

## **PIU – a Danish programme to stimulate work placements abroad**

*Qualifying young people for a future where cultural awareness, foreign language skills and ability to adapt to new circumstances play a crucial role is one of the challenges for the vocational education and training system - in Denmark, as well as in other countries.*

### **Practical training abroad - a pathway to skills for the global economy**

In 1992, the Danish Parliament passed legislation allowing trainees (students) in initial vocational education to have periods of work placement /practical training in companies abroad recognised as an integral part of their vocational education programme. At the same time, funds were made available through the Danish Employers' Reimbursement System (AER) to cover extra costs associated with international work placement. This new initiative was called PIU – a Danish abbreviation of work placements abroad.

Since the mid 1990s some 800-1000 trainees annually have taken advantage of the opportunity in the PIU-programme to add an international component to their vocational education. The PIU-programme was introduced by the government in part as a response to a large deficit of training opportunities in companies in Denmark at the time. However, the programme has a much broader value and impact on the quality of vocational education and training. Work placements abroad give trainees qualifications that are of major importance in today's global economy, including foreign languages skills, intercultural competencies and a better understanding of markets and work practises in other countries. Add to this the personal development of young people away from home for longer periods of time stimulating their independence, self-reliance, problem-solving skills, ability to adapt and assume responsibility and of course new technical/professional skills.

### **Initial vocational education and training in Denmark**

Initial vocational education in Denmark is structured as a so-called dual system where a trainee spends part of the time at a vocational college and part of the time working in a company as an apprentice. Most young people start their vocational education at the college where they attend a basic course introducing them to the professional trade they have chosen. Basic courses generally last 20-30 weeks, however basic courses in business are of longer duration. Completing a vocational education programme with a certificate normally takes 3½-5 years of which approximately one third of the time is spend at the college and the remaining time in the company. The company and the trainee sign a training contract and the trainee is paid an apprenticeship salary by their company determined by trade unions and employers. During the contract period the trainee returns to the college a number of times to complete college courses related to their specific trade.

### **Using the PIU programme**

The PIU-programme is open to all trainees who have completed a basic course in vocation-

al education or have similar skills. Most of them are from 18-24 years old. There are two ways to use the PIU-programme.

1. Companies in Denmark - private and public - who have signed a training contract may decide to place their trainee in a company abroad for a part of the training. The company abroad could be a customer, a supplier, a subsidiary or another organisation that the Danish company trusts can provide relevant practical training opportunities for their trainee. These trainees typically go abroad in the second half of the contract period when they have practical working experience from Denmark and solid professional skills. The Danish and the foreign company together with the student make an agreement specifying the tasks and training conditions for the work placement abroad.

2. Trainees who have completed a basic course, but have not signed a training contract with a company in Denmark may instead sign a contract with a company abroad. The contract can last for several years and encompass all the practical training required for the student to complete the program, or it may be a shorter work placement. The vocational college (or a trade committee) in Denmark will ask the company abroad for information about tasks for the trainee as well as staff and facilities in the company to ensure that the training will provide the learning outcome and contribute to the professional objectives of the particular vocational programme.

### **Financial support for work placements abroad**

Work placements abroad obviously involve extra costs for the Danish company or for the trainee. To make it attractive national funding is made available through the Danish Employers Reimbursement System (AER) – an institution established by law in 1977 and managed jointly by employers associations and trade unions. The purpose of the reimbursement scheme is to increase the number of training contracts and work placements in initial vocational training in Denmark and abroad through various financial incentives. All employers in Denmark contribute financially to the system based on their number of employees.

Danish companies sending their trainees on work placements abroad must cover travel costs and ensure the trainee the normal apprenticeship salary stated in training contract. AER will reimburse travel expenses and part of the salary costs of the trainee.

Trainees going abroad on work placements without a training contract in a Danish company will also have their travel costs reimbursed, and in addition AER will cover part of their housing costs abroad. Unlike trainees with a Danish training contract, however, they do not have a guaranteed income. They depend on a salary from the company abroad reflecting the costs of living in the particular country.

### **What is in it for companies abroad**

Working in a company in another country obviously is a great opportunity for a young trainee and companies who offer placements often do so because they see the value of em-

employees with international experience and want to help and contribute to the professional development of a young individual.

However, placements should be of mutual benefit. International work experience only matters if relevant professional tasks are available where trainees can contribute and add value to the company while learning. Not all young people have the motivation to go abroad and work as part of their vocational education and training. Trainees who decide to do so demonstrate a certain drive and determination, and what companies abroad can expect is a competent young person eager to work, learn and the face cultural and linguistic challenges in a new work environment. In addition trainees will bring professional skills from their vocational education in Denmark – and in some cases also solid work experience from a Danish company. In some cases trainees can also provide relevant information about business practises in Denmark that may be of value for companies abroad.