



STEAM BO.SS

boosting soft skills

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Evaluation with Companies

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Sapere utile



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1. Introduction

This transnational report presents a comparative analysis of the results collected through company surveys conducted across four partner countries **within the STEAM BO.SS project**. The main objective of this analysis is to explore companies' perspectives on collaboration with Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and to assess the role of soft skills in enhancing young people's employability in contemporary labour markets.

The data gathered provide valuable insights into how companies perceive the importance of transversal competences, such as proactivity, adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving, as well as the effectiveness of existing cooperation models between education and industry. In addition, the report examines the impact of participation in project activities, the most effective forms and timing of collaboration, and the potential for future partnerships.

By adopting a comparative approach, this report identifies both common trends and country-specific differences, allowing for a broader understanding of how VET-company collaboration is evolving across different European contexts. The findings highlight a shared recognition of the need for stronger, more structured, and practice-oriented cooperation, capable of bridging the gap between training provision and labour market demands.

Ultimately, this report aims to contribute to the development of more effective and sustainable collaboration models between VET institutions and companies, supporting the acquisition of relevant soft skills, improving employability outcomes, and fostering innovation and competitiveness within European economies.

2. Company Profile

Across the participating countries, the companies involved in the survey represent a **diverse range of economic sectors**, including technology, engineering, manufacturing, education, financial services, creative industries, hospitality, and the food sector. This diversity highlights the cross-sectoral relevance of VET-company collaboration and reflects a shared interest in strengthening links between education and the labour market.

In Italy and Estonia, the sample is characterised by a broad sectoral distribution, covering areas such as technology, media, logistics, engineering, manufacturing, design, and food production. This demonstrates strong cross-industry engagement and reinforces the transversal importance of collaboration with VET institutions.

In Spain, the sample presents a more **sector-specific profile**, with a strong concentration in the **engineering and technology sectors**, complemented by one company from the retail sector. This composition provides a more specialised perspective, particularly in areas related to innovation, automation, and technical development, while also introducing insights from customer-oriented environments.

In Portugal, the sample also reflects a **high level of sectoral diversity**, including organisations from education, financial services, technology and media, and accommodation. This variety reinforces the broad applicability of VET collaboration across different economic contexts. The level of involvement in the STEAM BO.SS project was mostly occasional across all companies, although one organisation (Ai9.PT) stands out for its regular collaboration with VET institutions. While some companies have already established partnerships with training providers, others have not yet engaged in such collaborations but have expressed a clear interest in doing so in the future.

Regarding involvement in the STEAM BO.SS project, participation levels vary across countries. In Italy, only a limited number of companies were directly involved in project

activities, while others had a more indirect role. In Estonia, one company reported active involvement, with the remaining organisations participating occasionally. In Spain, one company demonstrated strong and continuous engagement, while others participated occasionally or had no direct involvement. In Portugal, participation was also predominantly occasional, reflecting an exploratory stage of engagement with the project.

In terms of prior collaboration with VET systems, the results reveal a **mixed but promising landscape**. In Estonia, all companies reported previous collaboration with VET institutions, either regularly or occasionally. In Italy and Portugal, most companies also indicated existing relationships with training providers, although with varying levels of intensity. In contrast, Spain presents a more diverse scenario, where a significant proportion of companies had no prior collaboration experience, despite expressing strong interest in developing such partnerships. This highlights the existence of a **latent potential for future cooperation**, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises.

Overall, the findings reveal a business landscape that is **diverse, open, and increasingly engaged with educational processes**. Differences in sectoral focus, level of experience, and degree of involvement are not barriers, but rather opportunities to develop **flexible and adaptable collaboration models** capable of responding to the needs of different industries and regional contexts.

3. Soft skills and Labour Market Needs

Across all participating countries, companies consistently recognise the critical importance of soft skills for employability. The results show a strong consensus, with most evaluations ranging between **3 and 4 on a 4-point scale** (or equivalent), confirming that soft skills are considered as essential as technical competences in today's labour market.

Despite this overall agreement, some national differences can be observed in the specific skills prioritised. In Estonia, companies emphasised **teamwork, problem-solving, time management, and decision-making**, along with complementary skills such as analytical thinking, leadership, creativity, and flexibility. In Italy, the most valued competence was clearly **flexibility**, followed by **proactivity**, problem-solving, decision-making, and teamwork, reflecting the need for professionals capable of adapting to rapidly evolving work environments.

Similarly, in Spain, companies highlighted **proactivity** as the most demanded skill, followed by **flexibility and problem-solving**, particularly in sectors characterised by constant innovation and technological change. Spanish respondents also stressed the importance of analytical thinking, creativity, and decision-making, while identifying gaps in time management and effective communication among young graduates. The findings also point to the growing demand for “T-shaped professionals”, combining strong technical expertise with well-developed transversal skills.

In the Portuguese context, companies also strongly emphasised **proactivity** as the most relevant competence, followed by **empathy, creativity, and time management**, highlighting the importance of interpersonal and organisational skills in workplace environments.

Overall, the results reveal a clear and shared European trend: companies are increasingly seeking professionals who combine technical knowledge with transversal

competences such as adaptability, initiative, collaboration, and problem-solving. Soft skills are no longer perceived as complementary, but rather as fundamental elements that enable individuals to perform effectively, adapt to change, and contribute to organisational success in dynamic and complex labour markets.

4. Role of VET-Company synergy in soft skills development

Across the participating countries, companies consistently recognise the essential role of collaboration between VET institutions and businesses in supporting the development of soft skills among young people. The findings reveal a strong and shared perception that such cooperation is not only beneficial but fundamental for preparing future workers for the demands of the labour market.

In Portugal and Italy, companies expressed very high levels of agreement regarding the importance of this synergy, with most responses concentrated between **3 and 4 on a 4-point scale**, and a significant number of maximum scores. Similarly, in Spain, companies also reported a strong level of agreement (average **3.4 on a 5-point scale**), confirming the relevance of active and continuous collaboration. Across these contexts, collaboration is no longer perceived as a one-directional process, but rather as a **bidirectional and strategic partnership**, where companies act as active contributors to the training process.

This perspective is further reinforced by the broad consensus regarding the responsibility for developing soft skills. In all countries, the majority of companies agreed that these competences should result from a **balanced combination of school-based learning and workplace experience**. While a small number of respondents suggested that companies may play a more dominant role, the prevailing view highlights the importance of complementarity: schools introduce foundational competences, while companies reinforce and apply them in real working environments.

Moreover, companies recognised that ongoing collaboration contributes significantly to several key outcomes. High levels of agreement were observed across countries regarding the **alignment between training and labour market needs**, the **development of relevant soft skills**, and the **enhancement of young people's employability**. Spanish companies, in particular, emphasised the role of collaboration in reducing the gap between academic training and real business dynamics, while Italian companies

highlighted its contribution to reducing the mismatch between talent supply and demand.

Additionally, collaboration was also perceived as contributing to the **strengthening of companies' competitiveness**, supporting innovation processes, improving talent attraction, and facilitating smoother integration of young professionals into the workforce.

Overall, the results point to a strongly shared European perspective: effective, continuous, and structured collaboration between VET providers and companies is a key driver for improving training relevance, enhancing employability, and ensuring the development of transversal competences in increasingly complex and dynamic labour markets.

5. Key areas and timing of collaboration

Across the participating countries, companies consistently demonstrate a strong preference for **practical and experience-based forms of collaboration** with VET institutions. These approaches are perceived as having the greatest real impact, as they allow students to engage directly with real work environments and develop both technical and soft skills in authentic contexts.

In Italy and Portugal, **internships and work-based learning** emerge as one of the most valued forms of collaboration, reinforcing the importance of direct exposure to professional settings. In Italy, this approach is complemented by **practical projects based on real business challenges** and the **participation of professionals in training activities**, reflecting a model strongly oriented towards experiential learning. Similarly, Portuguese companies highlighted **mentoring and coaching**, along with internships and practical projects, as key mechanisms for supporting skills development.

In Spain, companies also emphasised **workplace internships** and **practical projects based on real challenges** as the most impactful collaboration formats, particularly in technical and engineering sectors. Additionally, the involvement of company professionals in training activities and the **co-creation of educational materials** were identified as valuable strategies, further reinforcing the importance of close interaction between education and industry.

In Estonia, companies showed a strong preference for **mentoring and coaching of young people**, followed by practical projects, internships, and the participation of professionals in training activities. This highlights the importance of guidance-based and experience-oriented approaches in supporting students' development.

Overall, the findings reveal a clear and shared trend: companies prioritise collaboration models that promote **active participation, real-world application of knowledge, and**

continuous interaction between learners and professionals, highlighting the central role of experiential learning in VET systems.

Regarding the **timing of collaboration**, there is also a strong consensus across countries in favour of **early and continuous engagement throughout the training process**, although some variations exist. In Italy and Portugal, most companies support collaboration throughout the entire training programme, combining school-based learning with ongoing work experience. In Spain, companies strongly emphasised the importance of starting collaboration from the **beginning of the training pathway**, allowing for progressive skills development.

In Estonia, opinions are slightly more divided, with some companies favouring collaboration during **initial training**, while others support continuous involvement throughout the programme. Despite these differences, the overall perspective remains aligned: early exposure to professional environments is essential for developing both technical and transversal competences.

Overall, these results reinforce a shared European perspective: effective collaboration between VET institutions and companies should be **practical, continuous, and integrated throughout the training pathway**, ensuring that students are better prepared for the realities of the labour market.

6. Perceived impact of collaboration

Across the participating countries, companies involved in collaboration initiatives report a **consistently positive perception of their impact**, particularly in strengthening the relationship between VET institutions and the labour market, as well as in supporting the development of key competences among young people.

In Portugal and Italy, companies expressed a **high level of satisfaction** with their participation in the STEAM BO.SS project. In Portugal, most companies rated their experience between **3 and 4 on a 4-point scale**, indicating overall satisfaction. Similarly, in Italy, participating companies reported very positive experiences, highlighting the value of structured collaboration and the opportunity to engage meaningfully with VET institutions.

In Spain, companies also reported a **positive overall assessment**, with an average rating of **3.6 out of 5**, emphasising both external and internal benefits. In particular, collaboration was seen as contributing to organisational development, strengthening mentoring capacities within companies, and enhancing alignment between training and industry needs.

In Estonia, satisfaction levels were similarly high, with most companies awarding the highest possible scores. Respondents consistently highlighted several key impacts, including a **significant improvement in the understanding of VET systems**, as well as a strong contribution to the **development of young people's soft skills**. Additionally, all companies agreed that collaboration helped to **clarify which soft skills are most critical for their respective sectors**.

Across all countries, collaboration initiatives were also perceived as contributing positively to the **understanding of VET dynamics**, although with some variation in intensity. While Portuguese and Estonian companies reported consistently strong

improvements, Italian responses showed some diversity, suggesting the need for further alignment and communication between stakeholders.

The impact on the **development of soft skills** was widely recognised across all contexts. Companies reported improvements in areas such as proactivity, problem-solving, and adaptability, particularly when students were exposed to real work environments and practical learning experiences.

Moreover, collaboration was seen as generating broader benefits beyond student outcomes, including **enhancing organisational culture**, fostering stronger connections with emerging talent, and supporting innovation and knowledge exchange within companies.

Overall, the findings confirm that collaboration initiatives such as STEAM BO.SS have a **significant and multidimensional impact**, benefiting both learners and organisations, and contributing to stronger, more aligned relationships between education systems and the labour market.

7. Potential for future collaboration

Across all participating countries, companies demonstrate a **strong willingness to engage in future collaboration** with VET institutions, highlighting a shared recognition of the strategic importance of sustained partnerships between education and the labour market.

In Estonia, all surveyed companies expressed a **unanimous willingness to collaborate**, while in Spain and Portugal, nearly all companies also indicated a positive intention to continue cooperation, with only a small number selecting a more cautious “Maybe.” Similarly, in Italy, most companies (7 out of 9) expressed a clear willingness to collaborate, with the remaining respondents indicating openness, and no negative responses recorded. Overall, these findings reflect a **very high level of interest and openness across all countries**, confirming strong potential for expanding future partnerships.

Regarding the most appropriate forms of collaboration, companies consistently prioritised **practical and experience-based approaches**. Across all countries, **internships and work-based learning** and **participation in real business challenges** emerged as key formats, highlighting the importance of direct exposure to professional environments. In Estonia and Portugal, participation in real challenges was particularly emphasised, while in Italy, internships were the most frequently selected option, reinforcing the value of immersive workplace experiences.

Additionally, companies across all contexts highlighted the importance of **co-creation of training activities**, reflecting a growing interest in actively contributing to the design of educational programmes. Other relevant forms of collaboration include **mentoring and coaching, professional testimonial sessions, and participation of professionals in training activities**, all of which support knowledge transfer and closer interaction between students and industry.

Spanish companies emphasised the need for **more integrated and strategic collaboration models**, including open communication channels and active involvement in curriculum development. This aligns with findings from Italy, where companies expressed a clear preference for **structured and co-designed pathways**, rather than occasional or purely formal collaborations.

Across all countries, companies stressed that effective collaboration should be grounded in **real industry needs**, allowing students to develop relevant competences in authentic work environments. Flexibility was also identified as a key factor, ensuring that cooperation models can adapt to evolving labour market demands.

Furthermore, companies recognised that future collaboration generates **mutual benefits**: while VET institutions can enhance the relevance and employability of their training programmes, companies gain access to better-prepared future talent, strengthen their connection with emerging professionals, and contribute to local and regional economic development.

Overall, the findings highlight a strong and shared European commitment to deepening collaboration between VET institutions and companies, particularly through **practical, flexible, and co-designed approaches** that support both student development and organisational needs.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

The findings of this transnational report highlight a **strong and consistent recognition across all participating countries** of the importance of soft skills and VET-company collaboration in supporting young people's employability and professional development.

Across Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Estonia, companies clearly identify soft skills—such as proactivity, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication—as essential competences in today's labour market. These skills are no longer perceived as complementary, but as fundamental elements that enable individuals to navigate complex, dynamic, and rapidly evolving professional environments.

The results also demonstrate a shared understanding that **effective development of soft skills requires a balanced and integrated approach**, combining school-based learning with practical workplace experience. Collaboration between VET institutions and companies is widely perceived as essential, contributing to better alignment between training provision and labour market needs, enhancing employability, and supporting the development of relevant competences.

Furthermore, companies consistently emphasise the value of **practical, experience-based collaboration models**, such as internships, real business challenges, mentoring, and co-creation of training activities. These approaches are considered the most effective in preparing young people for real working environments.

Participation in collaboration initiatives, including the STEAM BO.SS project, is generally associated with **positive outcomes**, not only for students but also for companies. Benefits include improved understanding of VET systems, clearer identification of key skills, strengthened organisational learning, and enhanced connections with future talent.

Finally, the strong willingness expressed by companies to engage in future collaboration highlights a **significant potential for expanding and strengthening partnerships**, particularly through more structured, flexible, and long-term cooperation models.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this transnational analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen long-term collaboration between VET institutions and companies** by promoting structured and continuous partnerships rather than occasional or short-term interactions.
- **Promote integrated learning models**, combining theoretical education with practical workplace experience, to ensure a more effective development of both technical and soft skills.
- **Increase opportunities for experiential learning**, such as internships, real business challenges, mentoring programmes, and project-based activities that reflect real industry needs.
- **Encourage active involvement of companies in curriculum design and delivery**, including the co-creation of training content and participation in educational activities.
- **Support the systematic development of key soft skills**, particularly proactivity, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication, through targeted pedagogical approaches.
- **Enhance communication and mutual understanding between VET providers and companies**, ensuring clearer alignment of expectations, processes, and outcomes.
- **Develop flexible collaboration models** that can be adapted to different sectors, company sizes, and regional contexts, particularly to engage small and medium-sized enterprises.

- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** to better assess the impact of collaboration initiatives on students' skill development and employability outcomes.
- **Promote participation in international and innovative projects**, such as STEAM BO.SS, to foster knowledge exchange, innovation, and stronger links between education and industry at a European level.

9. Appendix

- Survey questionnaire
- Detailed tables and charts
- Open-ended responses (Question 17)



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