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Project Result 5: Policy Paper



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Executive Summary

With global warming, climate change, environmental and ecological destruction at the forefront of the political agenda, the Circular Economy and Zero Waste movement has gained considerable traction. The European Green Deal sets out ambitious targets for the next generations and will undoubtedly be underpinned by a wide range of climate change sensitive measures that will considerably alter the economic, social and environmental models that currently pertain.

iVET and cVET providers will have a significant role to play in supporting the new green objectives of all EU Member States. VET tutors will be the key front-line staff tasked with implementing essential training programmes to support a more sustainable economic model. They are one of the key multipliers when any significant change in policy occurs as they are the main stalwarts for training in the business sector.

Thus, the ECO-CENT project focuses on the development of the Innovation Ecosystem for VET, providing key structures and frameworks that support achieving the required policy and service impact at local, national and transnational level. It is key to the success of the project that there is a clear 'raison d'etre' for managing and sustaining the multi-stakeholder forums that each partner established in their local area. The function of these forums was to foster cooperation and interaction between representatives of the business and VET communities, while identifying the problems, bottlenecks or issues to be addressed to make VET more responsive to the challenge of growing the circular economy of the local economies concerned.

From this 2-years experience in seven countries of the European Union, we share evidence-based policy recommendations expecting to nurture the continuity of the green transition in European economy and education.

Introduction

The present document presents evidence-based Policy Recommendations formed to policy makers, ensuring the widespread sustainability and transfer of the ECO-CENT innovation ecosystem model to other regions and contexts.

It's one of a total of 5 ECO-CENT project results and contributes to the two key issues that the ECO-CENT project address namely:

- (1) developing the innovation capacity within VET to bridge the gap between VET and business and make VET more responsive to the needs of the business community;
- (2) supporting business owners to become circular economy entrepreneurs through the development and implementation of circular economy business modelling training resources.

Addressing these issues in 7 different countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Slovenia), provided a perfect opportunity for policy learning and the ECO-CENT consortium was able to develop and implement a robust comparative analysis framework to synthesize the policy learning that emerges from the project. The synthesis of these four analyses provide a set of clear policy recommendations to inform future VET provision and the future development of the circular economy.

The following recommendations are presented through a learning journey lived in 7 points of the European Union. While developing the five project results, partners were also learning and improving the next steps of the project to better understand needs and expectations, while delivering high quality and tailored made open resources. This learning journey was structured around four steps that represent the four national events (stakeholders forums) and resulted into four comparative analysis (CA). they are the following:

CA1 - a comparative analysis between the partner countries with regard to VET and business cooperation. Conducted in the first months of the project to get a general sense of the current situation in each partner country concerning the project topics.

CA2 - a comparative analysis between partner countries that assessed the understanding and openness of the skunk-works framework in each local setting and the buy-in from stakeholders.

CA3 - a comparative analysis between the partner countries that examined the response to the in-service training from VET professionals and assessed the local capacity to achieve the VET objectives of the project.

CA4 - a comparative analysis between the partner countries examining the attitudes of business owners to the circular economy business modelling curriculum.

In total, more than 278 stakeholders were involved across the seven countries of the partnership that organised 28 events during 24 months of the project with VET providers and business representatives.

VET and Business Cooperation in the Partner Countries

The overarching goal of the ECO-CENT project is to respond through the provision of targeted training to the needs of the business community to adopt innovative and sustainable models, and of VET providers to support the transition to a circular economy. In order to bring innovation to the forefront of vocational education and training activities in each country, ECO-CENT partners developed and implemented a robust comparative analysis framework to synthesize the policy learning that emerges from the project. A total of 49 participants from VET and business in the countries of the partnership validated the findings from each partner regarding the policies and curriculum related to ECO-CENT topics in their countries.

In general Bulgaria has strong traditions in the field of education with the share of the country's population with upper secondary and post-secondary education being higher than the average in the EU. Involvement of Bulgarians in VET is slightly higher than in general education and family traditions and personal interests are the main drivers for choosing VET. However, the current levels of cooperation between VET providers and the business leaves room for improvement. In addition, the concept of circular economy is still substantially unfamiliar both in the VET community and among entrepreneurs. These are some of the main reasons why in Bulgaria there are few examples for synergies between VET and the business aimed at the adoption of circular practices.

In Cyprus there is a body governed by public law that links VET with business aiming at creating the prerequisites for planned and systematic training and development of the human potential of Cyprus at all levels and in all areas to meet the needs of the economy within the framework of the social and economic policy of the state. In conjunction with the action of the Cyprus Circular Economy Network create the conditions for promoting the circular economy between VET and business.

The VET dual system in Germany is regarded highly all over the world because it combines the study of theory in classes, and training in a real-life work environment. Two main institutions are in charge of monitoring VET-related concerns in Germany, BIBB and BMBF. BMBF are responsible for many actions related to the running of the VET sector such as designing training content for occupations, recognising VET provisions, and providing financial support for the dual system through subsidies for apprentices. Through these two institutions, innovation in VET is constantly being encouraged and addressed, and businesses are actively involved in the VET system, so Germany has the potential to transition smoothly to a circular economy, if these institutions continue to address challenges faced by the VET sector, and work to bridge the gap between VET and businesses.

In Greece, the synergy between VET and business is not even foreseen in the new Action Plan for the Circular Economy of the Ministry of Environment and Energy. The new Action Plan supports the transition to a sustainable development model with clear objectives and actions to achieve them. There is no systematic synergy between VET and business beyond a few isolated cases that have no institutional framework, rather it is up to personal relationships in local communities.

In Ireland a lot of work has been done since 2016 between VET providers and the business community to re-develop the nationwide apprenticeship programme with the support of FÁS until 2006 and then with the establishment of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Apprenticeship programmes are the best example in Ireland of how cooperation between VET and business has made VET more responsive to business needs, as graduates of apprenticeship programmes acquire the skills they need to enter the labour market directly, improving their job readiness. The Rediscover Centre in Dublin, which is the national centre for the circular economy in



Ireland, provides training, mentoring and business support services to entrepreneurs working in the circular economy sector.

In Portugal, the government provides financial support, through the European Structural and Investment Funds, to VET programmes and VET providers, as well as to enterprises. At the local level, already since 2007, the Municipality of Lousada has adopted a strategy for sustainability based on various axes such as research, environmental education, social participation, infrastructure, seeking to promote environmental practices, inspire and support alternative ways to create protected areas, create employment opportunities and restore the connection of local citizens with the rural landscape. The impact of this initiative is significant as more than 4,500 volunteers have actively participated in the environmental activities promoted by the City, which consequently promote awareness of this transition to a green economy.

In Slovenia the specific needs of the business sector (labour market) are addressed in the open curriculum. Between 2022 and 2026, the recovery and resilience plan "Modernisation of secondary vocational and technical education, including apprenticeships, renovation of higher vocational education curricula and creation of digitally supported learning spaces" will be implemented to modernise vocational and technical education in a way that will allow for enhanced capacities for the digital and green transition, greater flexibility, resilience and responsiveness of VET to the needs of the economy and society, and an easier transition from education to the labour market.

Assessment of the Skunkworks Framework in the Partner Countries

In order to bring innovation to the forefront of vocational education and training activities in each country, ECO-CENT partners were asked to invite VET educators and business representatives to a national event and share the idea of a skunk-works team, identify if they are a skunk-works team and why, present the competences of a skunk-works team and debate if there are more competences they would identify as crucial for these teams, and invite participants to maintain and nurture this skunk-works team, dedicated to supporting business owners and VET providers to become circular economy entrepreneurs through the development and implementation of circular economy business modelling training resources. In total, 40 participants were involved in these forums at European level, joining VET and businesses representatives to think about the European transition to a circular economy through the organisation of a skunkworks team.

The reality in the different partner countries differs when assessing the knowledge and possible implementation of skunkworks teams. Thus, a different pace and approach to implement such a team must be embraced, addressing all partners' unique realities. While in Ireland and Slovenia, the participants were somehow aware of the term skunkworks, acknowledging its benefits in the green transition, the participants from Greece, Germany, Portugal, Bulgaria and Cyprus were unfamiliar with the concept although quickly recognising the positive impact that such team would have to boost innovation and the transition to the circular economy. The majority of the participants concluded that they are using this teams' structure informally, and they were not aware of the name 'skunkworks'. Despite the knowledge or lack of it about the concept, all participants agreed on the beneficial side of this type of teams, characterising it as very useful and promising to enable the collaboration among VET and business representatives, and also to include HEI students as suggested by the Greek participants.

When assessing the feasibility of such a team within their and among their organisations, participants presented some constraints. For some partner countries (Portugal, Slovenia), the suggestion from participants was to keep the teams small, involving few members and thus allow this intervention for the SMEs that are the main type of enterprises in the European countries. For other partner countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus), the bureaucracy in national organisations is a barrier to implement such a flexible team, thus these internal procedures must be overcome and actually the skunkworks teams may be a good starting point. Other barriers were highlighted, such as the need for an extra space, a well prepared and reliable leadership, the time and its Return on Investment, accurate guidance and funding to motivate organisations to facilitate the time, the people and take the risk.

For the green transition, VET and businesses representatives have no doubt about the added value of this type of teams to accelerate the green innovation, but more support and incentive are requested especially by the business sector, as providing human capital and time will directly affect the productivity of organisations, while the teams don't provide a successful solution all the time, and the risk that is taken may affect the capital of the organisation as well.

Thus, in the face of a circular economy and green transition at European level, participants agreed that the commitment and the incentive must be taken seriously, and organisations must be supported to affect as little as possible its current dynamics and productivity.

Participants were also able to provide a long list of competences needed for the teams' members and the steps to successfully plan, organise and implement such a team.

Implementation of the ECO-CENT training programme: Lessons Learnt

By designing business modelling resources for circular economy businesses and instigating a framework for business and VET collaboration in a new innovation ecosystem for VET, the ECO-CENT project proposes two significant innovations that will directly impact the provision of VET. Supporting these new innovations with bespoke in-service training for VET tutors is both practical and logical. VET tutors cannot be expected to substantially change their prevailing training approaches without in-service training support. In this context, a specialised in-service training programme has been developed to support the continuous professional development of VET educators to ensure that they are fully committed to the concept of the circular economy and the introduction of innovation in core VET education to better respond to the needs of businesses and are adequately trained to support business model activities of circular economy. The in-service training programme was developed jointly by FHW, CCIS and SRC and includes 35 hours of learning - 21 hours of face-to-face teaching, workshops and discussions and 14 hours of self-directed learning.

The third comparative analysis was dedicated to test the in-service training and obtain participants feedback to improve it and learn more about their needs and expectations on the topic. A total of 39 VET trainers attended the training and answered the survey assessing the training and ECO-CENT contents.

The responses from the training programme participants demonstrate a clear recognition of the significance of the circular economy and the need for comprehensive training in this area. The participants hope to achieve enhanced knowledge and understanding, curriculum development, industry relevance, skill development, awareness and behavior change, and collaboration and networking. They emphasized the importance of disseminating knowledge, developing practical skills, and raising awareness about the circular economy among VET teachers, learners, and the wider public. The participants also highlighted the need for synergy between different stakeholders and the importance of preparing future workers for the green changes happening in various sectors.

Overall, the responses reflect a strong commitment to promoting sustainability, environmental protection, and the transition towards a circular economy.

Intentions of Business Owners to the Circular Economy Business Modelling Curriculum

This was the last of four comparative analyses carried out throughout the ECO-CENT project lifespan. And each one was crucial to advance with the project commitments and to reach the project's target groups – the entrepreneurs, the business representatives, the VET trainers, the VET providers, the decision makers.

In total, 150 participants were involved in these workshops at European level, joining businesses representatives to think the European transition to a circular economy through the organisation of a skunkworks team and redesign of business models. A total of 65 participants answered the survey analysed in the next chapters of this report.

The fourth comparative analysis was dedicated to the assessment and dissemination of the project results, specifically the curriculum on circular economy business models, with business representatives and entrepreneurs. This moment organised in each country of the partnership coincided, in some countries, with the multiplier event which gather the participation of more groups of interest such as decision makers and VET professionals. In the end, the national events were crucial to gather the audience's feedback on the project results and understand their change in attitudes regarding the green transition in Europe.

The ECO-CENT consortium is proud to have received such a positive feedback and suggestions for improvement of the MOOC. It is certain that the free access to high quality contents and learning resources dedicated to the circular economy business models is very welcomed by the project target groups. This investment in terms of curriculum is an answer to the findings at national level in the first comparative analyses, ending this project with mission accomplished: the target groups were listened to and involved in every step to create a tailored made platform online with innovative learning resources and contents that will guide readers and doers into the green transition.

Recommendations

From this 24-months experience with partners, VET providers and business representatives, each partner and the consortium learned and sum-up these lessons learnt into recommendations expecting that decision makers proceed with this need of supporting the green transition in Europe through the support of businesses and VET.

Recommendations for VET Educators

- Emphasize Local Context and Emerging Economies = Encourage VET teachers to tailor their training programmes and curricula to the specific needs and challenges of their local community and emerging economies. Smaller, locally-led enterprises play a crucial role in transitioning to a circular economy, and VET teachers can support this by focusing on market-based solutions and circular business models that are relevant to the region. By understanding and addressing the unique context, VET teachers can better equip entrepreneurs and business owners to adopt circular principles effectively.
- Foster Collaboration and Innovation = Encourage VET teachers to facilitate collaborations between VET providers and businesses, ensuring that innovation in VET continues even after the project's conclusion. Teachers should promote a skunk-works framework where VET trainers, businesses, and entrepreneurs can interact and co-create sustainable solutions. By fostering a strong innovation ecosystem for VET, teachers can help sustain the circular economy transition and ensure continuous professional development in this domain. This collaborative approach can lead to new ideas, partnerships, and shared knowledge, strengthening the circular economy ecosystem in the long term.
- Connect students with circular economy businesses and organizations. This could involve arranging for students to visit circular economy businesses, shadow employees, or participate in internships.
- Let the students come up with their own ideas and practices in circular economy systems - ones that are close to their line of thinking, their priorities, and their generation! Support the development of new circular economy businesses. Tutors could connect students with entrepreneurs who are developing new circular economy businesses, or they could help students develop their own circular economy businesses.
- Form synergies with local industries and businesses that have already adopted Circular Economy practices and provide VET learners with work-based learning opportunities and hands-on experiences using actual circular economy projects.
- Start by the basics when sharing the business models in circular economy with business owners. Although it is more and more debated, the pillars need to be clarified and concepts such as skunkworks teams are new.
- Be available to act as a trainer-consultant and propose training-action offers to business owners, as they need concepts but also support in the transition.
- Incorporate going green, sustainability efforts, circular economy, net-zero and other green principles in everyday teaching and training; NOT only as a stand-alone topic to be discussed.

Recommendations for business owners

- Embrace Circular Business Models and Principles = Business owners should actively embrace circular business models and principles to establish or reform their business practices. They should move away from the traditional linear "take, make, and dispose" approach and adopt more sustainable practices that prioritize resource efficiency, waste reduction, and product



lifecycle extension. By integrating circular economy principles into their operations, business owners can not only contribute to preserving valuable natural resources for future generations but also tap into new market opportunities and enhance their long-term sustainability.

- Engage in Collaborative Partnerships with VET Providers = Business owners should actively engage in collaborative partnerships with VET providers. By forming local synergies with VET providers, businesses can tap into expertise and training resources that can help them transition successfully to circular business models. This partnership will facilitate knowledge exchange, foster innovation, and ensure that businesses receive the necessary support and training to effectively implement circular economy practices. Additionally, sustained collaboration with VET providers will enable businesses to stay updated with the latest advancements and best practices in the circular economy domain, thus enhancing their competitiveness and resilience.
- Develop skunk-works teams with help from the ECO-CENT project resources.
- Identify learning/training opportunities, such as the ECO-CENT project, and actively participate in VET learning/training courses regarding Circular Economy and implementing Circular Economy Business Models.
- Business owners who already implement Circular Economy Business Models should participate in sharing and exchanging of knowledge and experiences with other businesses who wish to transition to Circular Economy but are less experienced. This can be facilitated by VET courses.
- The consumers and staff of the future (Millennials and Gen-Z) are passionate about sustainability, and so in order to move with the times and appeal to consumers and future employees, it is important that businesses in all sectors embrace the CE principals. We would advise that you should engage in some networking activities with CE businesses to learn the challenges, pitfalls and benefits that they have experienced.
- Clarify the myths around the circular economy transition and break your beliefs blocking this change.
- Use all of your networks and all of your stakeholders to promote green economies.
- Do not focus solely on the monetary aspect of circular economy practices, but instead focus on all of the other benefits going green brings - higher stakeholder involvement, better community relationships, higher market values,

Recommendations for policy makers at national level

Greece

- Foster Inclusive Policy Frameworks for Circular Economy = Policymakers should focus on creating and implementing inclusive policy frameworks that actively involve smaller, locally-led enterprises and businesses from emerging economies in the transition to a circular economy. Recognizing the contributions and challenges faced by these enterprises is essential to ensure their active participation. Policies should provide targeted support, incentives, and resources to help such businesses adopt circular business models and principles.
- Support VET and cVET Collaboration for Circular Economy Transition Policymakers should prioritize and support collaboration between VET providers and businesses. By strengthening synergies between VET institutions and local businesses, policymakers can enhance VET provision to be more responsive to the needs of the business community. This collaboration should extend beyond the duration of the ECO-CENT project to ensure that innovation in VET



is sustained in the long term. Providing financial incentives and resources for in-service training programs and continuous professional development for VET trainers will further reinforce the support for circular economy transition and facilitate the adoption of circular business models and practices across diverse sectors of the economy.

Germany

- Support research and innovation, and create incentive programs and regulations to encourage businesses to adopt circular economy practices.

Cyprus

- Mainstream Circular Economy in Cyprus by providing learning/training opportunities to both the VET community and the business community. This can be done with a central platform where resources are collected and opportunities for trainings/seminar/workshops are announced.
- Provide business owners with incentives/funding to implement circular economy business models.
- Launch public Circular Economy Awareness Campaigns, both among citizens and businesses.

Bulgaria

- It would be beneficial if national authorities develop additional opportunities for cooperation between education and training providers, businesses, NGO's, and public authorities on a local level.

Ireland

- We have seen that VET and business sectors are interested in CE practices and principals, but supports and funding are needed to ensure CE's widespread adoption in the economy.
- The skunkworks model is effective in bringing people from VET and business together to update existing programmes with CE modules and to test how these programmes can be better suited to fit the needs of businesses. This could be adapted to a wider national pilot programme to test its effectiveness, especially in sectors such as agriculture which is behind a lot of our national greenhouse emissions.

Portugal

- Create advantages for VET providers and business owners that collaborate and/or that follow a circular economy transition pattern (e.g. prizes, badge, benefits, etc.).

Slovenia

- Provide VET centers/schools and businesses with more incentive and opportunity to work together on green topics - by providing (partial) financing options of collaboration between the educational sphere and business environment.
- Promote innovation at all levels, and provide systemic support in terms of collaborational facilities, financing, informational level, helping businesses and educational centers find synergies, and so on.



Recommendations for policy makers at European level

- Promote Inclusivity and Diversity in Circular Economy Strategies = Policy makers should promote and prioritize inclusivity and diversity in circular economy strategies at the European level. This involves recognizing the significant contributions of smaller, locally-led enterprises and the specific needs of emerging economies in the circular economy transition. Mainstream business models that follow the traditional "take, make, and dispose" approach dominate many entrepreneurship and business development training resources. To overcome this, policymakers should develop targeted policies and initiatives that support and empower smaller enterprises to adopt circular business models.
- Facilitate Knowledge Exchange and Collaboration = Policy makers should facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration between VET providers, businesses, and entrepreneurs at the European level. The ECO-CENT project emphasizes the importance of local synergies between VET providers and businesses to foster innovation in VET and support circular economy transitions. Policymakers can play a crucial role in scaling up such collaborations by providing funding and resources for cross-border cooperation and establishing platforms for the exchange of best practices. By facilitating the transfer of successful circular economy models and policies across regions and contexts, the European Union can promote the widespread adoption of circular business principles and ensure a more unified and effective approach to achieving a circular economy at the European level.
- Establish a Circular Economy Competency Framework, outlining the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to promote circular economy principles in various sectors.
- Provide incentives/funding to academia and the business community to encourage them to form joint initiatives for research, development and innovation in circular economy practices.
- It is necessary to widely promote VET as the sector where businesses can learn to implement CE practices, for their own economic gain, but also to support the 'greening' of the European economy.
- Design and provide funding calls that demand a collaboration between VET trainers and business owners under the circular economy transition's umbrella.
- Provide VET centers/schools and businesses with more incentive and opportunity to work together on green topics - by providing (partial) financing options of collaboration between the educational sphere and business environment.

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