

## Expect project visit to Bilbao

The 9th meeting of the Erasmus+ funded international project on the Exchanges of Practices in Education for Climate Targets (EXPECT) was held in Bilbao in the Basque Country region of Spain on 23rd and 24th March 2023

We were hosted by the vocational college *Politeknika Ikastegia Txorierra* which is part of the Mondragon co-operative group. Josu Orbe outlined the college's involvement in the wider Mondragon group which is creating a more democratic and inclusive economic system.

The Mondragon co-operative movement itself started from a demand for public access to vocational education and training (VET). Post-war Mondragon was a relatively isolated town of 8,000 in a mountainous part of the Basque Country with limited transport links. The town had deep inequalities and very limited employment opportunities but it became the birthplace of an experiment in economic democracy that has come to be known around the world.

Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta initiated the network after developing community services and a medical clinic in the town in the 1940's, and went on to build further institutional responses to local needs. The need for technical education is key to the Mondragon origin story and the first Mondragon cooperative was a technical college, founded in 1943.

At the time, the largest employer in Mondragon ran an apprenticeship programme limited to the children of existing employees. In response, Arizmendiarieta organized a parents' group and fundraised for a technical school open to all. This was organized as a cooperative, with around 600 members who elected a general assembly and college board. *Escuela Politecnica Profesional* (Professional Polytechnic School) initially enrolled young people aged 14-16 and then grew as students completed each level. The college was key to developing the skills base needed to support the development of industrial and service co-operatives and in 1956, five graduates of the college started *Ulgor*, the first worker cooperative in Mondragon, which made paraffin stoves.

A credit union, *Caja Laboral Popular*, followed in 1959 to support the creation and development of worker cooperatives, and the first cooperative group *ULARCO* was formed from *Ulgor* with two other enterprises which made their tools and machine components. Today, the Mondragon group is the largest business in the Basque Country and the 10<sup>th</sup> largest in Spain. It includes 83 companies, employing around 80,000 people with a turnover of 11 billion Euros., 14 research and development centres with over 21,000 people trained in

Mondragon educational centres such as Txiorierri, and hundreds of Mondragon worker-owners participating in educational governing bodies.

Mondragon cooperatives are organised in five groups: Industrial, Retail, Finance, Corporate and Knowledge. The Knowledge section contributes to both training and research and includes four colleges, including Txiorierri, and a university with 7,500 students.

Our visit to Txiorierri started with an overview of the work of the college and the Basque Vocational Education and Training (VET) system from Kepa Larrondo. The college has a particular expertise in energy efficient systems, robotics and automation and has 154 solar panels which supply an average of 42% of the college's electricity needs, with more to come.

There is widespread use of problem-based pedagogy, described as 'Collaborative Challenge Based Learning'. Student projects are generated from real-world challenges which emerge from the local community and students' learning is mapped to transversal competencies.

The Basque dual system's two-year VET Diploma is in transition, with the timing and scale of work placements changing from 800 hours in the second year to 128 hours in Year 1 followed by 416 hours in Year 2.

The college's environmental studies teacher Naiara Yuste who also leads on embedding Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the curriculum, described how she works closely with many other organizations including the Mondragon group, the *Ingurugela* school network, *Hetel*, the government provider support group and *Tknika*, the Basque VET Centre.

Naiara spoke about the projects her students are working on: they provide an introduction to the SDGs for all new students at the college, they work with the residents of a retirement home to design environments and aids which are aligned with their cognitive skills and they are also working on ways to reduce emissions in the cleaning industry. Other projects include educating others about the circular economy and the environmental impacts of production and consumption, and showing how the threat to biodiversity impacts on all of us.

We heard from Jon Zubiria about *Ondoan*, a 40 year-old Mondragon group company of 400 employees operating in facilities engineering, environmental and occupational health and safety, land decontamination, air quality and energy supply. The company is very focused on "Ecoinnovation" for a range of enterprises in the Basque region.

*Ondoan* works with teachers to help define what they need and their initiatives include environmental management, ecolabelling, ecodesign and environmental product declarations.

We also spent a morning at BBK Kuna's excellent 'Home of SDGs' in the *Bilbao La Vieja* city centre quarter. BBK Kuna is a foundation which owns 57 % of *Kutxabank* which used to be a mutual and is now a non-profit 'commercial' bank which in turn re-invests its surpluses back into BBK Kuna. Eider Inunciaga showed us around this welcoming community space for social innovation in which different partners collaborate to make a sustainable positive impact on the local community.

BBK's work aims to address local social, economic and cultural needs through innovative projects, providing solutions to challenges such as the ageing population, loneliness among older people, climate change, the technological revolution and building community cohesion in a diverse urban context. Their values and every aspect of their work are closely mapped to the SDGs.

This was our penultimate EXPECT visit and many thanks to Kepa, Txorierrri college and all the presenters for making it so memorable. We were delighted to discover the beautiful city of Bilbao and to get some insights into the egalitarian, democratic and co-operative traditions of the Basque region. The team is now starting to pull together some main conclusions and recommendations from the project. These will be shared when they are finalised but we can already see some of the key elements of successful sustainability education in VET:

- Strong government and institutional support for sustainability education, placing the SDGs at the centre and integrating them with transversal skills;
- A broad, holistic general curriculum for all students with good coverage of economic, civic and environmental content which can allow students to move between academic and technical routes;
- A problem-based / service-learning pedagogy, which engages and motivates students and supports them to follow their interests while developing their skills and knowledge;
- Good integration between the work of educators, employers and the third sector in practical partnerships which can result in employment and training opportunities for students.

We are now looking forward to our final summative meeting in the Netherlands next month.

**Eddie Playfair, Association of Colleges, April 2023**

