

WORK-BASED LEARNING AND APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS AIMED AT REDUCING HIGH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN ARMENIA

ԱՇԽԱՏԱՆՔԻ ՎՐԱ ՀԻՄՆՎԱԾ ՈՒՍՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԵՎ ԱՇԿԵՐՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԾՐԱԳՐԵՐԸ՝ ՈՒՂՂՎԱԾ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆՈՒՄ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՆԵՐԻ ԳՈՐԾԱԶՐԿՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԲԱՐՁՐ ՑՈՒՑԱՆԻՇՆԵՐԻ ՆՎԱԶԵՑՄԱՆԸ

ПРОГРАММЫ ОБУЧЕНИЯ НА РАБОЧЕМ МЕСТЕ И УЧЕНИЧЕСТВА, НАПРАВЛЕННЫЕ НА СНИЖЕНИЕ ВЫСОКОГО УРОВНЯ БЕЗРАБОТИЦЫ СРЕДИ МОЛОДЕЖИ В АРМЕНИИ

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Received: 10.12.2026; Revised: 22.12.2025; Accepted: 14.04.2026
Ներկայացվել է՝ 10.12.2026; գրախոսվել է՝ 22.12.2025; ընդունվել է՝ 14.04.2026
Представлено: 10.12.2026; рецензировано: 22.12.2025; принято: 14.04.2026

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DOI: 10.53548/0320-8117-2026.1-104

Abstract – The aim of the article is to present and analyze the current state of work-based learning and apprenticeship system in the Republic of Armenia, to examine advanced international experience, and, based on comparative analysis, to propose practical solutions for further development and enhancement of the sector’s effectiveness. The article also emphasizes policy recommendations aimed at reforming the work-based learning and apprenticeship system, steps for the further development of social partnership, and their importance. The relevance of the study is grounded in several fundamental factors. First, the persistently high level of youth unemployment in the Republic of Armenia continues to be regarded as a socio-economic problem, contributing to the increasing migration of young labor force. Recent research conducted by various organizations over the past few years highlights that Armenia continues to have the highest youth unemployment rate in the region. At the same time, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and digital technologies has posed new challenges to the labor market, leading to structural, professional, and content-related transformations at both national and global levels. Numerous expert studies indicate that in the near future, several traditional professions will lose their relevance and competitiveness due to the influence of artificial intelligence. These will be replaced by new skills and specialties, which will

create significant challenges not only for the labor market but also for economic systems. In this context, the development of work-based learning and apprenticeship can serve as a positive driver for strengthening cooperation between the education system and the labor market, fostering a competitive workforce, and promoting the development of practical skills and professional competencies.

Ամփոփում – Հոդվածի նպատակն է ներկայացնել և վերլուծել Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունում աշխատանքի վրա հիմնված ուսուցման և աշխերտության ոլորտում առկա իրավիճակը, ուսումնասիրել միջազգային առաջադեմ փորձը և համեմատական վերլուծության հիման վրա առաջարկել գործնական քայլեր ոլորտի հետագա զարգացման և արդյունավետության բարձրացման նպատակով: Հոդվածում շեշտադրվում են նաև աշխատանքի վրա հիմնված ուսուցման և աշխերտության համակարգի բարեփոխմաներին ուղղված ռազմավարական առաջարկները, սոցիալական գործընկերության հետագա զարգացման քայլերը և դրանց կարևորությունը: Հետազոտության արդիականությունը պայմանավորված է մի քանի հիմնարար գործոններով: Նախ՝ ՀՀ երիտասարդների գործազրկության ցուցանիշները շարունակում են դիտարկվել որպես սոցիալ-տնտեսական խնդիր՝ նպաստելով երիտասարդ աշխատուժի միգրացիայի աճին: Ինչպես վկայում են վերջին տարիներին տարբեր կազմակերպությունների իրականացրած հետազոտությունները, Հայաստանը տարածաշրջանում շարունակում է մնալ երիտասարդների շրջանում ամենաբարձր գործազրկության ցուցանիշներ ունեցող երկիրը: Միևնույն ժամանակ, արհեստական բանականության և թվային տեխնոլոգիաների արագ զարգացումը նոր մարտահրավերների առաջ է կանգնեցրել աշխատաշուկան՝ առաջացնելով կառուցվածքային, մասնագիտական և բովանդակային վերափոխումներ ինչպես ազգային, այնպես էլ համաշխարհային մակարդակներում: Բազմաթիվ փորձագիտական ուսումնասիրություններ արձանագրում են, որ մոտ ապագայում արհեստական բանականության ազդեցությամբ մի շարք ավանդական մասնագիտություններ կորցնելու են իրենց արդիականությունը և մրցունակությունը: Դրանք կփոխարինվեն նոր հմտություններով ու մասնագիտություններով, որոնք ստեղծելու են զգալի մարտահրավերներ ոչ միայն աշխատաշուկայի, այլև տնտեսական համակարգերի համար: Նշված իրավիճակում աշխատանքի վրա հիմնված ուսուցման և աշխերտության ոլորտի զարգացումը կարող է դրական ազդակ լինել կրթական համակարգի և աշխատաշուկայի համագործակցության արդյունավետության, մրցունակ աշխատուժի ձևավորման, գործնական հմտությունների և մասնագիտական կարողությունների զարգացման հարցում:

Аннотация – Цель статьи – представить и проанализировать текущее состояние обучения на основе труда и путем ученичества в Республике Армения, изучить передовой международный опыт и на основе сравнительного анализа предложить практические решения для дальнейшего развития и повышения эффективности этой сферы. В статье также подчеркиваются стратегические рекомендации по реформированию данной системы, излагаются шаги по продвижению социального партнерства и акцентируется внимание на их значимости. Актуальность исследования обусловлена рядом фундаментальных факторов. Прежде всего, устойчиво высокий уровень безработицы среди молодежи в Республике Армения продолжает рассматриваться как социально-экономическая проблема, способствующая росту миграции молодого трудового потенциала. Как показывают исследования, проведенные различными организациями в последние годы, Армения продолжает оставаться страной с самым высоким уровнем безработицы среди

молодежи в регионе. В то же время стремительное развитие искусственного интеллекта и цифровых технологий выдвинуло перед рынком труда новые задачи, обусловившие структурные, профессиональные и содержательные трансформации как на национальном, так и глобальном уровнях. Многие экспертные исследования отмечают, что в ближайшем будущем ряд традиционных профессий утратит свою актуальность и конкурентоспособность под воздействием искусственного интеллекта. Эти профессии будут заменены новыми навыками и специальностями, что создаст значительные вызовы не только для рынка труда, но и для экономических систем. В этих условиях развитие обучения на основе труда и системы ученичества может стать важным фактором укрепления взаимодействия между системой образования и рынком труда, а также формирования конкурентоспособной рабочей силы и развития практических навыков, профессиональных компетенций.

Keywords – youth, employment, apprenticeship, education.

Հիմնարարեր – երիտասարդություն, զբաղվածություն, աշխատություն, կրթություն:

Ключевые слова – молодёжь, занятость, ученичество, партнёрство, образование.

Introduction

Youth employment remains a critical challenge in Armenia that affects economic development and broader socio-economic growth. A similar situation can be observed across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, where high levels of youth unemployment continue to pose structural and policy-related concerns (ETF, 2022).

According to the research conducted by European training foundation (ETF), the EaP countries have common issues related to high numbers of labor marketing integration challenges of young people aged 15–29. The research suggests that one of three young people in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova fall within the category of those not in employment, education or training (NEET). In the past five years, three countries (Armenia, Georgia and Moldova) displayed much higher NEET rates (30–35%), whereas in Ukraine the rate is close to 20% and some 10% in Belarus (ETF, 2022).

These numbers suggest that despite national, traditional, cultural, social-economic diversities, young people across the region face similar challenges in the transition from education into the labor market. The youth is facing significant barriers in realization of their potential, and inclusion into the labor market compared to the adults. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the artificial intelligence and digital technologies have further exacerbated the challenges in the labor market. This has resulted in skills mismatch and enlarged the existing gap between the enterprises and educational system.

Above mentioned trends highlight the pressing need for an institutional approach to facilitate the inclusion and smooth transition of youth from education to the labor market. It is evident that we must urgently transform educational and vocational training systems to better align with labor market demands. In this case, based on international experience, Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Vocational

Education and Training (VET) are not just beneficial additions but crucial solutions to this challenge.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining comprehensive desk research with qualitative interviews to provide an in-depth understanding of the VET system and youth employment dynamics in Armenia.

The desk research involved a systematic analysis of official statistical data, national and international policy reports, and scholarly literature on WBL and VET systems. Key data sources included the Armenian Statistical Committee, Eurostat, the European Training Foundation (ETF), and the International Labor Organization (ILO), providing robust quantitative insights into youth employment trends, NEET rates, VET enrollment, and sector-specific skills demands.

To complement the quantitative analysis, the study included in-depth interviews with 17 key stakeholders conducted from February to April 2025. These included representatives, policymakers and experts from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, the Unified Social Service, the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ), the "Strategic Development Agency" NGO, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of the Republic of Armenia, as well as directors from Yerevan State Humanities College and Yerevan Armenian-Greek State College. These interviews provided qualitative perspectives on the practical challenges of VET implementation, employer engagement and the effectiveness of existing apprenticeship programs. This triangulation of data sources allowed for a nuanced understanding of the systemic gaps and social perceptions that influence youth employability and the effectiveness of VET programs in Armenia.

VET institutions and students in Armenia: Statistics and current tendencies

In Armenia, VET is a key component of the educational system, offering an alternative pathway to traditional higher education and directly contributing to workforce development. Understanding the structure and dynamics of the VET system is essential for assessing its effectiveness in meeting the needs of both students and the labor market. Key indicators such as the number of institutions, student enrolment rates, gender distribution, and public financing trends provide valuable insights into the functioning of the system. Over time, these metrics can reveal shifts in participation patterns, emerging disparities, and changes in policy direction that influence access to vocational education.

In terms of institutional distribution, the number of VET institutions in Armenia has remained relatively stable in recent years. As of 2022, there were 51 primary (handicraft) and 99 secondary vocational educational institutions. Of these, a disproportionate share – 11 primary and 38 secondary institutions – are located in the capital city, Yerevan (Chart 1). This concentration reflects a common structural trend, where urban areas tend to house a larger number of educational institutions. However, the relatively high number of institutions outside Yerevan indicates that

VET remains an accessible option for students across the country, even though regional disparities may still exist in terms of resource allocation and institutional quality. Turning to enrolment figures, we observe distinct trends at the primary and secondary levels of vocational education. At the primary VET level, enrolment has shown remarkable stability over the last decade, with approximately 6,450 students enrolled in 2022. The gender distribution at this level remains consistent, with female students representing around 23% of the total enrolment. This persistence in the gender imbalance suggests that primary VET continues to attract a predominantly male student base, a trend likely influenced by the traditional association of handicraft and manual trades with male-dominated professions. Despite the consistent overall enrolment figures, the underrepresentation of women in these fields highlights the need for policies aimed at broadening the appeal of primary VET to a more diverse student body, including gender-sensitive program development and outreach efforts.

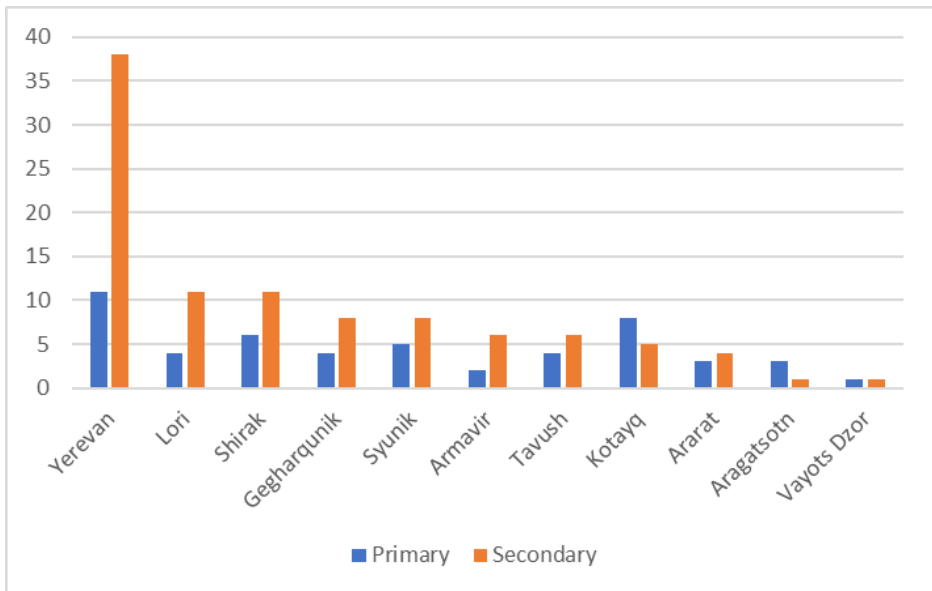


Chart 1. Regional distribution of Primary and Secondary VET institutions (2022).

Data Source: RA Statistical Committee, Social Situation of RA in 2022,
<https://armstat.am/en/?nid=82&id=2591>

In contrast, secondary VET enrolment has shown more dynamic growth (Chart 2). From 2017 to 2022, the number of students enrolled in secondary VET institutions steadily increased, reaching a total of 33,230 students in 2022. This includes a substantial number of female students – 16,926 – representing approximately 50% of total enrolment. Although this marks a shift towards gender parity, it is important to note that the proportion of female students has steadily decreased over the past

two decades. In 2006, females constituted about 65% of the student body in secondary VET. The reduction in female enrolment share may reflect changes in social perceptions of vocational education, an increase in male participation, or a diversification of VET programs that appeal more to male students. This evolving gender balance underscores the growing attractiveness of secondary VET for male students, suggesting a broadening of vocational training opportunities aligned with labor market needs.

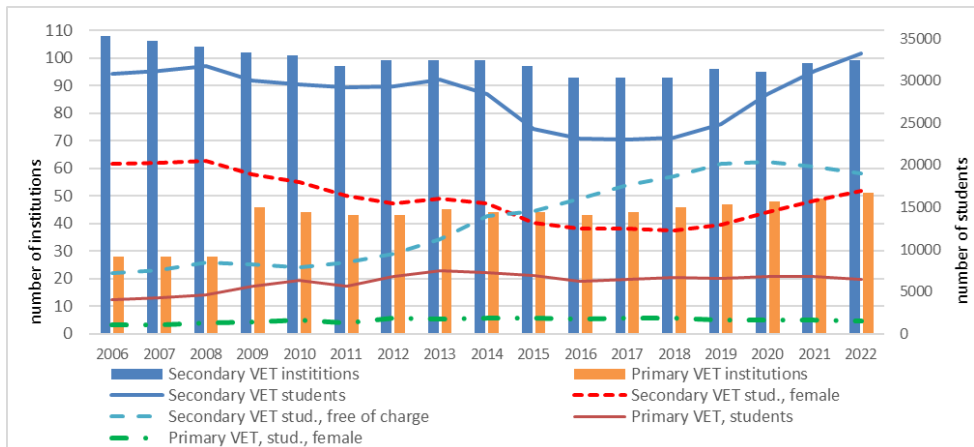


Chart 2. VET education institutions and students. Data Source: RA Statistical Committee, Social Situation of RA (2022-2006), <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=82>

State funding is another crucial factor influencing access to VET. Between 2011 and 2020, there was a significant increase in the number of state-funded (free-of-charge) study places in the secondary VET system. In 2020, the number of students benefiting from state funding nearly doubled compared to 2011, rising from 8,417 to 20,344 students – an increase of nearly 140%. This sharp rise in state-funded places indicates a strong policy push towards improving access to vocational education for economically disadvantaged students, which likely helped increase overall enrolment. However, a noticeable shift occurred after 2020, when a decline in the number of state-funded places was observed in 2021 and 2022. This reversal could be indicative of changes in government priorities, budget constraints, or shifts in the demand for vocational education, warranting further investigation into the long-term sustainability of such funding policies.

Finally, a closer look at the distribution of students across different vocational specializations in the secondary VET system reveals a significant imbalance. This is particularly evident in the disproportionate concentration of students in certain sectors, with notable gendered differences in participation. Fields such as healthcare and education see relatively high female participation, while male-dominated industries such as engineering and construction continue to attract fewer women. This

sectoral imbalance reflects broader gendered stereotypes and societal expectations surrounding certain professions. It also highlights the need for targeted interventions to encourage greater gender equality in VET, including policies that promote cross-sectoral training and address occupational gender segregation in vocational programs.

Table 1. Specialties and number of students (female students), Secondary VET education, 2022

<i>N</i>	<i>Specialty</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>female %</i>
1.	Business, Management	8283	4546	54.9
2.	Health	7013	5301	75.6
3.	IT and Communication	4735	1284	27.1
4.	Art	4438	2777	62.6
5.	Industry and Technology	1713	581	33.9
6.	Engineering	1695	108	6.4
7.	Individual Services	1198	778	64.9
8.	Education	1130	752	66.5
9.	Transport Services	1005	40	4.0
10.	Agriculture	887	202	22.8
11.	Architecture and Construction	399	132	33.1
12.	Security Services	254	104	40.9
13.	Social Work	202	161	79.7
14.	Journalism and Information	123	116	94.3
15.	Law	87	38	43.7
16.	Fishing	38	0	0.0
17.	Environment	30	6	20.0
Total		33230	16926	50.9

Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Armstat). (2023). *Number of students in middle vocational education institutions by specialty (field of education) and sex, 2022*. ArmStatBank database. Retrieved from <https://statbank.armstat.am>

Social partnership and coordination of VET education activities

In contemporary VET systems, social partnership plays a crucial role in ensuring that vocational education and training remain responsive to rapidly changing labor market requirements and tendencies. International experience, particularly within European VET systems, demonstrates that effective cooperation between gov-

ernments, employers, trade unions, and educational institutions contributes significantly to the development of demand-driven training systems (OECD 2023).

Moreover, the participation of employers and industry representatives in curriculum design, qualification development, and quality assurance mechanisms enhances the relevance and practical orientation of VET programs. Such collaboration supports the integration of innovative training methods, promotes the development of occupational standards, and facilitates the modernization of teaching and learning processes. Importantly, social partnership also strengthens the link between education and employment by encouraging the expansion of work-based learning models, apprenticeships, and internship opportunities.

In Armenia, the main structure of social partnership in VET education at the national level is the National Council for VET Development (NCVETD), a tripartite consultative body whose primary objective is to provide strategic advice to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports in the decision-making process and in the formulation of VET development policies and programs. Social partners are actively involved in the activities of 14 sectoral committees, where they contribute professional expertise through the technical review of draft state educational standards and the identification of sector-specific skills needs. In addition, social partners participate in the governance boards of colleges, which serve as the main management bodies in public VET institutions. It is worth to mention that the new Concept on Social Partnership in VET was endorsed by the NCVETD and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in March 2018, with the aim of strengthening cooperation between education providers, employers, and other key stakeholders (ETF 2020).

However, the level of consistent and active engagement of employers and other social partners in the implementation of VET programs remains limited. This gap often affects the alignment of training provision with rapidly evolving labor market demands and sector-specific skills requirements. As a result, graduates may enter the workforce with skills that do not fully meet employer expectations, limiting their employability and the overall effectiveness of VET programs. Limited employer involvement also reduces opportunities for work-based learning, apprenticeships, and real-world training experiences, which are critical for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Policy recommendations for strengthening VET education sector in Armenia

Despite institutional frameworks and existing programs, the VET sector continues to face challenges related to low participation rates among youth, limited employer engagement and social participation, outdated curricula, and the underutilization of modern teaching methods and digital tools. Addressing these challenges is essential to enhance the relevance, quality, and attractiveness of vocational education, to ensure that graduates acquire the skills required for competitive and sus-

tainable employment, and to establish targeted incentives that promote effective collaboration among stakeholders.

The following policy recommendations are proposed to strengthen the VET sector in Armenia, improve alignment with labor market needs, and foster broader social recognition and cooperation in vocational programs.

Image of VET education and public campaign

In Armenia, as well as in a number of countries of the region and Europe, VET education is undervalued both by the society, particularly among youth – and by segments of the private sector. Traditionally, the students of VET institutions and apprentices were often perceived as individuals who did not succeed in gaining entrance into the higher education or who came from disadvantaged background. Consequently, apprenticeship and vocational programs are less popular than higher education pathways, resulting in lower participation rates among young people.

To better understand these perceptions, additional research is needed among the young people to assess the current perception of VET education among general population. Such research would identify misconceptions and knowledge gaps and provide the basis for designing evidence-based strategies and public awareness campaigns aimed at increasing youth participation in vocational programs. Modern communication tools, including social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn), digital media, and traditional channels such as radio and television, can reach broad audiences and help engage potential participants in the VET system. In addition, workshops, meetings, seminars, career fairs, and other events can be organized to highlight success stories and best practices gained through dual education programs.

Currently, career centers within VET institutions organize informational meetings with school pupils to promote VET programs and the advantages of work-based learning. However, the effectiveness of these centers could be enhanced through closer collaboration with the United Social Services (USS), which can provide strategic career guidance, develop innovative approaches for professional orientation, and support safe and modern methods of vocational training.

Another important initiative is the development of a unified VET digital platform that integrates stakeholders from both public and private sectors, as well as formal and non-formal educational systems. Such a platform would support the digitalization of the VET system, create additional opportunities for informal education and apprenticeships, and provide a centralized hub for job vacancies and alumni connections, fostering collaboration between educational institutions and enterprises.

The successful implementation of these measures requires strong social partnership and a collaborative approach among all relevant stakeholders, including the Government of the Republic of Armenia, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture

and Sport, the National Centre for Vocational Education and Training Development, USS, VET colleges, trade unions, enterprises, and business associations.

Industry involvement: Financial and non-financial incentives

Active participation of the private sector and enterprises is one of the most crucial factors in the success of dual education and WBL programs. According to the International Labor Organization, governments in many countries provide incentives to encourage participation in apprenticeship programs for both apprentices and employers. For apprentices, these incentives often cover learning materials, stipends for living and transportation costs, and additional support for vulnerable groups, including women and persons with disabilities (ILO 2024).

In Armenia, however, there are currently no financial or non-financial mechanisms in place to promote apprenticeships and dual education within the private sector. There is also no legal regulation regarding the employment status of students, meaning that companies are not obligated to provide minimum wages or social protections for apprentices. This gap limits both the quality and availability of apprenticeship opportunities and reduces employer engagement in dual education programs.

International experience demonstrates several mechanisms that have proven effective in countries with well-developed WBL systems and could be applied to strengthen the Armenian context. One approach involves apprentice loan schemes that provide financial support under favorable conditions to cover training, transportation, and living costs. For example, in Australia, successful completion of apprenticeship training reduces the amount borrowed by 20 percent, and repayment begins only once apprentices earn above a defined minimum income threshold (ILO 2017). Such mechanisms improve accessibility for apprentices, particularly those from vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. Tax credits and exemptions are another common incentive, offering reductions in taxes for enterprises employing apprentices. In France, for instance, companies, including public institutions, that employ apprentices for at least one month can benefit from an annual tax credit of EUR 1,600 per apprentice. (Cedefop 2024). Subsidies, grants, and other direct financial support provided by governments are also widely used to offset the costs of apprenticeship programs and encourage private sector participation.

In addition to financial incentives, non-financial measures can motivate enterprises to engage more actively in dual education. Several European countries, for example, provide preferential treatment in public procurement for companies that implement apprenticeship programs, creating a cost-effective incentive to participate. Reputation enhancement initiatives also play an important role; in Norway, enterprises recognized as "approved learning organizations" gain a public certification that highlights their commitment to workforce development. Public awareness campaigns further reinforce these efforts, encouraging consumers to favor

goods and services produced by companies participating in apprenticeship schemes (Kuczera 2017). Capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching and administrative skills within enterprises strengthen the quality of apprenticeship provision and foster sustainable collaboration between VET institutions and industry.

Despite the potential benefits of these mechanisms, motivating employers in Armenia remains challenging due to distrust in the quality of education provided by VET institutions, organizational constraints within companies, and the absence of structured financial and non-financial incentives (ETF 2020). Addressing these barriers through targeted policies, coordinated social partnerships, and evidence-based incentive programs is essential for improving employer participation, enhancing the quality of dual education, and ensuring that apprentices acquire the skills required for a competitive and sustainable workforce.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing youth unemployment in Armenia is a complex challenge that demands innovative and effective solutions. WBL and apprenticeship programs present a promising strategy to bridge the gap between education and the labor market, enhancing both the employability of young people and the relevance of the educational system. The data and trends highlighted throughout this study reveal that while progress has been made, significant challenges remain, particularly in aligning vocational education with the rapidly evolving demands of the global and national labor markets.

To strengthen the VET system in Armenia, it is essential to foster deeper collaboration between educational institutions, employers, and government agencies. The integration of work-based learning models and apprenticeship opportunities into vocational education can provide young people with hands-on experience, making them better prepared for employment in various industries. Additionally, improving employer engagement through financial and non-financial incentives, along with the modernization of curricula and teaching methods, will contribute to the long-term success of these programs.

Public awareness campaigns and a strategic shift in how vocational education is perceived by society will also play a pivotal role in enhancing the appeal of VET. By challenging existing stereotypes and promoting the value of vocational pathways, Armenia can encourage more young people to pursue these educational options, ultimately contributing to the reduction of unemployment rates and fostering a competitive and skilled workforce.

Ultimately, a cohesive approach, supported by strong social partnerships and evidence-based policies, is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of work-based learning and apprenticeship programs in Armenia.

Acknowledgment

I sincerely thank the representatives of various enterprises, sector specialists, and experts, as well as the editorial team of "Herald of Social Sciences" journal, for their invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and support throughout this work.

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