THE WE WELCOME WORK (WWW) PROJECT: ONLINE APPRENTICESHIP SIMULATOR INTRODUCING WORK STRATEGIES TO TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND COMPANIES

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the We Welcome Work (WWW) project (No.2016-1-RO01-KA202-02471), which meets the growing needs of high school students. Nowadays young people live in a very mobile environment and their employability is a challenge due to their lack of workplace experience and the related skills and competences. The article presents the project main objectives and outputs. The main aim of the WWW project with partners from Romania, Cyprus, Germany, Italy and Spain, is to offer non-formal opportunities for young people to acquire employability, entrepreneurship and digital skills to support their transition from school to the world of work thus achieving a better skills match and career orientation. The project aims at facilitating students' induction into the world of work by connecting the theoretical knowledge they acquire at school with the world of work. This is made possible by creating a data base of support resources (job profiles studied from different perspectives), equipping teachers and schools counsellors with interactive tools to tests and evaluate students' competences and skills and guide them according to their specific needs for their career and finally involving students in an interactive training session of apprenticeship, simulating various jobs situations in the form of animation problem-solving game.

Keywords: teachers, students, companies, job simulation, world of work, school.

1 EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The We Welcome Work (WWW) project meets the growing needs of high school students/young people who live in a very mobile environment, where time, education and employment are challenging issues. The Council of Europe has repeatedly stated that it is “committed to building a Europe with and for all young people, who will have access to quality education and training, to decent work and living conditions, as well as developing the conditions to enable them to contribute to the development of society [1].” Despite these commitments, the supply of apprenticeship and traineeship places in the EU continues to be underdeveloped. Lack of work experience and the related skills and competences are factors contributing to the “skills gap” in the EU today.

2 THE WWW PROJECT AND ITS OBJECTIVES

The main aim of the www project is to offer non-formal opportunities for young people to acquire employability, entrepreneurship and digital skills which can support their transition from school to the world of work. By connecting the theoretical knowledge students acquire at school with the world of work a better skills match and career orientation will be achieved. This will definitely facilitate students' induction into the world of work. The project highlights the role that investment in technical and vocational education, training and apprenticeship programmes plays and introduces free and easy access to interactive simulation job related tasks.

The project aims to create:

- a data base of support resources: job profiles studied from different perspectives (most wanted jobs for young people, professions obtained in non-formal ways, jobs in which young people from disadvantaged groups can have success);
- interactive tools for teachers and schools councilors to test and evaluate students’ competences and skills and then guide them according to their specific needs for their career;
• an interactive training session of apprenticeship for students, simulating various jobs situations in the form of animation problem-solving games;
• practical activities helping students develop a range of competences: workplace skills, problem-solving, teamwork, foreign languages, IT and social media skills, communication and cultural skills, etc.

3 THE PROJECT METHOD AND ITS BENEFITS

The project uses simulations as the main teaching method. Simulations introduce students to the environment of the job chosen. Students are familiarised with the main procedures, tasks and activities of the job. Simulations provide students with experiential learning by placing learners in reality situations where they have to interact. The situation looks real and helps students understand and gain knowledge about the job they are interested in.

In general the benefits of simulations on learning can be grouped into three strands: depth of learning, student engagement and transferable skills development [2].

Depth and Breadth of Learning: A number of scholars hold that simulations are associated with improvements in overall student learning by stimulating students’ levels of cognitive learning. Simulations recreate complex realities bringing them to the classroom environment, which allows students to examine them at their own pace and according to their own interests. Students’ high engagement in the activities ensures their deeper understanding of abstract concepts. Simulations, as first-hand experiential practice, get students emotionally immersed in processes of the real world situations, which become relevant and accessible and generate enduring and easily recalled memories. Simulations improve both knowledge retention and long-term student learning [3].

Student Engagement: Simulations stimulate students’ active participation not only in the classroom but also outside it by creating good relationships between students and teachers and an open and exciting learning environment. Needless to say, this shows an increase in students’ motivation to learn. Students express satisfaction with participation in simulations and are excited about the learning that took place. Students connect with simulations because simulations deal with real questions and issues [4].

Transferable Skills Development: Simulations are also reported to support the development of particular skills (communication/debating/research skills), attitudes and perceptions (empathy) that are not generally well cultivated through more traditional methods [5].

4 THE MAIN OUTPUTS OF THE PROJECT

In order to facilitate students’ successful transition from school to the world of work the project creates a data base of support resources (job profiles studied from different perspectives), equips teachers and schools counsellors with interactive tools to tests and evaluate students’ competences and skills and then guide them according to their specific needs for their career. The project main output involves students in an interactive training session of apprenticeship, simulating various jobs situations in the form of animation problem-solving games.

4.1 A data base of support resources and a collection of best practice actions

The first intellectual product of the project highlights the necessity to familiarise students with a range of jobs before they actually choose one. The Partnership has created a data base of support resources, which allows young people’s free access to 50 job profiles (in 5 countries: RO, CY, DE, IT, ES), studied from different perspectives (most wanted jobs for young people, professions obtained in non-formal ways, jobs in which young people from disadvantaged groups can have success). In addition to this, a collection of best practice actions has been made in the field of bridging the gap between education and employment.

The main objectives of this output are the following: to provide free and easily accessible information on available jobs to students/young people, to create educational resources on career guidance service for teachers and school counsellors, to make students/young people aware of the competences and skills they need for specific job profiles, to support different types of students (including those with fewer opportunities) to have access to specific information about the jobs they
can have and the competences they need, to create new educational resources and to promote the best practices products and actions related to students’ career orientation.

The data base and the best practices are to be introduced in schools where teachers and students are familiarized with the content, evaluate and provide feedback on the impact, the way the needs have been met, the support and knowledge that the products offer.

4.2 The toolkit package for teachers and school counsellors

The second intellectual product of the project equips teachers and school counsellors with interactive tools to test and evaluate students’ competences and skills and to guide them according to the specific needs for their career and job profile.

The partnership creates two types of products: interactive tests to identify students’ competences and provide them with the job profiles they could be interested in; a toolkit on the introduction and utility of interactive educational resources to motivate and familiarize students with workplace situations.

First, the test assesses students’ aptitudes. This helps them learn more about themselves and the occupations that best fit the aptitudes they have. Then students can gain important new insights into what types of careers would motivate them and the top ten vocational areas they are best suited for. The test also contains personality career elements that are used to determine student’s personality, social and moral values, strengths and main weaknesses. Based on the initial job profiles research done, the project partnership collaborates with school counsellors and elaborates a test, which is available to teachers/students and school counsellors and it is easy to access. Thus students receive concrete data related to their personal profile (competences and skills) and are guided to choose the job profile that matches their personal profile.

A guidance tool on the introduction and utility of interactive educational resources will be elaborated for teachers and school counsellors to enable them to motivate and familiarize students with workplace situations. The teachers are provided with strategies and tips on how to organise students’ work on the programme so that their efforts will be successful. Teachers will also benefit from techniques and strategies on how to motivate students to work and get over learning obstacles. Partners will collaborate with teachers to identify their interests and will work together in the elaboration of the content of the guide. The tool will be designed in a friendly form and will be promoted in schools to be used as educational material for teachers.

The products developed, the interactive test and the toolkit, will be tested in schools. Teachers and students will test the products and will evaluate its utility and applicability in students’ learning process.

4.3 The Online Apprenticeship Simulator

The third intellectual output of the project aims to involve students in an interactive training session of apprenticeship, simulating various jobs situations by accessing different types of online job profiles through an animation problem-solving game. The Online Apprenticeship Simulator will be structured and organised according with the findings of the research, which have identified the most required jobs in Europe and their most important characteristics.

4.3.1 The scenarios for the online job simulator

First, the scenarios for the online job simulator is created (scenarios based on development of a CV, a letter of intent or motivation; tasks related to dealing with different work situations involving the use of foreign languages, cultural aspects, teamwork, creativity, social media and IT skills, etc.). The aim is to set up the job field, collaborate with companies and create six job profiles (e.g. Customer services, IT, medicine, teaching, tourism) and 60 work place scenarios.

4.3.2 The creation of animations of work tasks from different domains

The job scenarios will be transferred to virtual simulation activities. The online apprenticeship simulator will include virtual gaming actions for six job profiles with different scenarios and solving problem tasks to be fulfilled by students.

The virtual simulators will include: clarification of facts and concepts; build tasks and interact with others; record videos and upload; navigation through the work place environment, click on objects or characters to deal with problem solving tasks; receive quizzes and choose the correct answer; self-assessment opportunities.
A number of at least 20 students will be involved in testing the virtual apprenticeship from a chosen field. Practical activities with students will develop various competences: workplace skills, problem-solving, teamwork, foreign languages, IT and social media skills, communication and cultural skills, etc. The beneficiaries will be invited to evaluate the product and provide feedback and testimonials of the experience of doing job tasks in a virtual context and then cascade the product to other students or young people.

4.3.3 The creation of a network of institutions and companies in different areas from partners’ countries

The aim of the action is to involve companies to promote skilled workers to young people by offering real practice training sessions and motivational testimonials. Partners will be involved in contacting companies from various working fields and promote the project and its objectives of supporting students and young people to be better prepared for the world of work by familiarising them with different work tasks. As the main aim of the project is to facilitate the access of students and young people to apprenticeship activities by first introducing them to the virtual context, the project does not ignore the role the companies have in supporting and collaborating with schools. Therefore, the project partners collaborate with companies and link them with the schools involved in the project, with a view to better preparing young people for the job market.

4.3.4 The creation of company tutor’s guide in career guidance

The aim of this action is to develop a guide to enable the tutor to better connect the knowledge and skills students have learned during the academic training with the reality found in everyday practice:

- familiarise students with practical skills required in real practice situation;
- identify the most frequent difficulties, the crucial moments students might encounter while doing their practice;
- improve the students’ knowledge, skills, and learning experience;
- encourage students to contribute their experience and knowledge.

All partners, in collaboration with the companies included in the project network, will develop the guide content. The guide will be very interactive and will cover both students’/young people’s and companies’ needs. The project also includes students with fewer opportunities as a target group: disability, cultural differences, educational difficulties or refugees; the guide will include specifications on how to support companies and employers to adapt to the needs of these target groups and benefit from their working competences. The guide will be piloted in the network of the companies and the tutors involved will provide feedback on the usefulness of the material.

4.3.5 Motivational practices and videos made by companies

The aim of this action is to collect companies’ best practices, motivational stories and messages to be transferred to students and young people in order to better prepare them for the world of work and to help them with the choice of a meaningful career.

Partners will collaborate with companies/managers/employers and hold interviews on the project aim which will be filmed and further promoted in schools to students and young people.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The ‘We Welcome Work’ project raises stakeholders’ awareness about new routes meant to raise the effectiveness and quality of education and training programmes in Europe. The project’s outputs equip learners with important skills for the changing labour market by resorting to a creative technique: simulations. Simulations appeal to students as they have the power to recreate complex realities and allow students to examine them in a safe and challenging environment. Simulations are also motivating for students. Students become engrossed in simulations because simulations focus on real issues, raise real questions and facilitate students’ transition from school to the world of work.
REFERENCES


