REPORT
EARLALL survey results:
EARLALL Member Regions' reaction to COVID-19

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EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF REGIONAL & LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Resilient skills ecosystems
for a crisis-proof future

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For more information, visit www.earlall.eu/resilience.

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Introduction

This report gathers the main actions carried out by regional and local authorities in the field of education and training in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in Spring 2020 and the initiative "Building Regional Skills Ecosystems," launched by EARLALL in June 2020. Personal interviews were carried out with officers at each of the presented regions, who assessed the main challenges and solutions put in place in order to guarantee the functioning of education and training in their regions, as well as the measures taken to counter the effects of the subsequent crisis.

Interviews were carried out during the summer of 2020 (June-July) with officers from EARLALL Member Regions, which also contributed with reports and documents. Their contribution to this report was extremely valuable.

Please note that the contents of this report were gathered right after the first lockdown (spring 2020) in order to assess the impact of the first wave of COVID-19 on regional education and training systems, and how they faced it. Therefore, further measures might have been applied in the mentioned regions as of September 2020.

Baden-Württemberg

Baden-Württemberg is a state in southwest Germany, east of the Rhine, which forms the border with France. It is Germany's third-largest state, with an area of 35,751 km2 (13,804 sq mi) and 11 million inhabitants. Baden-Württemberg is a parliamentary republic and a partly sovereign, federated state which was formed in 1952 by a merger of the states of Württemberg-Baden, South Baden and Württemberg-Hohenzollern. The largest city in Baden-Württemberg is the state capital Stuttgart, followed by Karlsruhe and Mannheim.

The Ministry of Education, Youth & Sports in Baden-Württemberg is in charge of the **regional education-system (subsidiarity).**

Effects of the pandemic on the educational system in Baden-Württemberg

The increasing number of infections during the first phase of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 led to the **closure of all state and public schools, universities, and adult learning institutions** in Baden-Württemberg. During this period, teaching took place mainly from home using print and online media.

The **resumption of regular operations,** i.e. classroom teaching in schools (from June 2020), was accompanied by adult education institutions offering face-to-face courses again. However, these were only allowed to be carried out under **strict hygiene conditions.**

In the current corona regulations of the state of Baden-Württemberg, the hygiene concepts to be observed by schools, universities and adult learning institutions are continuously adapted, in accordance with the local infection incidence. A further closure of the educational institutions is currently (as of October 2020) not planned.

Measures to support schools

The state reacted quickly to provide the **school management** teams with the best possible support and to ensure that teaching could continue. **Financial and educational measures** were implemented in the short term. The focus was on providing **digital devices** (hardware) and supporting teachers and pupils in the use of **virtual services** (e.g. virtual classrooms, group telephone, chat application, etc.)

Challenges in the school sector

Although the schools were able to continue teaching with the financial and technical support of the state, there were some challenges for everyone involved (principals, teachers, pupils, and parents). The biggest challenge was to **ensure continuous and equally supported learning** at home:

- In the case of **"home learning",** the supervision by teachers was limited. Parents had to step in and not only take over homework supervision, but to some extent also the teaching of their children.
- Children from a different cultural and linguistic background, from a socio-economically weak background and / or educationally disadvantaged parents often could not be looked after to the same extent and level as their classmates and ran the **risk of being left behind.**
- Learning in **small, noisy flats and the lack of suitable, basic technical equipment** in the private environment (no own laptops, smartphones etc.) made the situation and not least the ability to concentrate more difficult for many pupils.
- Childcare at home often had to be provided by **working parents** (mostly mothers), as, for example, childcare services (which often take place in public spaces) could not be provided.
- The **parents' occupational situation** (fear of losing their jobs, short-time work or a systemically relevant activity with a risk of infection, e.g. in a hospital, nursing home, etc.) and the resulting **psychological effect** made the children's situation even more difficult.

Current development in the school sector

The departments responsible for school and vocational training have gained a lot of experience from the COVID-19 crisis. The need to implement a **comprehensive digitisation strategy** in schools is currently the focus of education policy. This includes not only improving the technical infrastructure (hardware) at educational institutions, but also promoting digitally supported teaching and learning methods and instruments (software) and the corresponding **training and qualification of teachers** in this field.

Measures to support institutions for further education (General continuing education)

From March to June 2020, all public and private adult education institutions were closed. Here, too, the state reacted quickly in order to support CET providers (adult education centres, church education providers, etc.) in the best possible way - in this case mainly financially. In contrast to the school sector, the focus here was not primarily on the seamless continuation of all course offerings, but on the **structural maintenance of the corresponding institutions.**

Challenges in the adult education sector

Further education institutions, such as adult education centres and church educational institutions, receive **partial funding** in Baden-Württemberg **from the state and / or the municipality.** For example, teaching units for basic education are proportionally subsidized through the "basic funding of the state of Baden-Württemberg". Adult education centres that are affiliated to a municipality also receive financial support from their municipality, which can be used to maintain the infrastructure. Furthermore, further training institutions are also dependent on the receipt of **participant fees,** e.g. to pay out lecturer fees.

Due to the closure of the training facilities as a result of Corona, the training providers were faced with the following problems:

- Many **further training offers that can only be carried out in face-to-face** form (such as courses in the sports and health sectors) were **cancelled.** So, no participation fees could be collected and thus no lecturer fees could be paid out.
- The **costs for maintaining the facilities** (rent, electricity, salaries of the house staff, etc.) continued and could not be covered by reserves for some facilities.
- The **lacking digital equipment** (hardware), especially for smaller educational institutions, did not allow a complete switch to digital offers.
- Some of the **staff was not prepared** for the digital administration of courses and had to be trained in this regard.

In order to ensure the structural maintenance of the further education institutions, the state of Baden-Württemberg developed and implemented an **"emergency aid programme"** within a very short time. The financial support measures were promptly passed on to the training providers eligible for funding. The municipalities also received funds to improve the infrastructure at adult education centres, among other things.

Current development in further education

In contrast to the school sector, where a uniform digital education platform is currently being worked on, Baden-Württemberg is the only federal state to have created a **technical infrastructure for adult education as the basis for online-based continuing education offers as early as 2013.** This infrastructure is known under the name "Digitaler Weiterbildungscampus" (DWC) ["Digital Campus for Continuous Education"].

The DWC has been used by numerous providers of general and professional further education in Baden-Württemberg since 2014. It is an example of how e-learning elements can be used flexibly, independent of time, location, and target groups for the entire, diverse further education landscape. The provision, technical development and use of the DWC is **funded by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Baden-Württemberg.** Eligible users are exclusively institutions of further education in Baden-Württemberg. Further education institutions not located in Baden-Württemberg can also use the DWC, but do not receive any funding from the state of Baden-Württemberg. These contact the participating service provider directly and conclude their own SaaS contract (Software as a Service contract) with them.

During the corona-related closure of the training facilities, there was a **greatly increased (8-fold) user behaviour on the digital training campus.** In addition, the training providers were able to **rework some of their face-to-face offers** on the DWC and carry them out digitally. This not only led to a positive response from the course participants, but also from the heads of the training institutions. In the future, they not only want to digitally train and qualify their teaching staff, but also work on the digitisation of their own organizational, administrative and personnel structures.

Long-term measures to support further education in Baden-Württemberg

In the course of the structural change that encompasses all areas of life and the digital transformation of our society (which is accelerated by the current corona situation), **training is becoming increasingly important in political discourse.** The state of Baden-Württemberg is already relying on **intensive cooperation between politics, business and education** as well as **closer integration of the various ministries** responsible for general, vocational and scientific education and training.

Against this background, in July 2020 the state of Baden-Württemberg, together with its partners in the "Bündnis für Lebenslanges Lernen" ["Alliance for Lifelong Learning"], reached a **new agreement on continuing education and training** which specifies the most urgent topics and tasks of continuing education and training in the next five years. Under the title **"GEMEINSAM. FÜR. WEITERBILDUNG" ["TOGETHER. FOR. FURTHER EDUCATION"]** the following seven chapters are to be implemented jointly:

1. Managing structural change in the economy and the world of work
2. Strengthening social cohesion
3. Expanding continuing education guidance
4. Securing and expanding basic education
5. Shaping the change in the forms of provision
6. Ensuring the quality of further education
7. Promoting information, transparency, and cohesion

Examples of Good practice

With the help of the "Digital Campus for Continuous Education" and other online learning platforms of adult education centers like the "vhs.cloud", adult education in Baden-Württemberg could transfer a broad range of classes and educational offers to flexible online formats, be it in the framework of live webinars, learning materials for self-study or interactive exercises. In this way, course instructors and participants could stay in contact and continue learning together during the COVID-19 shut-downs of schools. The platforms could also be used for team meetings and internal communication at adult education centers. Examples of good practice are among others:

- The **adult education school "Volkshochschule Calw"** has transferred its preparatory classes for secondary and higher school exams ("Realschulabschluss" and "Abitur") to online formats. Meanwhile, the school offers a wide selection of classes online including German as a foreign language classes for immigrants, vocational training webinars in the field of business administration and bookkeeping as well as IT courses. The school has created the brand "#LearnAtHome" to advertise the online classes and continues to use it.
- The **adult education school "Volkshochschule Tuttlingen"** has transferred language courses like a Chinese class to online formats right after the lock-down in spring. Meanwhile, various foreign language classes are offered remotely in life sessions using electronic classrooms, accompanied by online exercises and learning material. This offer also continued after the lock-down when face-to-face lessons were allowed again and the schools re-opened. Many language trainings are organised as embedded offers, now.

- Using the brand **"Kultur frei Haus" ["Culture for free at home"], the adult education school "Volkshochschule Karlsruhe"** informs via online tutorials in a short and comprehensive way on history and cultural epochs such as Baroque, Renaissance and others. The tutorials can be used independently by participants at any time. They now also address people that are not able to attend physical classes, e.g. persons with handicaps.
- The **adult education school "Volkshochschule Biberach"** has produced yoga and gymnastics videos which were published via YouTube during the lock-down. Teachers have developed these online lessons that helped students and the general public to stay fit while being at home.

Basque Country

Located at the eastern end of the Atlantic coast in Spain, the Basque Country covers an area of 7,234 sq. km and its position makes it the nexus of the European Atlantic axis and the core of the Euroregion Basque Country-Nouvelle Aquitaine-Navarre. It has a population of over 2 million people, with a density of over 300 inhabitants per sq. km.

The capital of the Basque Country is Vitoria-Gasteiz, where the Basque Parliament and the seat of the Basque Government are located. Its three historic provinces are Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. Its degree of fiscal autonomy and state transfer competencies in policy areas including fiscality, education, industry, culture, health and social security and services, among others, has enabled it to achieve a high rating in the human development index: eight place in the world. The official languages are Basque and Spanish.

As in most European regions, the COVID-19 outbreak hit the Basque country in early March 2020. Strict lock down measures were rapidly taken and the education centres were closed. Below is the description of the actions and initiatives deployed during the pandemic crisis and the lessons learnt.

Basque VET Strategy- During and After the COVID-19 Crisis

Vocational Education and Training Strategy within the education system

Including the EU perspective, in close dialogue with the European stakeholders and informing all the steps to the European Commission, the Basque Government's **Vocational Education and Training Vice-Ministry** took immediate actions in order to avoid as little disruption as possible in the provision of vocational education and training offer, but putting the health and safety of the trainers and learners, at the heart of the measures, always driving innovation:

- A **crisis management team** was appointed.
- **Guidelines and instructions** were sent to the VET centres about the **actions** to be undertaken both by the students and the teaching and administrative staff regarding the Covid-10 pandemic.
- **Guidelines** about postponing and/or cancelling **conferences, lectures, and other events.**
- Preparing **Action Plans** for the VET sector.
- A **survey** was designed for VET students to identify those who had no **access to a device** to follow online classes. This information was crucial for VET centres in order to launch different actions to solve the problem.
- An **intensive training programme for teachers** was launched in July and September to improve the use of Digital tools and Digital platforms and make the system more responsive to the current needs.

- Many ***training pills*** have been launched in the field of cybersecurity both for teachers and students.
- **Forecasting and anticipating** upcoming needs for the VET centres.
- Designing **support schemes** for companies, particularly SMEs and MicroSMEs.
- Designing a **communication plan** with the VET centres.
- Designing a plan to **monitor and evaluate** the actions implemented.

In parallel, the **VET centres** also took ad hoc measures to respond to the impact of the pandemic in their contexts:

- Deployment of **crisis management teams** at the VET centres.
- **Scanning teams** were also set up to identify the degree of digital connectivity, platforms, and content.
- **Work plans** with the students were described. These work plans would define each student schedule, the remote learning timetable, the training content, and its possible assessment models.

Regional VET in support of the Health and Business sectors

TKNIKA, the Basque VET Applied Research Centre, (https://tknika.eus/en/) was responsible for coordinating the work and actions that were implemented by the VET centres to support the health and business sectors in the region.

Surgical Masks: three different mask prototypes were designed, sent to the certification laboratory Alcoy, and started manufacturing in less than one week. Manufacturing the masks took place at 3 VET centres. The masks were distributed to the hospitals in coordination with the Basque Government Health Ministry.

Masks with Protective Screen: these were designed for the health workers and were manufactured using 3D printing. They were tested at the Urduliz Hospital (Bizkaia), feedback was received by the users and then final versions produced. As result, four different models were produced in four days. In April 2020, more than 20,000 masks were produced, including new sustainable materials.

Ventilators: TKNIKA worked on designing an Arduino controlled ventilator prototype with the use 3D printing technology. Four possible ventilator models were analysed to see if they could meet the requirements to be used in hospitals' UCIs.

Healthcare material: VET centres providing health courses and programmes handed over their healthcare material and expertise to different regional hospitals.

Support to businesses: Basque VET centres prepared action plans to support the region's private sector, mainly SMEs and MicroSMEs, in order to improve their production and productive processes:

- VET centres supported SMEs and MicroSMEs to respond to their training needs when working remotely.
- Training modules about the different digital platforms was also in place.
- A recognition of prior work experience mechanism was set in order to facilitate the training and retraining of unemployed people due to the pandemic crisis and thus improve their employability in the short term.

International and European Cooperation in VET

The Basque Government received a request from the **Chilean Ministry of Education**, General Directorate for Technical Training, to support the Chilean teaching staff for remote training. Online training and access to digital material and content was provided to 50 teachers selected by the Ministry. They will then train other teachers and trainers in their country.

In addition, The Basque VET system is collaborating **with OEI (Organization of Ibero-American States),** supporting them in the improvement of digital skills, digital infrastructure, and digital strategies.

At **European level,** TKNIKA has supported all VET centres in working online and using TICs when working with their EU funded projects' partners. Moreover, as an example, a successful Erasmus+ KA2 and KA3 Dissemination Day showcasing projects with Basque organisations involved was organized via twitter on 3 April 2020, as well as a conference organized by TKNIKA on 16 June 2020 on the topic of Centres of Vocational Excellence, reaching more than 1,700 participants from all over the world.

All **EU-funded projects** coordinated by Basque centres or having a Basque establishment among the consortium partners, have adapted their action plans and learning/training content to the new situation. Online meetings and trainings have been regularly on the agenda of these organisations. One of these projects is the pilot Centre of Vocational Excellence project **EXAM 4.0** (Excellent Advanced Manufacturing 4.0 https://examhub.eu), led by TKNIKA.

Lessons learnt

Success factors of the strategy to counter the COVID-19 effect identified by the Basque Country are:

- Regional partners, teachers, and students, as well as different VET centres and specialisations, **working together.**
- **Monitoring** the whole process and adapting the decisions accordingly.
- Regional authorities guaranteeing the **communication/bridge** between VET centres, SMEs, and the society in general.
- **Private and public agents** and stakeholders working together, sharing information, knowledge, materials (3D printers, etc.), resources, etc.
- The whole **society** pursuing together the same goal.

Examples of best practices

In the Basque VET system, the **remote learning centre "Virtual and Digitalized learnings VET Centre"** has supported the rest of VET schools. It is specialized in this kind of learning processes and has a lot of knowledge within this area. This knowledge was shared with the whole VET system in order to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on teachers and students.

In addition, thanks to the **"Jakinbai" digital platform** that was created some years ago, all VET teachers have been able to download documentation and digital content for any subject in Basque. All this digital support was a crucial tool in the outbreak of the pandemic.

From the point of view of both the Basque VET system and the Basque society, a big leap has been taken in the field of **sustainability.** The concept of **"green thinking"** has had a great development in our students' mindset due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Basque students are very aware of climate change and environmental degradation and they have realized that they are an important part of the transition towards a greener economy. The impact of all VET centres' actions in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is being measured thanks to a digital tool. This is considered to be the best way to make students understand that the green and digital transition are core elements for the Basque VET system.

The Basque VET system currently focuses on the use of **KET (Key Enabling Technologies), data culture, sustainability, and the skills linked to all these fields.** VET centres are being upgraded and digitalised with the objective of being more sustainable.

Brittany Region

Located in the far West of Europe, Brittany is one of the thirteen administrative regions of Metropolitan France. With an average of 25,000 new inhabitants per year since 2000, the population of Brittany continues to grow. In 2016, Brittany ranked 7th out of the French regions with 3.3 million inhabitants. Traditionally based on agriculture and fishing, the economy of Brittany is increasingly counting on a **performing industry** that has developed around agribusiness, telecoms, the automotive industry, and shipbuilding.

The COVID-19 outbreak forced the region to **revise its actions and make them as flexible as possible** so they could be adapted depending on the needs. For example, when **publicly contracting** welding training courses for the shipbuilding sector, the possibility to make more places available if companies are in a larger need of these kind of skills was introduced.

Training centres are also **adapting their training offer** to the needs of companies (if agreed by the Region) so the learners acquire the adequate competences. This process is monitored to guarantee the **recognition** of the training course when the learner changes companies. Furthermore, if unforeseen needs arise, **tailored training** can be provided together with the enterprises. In this case, co-financing is sought after. Funding for training comes from different sources in France, i.e. social partners, national PES agency (Pôle Emploi), companies, etc.

Key challenges and solutions

Distance learning

During the lockdown period, distance training solutions have been developed by training centres, with a great heterogeneity. Between 60% and 70% of trainees in the training programmes funded by the region have pursued them in a distance format. However, it was soon identified that both training centres and learners needed to improve their performance to tackle the challenges that emerged from the COVID-19 outbreak.

- **Capacity of training centres to develop a distance training offer.** The region has at first cooperated with other French regions to set up a distance training platform for centres that did not have one. Currently, the region is working on an innovation support programme and a programme to support distance training (assessment, strategy, action plan, equipment).

Vocational centre specialised in the Naval Framework

A centre moved online most of the theorical lessons, so students were free to work this part of the training by themselves as a first step and then privilege practical lessons at the training centre. This organisation was very appreciated by students.

Teachers could accompany students in their progress through an online platform. Unfortunately, very few centres used this platform even if it was well designed, due to the fact that they were not ready. Most of the centres had no strategy, and the team of educational trainers was poorly trained in digital learning. This is the main raison that drove the Regional Council of Brittany to build a digital change strategy for vocational centres. This strategy not only focuses on distance learning, but also on the use of all the relevant pedagogical innovations available in order to create a resilient educational ecosystem.

Furthermore, webinars about training innovation have been made available for initial training practitioners from the beginning of 2020 by GREF Bretagne (public interest group for employment-training relations).

	15-31 March	1-15 April	15-30 April
% of ongoing sessions that were continued through distance learning	70%	66%	53%

At the beginning of the lockdown, it was relatively easy for the vocational centres to continue the training by e-learning, but not anymore at the end of it. Many vocational centres were unprepared, and this situation prompted the Regional Council to speed its plan.

- **Capacity of learners to access distance training.** Three key needs have been identified:
  - Improving **digital literacy: PREPA Clés** is a new training action for basic digital skills acquisition has been launched.
  - Providing **digital devices** for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A call for projects has been launched by the region to support local projects aimed at supplying people in need with reconditioned devices. Initially, the aim is to provide 1,500 computers. Furthermore, in 2021, a new regional organisation aimed at collecting old computers will help to provide much more devices to the population in need.
  - Building up a **network of local support centres** for distance learning to avoid isolation and accompany people. Different options are being explored in cooperation with local authorities, with a three-fold objective:
    - Locally based training programmes to accompany people in carrying out digital tasks.
    - Distance learning centres with Internet connection allowing socialisation opportunities.
    - Innovation centres allowing locally based training and resource pooling.

In this respect, a regional plan to support training centres' innovation through the development of digital technology will be presented. The objective of this plan will be

assessing the situation at the centres, supporting trainers, and identifying the most appropriate digital solution for the centres. Its implementation will be funded in accordance with the Skills investment regional pact (Pacte régional d'investissement dans les compétences). The region is currently studying the possibility of using the REACT EU Fund in order to amplify the effects of this plan.

Vulnerability and risk of dropout

The lockdown period interrupted the **pedagogical continuity of initial training** (at both schools and apprenticeship centres). The width and nature of the disruption remain today unknown. In the context of the region's coordination competence to fight against dropout, a **regional observatory of dropout** was established by GREF Bretagne. The observation work has been reinforced and research is being carried out at education centres by academic authorities. These measures will help better understand young people's situation and better implement the support programmes already in place.

17 **PSAD** **(monitoring and support platforms for dropouts),** made up of a CIO (information and orientation centre) and the local support services, have implemented measures in cooperation with local partners to accompany young people, but individualised solutions remain a challenge.

Indeed, **risk of dropout** is identified mostly among **young people,** mainly due to delays in the programmes and obstacles related to housing, health, confidence, and administrative procedures. In order to counter it, a programme of accompanying measures to help young people access qualifying training courses upon personal project building has been set up. The project is reinforced by means of complementary apprenticeships, upskilling actions for basic skills, etc. In order to mitigate the social crisis caused by COVID-19, this programme has been extended to single parents, minimum income recipients, and people with functional diversity.

Since the beginning of the year, a drop of 30% in vocational training was registered in June 2020 (in comparison with 2019 data). However, data for September show a new rise, but unemployment remains at high rates.

Decrease in labour demand

The **unemployment rate** in the region has increased since April by 30% per month (category A), amounting to 40,000 new inscriptions.

The region had already renewed its **training offer for unemployed people** in 2018 and 2019 in the context of the Regional Skills Investment Pact (Pacte regional d'investissement dans les compétences). The **pedagogical, legal, and financial innovations** included in these new programmes have allowed a quick reaction in the current context. More specifically, two key already existing innovative programs to accompany job seekers, less qualified people and NEETs to employment have been mobilised:

- **PREPA,** which helps beneficiaries to prepare a professional project. These funds are being mainly used to meet the needs of job seekers. The different programmes available (PREPA Avenir, PREPA Projet and PREPA Clés) offer services for personal path reorientation, professional project development and

key competence acquisition. Furthermore, a specific PREPA Clés modality for digital inclusion has been put in place in 2020 to meet the digital skills' needs of the population.

- **QUALIF,** which focuses on training to get access to the job market, by ensuring a recognised qualification at the end. The QUALIF Emploi programme offers flexible qualifying training courses in more than 16 sectors, which can be adapted for the skills needs of companies and workers.
  Before the COVID-19 outbreak, mainly collective training projects were funded by this programme. However, funds have been increased under a new modality (individual territorial action) for people who have been offered a job (permanent contract) and need training (400 hours) for the position they wish to fulfil. These funds complement the already existing national funds to support **qualifying training courses** and accompany the enterprises' recruitment processes.

The CTEF (territorial commissions for employment and training) are being also mobilised to identify local needs and challenges in order to propose adapted action plans.

Vocational Education & Training (VET) for activity recovery

As the main responsible body for VET policies, the region will make use of the opportunities that the sector offers to mitigate the economic and social impact of the health crisis. In addition, the region takes part in a plan that has been produced by the French state and the social partners within the Regional Committee for Employment, Training and Professional Guidance (CREFOP). This plan is divided into four main fields of action:

- Upholding **apprenticeships**.
- Training **unemployed** people.
- Keeping **workers** in a job.
- Accompany people who **drop out** education.

Skills adaptation and development is a key element of the region's economic development strategy. The goal is to guarantee the development of new competences in a context of unprecedented changes to foster a sustainable competitiveness for enterprises, while improving the already existing skills. A specific "employment-competences-training-guidance" goal-driven contract type sets the action framework to provide coordinated answers to skills adaptation challenges.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis and the economic challenges that it has brought, specific measures for employment-skills assessment are being put into place. In this respect, goal-driven contracts will be developed with a focus on the tourism, digital, healthcare and homecare sectors

Catalonia

Catalonia is an autonomous community in Spain, on the north-eastern corner of the Iberian Peninsula, designated as a nationality by its Statute of Autonomy. Catalonia consists of four provinces: Barcelona, Girona, Lleida, and Tarragona. The capital and largest city is Barcelona, the second most-populated municipality in Spain and the core of the sixth most populous urban area in the European Union. It is bordered by France and Andorra to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the east, and the Spanish autonomous communities of Aragon to the west and Valencia to the south. The official languages are Catalan, Spanish, and Aranese, a dialect of Occitan.

Catalonia has more than 5,000 educational institutions throughout its geography with more than 500,000 students in total.

The effect of COVID-19 in the VET Catalan System

Key measures taken

Five important elements need to be highlighted and were put in place by the regional government. They combine traditional measures with new ones that were released due to the exceptionality of the circumstances:

1. Remote teaching and learning have been implemented in all education and training sectors. The regional government has been actively working & coordinating responses and support with the training centres and their staff.
2. Most of the scheduled events have been carried out online to avoid disruption and show continuity with the actions initiated before the crisis.
3. Many initiatives were designed to help the students & staff to end the course safely by reducing the number of hours of students' internships in companies/work placements /stays at the company.
4. Helping students abroad to come back home quickly and safely
5. Postponing some events & activities until next year

Challenges

In order to reduce the educational impact of potential disruptions that should happen in the years to come, the following challenges have been identified by the regional authorities dealing with education and training:

- Effective coordination among all agents involved in a specific issue, for example, to repatriate students (Foreign Affairs Department)
- Managing the provision of online tools to all teachers and students
- Assuring all the students have access to Internet and can follow the lessons with the right devices.

- Adapting plans and strategies constantly and fast to align them with the official guidelines and instructions provided.
- Working with other Departments to design measures and action plans.

Possible **solutions** suggested by the regional government in order to improve crisis reaction could include:

- Try to keep normality as much as possible to avoid disruption.
- Massive use of online tools and applications to organise events and meetings.
- Providing safety measures and action plans
- Giving clear and supportive guidelines to the training centres
- Design of a plan to boost and adapt international mobility, set up programmes with blended mobility and training.

Lessons learnt

Looking at the future, the Catalan authorities dealing with education and training believe that the lessons learnt from the crisis should be embraced and should be translated into regional policies and practices.

Three areas need special attention: improve the offer of teacher training courses online, making sure all students have access to online tools and resources and increasing the number of portable IT devices for the training centres and to the students who did not have them, so that they could follow lessons online and access to all the online resources.

The regional government of Education has designed a plan for students in primary and secondary schools, which consists in training them on IT tools and software. Another plan will enter into force with the aim to eradicate differences among students when it comes to their accessibility to online tools and resources.

The Continuous Training (adult learning) sector in Catalonia – experience gained from the pandemic

Many similarities can be drawn from the formal VET sector. The regional government tried to implement measures that would allow little disruption and the continuation of the training provision despite obvious difficulties.

Taking advantage of the experience that the region had in VET online mode, the continuous training unit within the Labour Department of the regional government adapted the training methodologies and tools to the new scenario, introducing virtual classroom and developing other virtual online tools without stopping the programmes and continuous training offer.

Everything happen in a fast, but smooth manner and the education establishments adapted to a sudden transition to training in a virtual environment, accelerating remote learning solutions and coming back to face to face and blended training too when it was possible.

Challenges identified

The main challenges identified complement those highlighted by the formal VET sector, especially when it comes to the provision of the right digital infrastructure:

- Developing the new methodologies, introducing virtual classroom as a bidirectional and synchro one and Implementing online tools to a highly regulated face-to-face training.
- Training needs of both trainers/ tutors, VET centres and the administration, from where these new policies were designed:
  - Become familiar with technology-based teaching techniques to increase the motivation and participation of trainees and create a pleasant atmosphere.
  - Learning how to use digital technologies fruitfully both to save time while designing a training programme and to follow-up the participants learning paths (e.g., to evaluate their results, and assess their feedback).
- Adapting all the contents and keeping the programs without stopping them, giving a training opportunity to all workers (no matter if they are employed or unemployed).
- Avoiding digital gap.

The department is already monitoring and analysing **some solutions** that could proposed to overcome the mentioned challenges in case of future disruptions

- Assessing the **quality** of the implementation of these methodologies (by learning incomes and satisfaction level).
- Keeping the programmes on with a **continuous virtual training offer**
- **Training all the actors** in this new scenario: use of telematics tools, conducting transversal training to provide them with basic knowledge to be able to follow these training tools.
- Avoiding digital gap: promoting the **purchase of devices** to the collaborating entities so that they can offer a student borrow service.
- Implementing online tools to a highly regulated face-to-face training, **adapting to on-line tools** with quite different characteristics. The return to face-to-face classroom attendance has also been a great challenge, due the strict sanitary measures that must be adopted to be safe and accomplish them.

Lessons learnt from introducing online learning environments

- There is a need to establish a **collection of good practices** in online training and new skills in order to provide quality training to students.
- The COVID crisis has shown that **we can adapt to a new reality**: These alternative learning environments have become a good solution to VET centres, trainers, and trainees.
- The changes that the department was designing for a close future have suffered an **acceleration** these three last months and as public administration, there is a need to react quickly and find solutions to guarantee that training does not stop.
- **Conciliation** has become a core element in people's working life. Working remotely helps balancing professional and family lives.

All these elements that have been identified as lessons learnt will be introduced **into the regional policies.** In the department's new rules, this new methodology that was implement will be considered as a regular one. **Priority areas** are then:

1. Promoting the acquisition of devices at the collaborating entities in order to offer a borrow service to their students.
2. Developing strategic and updated training facing this new reality for both trainers and trainees as well as VET centres.
3. Promoting innovate projects by entities in areas such as gamification, virtual training, etc.
4. Using a common platform that can offer a proven service allowing a supervised control.

The Regional Government of Labour is introducing these online methodologies on a daily basis in every program related to training and developing specific programs to strengthen IT skills and new competencies gap.

Education and training policies are key to building resilient societies, providing citizens with different tools, and allowing them to decide which ones to use depending on the time and situation, making adverse situations less impactful. The implementation of new ways of doing things allows people to adapt more easily to changes and makes them more likely to acquire new skills.

The Regional Government of Labour believes that a blended training model should be promoted, allowing the use of online resources to facilitate the acquisition of skills in a dynamic way and reserving the most practical tasks to be done in face to face.

From theory to practice

Examples of **good practice from the regional education department in the VET sector are:**

- Networks Yearly Closing Event (https://sites.google.com/xtec.cat/jornadacloenda/)
  An online event with the VET centres was organised by the regional government department of education to officially close the academic year. It was an occasion to share views and concerns regarding the end of the academic year and also to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

- International Entrepreneurship & Innovation Seminar (http://www.mostraimpulsfp.cat)
  An online Fair that took place in May 2020 with the objective to discover VET talent and share practices. It was the first show to gather learners from the entire region to promote entrepreneurial competences and innovation.

- QCAMPUSFP

- Education Fair 2020

- An intensive dissemination campaign was designed to promote education and training opportunities in the region.

- New Mobility Platform & Website
  A revamped mobility platform and website was launched during the pandemic crisis. It is more user friendly and provide clear information about mobility opportunities, programmes and contacts from Catalan VET centres and centres from abroad.

Examples of **good practice from the Regional Government of Labour**:

- Designing and developing a **specific online training for caregivers in nursing homes**, due to the sanitary crisis and the lack of professionals already trained to deal with this urgent situation:
  https://conforcat.gencat.cat/ca/consorci/informacio-sobre-la-covid-19/ciutadans/formacio-sobre-la-covid-19/

  - In collaboration with a health organization, the labour department organized this training so that people could be trained in order to start working in nursing homes after the supervision by an expert. This training was user friendly and provided clear information about the job and measures to be taken during the COVID.

- Creating a **resources bank for both trainers and training centres**, sharing new methodologies and tools and how to use them so they could adapt to this new situation. It was created during the lockdown, but its goals is to be set as a permanent space, open to the ones coming in this environment of continuous change: https://conforcat.gencat.cat/ca/formadors/recursos-pedagogics/

Examples of **initiatives led by the education centres themselves:**

- Confid Unlocked: a project to support the local shops and retailers. This project was led by the Trade and Marketing Department at the VET centre La Provençana in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, a city near Barcelona. With the support of their teachers/tutors, the students gathered interest to participate from more than 30 small shops and retailers and supported each of them with targeted marketing and communication material. A clear example of a win-win experience: the students were working on practical real projects (analysing marketing and communication needs and providing the right material and tools) and the local shops and retailers got promotion material that have improved their economic and trade situations during the crisis.

  Further information can be found on the VET centre website:
  https://www.proven.cat/intraweb/index.php/activitats/655-confid-unlocked-un-projecte-d-ajuda-al-petit-comerc
  A YouTube video has also been released:
  https://www.proven.cat/media/20200414_config_unlocked.mp4

- Sanitary equipment (glasses) for the Hospital Duran I Reynals, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat. The Chemistry Department at the VET Centre Provençana made a donation of 200 sanitary safety glasses to the Hospital staff to be used as personal protection equipment. More information available here: https://www.proven.cat/intraweb/index.php/activitats/653-donacio-d-epis-al-hospital-duran-i-reynals

- **3D printing.** In order to show their commitment with the local community and solidarity with the health care professionals, the academic and administrative staff in the VET centres got mobilized to 3D print more than 500 face protection screens, glasses, and other items. More information available here: https://www.proven.cat/intraweb/index.php/activitats/651-fabricacio-d-equipaments-epi-amb-les-nostres-impressores-3d

- **Health care VET students working in local hospitals.** More than 4000 VET students in the health care and services to the community sectors volunteered to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Future generations of nurses to radiologists, they provided support to hospitals and care houses and they found the experience hard, but extremely rewarding. Long and intense working hours that offered a special learning environment. They all highlighted that the stress and uncertainty of the situation was compensated with values such as empathy and solidarity with the patients and with the rest of staff. More information available here: https://diarieducacio.cat/el-batallo-de-la-formacio-professional-contra-la-covid19/

- **Other initiatives by the training centres:**

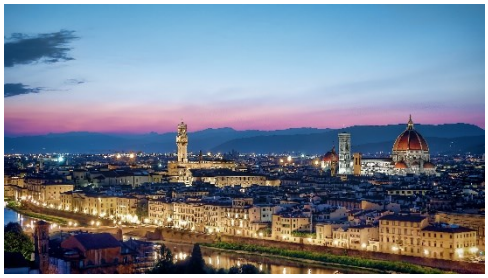
1. Tutoring participants who wanted to follow with their training in other fields (health, languages, chemistry…), that was adapted into a virtual class without the computer skills needed to do so, with the extra effort that this means by the training centres that were closed due to the pandemic.

2. Dividing groups in two: half of the participants kept with the training face to face and the rest followed the class from home, keeping on with exactly the same quality of the training.

3. The training centres have lent computers to students who did not have on available, so that they could keep with their course.

4. Training all their trainers, so that they could keep the same quality standards no matter the methodology to be use.

Tuscany Region



Tuscany is located in Central Italy and it is limited on the west coast by the Tyrrhenian sea. Its land borders, starting from the north: Liguria, Emilia Romagna, Marche, Umbria and Lazio. The regional capital is Florence.

Tuscany Region promotes education, vocational training and employment of citizens in order to build an integrated regional system that guarantees, consistently with the European Union strategies for human resources development, the full realization of individual freedom and social integration as well as the right to guidance and lifelong learning as a necessary foundation for the right to study and the right to work.

Regional policies contribute to ensuring the development of personal and social identity, in respect of the freedom and dignity of the person, equality and equal opportunities, in relation to the physical, cultural, social and gender.

VET and training provision during the pandemic crisis

The Italian national government decided that all education and training activities in presence should be stopped and provided at distance by ICT tools and according to this, Universities, Schools and VET Providers establishments were closed. In Tuscany, at the early stages of the lockdown, all the regional training activities, but also traineeships and apprenticeships, were stopped.

Soon after then, the regional government decided that, whenever possible given the situation, teaching and learning should continue in a distance format. *Formazione sincrona* or **synchronous training** (live delivery of the teaching) allowed the teachers/trainers to be in contact with the learners as in a normal classroom.

This methodology was put in place in Tuscany for the first time during the pandemic. Interaction between the teachers/trainers and the students was key and was facilitated thank to the virtual environment provided. The teaching and training also counted with the supervision of a tutor as it is the case in the regular face to face programmes.

As regards **traineeships,** it is obvious that not all activities could take place remotely, especially those regarding low-level profiles (e.g. those engaged in industry production lines). Also, an important number of learners enrolled in the commerce and retail sectors had it difficult to reconvert their training into a distance/virtual one.

Two important facts need to be highlighted:

- In the commerce and retail sector, the companies hosting the trainees decided to transform most of the traineeships in proper **employment contracts**. This was the case for big supermarkets chains.

- For traineeships that could take the shape of a distance experience, the **Region elaborated some guidelines** to legally adapt them to the situation and to make them 'safer', and not only from the point of view of a safe working environment at home. The guidelines were addressed to the three stakeholders involved in any traineeship: 1. company, 2. trainee and 3. the 'promoter' of these traineeships (the public employment service in most cases in Italy and in Tuscany). They were kindly request to follow the guidelines and modify the initial personalized **project work** of the training programme in order to update it with the new ICT methodologies that they were going to adopt, the improvement of distance tutoring and the respect of health and safe working environment. This project work was individualized for each participant and was a compulsory step to reconvert the training activities from how they were supposed to be to the new situation. Monitoring of these individual project works was also defined in the guidelines. The Region also provided reference documents for the training courses and not only for the traineeships. These documents are available on the same website link (see below).

The Regional authority had also invested a lot of efforts to agree with the different companies and sectors about what could be possible and what not under the scheme of **distance traineeships**. Safe and health insurance were a particularly important subject for education and training authorities. Learners should be covered even if they are at home.

All measures taken by Tuscany Region ever since the COVID-19 broke out are available at their website: https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/la-formazione-riparte-in-presenza.

The Regional authority responsible for education and training will continue to implement these new methodologies, even if some traineeships and in-company training are already taking place in the companies due to new less restrictive measures taken by the Italian government. It is a highly effective way of working that can well complement the regular delivery of these practices.

Challenges identified

One of the main obstacles to overcome have to do with the **learners' assessment and with the exams –** to evaluate the knowledge acquired through the virtual teaching and to carry out the exams remotely. In order not to postpone the final exams to September, the regional government decided to carry them out online. However, this is an area where further reflection is needed. Assessing learning outcomes remotely is possible but should be done in the best possible way and under the best possible conditions.

Another challenge was to guarantee that the teaching and learning process happened according to certain **quality** standards. Quality VET provision should be at the core of any activity regardless of the tools and methods used.

As it has been mentioned earlier, another important challenge was to run and organize the **in-company trainings** when the economic activity for the non-essential sectors was stopped.

Plans for the near future – next steps

The regional government has a collaboration agreement with the German-Italian Chamber of Commerce. Before the pandemic, it was decided to design courses targeted to in-company trainers. **Blended learning** (distance and presence) has come up as the best way to run these training courses. The Regional authority believe that this is a good way of promoting quality apprenticeships and blended learning can also be a good methodology in case of future disruptions.

Blended learning adapts well to the target learners – in this case, in company trainers who instead of having to be away from work for 4 days can get organized to take the 2 days online component at their best convenience. The Ministry for education and training is supporting the improvement of an **online platform** where to host these trainings. It is important to support trainers, to accompany them, give them tools, etc. The Region hopes to have everything in place before the end of the summer. This initiative will be promoted at national level too, being Tuscany the first Region to implement it.

The second activity that the Region will implement was also initiated before the Covid-19 crisis: for the third level apprenticeship the region financed in March 2020 **two ITS (higher technical institute programmes) – *Istituto Tecnico Superiore*** – that include an apprenticeship component, one in the Environment and Energy Sector, the other one in Culture and Tourism Sector. ITS are two- to three-year post-secondary non-academic programmes which lead to a high-level technical diploma (*diploma di tecnico superiore,* EQF level 5). These courses are organised by foundations that represent schools, universities, training centres, enterprises and local bodies. They are mainly specific for high skilled technical professions. A third apprenticeship activity (again Level III apprenticeship) was financed in the field of Viticulture and Enology aimed at achieving the "Oeno-Technician" qualification, a strategic profession within the wine sector.

For 2021 two new calls for proposals for Apprenticeship ITS and "Oeno-Technician" were recently published. There is a lot of interest in participating from ITS Foundations in sectors such as Pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical devices and mechanical, mechatronic and IT. The budget has been blocked for these ITS and Oeno-Technicians and there is a lot of interest at national level because of the novelty of including the apprenticeship element.

Lessons learnt

The Regional authority dealing with education and training have learnt that the new digital tools and distance teaching and learning pedagogies can be integrated into the regular face to face teaching and learning delivery: **blended learning is here to stay.**

It will also be important to revise Tuscany's TRIO PLATFORM to include distance learning provisions in the training courses that are offered by the platform. TRIO is the web-based learning system realized by the Region. The platform offers free and accessible learning objects and services to citizens, public administrations, and private organizations, on multiple and/or specialized topics. TRIO is a system for the innovative, easy, and intuitive learning, based on Open Source software environments.

What TRIO provides to its users:

- a wide catalogue that counts more than 900 learning objects available online at any hour
- the issue of a certificate of attendance to the users who ask for it after completing the course and passing both the halfway and the final tests;
- a technical support through various channels: a Help Desk, a Tutoring service, and an Orientation guidance to the Learning Objects;
- the opportunity to be part of a social network learning-oriented, within the Webinar, the English and IT Labs and the Community itself;
- a customized access to the Learning Objects especially designed for the organizations which require it, through the implementation of a specific Web Learning Group (WLG).

It is all free and open to interested learners with the only condition of setting up a private account. The Regional authority should reflect now on how adapt TRIO and its training provision, including the synchronized learning.

The crisis has also reinforced the regional government plan to promote and invest in digitalization and digital skills. Within its "Training 4.0 Strategy" framework, the Region is strongly committed to support professionals, managers, company owners and individual learners to improve their digital skills.

Investing in the right infrastructure to provide the same opportunities to all citizens in the region is also a message that the authorities will take forward. Inclusiveness is important and no one should be left behind. Especial attention needs to be paid to remote and rural areas where access to digital infrastructures and devices is scarce.

Rhineland Palatinate

Covering an area of 19,846 km^2 (7,663 sq mi) and with a population of 4.05 million, it is the ninth largest and sixth most populous of the sixteen German states. With 42% of its area covered by forests, it is the most forested state along with Hesse. It also borders three foreign countries (France, Luxembourg, and Belgium), which has made of the region an excellent example of cross-border cooperation, including collaboration in the fields of education and training.

The COVID-19 outbreak also had an impact in the learning system in the region. The authorities, together with the education establishments, teachers, trainers, headteachers and families have been mobilized to make sure that learning did not stop despite the difficulties encountered.

The effects of the pandemic in the regional education and training systems:

Context

Education and training were organized in the region to cause **as little disruption as possible.** Meetings and trainings that were scheduled with teachers, trainers and headteachers still took place, but virtually. Especially important was the support provided to teachers and trainers so that they were able to make their courses available in a digital format.

Education establishments were closed during the lockdown period and learners had to follow their courses from home using **virtual tools** and with the **support of their parents** in the case of the younger ones. Once schools were opened, and due to the measures adopted, learners could go back to school in shifts and one in two weeks, alternating learning in the school with learning at home.

As regards the **dual system and work-based learning,** apprenticeships could continue being connected to their work environments and received their monthly salaries thanks to the German support programme Kurzarbeit.

Academic year 20-21

For the academic year 2020-2021 to start in September [date of the interview: 19 June 2020] the regional authorities were not planning major changes. **Health and safety measures** were reinforced during the school hours and the timetables were slightly adapted to avoid big conglomerations in the establishments' common areas. The students did not have to respect any social distance in the schools (if the infection rate stayed as low as in June 2020) though measures were put in place regarding visitors and staff members. The programmes and courses continued to be taught and not many new programmes or courses were planned to be designed and/or implemented.

Challenges, lessons learnt

Three main challenges were identified, remaining a focus of special attention for the regional public authorities dealing with education and training:

- **Reaching** all students during the home-schooling.
- Shifting from home schooling to school and the **digital implications** of having to learn alternatively at home one week and at the school the following one.
- Lack of **digital competences** of some teachers/trainers.

Future initiatives

The experience from the COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed that the region should invest additional effort in the following areas:

- Improve and advance the **digital training offer** for teachers and trainers.
- Strengthen **collaboration** between teachers and the teaching community
- Provide adequate **digital infrastructure** and facilities for all

The regional authorities have already planned to organize digital facilities and provide digital tools for every student and reinforce the digital training offer for teachers to guarantee that no one is left behind.

Case Study - BBS Westerburg - Concept for face to face and distance teaching in times of the corona pandemic

Since the day when the school was closed, teaching at BBS Westerburg was organised mainly via Microsoft Teams. At the beginning of the school year, each student received a free licence of Microsoft Office 365 from the school, which includes the platform **Microsoft Teams and is available to the learners** for the duration of their training.

Since the middle of April, learning groups were admitted for face-to-face teaching at BBS Westerburg and the individual departments have **developed a training concept that is tailored to the needs of the learning groups** until the 2020 summer school holidays. The learners themselves were also asked about their needs when developing the concepts. Furthermore, the lessons are organised as a recurrent theme through MS teams; the attendance phases serve to give the learners security in the current learning process, to discuss unsolved questions and to enable social learning again. The interaction between the students is considered to be essential for learning success and a successful education.

The didactic concept of BBS Westerburg with its teams of students and teachers integrated in classroom management is aimed precisely at those **professional skills that are required in today's working life:** The ability to work in a team, self-learning competence, problem-solving competence, responsibility for one's own learning process and that of the team, to name but a few examples.

With a view to the coming **school year 2020 / 2021**, the aim of the present concept was to continue to organise teaching in times of the pandemic in such a way that all learners in their learning groups were equally provided with the lessons according to the relevant

timetables and can achieve their training goal. It must be noted that the share of newly enrolled learning groups is very high at vocational schools and that, from the region's perspective, these pupils need longer attendance times at the school as a place of learning in order to get to know the new system and, above all, to get to know each other in the learning groups. The different prerequisites and learning biographies of the pupils must also be taken into account in the planning. It is also essential for learning success to support joint learning and working in teams and especially in times of pandemic to integrate social interaction into the learning process. The region would like to stick to their didactic concept and implement it within the framework of current possibilities, even under the strong restrictions currently affecting the planning of teaching in schools.

In the view of BBS Westerburg, the following key points should be taken into account for the **provision of teaching in the coming school year 2020 / 2021** based on experience in the current school year:

- All learners have lessons according to a timetable (planning reliability), which can take place at the learning location school or at any other learning location.
- All learners are given the same opportunities to participate in face-to-face teaching.
- Newly enrolled learning groups receive preferential introductory offers at the beginning of the school year and are on site throughout the first weeks of school.
- All performance records take place.
- All degrees can be achieved without restrictions.
- All organizational regulations for teaching (attendance, handling of absences, sick leave, etc.) are valid.
- Substitutions and co-supervision of lessons are still regulated in the (teacher)teams.
- Break times in the learning groups are flexibly adapted to the respective leaning process (equalization of the encounters in the corridors, paths and in the schoolyard)

The beginning of the learning day can be set individually by learning group between 7:45 and 8:30 a.m. Lessons start at 8:30 a.m. (equalization of encounters on arrival and departure to and from school). Before the start of the lessons, the learning groups talk to each other, make agreements, and contact their partner groups in the online lessons.

Teaching at BBS Westerburg is organised in such a way that **problem-solving competence** is at the heart of the lessons and therefore all learners generally work independently in groups on projects and (individual) tasks. **The role of the teacher is that of a learning facilitator**, who provides individual support in the classroom mainly to individual learners or groups; frontal phases usually take place in meeting situations or when introducing new topics. Presence teaching is currently understood and discussed in such a way that it is mainly the teacher who is active. However, teaching, or even better, learning should take place predominantly in processes that are controlled by the learners themselves. This does not necessarily require the presence of a teacher in the classroom, but direct access to a teacher is important and inevitable to provide support and security for the learners.

Teams of 4 are divided for teaching according to the timetable so that each team in face-to-face teaching has a partner team in online teaching, connected via MS teams. If a maximum capacity of 16 students in one learning room (four teams) is assumed, then

together with the four partner teams in MS Teams, learning groups of up to 32 students can be supervised simultaneously.

The teams in the classroom have the task of discussing and working through MS teams with their partner teams in the other places of learning on the respective problems and tasks from the classroom, exchanging materials and discussing solutions together. The teacher in class can also interact with the partner teams through MS Teams and support them in their work. First and foremost, however, a learner in face-to-face teaching takes responsibility for ensuring that the learning partner in online teaching receives all materials and that his or her questions and contributions are taken into account. It is conceivable that one learner from the presence group is responsible for one learner from the online partner group, so that central elements of the teacher's work can be directly transferred to the learning partner at the other learning location (blackboard pictures, screenshots, and, if necessary, with the teacher's permission, videos of certain passages of the lesson). The teams taking part in face-to-face teaching and those at other learning locations alternate in a cycle determined by the department or by the teams of the course, so that all teams have the same opportunities to take part in face-to-face and online teaching.

According to this concept, teaching can in principle take place according to a timetable, but it is also possible in individual courses or learning groups to adapt (quantitatively) the structure of the teams and the corresponding partner teams so that it is appropriate for the respective situation. The composition of the teams can be chosen according to the places of residence, so that the teams can also work together outside of school lessons. It is also conceivable to divide up teams according to occupations (if several occupations are combined in a learning group) or according to vocational training companies. In this way, out-of-school places of learning such as the companies of the dual system partners (dualer Partner) or social institutions can also be integrated into lessons. Even partners in the vocational training facilities can be integrated directly and as required into the lessons if their expertise is helpful for the learning process.

It is important to note that these teams are fixed for a given period of time (e.g. six months). The change from the isolation of the individual learner within his or her learning group to learning groups consisting of up to four learners with corresponding partner teams is considered to be fundamental for learning success. Learning can only be successful if there is interaction between the learners and a professional exchange. From the region's perspective, face-to-face teaching, in which each learner works only for himself, cannot enter into an exchange with other learners, which also takes place in a 14-day rotation with other sub-groups and often cannot be meaningfully continued in the weeks in between, is not effective.

In addition, every-day experience has shown that the region needed to focus on professional skills during the pandemic because of the teaching organisation, which was repeatedly adapted at short notice. Due to the currently intended organisation of lessons at schools, all other competences, which are of great importance especially in vocational training, are in danger of being clearly neglected or even completely neglected.

The aim is to **Implement a long-term concept in everyday school life**, which offers security for all those involved in school life: Security for scheduling, confidence that the

desired degrees with the corresponding performance requirements can be achieved and, above all, continuity in the quality of education for partners at universities, universities of applied Sciences and in business and society.

Vestland County Council

Vestland County is situated on the west coast of Norway and has a population of about 636 500 inhabitants (2019). The region is newly formed under the 2020 Norwegian regional reform and was established on 1 January 2020. (formerly Hordaland and Sogn & Fjordane counties). The county is made up of 43 municipalities each with their own governing councils. The county administration, Vestland County Council (VCC), is situated in Bergen (second largest city in Norway) with offices also in Leikanger and Førde.

First steps and crisis prevention

In Norway, main general directions regarding the management of the COVID-19 outbreak have come from the national government, while regions have been responsible of effectively implementing them. Nevertheless, a certain level of discretion has been kept by regions, which is expected to be amplified as measures are eased.

As the **first alarms** were raised in Europe between the end of February and mid-March, Vestland County Council's efforts focused on carrying while implementing all the **preliminary requirements** issued by the health authorities, including social distancing measures, washing hands, staying at home if feeling ill, etc. This decision was the result of **regular meetings** held with schools as well as *beredskapsmøte - opplæring* (regional crisis management meeting for upper secondary education).

Online learning

Main measures

On 12 March, the Norwegian government decided to close kindergartens, primary and secondary education centres, as well as higher education institutions and universities. Therefore, most of education was transferred to an **online learning modality,** on which the focus has been placed in the last months.

The region was well **equipped and trained** for the shift. Centres are usually well equipped with computers and all necessary gadgets, and all students and teachers have also access to one. For the past 10-15 years, efforts were put in learning to **use digital tools,** and, in the last 5-6 years, the focus has shifted towards a pedagogical use of them. Examples of them are learning campuses and **online learning spaces:**

- Læring i Hordaland is a site that comprises some of the projects that were developed by Hordaland County Council (one of the territories that as of January 2020 integrate Vestland County Council).
- Its learning is one of the region's system providers.
- NDLA, Norwegian digital learning arena (national website).

During the two first days after schools were closed, **full-time training for teachers** was held and support was available for them in case they had any troubles in providing online learning. The **ordinary class schedule** was kept in most cases, focusing on the **theoretical part of curricula.** It was mandatory to hold the lessons live, to make sure that a strict control of the learning progress was kept. In order to monitor the measures' implementation, small surveys were launched by Vestland County Council once a week, both for teachers and for students.

In addition, the crisis brought regional and local actors closer to the schools. Daily meetings were held between regional directors, upper secondary schools, and regional centres. An eager participation of all actors and willingness to help each other was fundamental. The meeting plans were regulated, since soon it was noticed that shorter meetings were more productive and brought them more together, instead of large day meeting conferences.

Challenges and solutions

Soon the lesson was learnt that keeping the original class schedules was not working, so a **more pedagogical online approach** was introduced for the majority of the classes. For example, lessons were prepared beforehand, and then work was organised in small groups and discussions with the teachers. Finally, students had a reading part and essays were an important part of evaluation.

The focus on theory worked well, but **practical parts** became progressively more difficult to introduce, including key areas, such as:

- Skills acquisition and training
- Sciences subjects, where laboratory work is usually a key component of the learning process
- Drama lessons and high-level physical education, where group training is also an important part of the curricula, and distance monitoring exercises proved not to be an efficient solution.

Another challenge was that the **workload for teachers increased** heavily, especially in the beginning, when ordinary schedules were kept. Keeping attention on an online meeting for 7 hours a day was a challenge itself for them, who also needed to follow complementary online training. Nevertheless, a pedagogical approach shift was proposed, and the workload decreased with a more dynamic schedule, as mentioned before.

Concerns also were raised regarding certain groups of students, as schools provide more than education and are a key component of the **social fabric.** Firstly, groups with deep **special needs** (both physical and psychological) were allowed to keep going to school, with a very high level of sanitary and medical safety; however, not enough equipment was available at first, since it was being used at hospitals, which was a challenge since physical contact is essential in working with some of these students. Other groups of students with functional diversity who attend upper secondary schools, where they learn to perform basic tasks, were also able to go to school; *regional centres* provide pedagogical support and specialists who advice schools and training establishments.

Teachers and school administrators were especially worried about groups in the so-called *grey zone,* comprising **students with learning difficulties** and students with a **migrant background** who do not master the Norwegian language, as well as families with a **disadvantaged background** and poor housing conditions. The latter was a main concern since some of them were not able to properly follow online lessons, not having a quiet place to study at home or lacking good internet access.

Teachers asked to bring these groups back to school, not necessarily on a full-time basis, but just to provide them with some ground basis so they could then follow the online lessons. However, schools could only take them back if they belonged to the proper programme, which was set by national authorities according to the education level, etc. Nevertheless, as the COVID-19 situation evolved, more discretion was granted to the county council and schools so they could decide who to take in back.

Best practices

Some schools offer good examples of best practices to teach practical skills. For example, some schools bought kits to automate different kinds of lights in simple woodwork that made it easier for students to follow the lessons.

Kits distributed by Stord upper secondary school
(Source: https://www.facebook.com/stordvgs/photos/a.784883364859773/3296028777078540/)

Vestland County Council made available a site **gathering reliable links** and ideas so teachers could discuss and learn about online learning and teaching. In addition, high quality **Facebook groups** were created for different subjects and levels by teachers and for teachers, under the heading "Teachers for corona." In them, ideas for whole group lessons were exchanged, as well as tips to deal with digital teaching.

Practical skills and apprenticeships

Main measures

After 26 April, students were allowed to go **back to school** in secondary education. The groups who were to come back first were decided by the Norwegian government, being the first ones those in their **second year of vocational training** just before going on an apprenticeship. All timetables were reorganised in order to make up for the time of practical training that students had lost: they had **training-intensive lessons** in the different laboratories, workshops, and training grounds of the school. Then, between 50% to 70% of students were allowed to come back by mid-May, and for the last 3 weeks of school (the last day was 19 June), almost the full amount of them were back.

Key safety measures were keeping a one-meter **distance between students** in the classroom and two meters outside. Furthermore, **schedules were reorganised** so that breaks did not take place at the same time for everyone.

The case for **apprentices** was different. In Norway, when you are an apprentice in a company, you are the last one to be laid off (unless exceptions). Therefore, even if there are many businesses who have stopped or reduced their activity during the COVID-19 outbreak, companies where some activity remained did not made their apprentices redundant. For those who were not that lucky, **Vestland's *regional centres*[1]** provided support to students so they could find a new placement, and the region has not cut down any kind of funding.

Lastly, no variations have been appreciated in **applications** for vocational education and training courses, which usually make up for half of the total students enrolled in that level of education in Vestland (the remaining 50% corresponds to those who follow a science, language or social science path). However, it must be noted that the application deadline for the next school year was in February.

Challenges and solutions

For the 26 April reopening, **not all groups** were allowed to come back. For example, the drama classes were still not allowed by the national government. Nevertheless, it is expected that, should restrictive measures need to be applied in the autumn, the county council will be able to make its own decisions in terms of groups who can come back to school.

As measures have been lifted up, the main problem that remains is **bus travel.** Vestland is a region with many rural areas, and transport is an essential part of the system so that all students can attend school. Facemasks are not mandatory in Norway nor commonly used in the street and public spaces (unless exceptions such as airplanes, hospitals, and retirement homes). Therefore, a **distance** needs to be kept on school buses by keeping free every second seat, which makes it difficult to bring all students at a time.

On another note, Vestland is one of the most important regions in terms of **apprenticeships** in Norway, with around 6,000 contracts with companies. The COVID-19 outbreak forced some companies to lay off their apprentices, and *regional centres* provided support and advise to them so they could find a new placement. For the upcoming semester, the region is behind their contract goal, and some measures have been put in place, including schools, and getting information about companies in the region to help students.

In Norway, students have the ***right to finish,*** but a company cannot be forced to hire them. Therefore, a solution that has been put in place are *apprenticeships courses at school,* so they can finish their programme and do their ***craftmanship exam.*** This exam requires one year at school and one year of work-based learning, but new measures with a modular approach allow to have 1.5 years at school (including practical training) with as much training outside school as possible.

[1] Regional centres have a social-pedagogical responsibility, dealing with special needs, apprenticeship support, early school-leavers, etc.

A key challenge has also been the case of **international exchanges.** Usually, 5-6 groups are sent abroad, since the region has agreements with regional departments in Thüringen (Germany), Normandy (France) and Wales (UK). Applications have fallen heavily for next year, with only 10% of the usual amount. International travel restrictions also play a big role, and therefore the international programme has been stopped for the next year.

In the case of students who were abroad, they received support from the national government to go back to Norway by means of special regulations that compensated their curricula so they would not lose their year. A programme in Vestland was ongoing for VET students with special needs in Spain and Italy when the pandemic broke out. They were accompanied by teachers, and county council's advisors were sent there so they could get back home due to the difficulties caused by flights being cancelled.

Autumn semester

For the upcoming semester, a **traffic light system** (green/yellow/red) has been implemented following other countries such as France. The current level (summer 2020) is yellow, which means that **social distancing** rules must be applied, and an intensive cleaning of facilities must be carried out. The county council and the schools will be allowed to **choose the groups** that go back to the centre in case not all students can come back in autumn depending on how the situation evolves. The selection will be done on the basis of the technical or practical component of courses. In addition, local health authorities decide who will be quarantined should students or teachers fall ill.

For now, the instructions from the national government indicate planning for level yellow. Pupils are divided into **cohorts** (1 class = 1 cohort), and they can work together as they used to do before as long as they are not in contact with other cohorts. Currently, the required distance is of one meter between groups that are not part of a cohort so, for example, in the school canteen, only two groups are allowed at the same time. However, as mentioned before, **transport** remains a challenge.

On another note, the region is **prepared and well equipped** should a shift to the red level be needed, corresponding to staying home and online learning. The solutions developed in spring about the pedagogical use of online learning and lesson planning will also be taken as a basis should a new outbreak occur.

For the beginning of the autumn semester, which is expected to be following all sanitary measures, some schools have planned ***ad-hoc* courses** with a big component of digital work for students who begin a programme. In the case of VET, some schools are considering putting more emphasis on a **training-intensive beginning of the school year** is planned, pushing theory back in the schedule should it be required to transfer again to online learning. Nevertheless, planning has been done considering the **possibility of local outbreaks** happening, which would force only a specific school to close. Therefore, no general instructions have been issued to schools, who are free to decide what measure fits them best in terms of lesson planning.

Vidin District

Vidin District is located in the north-western part of Bulgaria and covers an area of 3,032.9 sq km, which represents 2.73% of the country's territory. The population of the Vidin region is 86,927, which represents 1.23 % of the Bulgaria's population (as of 31/12/2017). The region has a good potential for economic and demographic development. In its age structure, the share of people between the ages of 15 and 64 years is 58.72 % of the population. Key economic sectors for the region are agriculture, tourism, light industry, food & beverages, transportation & logistics, IT, outsourcing of business activities and healthcare. The school network of the region has 32 schools (1 primary school, 13 grade schools, 12 secondary schools, 4 VET centres and 2 profiled high schools).

Measures implemented

From the end of March, after the introduction of the state of emergency in Bulgaria, an organization was established for the transition to distance learning in schools. The **Regional Headquarters** for the overcoming the consequences of the pandemic at regional level have actively cooperated with the municipal structures to ease the abrupt switch to online learning. Each school was given the opportunity to choose how to do so, according to the possibilities available:

- **Electronic platforms** for synchronous and asynchronous learning, which some of the schools were already using: School, iStudy, Khan Academy, Office 365, Google Suite.
- **Real-time online learning** with the help of video tutorials and electronic communication.
- **Electronic diaries, e-mail, and social networks,** which allowed students to receive guidance for their self-preparation and the realization of exercises at home.

On the **territory of Vidin District,** about 90% of students followed online lessons. For students without access to technology and digital devices, **alternative forms of distance learning** were provided:

- Consultations and telephone conversations
- Use of social networks for communication
- Distribution of materials for self-preparation, in compliance with the anti-epidemic measures and social distance.

For children deprived of digital aids, mobile devices were provided, among **other solutions,** by the Ministry of Education, school boards, NGOs, and private donors:

- Tablets and telephones
- Financial aid for internet access
- Hard copies of teaching materials.

Students who missed the online classes were given the opportunity to attend summer classes. To this purpose, open "classrooms" are being built in some schoolyards.

Challenges and solutions

The **main challenges** identified were the following:

- **Inequality** regarding access to technology and digital devices.
- Preparation and adaptation of **study materials** for display on technological devices, with the aim of maintaining the effective teaching style of the classroom.
- Change in the organization of **teachers' work process.**
- **Students' commitment and engagement** to digital learning in a home environment.

However, the effective implementation of measures has proven that a digital environment can be successfully introduced, but only through the **joint work of all stakeholders:** teachers, students, and parents. Despite the initial stress of the new organization of the learning process, all parties were able to find the **optimal way of communication.** Furthermore, the organization of the learning process in a "home environment" revealed the importance of **students' entrepreneurial spirit** and willingness to accept the new form of training as their personal responsibility.

An adequate **organization and coordination** between the Ministry of Education, regional structures and school management was also key in making this possible. In practice, it has been proven that the institutions have the resources to adapt to an environment that offers a new approach to education.

In addition, prospective solutions to tackle potential challenges that might occur are the following:

- Campaigns for the **donation of laptops, tablets, computers, and telephones** for students without technical devices to study at home.
- **Training seminars** for teachers in order to build up on the experience that was gained during the distance learning months.
- **Joint working groups** with the participation of teachers and parents on the coverage and inclusion of all students following distance learning.

A key element to prevent potential crises will be **explanatory campaigns** when the measures are dropped for the conduction of courses to consolidate, share, and build up on the experience gained from the various modalities used for online training.

Best practices

Primary School "Ivan Vazov" Vidin

The interruption of the educational process in the schools, in the country in connection with the imposed state of emergency to limit the spread of COVID-19 forced "Ivan Vazov" Primary School to take swift measures to maintain the continuity of education and ensure an active communication between teachers, students and parents as of 16 March 2020.

Thus, measures for **transition to distance education** were implemented for a period of two days to one week.

Education from home has become a daily routine for teachers, students, and their parents. At the beginning, a specific mixture of high-tech and low-tech electronic tools, tools for synchronous and asynchronous education/classroom, groups in Facebook, Messenger, Viber, etc. was used, depending on the conditions. Then, the school joined the virtual classrooms at **Shkolo.bg** to conduct the training online until the end of the school year.

Depending on the age of the students, the predominant distance educational tools were different. Distance education for primary and secondary school students was carried out through **presentations, electronic textbooks, video lessons** and other additional materials prepared by the teachers. The duration of **the e-lessons** also differed, depending on the age. Classes for primary school students lasted 20 minutes, and 30 minutes for junior high school students.

The teachers from the school developed lessons in accordance with the curricula and the curriculum for face-to-face training and applied them in distance learning in an electronic environment. The teachers from the school looked for **new, modern methods** to involve the students in an active, creative process.

For younger students, the **help of parents** in learning from home was crucial for the successful completion of the educational process. In order to reduce the educational gap in distance education, measures were taken to **increase the inclusion** of students from socially disadvantaged families, by giving them laptops from the school for usage. Students with special educational needs were also included in synchronous and asynchronous e-learning.

Resource support was provided remotely, with online tools and various platforms. Viber and Messenger were used for this purpose. They provided an opportunity for the student and the resource teacher to meet in real time, by establishing a voice and video connection. For this purpose, groups were created, including the student and the specialists working with him. A **work schedule** was prepared in accordance with the capabilities and needs of students and their Internet security. To provide additional support, various sources have been used, providing online lessons, exercises, and games to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills of students with special educational needs.

The **involvement of parents** in conducting distance education was active and engaging, which created a positive and favourable environment for the successful implementation of the educational process. A meaningful **teacher-parent partnership,** and a relationship of trust and mutual understanding was built. The commitment of parents to school life in conducting education in an electronic environment was increased through:

- **Daily communication** with parents through **telephone** conversations or e-mails, in accordance with the peculiarities of the home environment.
- **Assistance** was sought and **teachers** had the support and understanding, both in technical or organizational problems and in teaching.

- Frequent communication with parents was carried out by placing praises and remarks in the **electronic diary.**
- There was cooperation with parents for the development and upload to **Shkolo.bg** of multimedia and other products.
- Voluntary and active participation and assistance of family members in the implementation of the task of **physical education** - implementation of six people-group exercise or dancing, and preparation of a diary exercise and sports' routine.
- Regular **parents' meetings** were held in the virtual classrooms of the classrooms.

Vocational School for Agriculture "G. M. Dimitrov" – Dunavtsi

Since 16 March, students and teachers faced a new challenge - the situation with COVID-19. Until that moment, such an emergency had not happened in the educational environment of the republic. The Ministry of Education and Science had to react quickly to an adequate emergency plan and organize the training of students, so that the school year would be completed successfully, so a "zero school year could be prevented.

Parents, teachers, and students were initially worried about the uncertainty of what was happening and how the online learning would work. With the joint efforts of all, on 30 June principals, teachers, parents, and students shook hands for a job well done together and the results achieved with successfully passed SGE and NOG, as well as with a successful candidate student campaign.

For the principal, the teachers, and the students at Vocational School for Agriculture "G. M. Dimitrov" Dunavtsi, the challenges were no less than anywhere else. Some of the students did not have the **financial ability** to access the Internet and digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers. Thanks to RME-Vidin, the school equipped 6 students with tablets and provided them with access to the Internet.

That is why a key good practice, without which the distance education in Vocational School for Agriculture "G. M. Dimitrov" - Dunavtsi could not be successful, is the appointment of a **telephone mediator.** A worker, who is an educator in the school dormitory, performed this function all the time. The lessons were taught over the phone, selecting the most important information, after which the students answered questions related to the topic. Then, the telephone mediator reported in the **Shkolo.bg platform,** where the online training of the students from Vocational School for Agriculture "G. M. Dimitrov" - Dunavtsi was carried out.

Teachers developed **tests in the online format** of Shkolo.bg. Thus, students answered questions related to the lessons for a certain period of time, and the result was automatically reported, so a percentage of students could track the correct and wrong answers. This is how the class and control tests were conducted. Also, a **virtual classroom** was created for each class and each lesson was conducted in real time with the respective teacher, through a video link. During some lessons in the virtual classrooms, the teachers conducted **virtual walks** through museums, various centres, and galleries, which were related to the theme of the class and helped students understand the subject.

The video lessons from the educational site **Ucha.se** also turned out to be a good practice for mastering the study material. The tests after the videos were used for exercise and knowledge testing.

A group was set up on each class on **Facebook and Messenger** for better communication. Teachers published their information in these groups, as it reached students the fastest, due to their activity in these social networks, which also proved to be a good practice in the organization of online learning.

The school's English teacher has reported a successful practice of her v**ideo lessons and lesson presentations** via PowerPoint. To learn and improve communication and speech skills in **foreign languages,** colleagues directed links to the films *Star Wars, Mr. Bean, Alf, Anna Karenina,* and *Stalingrad.* In this way, students could listen to the speech and learn the words. On another note, the teacher for **"Baker-confectioner"** took the students virtually through the educational section "Martha Stewart's Cookies". Lastly, a good practice that caught the students' attention were the **chemistry experiments** in the virtual classroom. The experiments were done with homemade products such as salt, pepper, water, baking soda, and soap.

Conclusions

In its essence, with the introduction of online learning in the conditions of a pandemic, the **basic principles to build a sustainable education system** were followed:

- ***Equality*** - practices to ensure an equal access to all those involved in the educational process were applied depending on their needs and abilities. Each learner was given the opportunity to discover their potential.
- ***Partnership*** - an **active cooperation** between all those directly and indirectly related to the educational process was observed: government institutions, teachers, school management, unions, parents, and students.
- ***Quality*** - using the opportunities provided by digital devices, the highest standards of education for each student were determined, guaranteeing equality. Through them, the overall efficiency of the educational system is achieved.

Responsibility and resilience – the new form of education has made schools, training centres and universities more **open and adaptable** to the changes caused by the pandemic situation