to flourish in their WBL placements

- developing modes of assessment which test students on this knowledge and skills, and on their ability to apply them in a work-based environment

6.2 HEIs and companies share experiences and knowledge to ensure that WBL placements are based on realistic needs. This is achieved by:

- regularly updating their mutual understanding, e.g. through peer learning experiences, knowledge exchange, and conferences
- forming close partnerships between tutors and mentors from both HEIs and companies, and fostering regular communication and exchange.

6.3 WBL placements lead to tangible results, specifically in the increase in offers made by companies to students for:

- placement/training/internship opportunities
- full-time and long-term employment

Proof and supporting documents may include job fairs, advocacy, research and analysis of the business development, participation in fairs, membership in organisations and associations for the promotion of WBL, or networks, surveys establishing the state-of-the art of professional sectors, data on the successful recruitment of students.

Useful Tool: HEIs can implement different types of **surveys** (relevant to indicator 6.1), e.g. surveys measuring students' and companies' satisfaction with WBL placements, or post-graduation employment surveys, in order to assess the content, relevance and overall quality of their WBL programmes. HEIs are not only able to ascertain whether WBL placements are meeting the requirements of students and companies, but can also obtain information on students' progression into employment.

D. Improving WBL programs

Standard n°7: Implementation of problem-solving approach to claims

Main indicators

7.1 The HEIs elaborate problem solving processes, in order to address any issues or difficulties which may arise throughout the WBL placement. Such processes are established by:

- setting up confidential channels of communication through which students, company representatives, academic staff and other stakeholders can report a problem, risk or claim related to their experience of the WBL programme
- assigning staff within the HEI as responsible for receiving and processing these claims and reports

7.2 The HEI implements procedures to handle claims and risks for activities involving all stakeholders. This entails:

- establishing and maintaining procedures for identifying, categorising and responding to claims and reports
- training staff who are responsible for handling claims and reports to ensure that they deal with such claims and reports in a professional manner and have sufficient and up-to-date knowledge of the WBL programmes to do so.

Proofs and supporting documents may include acknowledgement of receipt of claims, answers, satisfaction survey, and analysis of claims.

Useful tool: A standard **queries and complaints procedure** (relevant to indicator 7.1 and 7.2) which is implemented for every WBL programme serves to ensure a common approach to problem-solving and handling claims across the HEI. Claims can be made by students, companies, and other stakeholders. Besides administrative staff tasked with receiving, processing, and passing on the claim, there should also be a designated member of staff within every academic department (e.g. the WBL programme coordinator) who is responsible for receiving the claim and taking the necessary action. The queries and complaints procedure should be able to accommodate and process different types of claims, and should offer different action pathways depending on the nature and gravity of the query/complaint.

Standard n°8: Continuous improvement approach

Main indicators

8.1 The university develops actions to improve the services they provide based on the analysis of evaluations and claims. They do so by:

- evaluating the reports and claims made and analysing them for recurring issues and problems
- identifying areas for improvement based on these issues and problems and implementing the necessary actions to resolve them

8.2 The HEI guarantees staff's upskilling and continuous professional development by

- establishing, in addition to pre-service training (see Standard n°2), in-service training and continuous professional development for tutors who are responsible for overseeing WBL placements
- creating platforms for peer mentoring and learning, and ensuring that line managers set up regular supervision meetings with their subordinates

Proofs and supporting documents may include identification of causes of students' dropping out of WBL placements and main grounds for dissatisfaction, action plans for improvement, training materials for tutors' and other staff's continuous professional development.

Useful Tools: Rather than pursuing a top-down method of professional development, a **self-reflective continuous improvement approach** empowers WBL placement staff to take their professional development into their own hands. Tutors/mentors do so by recollecting, reviewing and analysing their experiences of supervising students on their WBL placements, identifying challenges and their responses to them, and developing (either individually or collectively) ways to improve their supervision practice. Ideally, HEIs should embed this self-reflective continuous improvement approach in their formalised continuous professional development for staff, and accredit it accordingly.