

# SCHOOL-BASED CAREER CENTERS IN KOSOVO ARE CHANGING THE FUTURE OF WORK FOR YOUTH



Picture a young traveler ready for an exciting journey, carrying some gear they believe will lead them to their destination. Yet, without a reliable compass to navigate the unknown expanse, they quickly find themselves disoriented or even lost. Similarly, the youth of Kosovo that enter the confusing labyrinth of the labor market need help to choose a career and advice on how to get suitable skills. In a country with a population of nearly 1.8 million, where 28% are aged 18–34, and unemployment rate is estimated at 26%, the quest of youth to find a job is a wandering journey with no clear target in sight.

EYE (Enhancing Youth Employment), a project funded by SDC since 2012, has intervened in the economy with a novel approach to help these young 'travelers'. Using a facilitative approach, the project enhanced the reputation and contribution of VET schools to address the mismatch of skills, fostered closer ties with businesses and obtained the support of municipal and national authorities to ensure the sustainability of the systemic change.

EYE is implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and Managing Development Associates. Its goal is to achieve a dynamic and socially inclusive labor market that provides more and decent jobs including self-employment for young people in Kosovo.

## HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

When EYE started, Kosovo was facing a difficult economic situation with a high unemployment rate and many challenges to integrate youth into the labour market. The social preference was for students not to study technical skills but to follow an academic route, possibly to university, aiming to work in government or management positions in business. But, there were not enough of these types of vacancies and employers found it hard to find enough workers with relevant skills to support growth in new areas of business (e.g. BPO, ICT, manufacturing). Despite the 2013 law on vocational education and training, which requires all VET schools to provide career development for students, career counselling services were scant, largely unsustainable and donor-dependent.

From its first phase, EYE decided to attempt to improve the situation by establishing a career guidance service in VET schools which would make technical education more attractive to families and youths, would guide



youths on what to study and how to find work and would help businesses to influence VET school to provide courses relevant to the demands of the economy. EYE collaborated with VET schools, municipal authorities, and businesses, to pilot socially inclusive career guidance services to provide early information to youth and assist them to make personal development choices that would increase their chances of employment.

# WHAT WAS THE BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS?

EYE's strategy was based on some key principles which were applied through four levels of engagement. The principles were: cost-effectiveness, local ownership by school and municipality, learning together, and building a coalition for change based on evidence of effectiveness rather than pushing an externally-funded model. The first level of the strategy focused on piloting and profiling the school-based career center model. The second level included know-how development and model replication. The third level sought to ensure efficient functionality through capacity building. The fourth level of the strategy focused on facilitating the institutional support critical to strengthen the sustainability and scale-up of change at the national level.

"To ensure the success and sustainability of the school based career center model in Kosovo we went down the path of forging strong alliances with indispensable



partners: the municipal authorities (through the Education Directorates), the VET schools, and the private sector, creating an interdependent triangle of collaboration," says Ms. Valbona Rraci, Senior Intervention Manager at the EYE project, and the brain behind the Swiss facilitation that enabled such profound transformation of the education system and career orientation of youth in Kosovo.

Another crucial element in this blueprint for success was learning through knowledge sharing between Career Centers. Ms.

Kovaçi of the VET school in Vushtrri, the first pilot school-based career center in Kosovo, became the mentor of all others who followed suit. "The know-how was shared with us, through peer-to-peer meetings and exchanges and study visits," says Nijazi Lutfiu, Quality Assurance Coordinator at "Jonuz Zejnullahu" VET school in the town of Viti, which has established one of the best performing career centers so far.

# INITIAL CHANGE WAS DIFFICULT BUT ENCOURAGING

"In a span of 4-5 years there is positive and visible change. Our students and parents constantly approach us to get information. We are building a broader concept than just career counselling, we are changing perceptions and behaviors of students, parents, and the business community, who now see the real value of the Career Center," says Zehra Kovaçi from the VET school "Bahri Haxha" in the town of Vushtrri.

The VET school "Bahri Haxha" in Vushtrri is the first one that piloted the model of a school-based career center in 2014, and Ms. Kovaçi is among the very first school teachers who took on the additional tasks of a career counsellor, before this occupation was formally recognized in Kosovo, requiring rigorous training and qualification. The road was bumpy as usual as deep-seated attitudes models of behavior were challenged. Ms. Kovaçi says that it took almost four years to convince the entire school leadership, the municipal officials, the community, and the private sector partners that the career center brought value.

"The career center serves like a conduit between the school and the private sector, and to reach to this stage we went through a lot of struggles," reminisces Ms. Kovaçi about the testing beginnings of the transformation. For the school staff, taking a "leap of faith" into the new occupation of career counsellors was a feat unto itself, as nobody was sure how career center services would fare within the system, or how secure their jobs would be. Hence, garnering genuine support and trust from the leadership was a key ingredient of the success recipe.

For Ms. Kovaçi, the unwavering support and encouragement of the school principal was essential.



"The school principal had firm confidence in the Career Center and its staff. He supported me in attending numerous training programs, encouraged the processes, and eventually appointed me as the coordinator of the team applying for a Regional Challenge Fund grant. Thanks to such support, I acquired the confidence needed and honed my skills to cultivate better relations with the businesses and engage them in various activities to the overall benefit of the students, their families, and the school career center," she says.

The turning point arrived four years after the pilot started, when the number of students interested in enrolling in the VET school increased beyond the capacity of the school. Consequently, the Municipality of Vushtrri reduced the quota of students who could enroll, which led to more competition and a higher quality of students. "That was the real evolution for us. The reform started from point zero and within a span of four years municipal policies were influenced by the results and quality of the career center services," says Ms. Kovaçi.

## WHAT SERVICES DOES A SCHOOL BASED CAREER CENTER IN VET SCHOOLS IN KOSOVO PROVIDE?

### Career education and information prior to entering VET school programs:

Provide high-quality career information to 9th graders to make them aware of VET options and other pathways available, ensuring well-informed and well-thought career choices.

### Career education and information within the VET school programs:

- Offer career information, advice, and training opportunities for education and work, preparing students for both work environments and everyday life.
- Develop career management skills to foster high-level transversal competencies for addressing complex challenges in learning and work life paths.
- Facilitate transition from school to work through cooperation with businesses, enhancing students' readiness for the job market.

Says Mr. Loshaj, "When students come to the career center, we strive to create for them a relaxed environment; away from the stiffness of the classic method. Instead, our approach is student-centric, and we showcase to teachers also how to make the lessons more attractive and listen to the students." Mr. Loshaj is aware that despite the good progress so far, just like any innovation, these processes too beg for time but at the same time, they are contributing to the advancement of teaching methods of other teachers.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT SO FAR?

The eighteen career centers established by EYE project Kosovo-wide include in their client portfolios over 13,000 VET students and about 38,000 primary school students (9th graders) who have received services about career choices and development. Additionally, over 2,000 businesses contribute to the development of students' practical skills and employment, while over 10,000 students have gained access to the labor market either through work-based learning or employment.

For Ms. Kovaçi, the career centers have brought a widespread impact in Kosovo's society. Through these centers, collaboration with various actors has been strengthened, especially with the municipal authorities as a key partner, and the private sector. "In our portfolio there are 130 businesses that we do cooperate to raise the practical skills of our students, which results in over 260 students being employed in their profiles."

"The municipal authorities are keen on helping youth acquire skills that give them an advantage in the labor market. Through our continuous research on skills in demand and industry trend, the municipal authorities adopt local-level policies to enable smoother transition of youth into the labor market," she says. In the 2019/2020 school year, the municipality introduced for the first time the profile of wood processing in VET school "Lutfi Musiqi" in Vushtrri, which meets the demands of this industry that is very developed in our city. Until now, 58 students have followed this profile, so we hope they will contribute to increasing the competitiveness of these businesses.

"EYE coached the career centers and advocated with municipal authorities to utilize joint investments allowing VET schools to provide these services in order to strengthen local ownership and reduce reliance on donor funds, as the surest way to ensure long-term sustainability and scalability of the model," says Ms. Raci.



Another element that ensures the successful continuation of the school based career centers in Kosovo is the Community of Practice (CoP) that career centers have established themselves, also supported by the Facebook page named as Network of Career Centers in VET schools. The values that CoP brings is helping members with challenges, access to expertise, creating professional confidence, fun with colleagues, meaningful work, personal development, enhanced reputation, professional identity, and networking.

"The career centers established this network on their own, and it operates outside of the EYE project support," says Ms. Raci, considering this to be yet another indicator of reliability and sustainability of the model.

Another important benefit is the change of reputation of VET schools. "Colleagues and parents already have a high regard for the professionalism of career counsellors, and this has resulted in an improved image of the school, adding value to the school and its programs, and I think this is a very good development," says Ms. Kovaçi.

Young people are selecting profiles in our school as their first choice, which has influenced the quality of those enrolled to rise. In the last school year 2022/2023, 70 new students remained unregistered due to the completion of the school's capacities. However, there is still more to be done to increase the awareness and change mindsets of students and parents in a national level towards VET, says Ms. Kovaçi.

"Initially, people thought the new school-based career center was something of no value," says Xhevdet Loshaj, Vice Principal of the Center of Competence (CoC) in Skenderaj. However, over time, by attending the training programs and information sessions, students, other teachers, and parents came to realize the role of the career center, which has now become the go-to place to chart out their future steps. "It is a mistake if VET schools are



not equipped with career centers. Even primary school students should receive career orientation advice as early as possible," says Mr. Loshaj.

## SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING THE CHANGE

EYE influenced MESTI so that the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (KESP) 2017–2021 contained measures to make career guidance and counselling functional in the education system for both students and adults. It also persuaded the ministry to establish career counsellors as a new occupation within Kosovo's education system.

In less than 10 years, twelve career centers were established within VET schools and six within Centers of Competences (CoC) around Kosovo with support of EYE project. In addition, the EYE's career center model has been copied by an additional five VET schools on their own. The enormous efforts invested by the champions of career guidance services embedded within the schools, would yield results in a relatively short time considering the system transformation and behavior change elements that the reform involved.

Five career centers of the VET schools and Centers of Competence in Vushtrri, Viti, Gjakova, Prishtina and Skenderaj have gone the extra mile to improve services, update the skills on offer, expand collaboration with the private sector, and thus ensure more opportunities for the students they cater to. Along the way, they have influenced the ecosystem within their respective municipalities – showcasing a genuine crowding-in effect of a magnitude with the power to touch the lives of many.

Thanks to their active engagement with the network of career centers and EYE's facilitation, these five career centers became aware of a golden opportunity to bring their work to the next level. While the Ministry of Education Science Technology and Innovation did initially share the information about Regional Challenge Fund (RCF) grants opened for applications, the career centers did the rest of the work. Resulting in winning applications amounting to a total of €2,497,167 for all five career centers combined.

Through the RCF project, the VET school in Vushtrri will renovate and adapt school premises to accommodate



the new equipment and tools for the laboratory, restaurant with a kitchen, and space for three processing lines for dough, sweets and cookies needed for the profiles of cook and food technologist.

"The career center was the key driver for our school to win the RCF grant for a three year project spanning 2023–2025 in the field of food technology," says Ms. Kovaçi. Besides the theory and practical learning at school, the students will do the practical work with three businesses we are collaborating for the project."

The CoC in Skenderaj, with a focus on construction, decided to apply for the profiles of wood and metal workers and architects. "We have adequate space at the school that is being adapted to accommodate the new equipment, like CNC machines, laptops and digital printers for the architecture profile. We have already signed memoranda of understanding with two local

companies,” says Mr. Loshaj. He sees the value of the project in another aspect too. The equipment the school will receive are modern, so the teachers will first update their own knowledge on how to operate the equipment so they can transfer the knowledge to their students.

The VET school “Nexhmedin Nixha” in Gjakova will use the awarded funds from the RCF to upgrade the mechanical engineering profile at school but also at the three private companies who partnered with the school. “This project was designed in line with the market needs,” says Mr. Leonard Shehu, Coordinator of the Career Center. “We aim to improve our own capacities and drive forward the development of production in our municipality, as the program seeks to establish collaboration bridges between our school and the private sector to ensure synergy so that all parties benefit.”

For Mr. Lutfiu from the VET school in Viti, the collaboration with the private sector in their small municipality is crucial. Through the project, the school will acquire equipment to train welders, metal workers, and CNC operators. He finds benefits for all parties involved. “Businesses will



have access to workforce, train them, and hire skilled workers. Youth acquire skills in demand by the labor market. School performance improves,” he says.

## GUIDING YOUTH WITH CONFIDENCE

Importantly, school-based career centers now provide personalized counselling to every student. Paired with the practical skills taught in their programs, the VET schools adequately equip the Kosovo youth to confidently navigate the job market. Every individual success story bolsters the impact of these career centers. The results are pouring in, inspiring more youth to lean towards VET education as a sustainable and rewarding pathway to a fulfilling career. Thanks to school-based career centers, the youth of Kosovo now have a reliable compass to guide them towards a better and brighter future – for everyone.



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