ENABLERS AND BARRIERS OF LEARNING THROUGH CO-CREATION IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

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Vocational education and training (VET) organizations are facing changes in work and operating environments that require a broadening of their collaborative development focus. For example, changes in learning environments, pedagogy and tools (e.g. digitalization), increased student diversity and stakeholder collaboration, as well as issues related to employee and student wellbeing, bring the need for co-creation to address these challenges.

Co-creation refers to collaborative development in the workplace involving at least two or more individuals, teams, or organizations. Its core principles are equal participation and free exchange of ideas. Co-creation provides different methods for continuous and systematic development. Through co-creation, individuals share experiences, tacit knowledge and skills, fostering open, ongoing dialogue and promoting collaborative learning.

In this presentation, we aim to explore the enablers and barriers of co-creation at work in the context of vocational education by exploring the experiences and views of VET staff on co-creation at work. The data were collected in four VET organizations in 2024-2025 through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative method of inductive content analysis was applied to the research data. The findings are preliminary as data collection is ongoing.

The preliminary findings suggest that different organizational, team, and individual factors can support or hinder co-creation at work. The analysis identified five enablers of co-creation: organizational strategy and its implementation in organizational culture, enabling structures, managerial support, shared understanding of need and purpose, and trust. Barriers to co-creation fell into four main categories: inward focus, lack of resources, unclear 'big picture', and conflicting priorities and practices.

Organizational strategy was seen as the ultimate starting point for promoting co-creation, but this also requires the concrete embodiment of strategy in organizational culture, values and practices. Managerial support was described as the positive and supportive attitude of immediate managers towards co-creation and the organization of work and working time to enable participation in co-creation. Shared understanding of need and purpose was seen as a prerequisite for motivation and commitment. Trust was described as openness to share one's ideas, views, opinions, and knowledge, and the ability to give space and listen to others. More theoretically, trust could be described as psychological safety.

Inward focus was identified as one of the main barriers to co-creation. At an individual level, this could mean that the teacher's pedagogical autonomy becomes 'pedagogical autocracy', where the teacher does not consider or care about the views of other staff. At group level, inward focus can manifest itself as too strong a team orientation, where the team works well together but is not open to outside ideas or collaboration. It can also manifest in negative attitudes towards new staff from other organizations or fields, or in a general suspicion of 'outsiders'. Lack of resources, such as overly busy and/or fragmented schedules that do not support participation, can also hinder co-creation. An unclear 'big picture' was described as a difficulty in seeing the broader context of the organization or the VET field and one's own role in it. This can also make it difficult to understand the importance and role of co-creation in one's own work, which can hinder motivation and commitment. Finally, conflicting priorities and practices between individuals or groups were also mentioned as factors that make co-creation difficult.

In conclusion, co-creation holds significant potential for organizational development and collaborative learning in the workplace. However, various organizational, team, and individual factors can either support or hinder this process. Therefore, it is beneficial for organizations to assess and identify the factors that promote and facilitate co-creation, as well as the structures, conventions, practices, and mindsets that may impede it. Enhancing co-creation appears to be more of a strategic and cultural endeavor rather than merely adopting specific work methods.