

**Promoting excellence and innovation in Italian VET –
Apprenticeship: learning path in higher education**

Silvia Spattini

Marco Biagi Foundation

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

The “higher-level apprenticeship” is a new and innovative education and training policy, consisting in an apprenticeship contract leading to a diploma (high school certificate), a university or higher education qualification. This means that apprentices obtain the qualification specified in their individual training plan by means of off-the-job training (courses and lectures at university or other higher education institution), individual study with a periodic evaluation, on-the-job training and the work itself.

It is important to underline the fact that the certificate awarded by the educational institution within a apprenticeship programme has the same form and value as a certificate awarded on completion of a standard university or higher education course.

Under the terms of the apprenticeship contract, the apprentice has the duty to perform his/her work, while the employer is under a dual obligation. On one hand, the employer has to pay the employee (the apprenticeship) and on the other hand has to provide training on the basis of specific training programmes for the purposes of acquiring vocational skills.

An apprenticeship contract can be offered to young people aged between 18-29 in all sectors of activities. The written contract must contain a description of the type of work to be performed by the apprentice during the training period, of his/her individual training plan and of the professional qualifications that he/she shall obtain after completion of the apprenticeship.

The duration of apprenticeship contracts and the minimum duration of training (number of hours of theoretical classes at University, formal and informal training at the workplace, work) is defined by the regional authorities in a multilateral agreement concluded among trade unions, business organizations and higher education institutions.

In order to support the spreading out of the apprenticeship, economic incentives (lower social contributions) for the employer are applied.

The implementation of higher-level apprenticeship programmes requires an agreement between the university or other higher education institutions and the employer intending to hire the apprentices.

With reference to the professional profile required by the company, the educational institution and the employer jointly define the vocational skills to be acquired by the apprentices at the end of the apprenticeship. Accordingly, the educational institution, with the help of the employer, has the task of designing a training programme responding to the needs of the company. Moreover, it is responsible for off-the-job training, for evaluating and certifying off-the-job (school, university and higher education institutions courses and lectures) and on-the-job training, and monitoring the acquisition of skills.

At this time, it is still difficult to make a final assessment of the achievements of the policy. It appears that the programme is being successful, but it has to be stressed that, in comparison with the over-all number of students in the Italian labour market, the number of the participating ones is very limited.

However, the advantages for all parties involved in the higher-level apprenticeship programmes are clear.

First of all, the apprentices work and at the same time continue their education with courses based on specific vocational training, with a view to acquiring particular skills and competences and, in the end, a higher-level education qualification. These higher-level apprenticeship programmes promote earlier access by young people to the labour market, in this way addressing the problem of the high age of entry to the labour market in Italy among graduates. Under this program, the employers are able to participate in designing the courses in order to suit their requirements. This in turn gives the universities a better understanding of today’s labour market, along with the opportunity to update their courses and to increase employability of their graduates, thanks to a better match between education and vocational knowledge of graduates and vocational skills, abilities and competences required by the labour market.