

Launching a Syrian apprenticeship scheme: paving the way for change

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SUMMARY

This article charts the progress of a project to introduce an apprenticeship scheme providing school and company-based training for the first time in Syria. It traces the successes and failures of the project.

Syria is new territory for this kind of initiative. The article outlines some of the difficulties of working in a highly centralised environment where government, schools and industry have little experience of working together. It describes how special attention was paid to building bridges between the different participants at all levels and how this paid off. It also shows how this modest pilot project is preparing the ground for a much more ambitious overhaul of the Syrian vocational training system.

Key words

Training, apprenticeship, Syria, social dialogue, pilot

Introduction

The Syrian Arab Republic has been engaged in tentative economic reform for several years now. The aim is to move away from a centrally planned economy to a more market-orientated approach. Syrian moves in this direction are clearly a response to international trends such as globalisation and increasing economic integration. However, the country is also driven by the need to find solutions to domestic problems such as high youth unemployment and low productivity.

It is within this context that the country's vocational training or VET system is coming in for more scrutiny. Improving VET to produce suitably qualified graduates is seen as a fundamental tool for fighting unemployment and improving the performance of industry. The European Training Foundation (ETF) has been working in Syria for the last three years. Since January 2001, its project to introduce the concept of apprenticeship schemes to Syrian vocational training has been quietly spreading its own particular brand of innovation. The scheme is pioneering in several ways which will be discussed in greater detail later on in this article.

Tables and figures:

Two tables provide an overview of the numbers of participating companies and new apprentices in the section on conclusions. Brief interviews with key Syrians who are taking part in the apprenticeship scheme are included at the end of this article.

This article provides some brief information on Syria's labour market, VET system and general business environment before turning to the apprenticeship scheme itself. It aims to trace the development of this project, charting its successes and failings and the reasons why. It also attempts to explain how the Syrians themselves see the progress of this scheme. In the absence of a formal evaluation of the project, the article describes the main outcomes produced so far.

The article is based on first-hand interviews with a range of stakeholders in the project and information supplied by the ETF.

The Syrian economy and labour market

The Syrian economy has several features in common with those of neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. All three countries have high birth rates, giving rise to a relatively young population ⁽¹⁾. In all three countries, many people are employed in the informal sector of the economy and unemployment rates are high ⁽²⁾. All three are in transition from a traditional economy based on local consumption to a more globalised one. As a result, the labour market is experiencing conflict between traditional sectors and ways of doing things and modern sectors which have very different qualification needs. However, there are notable differences between the Syrian labour market and economy and those of the other two countries.

Many of the best-qualified people in all three countries emigrate for economic reasons and many of these are employed in higher-paid jobs in the wealthier states of the Gulf. But Lebanon and Jordan themselves also play home to substantial groups of foreign workers, who tend to do much of the low-paid, low skilled work. Syria is a net contributor to this exodus – especially in the case of Lebanon – as it is estimated that more than half a million Syrians are currently working in Lebanon, many of these employed in construction or agriculture.

While Lebanon has a markedly liberal economy with a large role for the private sector, Syria has stayed true to the school of centralised state planning which other countries in the region, such as Egypt, started moving away from 20 years ago.

Since the 1990s Syria has taken steps towards liberalising its economy and, since the 1991 Law No. 10 on investment, the private sector has grown fast. Nevertheless, the Syrian state is still a dominant force in the economy and state-owned enterprises remain in charge of important sectors such as the production of cement, cotton yarn ⁽³⁾ or mineral water.

(1) In 2001, the annual population growth rates were as follows; Syria 2.5 %, Jordan 2.8 %, Lebanon 1.3 % (source: Statistics in Focus, Eurostat).

(2) According to Eurostat, in 2001 unemployment rates were as follows; Jordan 29.7 %, Syria 10.3 %, no figure was available for Lebanon, (source: Euro-Mediterranean Statistics, Eurostat). Journalistic sources such as The Syria Report or Syria Today put Syria's unemployment figure as considerably higher at around 16 %.

It is not easy to find accurate, up-to-date information on Syria's labour market; the tradition of central planning means standards of information-gathering are often poor. The existence of a large informal economy, estimated to account for around 40 % of workers, and the fact that many low-paid public sector workers have a second job, also tend to confuse the issue.

Several characteristics do stand out, however. Syria's high population growth rate - 2.7 % per year from 1995 until 2000 - means that young people tend to dominate the workforce. In 2001, people under 25 made up over 36 % of workers. Young people are also far more likely to be unemployed; in 2001 10.3 % of the workforce was unemployed, but 89 % of these were new entrants to the job market. Even by the standards of the Middle East, the participation of women in the Syrian economy is low. In 2001, only 21.3 % of women over 15 worked outside the home compared to 83.3 % of men. Job prospects for women are limited; over half of those employed worked for no pay in family businesses, while very few women either employed other people or were themselves self employed. Finally, the public sector is a major employer of men and women, accounting for 26 % of jobs in 2001. In recent years, jobs in the informal sector have been growing at the expense of those in the formal private sector. By 2001, the percentage of people working informally had reached a total of 39 % compared to 33.8 % in 1995.

ETF experts have identified various problems which prevent the Syrian labour market from fulfilling its potential. Private employers tend to use informal contacts to find and hire workers, while the placement work carried out by government employment offices is extremely limited. There are few effective mechanisms for matching job seekers with the jobs available and no services providing advice or guidance to job seekers. Trade unions and employers' associations are not especially well developed in Syria and so cannot play much of a role in training and research or lobbying the government to invest in these areas.

The Syrian VET system

Syria's VET system has evolved little in recent years. It consists of two phases; secondary and post-secondary. Secondary VET takes place at secondary technical and vocational schools. Programmes, aimed at 16 to 18 year olds, last for three years. Graduates are awarded a vocational secondary certificate as skilled workers and either join the job market or carry on with their studies at post-secondary VET institutes or, in very limited numbers, at universities. Although other ministries are involved, the Ministry of Education provides around 90 % of secondary VET. Post-sec-

⁽³⁾ Syria's textile industry is a case in point. 90 % of cotton yarn is produced by the Public Establishment for Textile Industries. Private companies, who tend to concentrate on fabric and garment-making, are obliged to buy the yarn at prices set by the government.

ondary VET is provided at technical intermediate institutes and lasts two years. Entry requirements include a general or vocational secondary-school certificate. Graduates are awarded the qualification of high-grade technician. They can then either join the labour market or, in very limited numbers, go to university. There are 16 ministries involved in the provision of post-secondary VET, although most technical intermediate institutes are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education (around 35 % and 20 % respectively). The latter is responsible for formulating policy for post-secondary VET.

The system is mainly school-based, with little direct input from the world of work. This means it is unresponsive to labour market needs and the training it provides often has little relevance to the labour market. The government's central management of the system gives individual schools little freedom to adapt curricula or teaching material to local conditions. There is not much capacity for predicting needs for new skills and occupations and almost no provision for retraining people once they have left formal education.

The combination of a supply-led VET system, which is unable to adapt to changes in the economy, and a labour market which has no mechanisms for matching supply and demand for labour, is one reason behind the high levels of unemployment seen in Syria today.

Syrian society tends to regard VET as the poor relation of the education system. Middle-class Syrian parents would far rather their children became doctors or engineers than technicians, even though job prospects for the latter can often be better. At the other end of the social scale is a large group of people with little or no qualifications; overall literacy rates for women, for example, stand at a mere 56 %. This makes it hard for industry to find the skilled workers it needs. 'The problem we have here in industry in Syria is that there are only unskilled workers and management,' says Muhammad Ali, production manager at Habitex clothing company in Damascus, 'between them there is a big gap; we have very few skilled workers or people to act as middle-management.'

Syria's thriving textile industry is a case in point. One thousand companies, mostly based in Aleppo or Damascus, currently employ around 300 000 people. The sector is probably the most competitive and export-orientated sector of Syrian industry; Habitex for instance exports 90 % of its T-shirts to Europe. It also requires a lot of labour as there are limits to how far one can automate the process of making ready-to-wear clothes.

'The major problem with this very labour-intensive industry is precisely the labour,' says Anas Abou Jieb, an expert in garment technology at the Damascus Chamber of Industry (DCI). The workers, typically women, usually come from rural areas near the big cities and tend to have little formal education. Companies are obliged to meet the high standards of quality required for export, but the workforce has low productivity and finds it hard to grasp complex procedures such as those required for ISO certification. It is also hard to find supervisors, so many companies have set

up their own training departments and strive to bring people up through the ranks.

Globalisation and the Syrian business environment

In common with other countries in the region, Syria wishes to revitalise its economy and become more involved in international trade. The government has been negotiating an association agreement with the European Union for several years now. This is part of a wider free trade agreement which aims to reduce tariff barriers and promote greater economic integration between the European Union and nine ⁽⁴⁾ countries of the Middle East and North Africa by 2010. While the EU-Syria negotiations have been lengthy and often held up by political issues, it is hoped the agreement will be signed soon.

Syria has already made moves towards boosting trade with other Arab countries by signing free trade agreements such as the one with Jordan in October 2001. However while regional trade barriers have come down, significant volumes of inter-Arab trade remain elusive. For Syrian manufacturers, opening up to trade with the EU could mark the definitive transition from a relatively protected environment to a much more competitive one. But if the trade barriers come down without sufficient preparation, the effect on Syrian industry could be traumatic. Once again the Syrian government has taken some steps towards domestic economic reform since the 1990s but change has been limited, and the fact remains that, today, Syria is not an easy place in which to run a business ⁽⁵⁾.

The problems business people in Syria face include excessive bureaucracy, restrictions on international trade, heavy-handed government intervention in the labour market and a weak financial sector. It takes more than a year to set up a business in Syria, according to a recent report by the Syrian-European Business Centre, and investors must complete all the formalities in person. Duties are payable on a wide range of imports and customs clearance can be slow. The large public sector and high levels of labour protection make for a rigid labour market. Even in the private sector, the government often intervenes in setting wages, imposing across the board increases which are not linked to any increase in productivity. Finally, the Syrian banking system is old-fashioned and inefficient, making it hard to raise capital. This sector could soon improve, however, as the gov-

⁽⁴⁾ These are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authorities, Syria and Tunisia.

⁽⁵⁾ The Global Business Environment Ranking, which covers 60 countries and uses a range of indicators to evaluate the business environment, gives Syria a very poor rating, according to the Investor Roadmap for Syria (Syrian-European Business Centre).

ernment recently authorised three privately-owned, foreign banks to begin operations in Syria.

One area where there has been discernible progress is taxation. The formerly punitive tax regime, which included a rate of tax on profits of up to 63 %, has been reformed by Law no. 24 which came into force in 2003. This law has reduced tax on profits to 37 %, while companies issuing their stock to the public can benefit from the lowest rate of 20 %. In terms of corporate taxation, companies in Syria now bear a comparable tax burden to their counterparts in Turkey (30 %), Jordan (25-35 %) and Egypt (35 %) ⁽⁶⁾.

The apprenticeship scheme

The aim of the apprenticeship scheme is to show how relevant, practical content can be introduced to Syrian VET and, at the same time, establish the practice of social dialogue. The idea was born back in February 2000 during a workshop organised in Damascus by the ETF. Hatem Al-Homsi, then deputy education minister, was aware the country's VET system was not producing the right kind of graduates and asked the ETF to help change this state of affairs. He persuaded a group of Syrian industrialists to get involved and a pilot scheme began to take shape.

The ETF came on board officially a year later in January 2001, bringing its expertise on how to reform VET systems and a contribution of EUR 600 000 for a three-year programme. At the outset the ETF set itself two aims. The first was to make the Syrian VET system more responsive to the needs of the labour market by involving employers in designing and operating vocational training. The second aim was to give people the know-how to run a sound pilot scheme involving several hundred apprentices within three years.

The project grew from fragile beginnings and, for some, it was not clear exactly how it would work. Karl-Axel Skjolstrup began helping out as an ETF expert on VET reform policy in 2001. 'At grass roots level I came across a handful of industrialists who wanted to do big things but who were not sure whether they had the political influence to do them,' he says.

The Syrians had some previous experience of the German dual system whereby trainees divide their week between the training centre and a placement in industry. A pilot dual scheme involving one VET institute in Damascus had been underway until the early 1990s. Bearing this precedent in mind, the ETF helped the Syrians design a pilot programme of school and company-based training adapted to the Syrian context. It was decided to concentrate initially on Damascus and to work with just four trades; making ready-to-wear clothes, and the engineering trades of automation, mould-making and mechanical handling.

⁽⁶⁾ According to Emerging Syria 2005, Oxford Business Group.

In September 2001, the operational phase of the project kicked off with 82 apprentices beginning their training at three training centres in Damascus – Adnan Merdan College, Dommer College and the Third Intermediate Institute – and one of 19 public and private sector companies. Students spent four days a week at their training centres and two days at companies; they retained their official status as scholars. By 2003/04 the number of companies had risen to 34, while the number of apprentices remained stable at 83 per year. During 2003, the scheme was extended to Aleppo, where training in two trades was undertaken by 110 apprentices at Al-Assidi College and 14 companies.

The project consists of three components; curriculum development, teacher training and a policy or framework component. A common thread to all three is the importance of building bridges between the different actors. Syria is a country where the state plays a very prominent role in both education and the economy and there is no tradition of dialogue between government and the private sector. The ETF believed that promoting that dialogue and getting employers actively involved in both designing and delivering training was the fastest way of improving VET in Syria.

Thus at the top of the tree, overall responsibility for the scheme lies with a steering committee comprising Ministry of Education officials and representatives from industry. Below this, an apprenticeship unit was set up at Damascus Chamber of Industry to carry out the day-to-day running of the project. IT and teacher training was given to mixed groups of teachers, technicians and supervisors from industry. Curriculum development has also been carried out by mixed groups. 'What the project has done is to bring together national planners and the operational experience of teachers, people in industry and heads of colleges in Damascus and Aleppo,' says Noel Dempsey, ETF expert on curriculum development, 'in Europe, you might not think this is much, but here this has been a major departure.'

For this to happen, a new degree of trust had to be built up between government officials and industrialists, two very different groups of people who were not used to working together. 'In Syria there is a big divide between the public and the private,' says Eva Jimeno-Sicilia, Head of the Department for the Mediterranean region at the ETF, 'so there was a certain amount of distrust between the government and the private sector.' Both parties had to be prepared to give up portions of power and take on new roles. The government, which was used to taking all the decisions on VET, had to accept that industrialists should have a say not just in designing courses, but also in allocating resources. Industrialists had to take on board the fact that training is also their responsibility and learn how to identify their needs. Some of the most heated discussions at the monthly meetings of the steering committee were about who was responsible for what and whether people were fulfilling their roles properly.

Curriculum development

In May 2001 four curriculum committees were established and began the task of producing new curricula for each of the trades. These used a modular design and included training plans for industry placements. A core group of teachers helped to flesh out the new curricula by producing modular lesson plans and tests. During 2001, key personnel were selected and trained, including industrial training officers whose main job is to act as liaison between industry, schools and apprentices. During the visits to companies they also collect first-hand information which is being used to set up a basic national database on the project. A new post of curriculum officer in schools was approved, although making the post work properly proved difficult. Also in 2001, an informal curriculum innovation unit was set up to capitalise on the expertise gained and provide input to the apprenticeship scheme.

The curricula, drawn up by a mixed group of people from schools and industry, including many engineers, were competence-based. However delays in equipping workshops at the VET schools, the time needed for teachers to become fully competent with new equipment and reticence on the part of Ministry of Education officials mean that, in terms of delivery, the scheme is still moving towards being fully competence-based. 'The barriers were the evolution from the old system to the new and the time needed for commissioning the equipment,' says Dempsey.

ETF experts were impressed by the enthusiastic way the Syrians involved at ground level responded to the demands of the project. For instance, people from industry and schools worked very well together on drafting a system of tests. However, as time went on, the project came up against a number of problems. Operational staff complained of a lack of clear organisational structures and adequate management support. For instance the curriculum innovation unit functioned as a voluntary, informal organisation from 2001 until 2003. In October 2002, the participants called on the project's steering committee to set up a more formal structure but this was not forthcoming.

Progress was also held back by a lack of resources. Although a national apprenticeship unit was formally established in June 2003, this was consistently understaffed due to the Ministry of Education's reluctance to commit full-time staff to complement those ceded by the Damascus Chamber of Industry. Ministry staff were only seconded on demand and tended to give apprenticeship duties a low priority compared to their 'normal' duties. Moreover the Chamber of Industry did not recruit enough industrial experts to help run the scheme. As a result, the existing staff were overstretched and the project became behind schedule in areas such as basic statistics and the national curriculum test bank. Resources such as transport or internet connections were very slow in coming.

The issue of financial compensation for effort invested in the scheme

was also crucial. Teachers in Syria are not well-paid and most take a second job to supplement their incomes. While this means a member of the teaching staff will sometimes have hands-on industrial experience, it also means people have little time to spare for non-essential duties. Teachers and school directors participating in the scheme were not compensated in any way for the extra hours they put into attending meetings, training and doing curriculum design. This meant some people's commitment and availability diminished over time. In general, the slow wastage of local experts, both from industry and schools, was a continuing problem.

Teacher training

Five training programmes for trainers were organised in Damascus or Aleppo between June 2001 and December 2003. A total of 123 teachers and instructors from industry attended. The programme covered areas such as course design, industrial analysis, adult learning, project work, testing techniques and presentation skills. Trainers were introduced to new methods and materials such as the use of visual aids, lesson plans and modules.

Most teachers responded well to the experience. 'Using the old way of teaching, I would just deliver the information to the students. Now I start a discussion with them to see if they have really understood what I am saying or not,' says Ghoufran Bayazid, who teaches automation at Damascus' Third Intermediate Institute. Care was taken on these courses to ensure an equal mix of people from schools and industry so as to break down barriers and enable networking. 'These workshops are a very good way of setting up a dialogue between teachers and industry in an informal way,' say Ahmed Oyouun, industrial training advisor for the project.

For the sake of sustainability, Syrian mentors in Damascus and Aleppo were encouraged to become trainers of trainers themselves and conducted several courses under ETF supervision. Support was provided on a cascade basis. 'Of course we gave them a lot of support on the second course they gave, but by the third course, our input was down to 10 % or 20 %,' says Atef Abdel Malak, an ETF teacher training expert. Other courses allowed some teachers to brush up on information technology and engineering skills. Others gained valuable practical experience by doing a placement in industry themselves.

Training centres have benefited from refurbishment as a result of the project. The Syrian government has spent around EUR 700 000 on new school equipment. Here the close links established between schools and industry by joint training courses really paid off. A mock production line set up at Adnan Merdan Garment College in Damascus in 2002 was planned and installed with considerable input from a local textile company, Al-Hamaly. A similar one has since been installed at Al-Assidi College in Aleppo.

Framework

In this part of the project, a lot of time and energy was devoted to helping the participants clarify their roles and responsibilities in the scheme. Handbooks were written for all the major actors in the scheme such as apprentices, company supervisors and members of school boards. Basic management courses were held for key people covering areas such as time management and office IT. In 2002, it was decided to set up school boards with three members each from government and private companies. The boards aim to give extra management support for the apprenticeship schools and provide another channel for company involvement. Following a training course in November 2003, the boards held their first meetings in late 2003. As they are a new phenomenon in Syrian education, there are still many uncertainties about how they will work within the current legal framework. For instance, setting up the boards aims to give schools greater autonomy, but they cannot decide how to spend their budgets as all financial decisions are still taken centrally.

One major achievement was producing a policy paper to pave the way for introducing a national apprenticeship scheme in the future. It is hoped this Green Paper will become law within one or two years. The basic structures will comprise an apprenticeship fund with joint private/public funding, a secretariat to administer the scheme and a qualification/curriculum development organisation in charge of training plans and courseware. While answerable to the ministry, the apprenticeship organisation will be independent of the existing education system and will enjoy a high degree of autonomy.

Drafting the policy paper has also launched the debate on how to pay for a nationwide scheme. The idea is to share the financial burden, with the government funding 100 % of costs at the outset, but with the proportion shifting to a 50/50 split in a few years' time. For Karl-Axel Skjolstrup, ETF expert on framework conditions, these moves bode well for the future sustainability of the scheme. 'All this goes to show that the Syrians have taken ownership of the project and have accepted the idea of a management structure independent of government,' he says, 'they are moving towards the idea of public/private partnership.'

Aleppo comes on board

One of the biggest successes of the project is the ease with which it has been introduced in Syria's second city, Aleppo, which was not in the original plans. A joint delegation of industrialists and local government representatives took the initiative and persuaded the scheme managers to let them try out the scheme in their city. In April 2003, work began on two trades, mechanical handling and garment-making, using curricula already

developed in Damascus. By July, Al-Assidi College had been converted into a dedicated institute of technology and staff appointed. An apprenticeship office was set up at Aleppo Chamber of Industry (ACI). In September 2003, 110 apprentices began training at Al-Assidi and one of 14 participating companies.

As the decision to begin in Aleppo came towards the end of ETF official involvement, an extension was granted to allow further training and support to be provided during 2004. During 2003, with modest support and very little time to make things ready, the Aleppo team achieved an impressive amount. An extremely close working relationship was established between government and industry, even though this kind of initiative was new to both. Antun Al-Jouni, director of the Aleppo apprenticeship unit, puts this down to local industrialists' appreciation of the importance of well-trained workers. 'People at ACI agree that this is the only way to go about upgrading Aleppo's industry,' he says, 'you can always buy in machinery, but you cannot buy in good workers.'

The future

Representatives from Syria's third city Homs have participated in training activities during 2004 and are preparing to begin training their first batch of apprentices in September 2005. Discussions are also underway on how to launch the scheme in Latakia. In Aleppo, the social partners have set some specific goals for introducing new trades and expanding student numbers. From September 2005, the Aleppo scheme will include the trade of foundry and the possibility of extending this to the tourism sector is currently under discussion. The social partners are also aiming to boost the number of apprentices from the current level of 4.5 % of VET students in Aleppo to at least 10 % by the year 2010.

Further good news for the project as a whole is the European Commission's decision to commit EUR 21 million funding to a much more ambitious programme aimed at overhauling the entire Syrian VET system. This Meda project, known as 'Modernisation of the VET system in Syria', started in September 2004, is scheduled to last for four years and will pay special attention to fostering the links between vocational training and the labour market. The apprenticeship scheme will continue as part of this broader initiative, and three of the apprenticeship schools – two in Damascus and one in Aleppo – have been selected to be part of a group of 16 schools scheduled for substantial upgrading.

The ETF is currently providing support to the European Commission in the financing and launching phase of this new project. The ETF's continuing involvement in the apprenticeship scheme in Aleppo is seen as a way of keeping the momentum going for reform and paving the way for the MEDA project.

Conclusions

The apprenticeship scheme scored some notable successes over the past three years, but it has also come up against problems. The whole issue of management was one of the biggest headaches. There was often a contradiction between the spirit of the scheme, which emphasised decentralisation and creating public-private partnerships, and the centralised way the scheme was managed by the ministry. Existing conditions of work, particularly in the Ministry of Education, were not really conducive to smooth implementation of the project. The project's steering committee lacked direction and failed to focus sufficiently on the problems of day-to-day management and implementation. Staff with little experience of apprenticeship issues were put to work on the scheme. These management deficits, coupled with the lack of resources, meant that the apprenticeship unit was often not as effective as it could have been.

Syrian inexperience of this kind of project plus a certain resistance to change meant achieving results often took longer than expected. 'We are not just operating a dual system, we are changing the attitudes of people at the Damascus Chamber of Industry, the ministry, in the schools and even the students,' says Haytham Al-Yafi, an industrialist and member of the steering committee, 'but you have to understand that these are the habits of 30-40 years and suddenly you are trying to change them in just three years.'

The question of resources was a constant issue. All too often too few people were being asked to do too many things, which meant parts of the project were held up or only half completed. People in schools and companies were not given any financial compensation for all the extra hours they put in. Also, in a large, sprawling city such as Damascus, there was rarely enough transport provided to allow heads of schools or industrial training officers to carry out their duties efficiently. In such a climate, there was little incentive for staff to take on new responsibilities and the risk of people getting demoralised was great.

On the plus side (7), a large volume of work was done and a lot of organisations and individuals have benefited in the process. The number of participants in terms of companies and apprentices is shown below.

Curricula have been revamped in the four pilot sectors and procedures established to align them with modern learning concepts. Handbooks have been written providing guidance to all the main players in the scheme. A pilot system of testing and certification has been designed and a test run was carried out in January 2004. However, full implementation has not yet been achieved due to a lack of commitment from the Ministry of Education.

(7) An external evaluation of all ETF projects in Syria is due to be carried out in 2005. In the absence of an official evaluation, any verdict on the success or failure of the apprenticeship scheme can only be based on informal feedback from stakeholders and ETF experts and tangible outcomes.

Table 1.

DAMASCUS

	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04
No of participating companies (*)	19	24	32	34
Mould making	10	8	6	7
Automatic control	6	8	13	5
Mechanical handling	4	6	11	7
Ready to wear clothes	5	8	8	7
No of new apprentices	82	84	150	83
Mould making	17	16	13	11
Automatic control	12	18	40	17
Mechanical handling	11	18	35	16
Ready to wear clothes	42	32	62	39

(*) The total number of companies does not correspond to the breakdown per trade as some companies participate in more than one trade and not all of them took on new apprentices in a given year, i.e. 2003/04.

Table 2.

ALEPPO

	2003/04
No of participating companies	14
Mechanical handling	7
Ready to wear clothes	7
No of new apprentices	110
Mechanical handling	52
Ready to wear clothes	68

Teachers, company supervisors, civil servants and school board members have benefited from training in areas such as information technology and management as well as teaching skills. A total of 123 people, including teachers, trainers and supervisors attended five training courses for trainers between June 2001 and December 2003. More courses, mainly in Aleppo, were carried out in 2004. Five Syrian mentors were trained to become trainers of trainers and conducted several courses. A total of 26 teachers and industrial trainers completed courses on information technology, while 53 people completed one of three courses on engineering subjects such as fluids technology.

The framework component of the project led to the establishment of a clear management structure which it is hoped will provide a solid basis for the future. While much remains to be done, a total of eight management training courses were held and the capacity for both management and co-operation among all the stakeholder groups increased accordingly.

On a wider scale, the ETF and its Syrian partners have shown that it is possible to set up and run a pilot apprenticeship scheme involving companies and schools in just three years. Moreover, a blueprint for launching a nationwide scheme has been produced and the debate about how to pay for this has been launched. Finally, the project has been used by the EU

as a way of testing the readiness of the Syrian VET system for further systemic change. The fact that the EU has committed itself to supporting much broader reforms in Syria is partly due to the success of the apprenticeship scheme.

Thus, with all its shortcomings and imperfections, this modest pilot scheme is making a difference to the bigger picture. Perhaps its most significant contribution is launching the whole process of social dialogue between government and employers. The project has managed to build bridges at all levels: between teachers and company supervisors, school directors and industrialists, between the Ministry and the Chamber of Industry. This dialogue has only just begun and has yet to produce the necessary change in the culture of management. However, the commitment shown to the apprenticeship scheme by both government and industry beyond the end of ETF support means this process of change will continue. For industrialist Haytham Al-Yafi, it is still early days, but he is certain that the change will come. 'The biggest success is acceptance by the government that the private sector is an important social partner and can improve the output of a project such as this,' he says. 'What the ETF has done for us is to initiate that major shift in opinion about public-private partnership.'

Teachers

Teachers gain industrial experience

Mazen Kiddo heads the Dommer Centre of Technology, a new VET school on the outskirts of Damascus. With 12 years' experience as a teacher of technical subjects, until recently he combined his work in education with a second job in industry. For Kiddo, a big advantage of the apprenticeship scheme is that it allows both teachers and trainees to gain practical experience. 'Teachers need real industrial experience,' he says, 'at the moment, an engineer may teach grinding but will not have hands-on practical experience.'

Lila Al-Jabr teaches at Adnan Merdan garment college where 50 % of teachers have attended training courses under the scheme. Like many teachers in this sector, Al-Jabr trained to teach domestic rather than industrial sewing. Changing to training for industrial production meant many of the machines and processes were unfamiliar to her. She spent a week training on the shop floor at a company that makes clothes for Adidas. 'I became familiar with the production line techniques for T-shirts and trousers and acquired a lot of skills to pass on,' she says ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ All interviews were carried out by the author in Damascus, Syria in December 2002.

Apprentices

Apprenticeship makes trainees grow up fast

Lina Tormeh, curriculum officer at the Third Intermediate Institute, sees a big difference in the students as a result of the apprenticeship scheme. 'They know how to deal with us and you see that you can depend on them much more than other students their age,' she says. 'The scheme is really good for the students, they become more self-reliant, it makes them grow up fast.' The apprentices, who are usually aged between 16 and 20, spend four days a week at VET school and two days at the company. They are paid a minimum of USD 10-14 per month and many have the chance to work full time at the company in the summer holidays. Each is assigned a supervisor who is responsible for their training and welfare in the company.

But in spite of the best efforts of all concerned, going into a company for the first time can still be a shock to the system for a young Syrian. 'My first day at the company, I was afraid. The workers thought that we were kids playing truant from school,' says Ahmed Yasser, a second-year apprentice in garment-making, 'But after we had broken the ice, it became very easy to get on with them and to learn from them.' Hala Ali, also learning garment-making, agrees. 'At home we are spoilt, we don't have to do anything so at first it was a big change to have to work, but we got used to it quickly,' she says.

Training Officers

A sharp learning curve for all

Kawkab Al-About, together with head of human resources Mustafa Kazzaha, is one of the mainstays of the apprenticeship scheme. She came to the scheme in 2000 after 10 years' experience on the shop floor producing clothes for Adidas. As industrial training officer for the scheme at the Damascus Chamber of Industry, she turns her hand to many different jobs. 'At the outset, I spent one year at the garment college giving practical input to teachers on the industry. I designed courses for the teachers on how to use the machines and how to give practical information to the apprentices. I also took the teachers to visit the companies to see how the work is really done,' she says. She has also designed a two-week course and curricula for all the different trades, and produced the apprentices' logbook for the garment-making trade in just two months. 'We wrote the logbook in both Arabic and English,' she says. 'It helps the student learn some English and I must admit I have learnt some myself in the process.'

One of the defining characteristics of the scheme is that all involved are on a sharp learning curve, not just the apprentices. Al-About is pleased to have acquired new skills and contacts through her job; 'Now I have a lot of

information on the industry. I worked in one company for 10 years, now I regularly visit 10 different companies. I have seen a lot of different systems and machines,' she says. The only drawback is that there is often just too much to do even though Al-Aboud often puts in a 12 to 14-hour day. 'I have met lots of people through this job; I talk to the workers, the supervisors, the bosses and the students. I am very happy but also very tired,' she says.

Company Supervisors

Company keen on graduates of the scheme

Muhammad Ali, production manager at Habitex clothing company, believes that in future the apprenticeship scheme will make his life much easier. His company, which exports 90 % of production to Europe and North America, suffers from a shortage of skilled workers. 'Our employees are usually from the villages, they are not highly educated so it is difficult to make them understand complex regulations such as those for ISO 1400,' he says. He currently has 15 trainees at his company and notices the difference between them and his workers. 'The students listen to me more and show more interest than my workers because they really want to learn,' he says. Ali aims to employ several apprentices once they have finished their training and hopes the apprenticeship scheme will expand. 'If it expands, then I can put as a condition for all new workers that they be graduates from this scheme,' he says. ■

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