Work-Based Learning Must Become Europe's Strategic Backbone, Not an Optional Extra, New Report Finds

WBL Champion Education Summit findings identify ten strategic shifts for Malta's and Europe's skills systems

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Malta — August 2026

Work-Based Learning should become a central part of Europe's education and skills systems rather than an optional add-on, according to a new report published by the Erasmus+ WBL Champion consortium partners.

The report, titled "Work-Based Learning Conference Key Findings Report", brings together insights from the WBL Champion Education Conference, held in Malta on 28 May 2026. Drawing on contributions from more than 80 policymakers, regulators, employers, higher education leaders and learners, the report sets out ten strategic findings on what must change if Work-Based Learning (WBL) is to move from the exception to the norm across Europe's skills systems.

Hosted under the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership "WBL Champion" (Project No. 2024-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000245540), the Summit brought together contributors from Malta, Ireland, Italy and Portugal under the theme "From Insights to Impact: Pioneering Work-Based Learning and Digital Transformation." The report confirms the central conclusion of the project's own Final Country Report: WBL can bridge the gap between education and the labour market only if it is treated as a coordinated, quality-driven and digitally supported ecosystem, rather than a fragmented set of individual placements.

> *"Work-Based Learning is the organising principle of Knights College, not a fashionable add-on."*, claimed **Kristina Galea Borg, Principal & Vice-Chancellor of Knights College.**

The report finds that employers are signalling a competence gap rather than a knowledge gap among graduates. While graduates are not short of what they know, they lack the lived, applied competence that only real work under real conditions builds. Skills traditionally described as "soft skills" are reframed in the report as "human power skills", with curiosity, adaptability, communication, critical thinking and collaboration now described as the core currency of employability.

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence are raising that baseline further, with the report calling for responsible AI literacy to be embedded as a core graduate competence across disciplines, reflecting the growing need for graduates to understand how emerging technologies can be used effectively, critically and responsibly in professional settings.

The report also argues that genuine Work-Based Learning requires education providers and industry to share responsibility more closely. Rather than limiting employers and workplace mentors to periodic consultation or advisory roles, it says they should have a meaningful voice in curriculum development, assessment and quality decisions.Embedding this shift is described

as a leadership and change-management challenge as much as a policy one, requiring institutions to win the trust of academic staff and, where necessary, retire controls that no longer serve the strategic aim.

> *"WBL is a strategic imperative for Higher Education to ensure that graduates have an impact on the economy and society", emphasised* **Assumpta Harvey, Head of School, Technological University Dublin.**

The report identifies European collaboration through Erasmus+ as Malta's and Knights College's key differentiator, providing shared standards and comparative learning that separate what is essential in Work-Based Learning from local habit. Its closing message is that systemic impact will depend on governments, regulators, education providers, employers and learners aligning around a common objective. That means bringing policy, regulation, curricula, assessment, quality assurance and funding into closer alignment so that Work-Based Learning is supported as part of the wider education and skills system.

To support this shift, the WBL Champion project has produced a practical suite of resources, including **four national reports** covering Ireland, Italy, Malta and Portugal, **a consolidated Final Country Report**, **three Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses** for academic coordinators, academic supervisors and industry mentors, and a **Quality Assurance Toolkit** for the design, implementation and monitoring of WBL programmes. The full Key Findings Report and supporting resources are available at wbl-champion.eu.

About WBL Champion

WBL Champion is an Erasmus+ KA220-HED Cooperation Partnership (Project No. 2024-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000245540, 2024 to 2026) reshaping Work-Based Learning across Europe. The consortium comprises VITECO SRL (Italy, coordinator), INOVA+ (Portugal), Technological University Dublin (Ireland) and Knights College (Malta).

Link to full report - *https://wbl-champion.eu/education-conference-on-work-based-learning/*

Link to the Online Learning Platform: https://platform.wbl-champion.eu/

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Erasmus+ National Agency - INDIRE. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Project No: 2024-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000245540