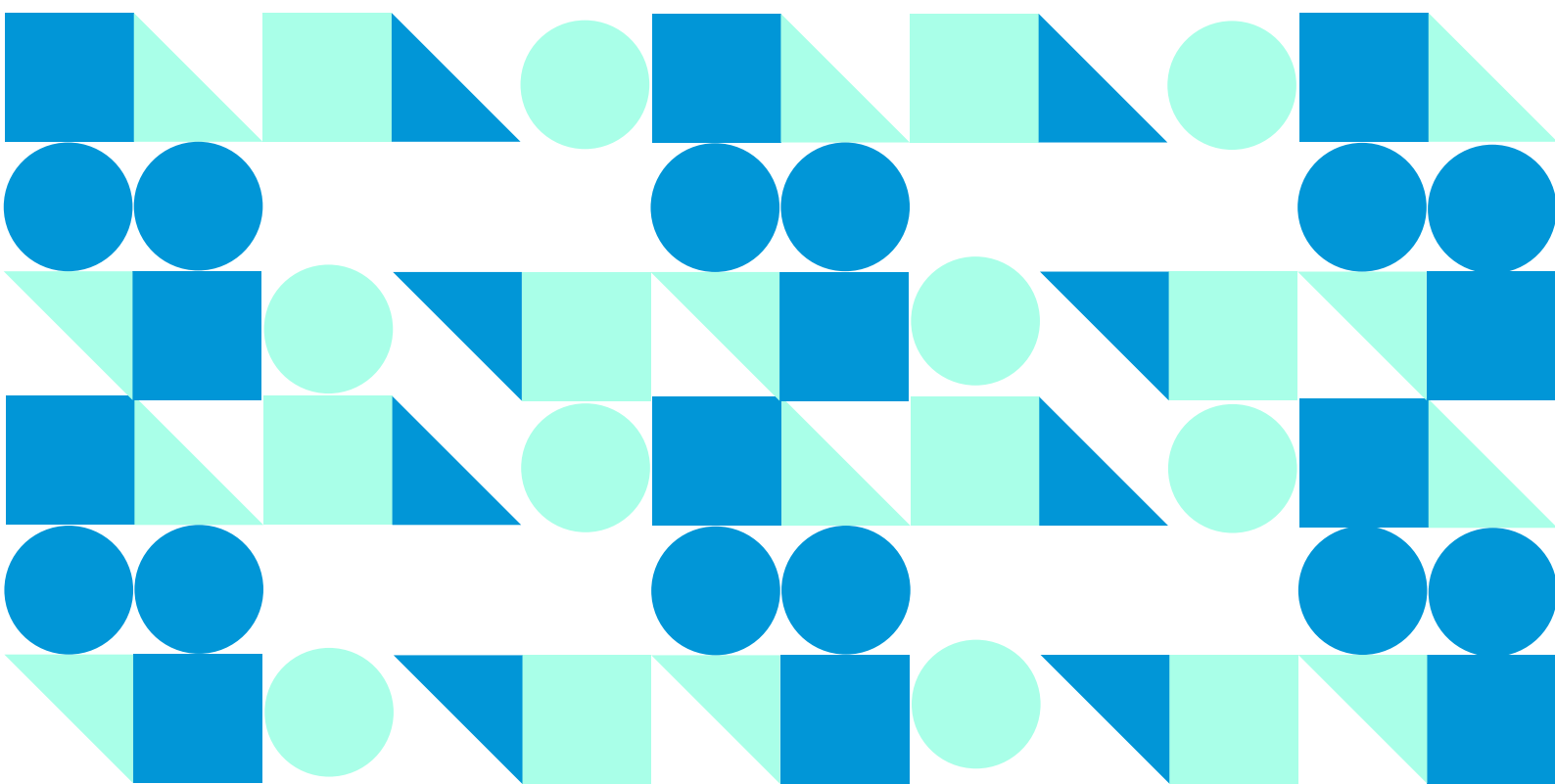




Research paper

The changing position of apprenticeships in education and training systems

Papers by Cedefop's Community
of apprenticeship experts





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Foreword

The forthcoming [European strategy for vocational education and training \(VET\)](#) is expected to place further emphasis on making VET systems more responsive to labour market needs, and ensuring that they are seen as an attractive, high-quality option for learners of all ages. These ambitions continue along the lines established by the [Herning Declaration](#) on attractive and inclusive VET, which, inter alia, calls for actions that enhance the attractiveness of VET and parity of esteem, and encourages initiatives to attract more learners and – in the case of apprenticeships – more companies to vocational programmes.

While participation in VET has been growing slowly in the European Union (EU), apprenticeships seem to be a particularly appealing option among the various VET offers. Cedefop's 2026 analysis of [apprenticeship schemes](#) not only shows a significant increase in apprenticeship enrolments in most EU Member States but also highlights the continuation of the identified notable expansion to new occupations and higher education levels, and the increasing average age of the apprentice population across the EU.

While apprenticeships dynamically adapt to emerging labour market needs and learner preferences, their position in the education and training systems of Member States has been changing significantly. In the past 10–15 years, new apprenticeship schemes have been introduced in countries with no or a minimal apprenticeship tradition, claiming a share of VET enrolment and a place next to school-based VET. Several of these new schemes were introduced at higher education levels (European qualifications framework (EQF) level 5 or higher) specifically for (young) adult learners. At the same time, some of the long-standing schemes that were traditionally targeted at young learners as part of upper secondary VET have opened their doors to adult learners.

These developments come with wins but also challenges. While some of the recently introduced schemes are at the consolidation stage, others have not managed to establish their place in national education and training systems or only attract a small share of all VET learners. In other cases, apprenticeships have grown more at higher qualification levels (European qualification FRAMEWORK level 5 or higher) than upper secondary ones (European qualification framework levels 3 or 4), gradually transforming what stakeholders think of this policy instrument's objectives and target populations. Recent reforms need to be studied in greater depth, in terms of how they have achieved the stated policy goals and whether they have reached the intended learner groups, but also whether they have produced any unintended outcomes (e.g. in terms of trade-offs

in enrolments between apprenticeships and other education and training pathways, or in terms of the allocation of public funding).

This publication is intended to enrich the evidence on the processes, challenges, wins and residual concerns that accompany the changing position of apprenticeships. The papers drafted by members of Cedefop's Community of apprenticeship experts offer valuable insights.

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The publication is a collection of papers on the changing position of apprenticeships in European education and training systems. The papers were authored by members of the [Cedefop Community of apprenticeship experts](#). Cedefop would like to thank the community members who contributed to this work.

The publication was prepared and edited by [Vlasis Korovilos](#), Cedefop expert, with the support of [Jiří Braňka](#), Cedefop expert, and Anđela Gojić, Cedefop trainee with the 'Team for VET for adults and apprenticeships'.

Executive summary

Introduction

Apprenticeships have been attracting renewed interest from stakeholders and policymakers since the economic crisis of the 2010s, initially as a means to facilitate the transition of young learners into the labour market and reduce unemployment. This attention has led to the introduction of new schemes in various European Union (EU) Member States over the past 15 years and the reinforcement of workplace learning elements in school-based vocational education and training (VET), resulting in new pathways that match the characteristics of apprenticeships and operate in parallel with classroom-based VET programmes.

The modernisation of existing schemes or the introduction of new ones in occupations not previously covered by apprenticeships has often been complemented by the opening-up of apprenticeships to new audiences, especially adults. With its multi-country analyses and a series of thematic outputs, the [work of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training \(Cedefop\)](#) has accompanied this expansion, especially in relation to understanding the function and position of the schemes in the education and training systems of Member States. In 2019, Cedefop's exploratory study on [apprenticeships for adults](#) showed that adults are increasingly participating in apprenticeship training, often due to policy interventions and measures that have removed barriers to such participation and provided incentives. In 2021, the joint Cedefop and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development publication [The next steps for apprenticeship](#) discussed cases of the emergence of apprenticeship programmes at higher education levels ('graduate' or 'degree' apprenticeships). At the same time, apprenticeships are being [introduced in sectors and occupations](#) that were traditionally covered by other education and training paths. Cedefop's work also shows that reforms regarding the position of apprenticeships in the education and training system are not always based on or reinforcing a shared vision of what the primary function and purpose of apprenticeships are among all key stakeholders in a country ([Built to last: apprenticeship vision, purpose, and resilience in times of crisis, 2022](#)).

In several Member States, the pre-existing (typically) upper-secondary-level programmes allowed for the admission of adults. In other Member States, new strands within existing schemes were introduced specifically for adults, such as the apprenticeship+ pathway in Portugal, or turned out to be more frequently used by

adults and/or at higher education levels, such as the consortium-led apprenticeship model in Ireland or the apprenticeship contract in France. Finally, in some Member States, the expansion involved entire new schemes specifically positioned at higher education and training levels to attract (young) adults (i.e. programmes at European qualifications framework (EQF) level 5 or higher), such as the post-secondary apprenticeship class in Greece or type 3 apprenticeships in Italy. [Cedefop's European database on apprenticeship schemes](#) offers detailed, structured and comparable information on the levels at which apprenticeships are offered in all Member States, and the average age of enrolled apprentices.

Such expansion involving new audiences and education levels is in line with the [Council recommendation on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships](#), which acknowledges that apprenticeships not only 'facilitate young people's entry in the labour market', but also aid 'adults' career progression and transition into employment' ⁽¹⁾. The [quality apprenticeships recommendation, No 208](#), of the International Labour Organization similarly acknowledges that, while 'apprenticeships are mostly considered as a form of initial education and training, they can be linked to continued education and training in a lifelong learning perspective to support reskilling or upskilling of adults' ⁽²⁾.

Member States are continuously working to improve the relevance of apprenticeship programmes and their ability to support young learners and adults in successfully transitioning into employment, frequently reconfiguring features of apprenticeship schemes linked to their position in the education and training system. At the same time, previous reforms are studied in greater depth, in terms of how they achieved the stated policy goals, if they reached the intended learner groups and also if they produced any unintended outcomes, such as in terms of trade-offs in enrolments between apprenticeships and other education and training pathways, or in terms of the allocation of public funding.

This publication is intended to enrich the evidence on the processes, challenges, wins and residual concerns regarding the changing position of apprenticeships as a result of their expansion to new levels, occupations and learner groups. The papers drafted by members of Cedefop's Community of apprenticeship experts offer valuable insights.

⁽¹⁾ Council recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships (OJ C 153, 2.5.2018, p. 1).

⁽²⁾ International Labour Organization, *Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023 (No 208) – Guide for policymakers*, 2024, p. 14.

Contributions in brief

Chapter 1 presents the attempts to establish dual learning (work-based learning (WBL)) as a prominent feature in upper secondary VET in Bulgaria (together with pilot projects to be introduced at the post-secondary and higher education levels) and discusses reasons why the option is not yet established to the extent that was initially intended. While prior pilot projects have helped establish a clear regulatory framework for upper-secondary-level apprenticeships, the participation of employers remains limited, despite, inter alia, financial incentives for training companies. The state vision for VET sees the dual pathway (WBL) becoming the leading VET pathway in upper secondary education by 2030, thus **consolidating and strengthening the current position of apprenticeships** in the national education and training landscape. The paper concludes that this would require better coordination between the institutions involved, regular monitoring of WBL progress, targeted interventions on a regional or sectoral basis and a wider set of incentives for employers other than financial ones.

Chapter 2 presents an ongoing reform that **potentially blurs the position of apprenticeships in the education and training system** in Croatia. While in the previous model (the unified model of education (*Jedinstveni model obrazovanja*)) apprenticeships were the only option leading to certain qualifications, this is no longer the case. New VET curricula can be applied either through school-based VET (with shorter periods in the workplace) or through apprenticeship programmes. The differences between the options may not be clear to all interested actors. While employers with a tradition of engaging in apprenticeships (and the accreditation to provide them) are quite likely to keep preferring this pathway, new companies that wish to start engaging in training young people may prefer other options for many reasons, including avoiding the licensing/accreditation procedure that is required for apprenticeships. The paper concludes that the strengths of apprenticeships in licensed companies should be acknowledged and promoted in the new, changing landscape, as this model ensures a safe environment for students and the high quality of apprenticeship training, with the involvement of master craftspeople or other qualified company staff.

Chapter 3 presents how **the massive expansion of apprenticeship enrolments in France largely referred to programmes at higher education levels, despite the initial policy focus** on young people and secondary-level programmes (2018 reform). The paper presents how this expansion of apprenticeships at higher education levels since the reform has brought significant benefits to employers, higher education students and universities. While these benefits are acknowledged, at the same time, several stakeholders raise concerns

regarding the extent to which the funding that supported the expansion has reached its intended audiences and achieved its policy objectives (arguing that instead the support has gone to those who need it the least). These concerns are coupled with observations that apprenticeships at higher education levels are costly, resulting in the reprioritisation and reduction of public funding. The paper concludes that turning attention to apprenticeship quality should accompany the changes in financing, as this will ensure the effective and efficient use of the public money invested in the system.

Chapter 4 presents **key wins and lessons learned from the expansion of apprenticeships at the post-secondary level** in Greece, and in particular the recent efforts to increase quality and improve governance. Although apprenticeships were traditionally offered at the secondary level, and other training options were dominant in the post-secondary landscape, post-secondary apprenticeships are now established and valued by social partners and also increasingly by individual companies. The numbers of learners and companies joining the scheme have been increasing consistently. Still, public awareness and appreciation of apprenticeships lag behind the progress achieved at the institutional level, as many families continue to prioritise general or academic pathways. The paper concludes that, following improvements in regulation, governance and quality assurance, apprenticeships have now become a stable and recognised pathway within the education and training system in Greece.

Chapter 5 presents the **coexistence of two apprenticeship models** in Ireland (the ‘craft’ model introduced in the 1990s and a ‘consortium-led’ or ‘enterprise-led’ model first implemented in 2016). The consortium-led model not only introduced a new system of governance but also **changed the position of apprenticeships** in the education and training system: apprenticeships now lead to awards in the national framework of qualifications from levels 5 to 10 (not just level 6 as before). The numbers of both apprenticeship programmes and apprentice enrolments have increased in the past 10 years. However, registration figures vary between programmes, with some new programmes having consistently high enrolment, others moderate and some very low or no apprentice registrations for several years. The paper explains that the National Apprenticeship Alliance supports a case-by-case approach to evaluate smaller-scale programmes, while consultation ahead of the 2026–2030 apprenticeship action plan is under way to gather views on how the system can be improved, made more inclusive, and better aligned with national skills needs. Moreover, there is a commitment to creating a single integrated statutory apprenticeship system.

Chapter 6 explains the positions of two apprenticeship schemes in Italy (type 1 at the upper secondary level and type 3 in higher education and research)

and discusses how, more than a decade after their introduction, enrolment remains relatively low compared with policy objectives and the less formalised type 2 apprenticeships (which lead to occupational qualifications, not formally acknowledged education ones). The paper presents some recent policy initiatives that may affect the position of apprenticeships in the education and training system. Among these, the establishment of an ‘apprenticeship supply chain’ that **provides better links between type 1 and type 3 apprenticeships** has shortened the overall duration of apprenticeships and now allows for progression to higher levels while learning with the same employer. While this may reinforce apprenticeships by establishing stronger collaboration between education and the business world, it may undermine the regional VET pathway (*Istruzione e Formazione Professionale*) through which most type 1 apprenticeships are currently offered. The paper concludes that this and other reforms discussed (e.g. opening type 1 apprenticeships to adults) demonstrate a sustained commitment to ‘formative’ apprenticeships, but the (positive or negative) impact remains to be seen in practice.

Chapter 7 presents how apprenticeships in Lithuania were introduced through **rather flexible arrangements**. Apprenticeships can be offered as part of VET programmes leading to a qualification at national qualifications framework / EQF levels 1–5, in the form of at least one module or as little as two months of the total programme duration. The paper discusses how, in this context, the overall concept of apprenticeships is diluted by programmes with a limited work-based element, which do not help to make clear the real value of apprenticeships. Other challenges that limit the acknowledgement of apprenticeships as a clear and valued option include insufficient quality assurance, dependence on EU financial support, recent changes in secondary education examinations and a persistent negative image of VET. The paper makes the case for reinforcing key characteristics of apprenticeship programmes (e.g. a workplace share of 50 % of programme duration) and developing a fully fledged quality assurance system. It concludes that a longer-term education strategy and the integration of different practices into a systemic policy vision and roadmap are also essential for consolidating and clarifying the position of apprenticeships in Lithuania.

Chapter 8 presents how apprenticeships remain the most preferred option at the upper secondary level in Norway, representing a robust, stable and accepted model among stakeholders. Despite a clear position and strong enrolment, completion and labour market transition outcomes, approximately one third of the learners enrolled in VET do not get an apprenticeship contract and several choose the bridge year to general education instead of continuing on the vocational pathway. At the same time, social partners and county authorities emphasise the

need for **greater flexibility in apprenticeships to better accommodate the needs of adults**, particularly those already in employment. The paper concludes that the recent Education Act (August 2025), introducing an extended statutory right to complete upper secondary education, is expected to influence participation in VET and apprenticeships; however, its effects remain to be seen.

Chapter 9 presents how apprenticeships in Spain, which are typically well established at the upper secondary and post-secondary levels, are also being explored **as an option in higher education**. A 2021 regulation introduced the dual track (*Mención Dual*) as an optional pathway within university programmes, establishing a formal regulatory basis and demonstrating national-level support. However, the degree of prioritisation and active engagement at the regional level varies. The paper presents barriers to and enablers of the introduction of apprenticeships into higher education. These enablers include strengthening support for academic staff and training companies, streamlining accreditation and administration procedures and consolidating clear institutional strategies that situate dual learning as a long-term commitment rather than an isolated innovation.

Observations and points for further reflection

The insights presented in this publication come from apprenticeship schemes that are at different stages of development: while some have only recently been introduced, others were established decades ago, with their roots tracing back to traditional apprenticeships of past centuries. At first glance, the position of apprenticeships may be clearer and better established in those education and training systems where apprenticeships have been offered for a comparatively longer time than those where apprenticeship schemes have been more recently introduced. Still, the landscape regarding apprenticeship provision is changing in both cases – even long-standing schemes can undergo adaptations that allow them to attract different ages and profiles of learners, operate in new sectors or offer qualifications at higher education levels. Within this changing position of apprenticeships, several trends and shared challenges can be identified.

First, the papers in this publication reaffirm previous observations that the **turn to adult learners** is a common theme across most schemes. In some cases, new schemes are introduced specifically to enrol learners over 18 years of age (e.g. the post-secondary apprenticeship class in Greece, type 3 apprenticeships in Italy). In other cases, schemes that had no upper age limit have recently attracted more adults than young learners as a result of the changing preferences of learners and employers (e.g. in France). In some other cases, while the schemes are still predominantly addressed to young learners as part of their initial VET,

policymakers have introduced adaptations to attract more adult learners, such as in the apprenticeships in Norway. In some of the countries covered, adaptations to allow for the (greater) participation of adults are currently being discussed (e.g. type 1 apprenticeships in Italy).

Many papers in this publication demonstrate how the increasing attention paid to adults is followed by apprenticeships now leading to a **broader range of qualification levels** than in past years. The Irish case offers a notable example. Often, programmes offered to adults lead to qualifications at EQF level 5 or higher, while programmes at level 3 or 4 can often also be accessed by adult learners, not just young people.

In some of the countries that are analysed in this publication, the introduction of new apprenticeship schemes or models within a scheme has led to significant uptake by employers and learners, such as in Ireland and Greece. Favourable funding conditions also repositioned apprenticeships in France, attracting impressively higher numbers of learners, especially adults and/or those at higher levels of qualifications. However, in several countries, enrolments in new schemes or new programmes at higher levels within existing schemes have not grown as expected or are highly dependent on financing capacity. In Spain, the success of the recently regulated higher apprenticeships varies among regions. This publication shows that the road to successfully introducing or repositioning apprenticeships is not always an easy one.

One challenge that emerges from several papers refers to the **consistency of and continuity in policymaking** regarding apprenticeships, and a systemic view of how apprenticeships operate in relation to other VET options. When new schemes are introduced or existing ones are targeted at new levels and audiences, it may take time for stakeholders and potential users to learn about the new options. The benefits from joining an apprenticeship are not always self-evident, the offers are less well known and the procedures and requirements to join may seem discouraging. Some of the schemes presented were introduced 10 or more years ago, and it took time to consolidate their position in the education and training system. Consistency and a systemic view are of particular importance when apprenticeships are offered in parallel with other school-based tracks that lead to the same qualifications. In Lithuania, the flexibility in how and when apprenticeships can be chosen during a VET programme and the reliance on EU funding cycles do not help establish participation conditions and create clear use cases for apprenticeships. In Croatia, a recent reform on VET curricula seems to introduce elements that possibly blur the boundaries between school-based VET and apprenticeships, which up until recently were offered for specific qualifications under a distinct, unified model that relied on quality assurance and input from

chambers. In Italy, it is not clear if reforms regarding other elements of the VET system will work in favour of or weaken participation in the apprenticeship schemes.

The papers also point to several enabling factors that could underpin the successful introduction or repositioning of apprenticeships in education and training systems. These factors may involve the following.

- (a) **Reinforcing and communicating the advantages of apprenticeship programmes** when it comes to the participation of training companies (and also, when applicable, in relation to other VET options that provide for shorter work placements). The papers show that this can be achieved by ensuring that the share of workplace learning in apprenticeship programmes is considerably higher (50 % or more of the total duration of the programme) than in other VET options, by introducing programmes for occupations in greater demand and by considering regional labour market needs (e.g. the needs of rural areas).
- (b) **Introducing regulations that make apprenticeships more attractive to learners.** This can be promoted either by removing age limits or by ensuring flexible learning arrangements and tailoring participation conditions to adult learners, who represent a growing audience for apprenticeships in most countries explored. It may also involve facilitating progression to higher education levels through clear pathways, which may help overcome stereotypes regarding the lower position and prestige of apprenticeships in the education systems of several of the countries analysed.
- (c) **Ensuring the high quality of apprenticeship programmes.** All papers point to this factor, through different means and at different stages of a quality assurance process. Some papers focus on raising the quality of VET centres, upgrading the competences of teaching and training staff involved in apprenticeships, and accrediting training companies as a way to ensure that apprenticeships are offered by well-prepared actors and sufficiently qualified staff in both venues (VET providers and workplaces). Some papers call for introducing monitoring mechanisms, with regular checks of the quality of the delivery of workplace learning, and others make the case for increased attention being paid to evaluating the outcomes of (new or repositioned) apprenticeship programmes to make the benefits for all parties involved as clear as possible and to consolidate the position of these programmes in the education and training system.
- (d) **Extending the involvement of labour market actors.** This can be through, for example, sectoral councils or skills anticipation mechanisms, with a view to improving the relevance of apprenticeship programmes and attracting new

employers and learners to occupations that are not traditionally covered by apprenticeships.

- (e) **Reinforcing the coordination of key stakeholders (ministries, social partners, provider representatives) and shared decision-making.** This aims to better align objectives, prioritise target groups (companies or learners) and mobilise resources from all key actors, with a view to improving the systemic approaches and consistency of policymaking when repositioning apprenticeship offers.

Standing at the crossroads of education and the labour market, apprenticeships offer opportunities for agile policy responses to dynamically changing skills and qualification needs. While the position of apprenticeships is changing to meet such needs, the results do not always match policy intentions. This collection of papers helps navigate common challenges and identify the conditions for the successful introduction or repositioning of apprenticeships in education and training systems.

Chapter 1.

Bulgaria: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Petya Evtimova, Modern Education Foundation

1.1. **Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system**

Apprenticeships in the Bulgarian education system exist in the form of a work-based learning (WBL) scheme (dual system of training) in vocational education and training (VET) schools, VET centres, VET colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs). Although, in the national language, the same word can be applied to both apprenticeships and internships, VET options providing for short-term learning in the workplace will be discussed as ‘internships’ in this report, as they do not match the understanding of ‘apprenticeships’ laid out in the European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships. These internships are described in the next section.

The WBL scheme (dual system of training) is organised into the following options.

- (a) **Upper secondary VET schools.** The training leads to a qualification at [national qualifications framework](#) (NQF) level 4 and European qualifications framework (EQF) level 4. Students are enrolled in VET schools at the age of 14 (grade 8), and for the first two years learning is school based. Training in the workplace as part of the apprenticeship pathway (WBL) starts when they turn 16 years of age and are in grade 11 or 12. The WBL scheme is organised through a partnership agreement between the VET school and one or several enterprises. Students learn and work in a real work environment for two days a week in grade 11 and three days a week in grade 12. They sign a labour contract with the employer, which requires prior approval by the General Labour Inspectorate. The legislative basis for this form of apprenticeship is provided in the [Labour Code](#), the [VET Act](#) and the [Ordinance for WBL \(dual system of training\)](#). Graduates receive a VET qualification certificate (NQF/EQF 4) and a diploma for their completed secondary education after taking matriculation exams. The diploma gives them direct access to higher education.

- (b) **Vocational training centres for adults / learners above the age of 16.** The different courses offer training that leads to qualifications at NQF levels 2–4, corresponding to EQF levels 2–4. WBL training is organised through a partnership agreement between the VET centre and one or more enterprises. This type of training is mainly applicable to adults looking for upskilling/reskilling opportunities. The VET Act regulates this WBL option.
- (c) **VET colleges (post-secondary non-tertiary level).** These colleges offer training leading to qualifications at NQF level 5 and EQF level 5; these are called professional bachelor's degrees. No reliable data exist on the qualifications issued through WBL in VET colleges. However, this option remains relatively less popular.
- (d) **HEIs.** This option is still in its pilot phase and is not yet systematised. It exists primarily through EU-funded projects rather than as a structural feature of all programmes. The training corresponds to NQF levels 6–7 and EQF levels 6–7. The EU project [‘From higher education to employment’](#) (BG05SFPR001-3.002-0001) (2024–2029) involves 44 universities and aims to improve practical training, foster university–business partnerships and introduce dual education into higher education.

In this context, it could be concluded that WBL is much more established in the VET sector than in higher education. Nevertheless, according to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analysis ([OECD, 2023](#)), the VET system still remains largely school based, and WBL opportunities are ‘particularly limited’ in many areas.

1.2. Other forms of VET/WBL at the same level

Regarding young learners, most VET programmes in VET schools in Bulgaria are still school based. Despite all efforts, projects and incentives, the share of WBL students in VET schools is still around 8 % of all VET students in the EU Member State. Short-term internships can be organised by VET schools (and HEIs) as part of the curricula. These short-term internships are organised through a partnership agreement between the educational institution and enterprises, but they differ from WBL in that students do not sign labour contracts, as the internship lasts just a few weeks and is based solely on the partnership agreement. These internships do not directly lead to a certification for a qualification, as they are considered only part of the training required to acquire a qualification. In the last 15 years, these short-term internships have been mainly financed through EU projects.

Regarding adults, parallel to the WBL (dual system) option, VET centres provide other forms of on-the-job training programmes for unemployed adults or learners above 16 years of age (who are not WBL students). These programmes are offered as an active labour market measure under the [Employment Promotion Act](#). Under the same act, for each post offered to an unemployed person, the employer receives a paid subsidy to cover the time for training, which can be no longer than 18 months. This type of training is organised through an agreement between the training centre, an employer or employers and the regional labour office. Matching is organised by the regional labour offices after an application is submitted by the unemployed person. This type of training can lead to qualifications ranging from NQF 2 to 4 (EQF 2 to 4). However, the measure is not very popular despite the funding provided by national and EU funds. Between September 2024 and August 2025, the number of unemployed people who completed a WBL programme was 44 across the whole Member State ⁽³⁾.

'Crafts apprenticeships' are another type of WBL programmes with low participation levels. They are regulated by the [Crafts Act](#) and the [Employment Promotion Act](#), and they are also available to unemployed people above the age of 16. Training – including the theoretical part – takes place in a crafts workshop (i.e. there is no alternating with a VET centre) based on programmes approved by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training.

1.3. WBL at higher education levels

WBL in Bulgaria's higher education sector is developing but is still largely project based, not yet being a system-wide standard. While dual education is well established in VET, HEIs are only beginning to integrate structured WBL components – primarily through EU-funded initiatives and national pilot projects coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science.

The main WBL projects and initiatives in higher education are the following.

- (a) The project '[From higher education to employment](#)' is funded by the European Social Fund Plus and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science. It involves 44 HEIs and aims to pilot dual education, improve students' practical skills and strengthen cooperation with businesses. The planned duration of the project is from 2024 till 2029. There are no data available so far on its implementation.
- (b) The project 'Student internships' (phase I and phase II) is funded by the European Social Fund Plus and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and

⁽³⁾ Information provided by the Ministry of Labour.

Science. It involves 43 HEIs and offers short-term internships for students in different enterprises and institutions. The aim of the project is to offer by 2029 internships to 90 000 students.

There are also some institutional and Erasmus+ initiatives. For example, universities such as Varna Free University, New Bulgarian University and Varna University of Management have developed internal systems for internships and practical modules.

Despite these recent projects and initiatives, the Bulgarian Higher Education Act still does not define the WBL system (dual education), although it does allow for practical training and internships. The current implementation of WBL in universities relies mainly on EU funding. Interviews with university rectors, especially from the technical universities, reveal that they are very interested in introducing WBL as an option in higher education. There has not been a survey conducted among potential business partners, yet similar interest is expected from their side. However, introducing a sustainable WBL model into Bulgarian HEIs would require legislative changes and stable financing.

1.4. Reforms affecting the position of apprenticeships

At the end of 2024, a major amendment to the VET Act came into force following a two-year consultation process with VET stakeholders. The most significant reform was the redesign of the [list of professions for VET](#), to make it less complex and bring it in line with labour market needs. Another reform was the introduction of modular units (units of learning outcomes), which enable students to acquire part of a qualification. Regarding the implementation of WBL, the amendments introduced easier conditions for training companies: company mentors' required professional experience was reduced from three to two years. This change was introduced to encourage more small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to join the WBL system.

The positive recent developments in the legislative basis make the implementation of dual training easier, although the percentage of students in WBL (dual system of training) at the upper secondary level is still around 9 % of the overall number of VET students. The updated list of professions for VET and the recent establishment of 20 sectoral skills councils should help design WBL curricula more closely related to the needs of the labour market.

However, these amendments did not cover higher education training and, despite the pilot projects for WBL in 44 universities, the legislation gap in the Higher Education Act still exists.

In 2023, the Ministry of Education and Science published a [*Strategic vision for the development of dual vocational education and training until 2030*](#), which still only covers upper secondary VET. The vision presents a set of objectives, including dual VET becoming the leading VET pathway in upper secondary education by 2030, fully integrated into the education and training system, quality-assured, driven by labour market actors and responsive to labour market needs. Yet the vision does not provide a clear time frame for the objectives nor any indicators for measuring results.

The challenges that remain to be addressed concern the low participation and involvement of employers in WBL, within the existing schemes. The recent [*OECD review of the labour market in Bulgaria in 2025*](#) shows that less than 10 % of Bulgarian companies are ready to offer WBL (OECD, 2025). The reasons stated for low participation levels include burdensome administrative procedures related to the Labour Inspectorate, the fact that students are not obliged to stay with the company after graduation, the insufficient information companies have on how the WBL system works, and the lack of information and counselling services (contact points) available to help business in the process.

The same review states that many VET schools, especially in distant and rural areas, struggle to provide WBL due to problems related to transport, the capacity of local companies and the low number of businesses in the region.

Regarding the participation of adults in WBL, although reforms have been introduced to provide extra financing for employers who engage with WBL for unemployed people, participation numbers are still very low. WBL should also be better embedded at the university level (especially in the technical higher education sectors) and in adult education.

Another issue concerns the financing of the system: most of the WBL schemes remain project based, which cannot guarantee their sustainability.

There are also some monitoring gaps in the WBL system, as it is very difficult to find reliable data on actual involvement in WBL. This observation concerns all schemes, as the ministries do not publish such data.

Another issue that needs attention, according to the review, is quality assurance in the workplace.

WBL could also be utilised to promote flexibility: partial qualifications, the recognition of prior learning, and short WBL modules for upskilling or reskilling.

1.5. Conclusions

The recent reforms in WBL and in VET in general represent a significant step towards modernising the different pathways from education to employment in

Bulgaria. The amendment of the VET Act in 2024, introducing a new list of professions for VET, modular units and more flexible pathways, is essential for a better WBL system. However, the success of these recent reforms in terms of scale, participation of employers and involvement of the higher education and adult education sectors will require better coordination between the institutions involved and the regular monitoring of WBL progress and challenges.

To reinforce the WBL system in Bulgaria, the first step could be ensuring better coordination between ministries – the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Economy.

These institutions should also strengthen the involvement of companies and put a special focus on rural areas and on occupations that are in demand. Although financial incentives for companies have been introduced in the last two years, these have not yet given the expected results. Therefore, other measures are needed to foster business participation.

1.6. References

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Legislation

[Crafts Act](#)

[Employment Promotion Act](#)

[Higher Education Act](#)

[Labour Code](#)

[National qualifications framework](#)

[Ordinance for WBL \(dual system of training\)](#)

[VET Act](#)

Chapter 2.

Croatia: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Mirela Laković, Department for Education, Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts

2.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

Apprenticeships in Croatia are positioned within the upper secondary VET system at EQF level 4 – that is, level 4.1 in the Croatian qualification framework (CQF) (Cedefop, 2019). Typically, apprentices are learners in the age group following compulsory basic education, usually from 15 to 18 years old.

With the introduction of new curricula, the secondary VET system in Croatia is currently undergoing the last steps of a reform that started with the development of new occupational and qualification standards. These last steps of the reform are also changing the apprenticeship landscape, to an extent that cannot be known at this stage.

Before the reform, the upper secondary VET schemes at CQF level 4.1 / EQF level 4 included an apprenticeship scheme for trade and craft professions, other (exclusively) school-based programmes and several more recently developed dual education curricula. Until the beginning of the 2025/2026 school year, when new VET curricula were introduced, the scheme called the unified model of education (*Jedinstveni model obrazovanja* (JMO), which replaced the dual model of education of 1995 in 2003, acting as its modernised version) was the only apprenticeship scheme in Croatia. The scheme encompassed three-year initial VET programmes for trades and crafts leading graduates directly to the labour market (Cedefop, 2019). It was regulated by the regulative framework consisting of the Law on Trades and Crafts of 2013 and its by-laws, and established the concept of shared financing between the state and local governments on one side and companies on the other (Republika Hrvatska, Hrvatski sabor, 2020).

With the introduction of new curricula, the former apprenticeship scheme (JMO) is going to be gradually phased out by the end of the 2026/2027 school year. Apprenticeships will continue to be offered, as a form of WBL in licensed companies (see Section 2.2), but regulatory changes may apply.

2.2. Curricula reform and changes in apprenticeships

2.2.1. Apprenticeships becoming an alternative option to school-based VET

The goal of the reform was set by the [programme for the development of the vocational education and training system \(2014–2020\)](#), responding to priority 1 'Improving the relevance of vocational education and training in relation to the labour market', objective 1.1 'Vocational education and training focused on labour market needs' and measure 1.2 'Development, adoption and monitoring of the implementation of sectoral and/or curricula for the acquisition of vocational qualifications' (Croatian Agency for VET and Adult Education). To improve the labour market alignment of VET, the new vocational curricula are based on the occupational standards and qualification standards from the [CQF Register](#) and developed in accordance with the Vocational Education Act (*Zakon o strukovnom obrazovanju*, 2013) and the national curriculum for VET (*Nacionalni kurikulum za strukovno obrazovanje*, Republika Hrvatska, Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, 2018). They have a modular structure and are skills oriented. The modular structure allows for the sharing of common modules in the same (sub)sector in the first year of training and allows for specialisation in the later years of training. The new curricula were introduced in the autumn of 2025 (Cedefop & ReferNet, 2025).

Apprenticeship is **one of the forms** in which WBL can be organised, in licensed companies and for specific occupations. In the past, for these occupations, it was mandatory that the corresponding qualification be achieved **only** through apprenticeships. With the reform, 33 of the 147 new curricula state that apprenticeships in licensed companies are one of the possible options for organising WBL ⁽⁴⁾. The list of occupations for which apprenticeship is possible is shorter than before the reform, and some occupations have been merged. Other options set out as alternatives to apprenticeships include WBL in non-licensed companies, regional competence centres and schools. The schools can decide whether they want to implement apprenticeships or other types of WBL.

For all WBL forms, at least 70 out of the total 182 credit system for vocational education and training points must be achieved through one of the forms of WBL (apprenticeships in licensed companies, or other forms of WBL in non-licensed companies, regional competence centres or schools), where students are gradually introduced to the job and participate in the work process to a limited extent under controlled conditions with a mentor and/or teacher. It needs to be pointed out that the new curricula do not state what an apprenticeship is with

⁽⁴⁾ Apprenticeships can be offered mainly in crafts and trades – occupations such as florist, butcher, carpenter, electrician, car mechatronic, tailor, installer of wooden constructions and roofs, and construction worker in sustainable construction – but also occupations in other fields, like construction machinery operator, warehouse worker and administrator.

regard to the minimum number of credit system for vocational education and training points earned in licensed companies or what needs to be taught at the workplace; in the JMO scheme, this was set out in the curricula.

The JMO scheme had a particularly high share of workplace learning in licensed companies (over 50 %) compared with the other forms of WBL in the new curricula, for which it is significantly lower.

The regulatory provisions for apprenticeships concerning the licensing procedures for the companies and the obligation to sign an apprenticeship contract have remained the same. The primary change has to do with lifting the mandatory provision of apprenticeships in the occupations in associated trades and crafts as was provided for in the JMO model. For these occupations, apprenticeship becomes an alternative to other forms of school-based VET with lower shares of workplace learning.

2.2.2. Progression opportunities

Both the old and the new three-year VET programmes provide direct access to the labour market; however, unlike four-year VET programmes, they do not grant access to the State Matura exam, which is required for tertiary education entry. To address this gap, a legislative change in 2012 introduced an indirect pathway: an additional fourth year for three-year VET programme graduates wishing to take the State Matura to progress to higher education. This indirect pathway is free of charge, but many schools do not offer it to their students (Matković & Šabić, 2022). Alternatively, apprenticeship graduates with a minimum of two years of work experience in their occupation can progress towards the master craftsman qualification at EQF/CQF level 5 by taking a master craftsman exam.

2.2.3. Changes in the list of occupations

For some occupations, new curricula have not been developed yet (e.g. photographer, pedicurist, locksmith, gas fitter and ship mechanic). The Ministry of Education decided not to allow enrolment in those occupations under the old curricula. Therefore, it was not possible for learners to enrol in secondary-level education for these professions in the 2025/2026 school year. Employers belonging to those professions and members of the chamber stated their concerns, since these professions are in high demand in the labour market.

The enrolment rates concerning apprenticeships in the 2025/2026 school year are not known, since statistics are kept only on the total number of VET students enrolled and not those who have signed or will sign an apprenticeship contract with a licensed company.

2.3. Reflections on the recent reform

The current position of apprenticeships in Croatia is not clear. With the old apprenticeship scheme being phased out, new regulations will be needed to make clear to all stakeholders how apprenticeships will be implemented based on the new curricula (the licensed company option). There are doubts that all stakeholders, especially entrepreneurs and students, are aware of the differences between WBL types and, more specifically, that apprenticeships can only be offered by licensed companies and formalised under an apprenticeship contract.

Due to their tradition of offering apprenticeships, most licensed companies are likely to continue with their provision of apprenticeship training, as it is expected for apprentices to spend more time in the company completing training than other students do, which is important for companies.

However, there is an emerging concern as to whether apprenticeships will be preferred by new companies that wish to start engaging in training young people, compared with other WBL options, as apprenticeships place greater demands on companies, with the licensing procedure often seen as bureaucratic burden.

Nevertheless, according to a ministry official ⁽⁵⁾, the Ministry of Economy hopes that companies will prefer to offer apprenticeships thanks to the specific financial incentives available, and it plans to continue with the implementation of the incentives. For the ministry, the successful implementation of the new curricula depends on the VET schools' implementation capacity, employer engagement and governance coordination. Potential opportunities could be found in the improved transition from school to employment, the better acquisition of practical skills and the stronger collaboration between schools and companies.

The greatest strength of the old scheme is the implementation of apprenticeships by licensed companies, which ensures a safe environment for students and the high quality of apprenticeship training, as students are taught by master craftspeople in specific occupations. This is why the concern has arisen regarding the impact of the new curricula on training quality in VET, as it can be expected that companies that cannot fulfil the requirements for licensing will still engage in the provision of WBL.

Similarly, the key remark of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts in the e-consultation process on the new curricula was that WBL should primarily take place through apprenticeships in licensed companies; only if there is a lack of licensed companies and with the consent of the Ministry of Economy should it take place through other forms of WBL. It was also highlighted that licensing was a way to ensure a safe and high-quality working environment for students. Although the

⁽⁵⁾ Based on discussions with a ministry representative.

remark was not reflected in the final outcome, thanks to the initiative of the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Education has prepared an official letter to be sent to all VET schools for the forthcoming enrolment in 2026, inviting them to favour apprenticeships wherever possible.

It is interesting to note that stakeholders asked for the recently introduced four-year beautician programme (which was a three-year apprenticeship programme in the past) to be offered in the form of apprenticeships, as they were not satisfied with the share of practical training. Due to the national curriculum for VET (Republika Hrvatska, Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, 2018), it is not possible to organise apprenticeships in the four-year education programme. Regulations need to change to allow for such an option.

The effects of the VET reform on apprenticeships in Croatia are yet to be studied.

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Chapter 3.

France: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Romain Pigeaud, Centre-Inffo

3.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

In France, the apprenticeship contract is an employment contract that includes a mandatory training period in a training centre for apprentices. Apprentices receive remuneration from their employers. Apprenticeship training is free of charge.

Since 1987, [apprenticeship has been open to higher levels of education](#): all certification levels can be achieved through apprenticeship ([Labour Code, Article L6211-1](#)). In practice, in higher education, this includes the (a) higher technician certificate (*Brevet de technicien supérieur* (BTS)) (International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 5), (b) technological bachelor certificates (*bachelor universitaire de technologie* (BUT)) and licences (ISCED 6) and (c) master's degrees or engineering diplomas (ISCED 7).

After obtaining an initial certification, the young person may follow another certification at the same level or at a higher level ([Labour Code, Article L6222-15](#)). To train an apprentice, the training centre must comply with the prerequisites and reference frameworks of the certification – for example, the qualification level required of apprentices before they start the training.

To sign an apprenticeship contract, a person must be at least 16 years old and typically a maximum of 29 years old. Young people aged at least 15 may start an apprenticeship contract if they have completed lower secondary education. Certain individuals can sign an apprenticeship contract after the age of 29: people with disabilities, company founders, apprentices aiming for an additional qualification, etc.

In recent years, the number of apprentices has risen substantially. This significant growth is a relatively recent trend: during the 2010s, the number of apprenticeship contracts in force fluctuated between 400 000 and 500 000. The threshold of 500 000 was surpassed in 2019, followed by a doubling to reach 1 million in 2023.

The expansion has been driven predominantly by higher education programmes, where participation continues at a high level, recording growth rates of + 20.1 % in 2022, + 10.3 % in 2023 and + 1.7 % in 2024 ([Ministry of Labour, 2025](#)).

It should be noted that another form of WBL arrangement, referred to as the professionalisation contract, exists as well. The number of participants in this scheme is lower than that recorded for the apprenticeship contract. At the end of December 2025, there were 63 700 beneficiaries of a professionalisation contract ([Ministry of Labour, 2025](#)). This pathway is designed principally for a different target population and addresses distinct certification frameworks ([DARES](#)).

In terms of certifications, social partners – employer and employee representatives at the national and inter-professional levels – are involved in the professional certification system. For instance, they take part in consultative bodies dealing with the creation of higher education diplomas ([Labour Code, Article L6113-3](#)).

3.2. Other forms of VET/WBL at the same level

At higher levels of education, other forms of VET/WBL exist apart from apprenticeship. Numerous professional diplomas are accessible, typically following a two-year technological training programme in principle. The Ministry of Higher Education uses the term ‘school-based pathway’.

Internships are often mandatory to obtain certain professional diplomas such as the BTS, the university technology certificate (*Diplôme universitaire de technologie* (DUT))/BUT, professional bachelor’s degrees (*licences professionnelles*) or master’s degrees. For example, the BTS is a national diploma corresponding to ISCED 5. The training, usually lasting two years, includes one or more in-company internships. The existence and compulsory nature of the internship depend on the curriculum: the internship must be explicitly included in the training framework in order to be a requirement for graduation. Some programmes require an internship for every student, as is the case for professional bachelor’s degrees and courses leading to the *Diplôme universitaire de technologie*.

These diplomas are usually also accessible through apprenticeships. It is important to understand that this represents a conditional choice for the student. If students wish to pursue the apprenticeship route, they must first secure an employer, since the apprenticeship contract is an employment contract. They must also be accepted by their training centre.

3.3. Apprenticeships at higher education levels: wins and benefits

The position of apprenticeships is now well established and broadly accepted, although the 2018 reform – which enabled its substantial development – has recently been the subject of renewed criticism. From the public authorities' standpoint, the Ministry of Labour has reaffirmed that apprenticeships have become a recognised pathway of excellence, fostering high-quality employment outcomes for young people and helping enterprises meet their needs for skilled and qualified workers ([Ministry of Labour, 2025](#)).

The government's 2018 reform objective of reaching 1 million new apprenticeship contracts was achieved. Despite a slight decline observed for the 2025 intake, enrolment figures remain at much higher levels compared to the first years after the reform. This demonstrates:

- (a) the resilience capacity of the apprenticeship system (the decline has been neither abrupt nor significant in terms of volume);
- (b) that financial incentives continue to act as a key factor in recruiting apprentices for employers.

Another positive effect of the expansion concerns the increased participation of small enterprises in apprenticeships, particularly when analysing the distribution of contracts by qualification level and company size. In 2023, entries into apprenticeship contracts within enterprises employing 10 or more people continued to increase (+ 5 % year-on-year), accounting for 57 % of all apprenticeship contracts initiated during the year (+ 2 percentage points compared with the previous year) ([DARES, 2024](#)). In this regard, a strong concentration at ISCED 5 has been observed in the Île-de-France region, within enterprises employing fewer than 50 people (65 % of apprentices preparing for a qualification at this level are in enterprises with fewer than 50 employees) ([Drieets d'Île-de-France, 2025](#)). This dynamic is among the factors that have contributed to strengthening apprenticeships and improving training-to-employment matching within small businesses ([France compétences, 2025](#)).

Mouvement des Entreprises de France (MEDEF), an employers' organisation, has also recently called for France to maintain a strong and cohesive national ambition in the field of apprenticeship ([MEDEF, 2025](#)). The aim is to ensure the success and professional integration of all young people within a simple, stable and sustainable framework that allows enterprises and training institutions to commit and invest in the long term.

For learners, apprenticeship is regarded as a particularly positive pathway to education, qualifications and employment. Numerous reports emphasise that

young people who have participated in apprenticeship programmes during their higher education – regardless of their social background – achieve better professional integration than those who have pursued exclusively school-based learning ([Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2021](#)).

In higher education, graduates who complete an apprenticeship programme significantly increase their likelihood of obtaining stable employment (70 % achieving permanent contracts, compared with 47 % for non-apprentices) and enjoy higher-than-average post-training earnings.

Apprenticeships also play a crucial role in supporting degree attainment, mainly through the financial autonomy they offer. This is particularly beneficial for students from less advantaged backgrounds, 39 % of whom rely on apprenticeships to fund their studies. Apprenticeships thus genuinely operate as a lever for social mobility at all qualification levels ([Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2021](#)).

Apprenticeships are moreover perceived as part of a purposeful and coherent learning trajectory. They are valued for offering a decisive advantage in terms of quicker and higher-quality integration into employment, while simultaneously providing learners with an income, practical work experience closely aligned with their field of study, and early exposure to real-world professional environments ([Céreq, 2024](#)).

The strongest arguments in favour of apprenticeships at higher education levels are as follows: at these levels, the added value of apprenticeships mainly lies in the opportunity they offer certain young people to finance their higher education studies in this way, and in the quality of employment they obtain upon graduation (stability, working hours, level of remuneration and alignment with the training received). Apprenticeships also enable universities to professionalise their curricula by fostering closer ties with the business world ([Cour des comptes, 2023a](#)).

In short, the expansion of apprenticeships in higher education since the 2018 reform has been significant, welcomed by various stakeholders and meaningful in terms of the benefits it has brought to employers, higher education students and universities. However, there are also concerns around this expansion.

3.4. Concerns regarding higher-level apprenticeships

The apprenticeship reform, introduced by the [Pénicaud Law](#) in 2018 (Law 2018-771), originally focused apprenticeship subsidies mainly on the upper secondary

and lower secondary levels. Its purpose was to facilitate young people's access to qualifications and their integration into employment ⁽⁶⁾.

Contrary to these initial pursuits, the expansion of apprenticeships has been more notable at higher education levels. Therefore, currently, the fact that apprenticeships have primarily expanded within higher education raises concerns, as does the cost in relation to public finances. One of the most significant criticisms was set out in a report by the French Observatory of Economic Cycles (OFCE) ([OFCE, 2023](#)). According to this study, the broadening of financial aid for apprenticeships benefits, above all, the apprentices and employers who need it least and less so those facing the greatest unemployment risks or with more limited resources. Apprenticeships thus lose their original aim as an integration tool for vulnerable groups, becoming a very expensive policy.

These critical observations have since been expanded: during a [parliamentary debate](#) on funding for apprenticeships in preparation for the 2025 Finance Bill, some parliamentarians expressed their views that qualifications at levels 6 and 7 do not correspond to priority qualification levels.

Apprenticeships, conceived in part to support priority groups facing greater barriers to employment, have – because of this generalisation – especially benefited those who do not encounter such difficulties ([CESE, 2025](#)). This last report particularly equates the increase in higher education apprenticeships with the growth of private HEIs.

In a parliamentary report ([Assemblée nationale 10 avril 2024 Rapport](#)), Members of Parliament Béatrice Descamps and Estelle Folest emphasised that apprenticeships had become a major opportunity for the principal actors in the private higher education sector. They also stressed that the for-profit private sector had particularly succeeded in capitalising on the 2018 reform, to the extent that the economic model of certain for-profit private training providers appeared to rely largely on resources derived from apprenticeships.

A significant portion of the funding dedicated to apprenticeships now benefits students from advantaged social backgrounds whose access to employment is not genuinely hindered, as is the case for certain engineering school students. More generally, the Cour des comptes (Court of Auditors) has voiced reservations about the expansion of apprenticeships in higher education, arguing that public funding should primarily support young people and workers with low qualification levels, to finance training designed to raise their qualification levels. While apprenticeships undeniably offer advantages in higher education – regarding democratisation,

⁽⁶⁾ In her speech dated 4 December 2018, Minister Muriel Pénicaud explained that the reform notably aimed to (a) support and train low-qualified individuals, young people without qualifications and long-term jobseekers and (b) make apprenticeships more accessible, straightforward and individual-centred to address unemployment.

professionalisation and funding – the added value for young people's access to employment is substantially greater for those with lower qualification levels (ranging from professional skills certificates – *certificate d' aptitude professionnelle* (CAP) to the BTS). Given the reduced state of the public finances, the court thus recommended that public financial support for apprenticeships should be adjusted (without restricting the range of courses available through apprenticeships) to favour the young people facing the greatest challenges in achieving sustainable labour market integration. The court also acknowledged that apprenticeships are widely acclaimed by students as 'a major asset for employability' ([CESE, 2025](#)).

Another point drawing criticism and currently being debated is the cost of apprenticeships for public finances. This cost includes direct aid to enterprises participating in apprenticeship training and social security contributions for apprentices, which are paid from the state budget (and not by training enterprises, which are currently exempt from paying such contributions). The allocated expenditure devoted to social security contributions to compensate for the specific exemptions from social charges on apprenticeship contracts reached EUR 1 696.85 million in the 2024 Finance Law (Finance Law, 2024). In 2022, this amount was EUR 938.70 million in authorisations for commitments and payment appropriations.

The Cour des comptes and the general inspectorates of finance and social affairs have repeatedly raised the alarm over the level of public expenditure dedicated to apprenticeships. There is currently no prospect of rebalancing resources and expenditure, given that the entirety of France compétences's resources barely suffices to cover expenses solely related to work–study programmes. It should be recalled that public funds for training and work–study are managed primarily by France compétences ([Cour des comptes, 2023b](#), and [IGAS, 2024](#)).

In the draft finance laws and social security financing laws for 2026, there is a clear intention to achieve a better financial balance through the following.

- (a) **A reduction in costs linked to direct aid to enterprises.** The 2026 Finance Law (Finance Law, 2026) allocates EUR 2 158 million in authorisations for commitments and EUR 2 368 million in payment appropriations for this purpose, whereas the 2024 Finance Law (Finance Law, 2024) allocated EUR 3 906 million in authorisations for commitments and EUR 3 530 million in payment appropriations to support the development of apprenticeships.
- (b) **A reduction in the state support for apprentice social contributions.** The cost to the state of covering the exemptions from social contributions has increased in recent years. In 2026, the government plans to abolish these exemptions for new contracts, which will transfer this cost directly to

apprentices (through a reduction in their net salary) rather than maintaining it as a cost borne by the state. This paradoxical dynamic clearly reflects the budgetary tension: while direct aid to enterprises had decreased, the cost of social contribution exemptions had sharply increased, leading the government to decide to abolish these exemptions to achieve savings. An allocation of EUR 1 042.63 million is thus planned in the [2026 PLF](#) for social contribution exemptions.

This reduction in funding is taking place through several elements and phases, beginning in early 2025 with the reduction of aid to enterprises. Since 1 July 2025, employers have been required to pay a mandatory contribution of EUR 750 for every apprenticeship contract for training starting at the Professional bachelor programmes level (ISCED 6). This measure enables a direct contribution from employers to training financing, modelled on the German apprenticeship system. This new financing modality will improve the system's financial sustainability ⁽⁷⁾.

3.5. Conclusions

The current situation of apprenticeships can be described as paradoxical. Apprenticeships' growth has led to very positive outcomes, highlighted by public authorities, but also to consequences that have not been perceived positively, with the public finance cost related to the increase in the number of apprentices being a major factor of concern.

A new context should therefore be explored for apprenticeship, from a financial perspective and in terms of quality for training centres. The government has announced the creation of new quality indicators, notably for apprenticeship training, focusing on the quality of the training itself and its alignment with the targeted learning objectives to enhance quality assurance and the effective and efficient use of the public money invested ([Ministry of Education, 2025](#)).

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Chapter 4.

Greece: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Olga Kafetzopoulou, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, General Secretariat for VET, LLL ⁽⁸⁾

4.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

Greece operates [two integrated, quality-assured apprenticeship schemes](#), anchored in law and aligned with the European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships, namely a) the post-secondary apprenticeship class (*Metalykeiako Etos – Taxi Mathiteias*) at EQF level 5 under the Ministry of Education and b) the vocational schools of apprenticeship (EPASs) of the Greek Public Employment Service (DYPA) at EQF level 3 under the Ministry of Labour / DYPA.

4.1.1. Post-secondary apprenticeship class

The [post-secondary apprenticeship class](#) (EQF/NQF level 5 – post-secondary, under the Ministry of Education) is offered as a progression pathway for upper secondary vocational school (EPAL) graduates (18+). It combines approximately 20 % school-based workshop learning (203 hours) with 80 % workplace-based learning (around 156 working days). Participants receive 95 % of the statutory minimum wage and full social insurance coverage. The scheme runs from September to August and concludes with national certification exams held by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP), leading to an EQF level 5 qualification.

In terms of entry requirements, the scheme addresses graduates of EPAL (EQF 4) who have successfully completed their final exams. Admission is organised through annual calls published by the Ministry of Education and managed jointly by regional education directorates and employers.

⁽⁸⁾ This short paper analyses the current position of apprenticeships within Greece's education and training system and recent changes shaping progression routes and audiences, with a particular emphasis on developments at higher education levels (EQF 5+). It synthesises information from Cedefop's Apprenticeship Database (country and scheme fiches), official Greek sources (ministry portals, the Greek Public Employment Service, Gov.gr) and presentations by national coordinators. Where relevant, adjacent WBL forms (schools for higher vocational training and other structured internships) are referenced to situate apprenticeships within the wider VET landscape in Greece.

In terms of progression routes, graduates obtain an EQF/NQF 5 vocational diploma after passing the EOPPEP national certification exams. They may progress to higher education through open entrance procedures organised annually by universities. This has improved vertical permeability between VET and tertiary education, strengthening the link between secondary and higher technical learning.

4.1.2. EPASs of the DYPA (upper secondary level)

The [EPASs of the DYPA](#) (EQF level 3 – ISCED 353) under the Ministry of Labour and the DYPA provide two-year programmes that combine paid on-the-job training with classroom learning. They are offered in around 50 EPASs across Greece, along with 7 experimental EPASs specialising in tourism. Participants are typically aged 15–29 (18–29 in experimental EPASs).

In terms of entry requirements, the scheme addresses lower secondary education graduates (compulsory education). Applicants must meet the age criteria (15–29 years, or 18–29 in experimental EPASs) and participate in a selection process organised by the DYPA, which includes the submission of supporting documents and interview-based ranking.

In terms of progression routes, graduates who successfully pass the EOPPEP certification exams can either enter employment directly or continue in further VET by enrolling in vocational schools (EPALs or model vocational upper secondary schools (PEPALs), 2nd grade; see Section 4.2) to obtain an EQF/NQF 4 qualification. This enables an indirect route to post-secondary VET and eventually the EQF 5 apprenticeship class.

4.2. Other forms of VET/WBL at the same level

At the upper secondary level (ISCED 3–4), EPALs (mainstream school-based VET) and PEPALs coexist with the DYPA's EPAS apprenticeship system. EPAL programmes are primarily school based, combining general education with theoretical and laboratory training. In the 3rd grade of PEPAL, learners may complete a 22-day internship in public or private sector enterprises. The internship is integrated into the curriculum for the laboratory classes and aims to provide limited but structured exposure to real work environments. If sufficient internship places are not available, the conventional school-based programme is followed. However, these internships differ from apprenticeships in scope and structure, as they are short-term, unpaid and not based on an employment contract.

At the post-secondary non-tertiary level (EQF 5), schools for higher vocational training (SAEKs) – formerly institutes of vocational training (IEKs) – offer five-

semester programmes that include one semester of internship rather than a full apprenticeship. These SAEK pathways represent an alternative to the EPAL post-secondary apprenticeship class, although they differ in nature (internship versus contracted apprenticeship), degree of employer involvement and overall scale. Compared with the post-secondary apprenticeship scheme, SAEK/IEK programmes remain more popular in terms of enrolment numbers, largely due to their broader field coverage (130 programmes versus 25 apprenticeship ones), broader admission requirements (any upper secondary education graduate can enrol), higher number of providers and shorter commitment requirement for training companies. Nevertheless, SAEKs face a high dropout rate. A small pilot project using the apprenticeship methodology (a retail trade executive at the experimental IEK Glyfada) at this level was implemented and evaluated, with the decision made for it not to be continued after two periods of implementation.

In parallel, several active labour market policy training schemes are delivered through the DYPA for unemployed adults. These focus on short-term reskilling or upskilling but do not constitute apprenticeships, as they lack formal dual learning arrangements.

4.3. Reflections on the place that apprenticeships currently hold in the education and training system

4.3.1. Improvements since the 2020 VET reform

Efforts regarding the strategic objectives of the [2020 reform](#) to improve quality, strengthen labour market alignment, expand participation and improve the public image of VET have shown tangible progress. Measures such as the establishment of sectoral skills councils, a common apprenticeship contract, higher remuneration levels and upgraded governance and monitoring structures have addressed long-standing weaknesses. Greece's active involvement in the European Commission's benchlearning exercise and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships continues to promote peer learning and system improvement.

The national implementation plan (2023–2025) addressed these objectives by prioritising employer engagement, mentor training, the digitalisation of apprenticeship processes and the systematic monitoring of results. It also linked apprenticeship planning with the national skills diagnosis mechanism, ensuring stronger alignment between training provision and regional labour market needs.

Building on this, the [Strategic plan for VET and lifelong learning 2025–2027](#) renews the emphasis on communication and awareness actions to enhance the

visibility and attractiveness of VET and apprenticeships, alongside inclusion measures for vulnerable groups and partnerships with regional employers (Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, 2025).

The EQF 5 apprenticeship class explicitly targets adult learners (18+), including graduates from unified special vocational upper secondary schools and individuals with special educational needs. Tailored psychosocial and workplace support mechanisms have been introduced to enhance inclusion, reflecting the social and inclusive orientation of apprenticeship policy, as reaffirmed in the strategic plan for 2025–2027.

4.3.2. Clarity of the position of apprenticeships and acceptance by employers and learners

The position of apprenticeships in the VET system has become clear and widely accepted. The dual model – the EPASs of the DYPA at EQF 3 for youth entry and the post-secondary year apprenticeship class at EQF 5 for adults – has gained visibility and legitimacy across ministries, employers, unions and education providers. Within the education community, the EQF 5 scheme is now recognised as a credible, high-quality alternative to immediate labour market entry, enabling graduates to consolidate occupational competence. Employers increasingly view apprenticeships as a structured recruitment and skills formation tool, while trade unions acknowledge the progress made in remuneration, supervision and insurance coverage.

Digitalisation has played a central role in improving clarity, position, access and coordination. The [e-Mathiteia portal](#) has simplified employer registration and apprentice placement, while new digital tools and help desk services have facilitated matching between learners and companies. Nevertheless, smaller firms still report difficulties in navigating payroll and insurance requirements, underlining the need for further simplification and targeted guidance. Widening access to mentor training and formally recognising certified training companies remain key priorities for maintaining quality and sustaining employer interest.

Implementation evidence confirms steady progress in acceptance by employers. Enrolments in the EPASs of the DYPA remain stable at roughly 7 500–8 000 learners annually (1st and 2nd grade), while participation in the EQF 5 apprenticeship class continues to expand. Employer participation has risen significantly, [with over 6 000 enterprises offering more than 14 000 apprenticeship positions in 2025–2026](#) – around 72 % from the private sector. Persistent challenges include the administrative complexity for SMEs, uneven engagement of large enterprises and continued public misperceptions about the value of VET, particularly among families and students.

Public awareness and appreciation of apprenticeships still lag behind the progress achieved at the institutional level, as many families continue to prioritise general or academic pathways. Although large-scale communication initiatives have not yet been launched, the [Strategic plan for VET and lifelong learning 2025–2027](#) explicitly provides for a coordinated communication and awareness strategy to promote the value of VET and apprenticeships (including the post-secondary one-year apprenticeship class), highlight success stories and inform learners about available progression routes. These actions aim to enhance the public image and social prestige of VET, contributing to a better-informed and more positive perception of apprenticeship pathways.

4.3.3. Social partners' acceptance, perspectives and future directions

Greek social partners broadly endorse the dual apprenticeship model as a key mechanism for strengthening the connection between education and the labour market. Employers' associations – including SEV, GSEVEE (and its Institute IME-GSEVEE), SETE and ESEE – consistently emphasise that apprenticeships can help reduce persistent skills mismatches and ease recruitment pressures on SMEs, provided that administrative and payroll procedures are simplified and mentor training opportunities are expanded (Lalioti, 2021). They advocate for a stronger sectoral role in updating occupational profiles and training guides, and for the creation of quality recognition mechanisms (e.g. certification or labelling) for companies and mentors meeting the apprenticeship quality standards. Employers also highlight the importance of flexible WBL arrangements, particularly in tourism and other seasonal sectors, while maintaining quality and safety requirements.

On the workers' side, [trade unions \(GSEE/INE-GSEE\) support apprenticeships](#) that guarantee fair pay, social insurance coverage and genuine learning outcomes, stressing the need for robust supervision, safe and lawful working environments and effective labour inspection to prevent the misuse of apprenticeships as low-cost employment. Unions underline that apprenticeship experiences must remain clearly distinct from standard employment and should be recognised as structured learning under decent conditions.

Across both sides, there is growing convergence on several priorities for system improvement, namely:

- (a) strengthening data feedback through graduate tracking at the sectoral and regional levels;
- (b) expanding incentives and accreditation for apprenticeship-ready companies;
- (c) aligning apprenticeship offers with the skills diagnosis mechanism to ensure responsiveness to local labour market needs;

- (d) exploring more flexible arrangements for the work-based component – such as adjusted schedules, rotations or seasonal placements – particularly in the tourism and service sectors, while maintaining strict quality standards.

The national implementation plan for apprenticeships (2023–2025) addressed several of these themes through actions to reinforce apprenticeship and internship schemes, modernise occupational profiles and promote closer cooperation between VET institutions and employers. While it did not explicitly include measures on mentor accreditation, SME-specific digital services or communication and awareness campaigns, these priorities are now explicitly incorporated into and systematised in the *Strategic plan for VET and lifelong learning 2025–2027*. The new plan introduced a coordinated communication and awareness strategy to promote the value of VET and apprenticeships, highlight success stories and inform learners about progression routes. It also reinforced the principles of inclusion – broadening the participation of under-represented groups – and enhanced employer engagement through sectoral and regional partnerships.

Based on these social partner views, actions that could strengthen the implementation and future development of the apprenticeship system in Greece are:

- (a) regulating the roles of employers and unions in the periodic updating of occupational and training guides;
- (b) scaling up structured mentor training and introducing mentor and company accreditation, including through quality labels on the central apprenticeship platform (e-Mathiteia);
- (c) simplifying SME administrative obligations through one-stop-shop digital workflows;
- (d) ensuring fair pay and safe conditions through enhanced labour inspections and clear guidance materials (FAQs and checklists);
- (e) aligning apprenticeship placement targets with those of the skills diagnosis mechanism and sectoral councils;
- (f) piloting flexible WBL timetables in seasonal sectors under strict quality safeguards.

Together, these actions reflect a shared vision among policymakers and social partners of a more visible, inclusive and quality-assured apprenticeship system in Greece.

4.4. Conclusions

Greece's apprenticeship system has developed from a fragmented set of schemes into a coherent, quality-assured component of the national VET framework, supported by stable legislation, expanding participation and improved governance. Evidence from implementation confirms tangible progress in structure, quality and employer engagement.

The EQF 5 post-secondary one-year apprenticeship class functions as a bridge between upper secondary VET and both skilled employment and higher-level learning, while the DYPA's EQF 3 EPAS apprenticeships continue to serve as a structured entry route into trades and crafts.

Compared with EPAL school-based VET or SAEK (former IEK) internships, apprenticeships provide longer and more structured workplace learning under a formal employment contract, while still leading to an equally recognised qualification through EOPPEP certification. Learners and employers value these features for producing job-ready skills and smoother school-to-work transitions. Nevertheless, apprenticeships can learn from these post-secondary programmes (SAEK/IEK) in relation to marketing reach and flexibility, while other VET forms could adopt learners' engagement, apprenticeships' quality assurance and structured mentor system.

To reinforce the position and systemic integration of apprenticeships within VET and lifelong learning, key priorities of the General Secretariat for Vocational Education, Training and Lifelong Learning for the next period include:

- (a) sustaining and improving quality assurance, with regular reviews of occupational standards, training guides and mentor preparation to maintain high learning outcomes;
- (b) strengthening labour market relevance through active sectoral councils and continuous feedback from employers and regional needs diagnosis mechanisms;
- (c) enhancing permeability between EQF levels, so that apprenticeship graduates can progress smoothly towards higher VET or tertiary pathways;
- (d) supporting mentors and training companies by expanding training opportunities, introducing recognition or quality label schemes and simplifying administrative procedures – particularly for SMEs;
- (e) developing systematic data feedback, including graduate tracking and regional reporting, to inform placement planning and policy design;
- (f) raising the visibility and social esteem of apprenticeships through coordinated communication and awareness actions, as set out in the *Strategic plan for VET and lifelong learning 2025–2027*;

- (g) exploring new higher-level pilot projects (EQF 5+) in sectors with strong employer readiness – such as advanced manufacturing, maritime and digital technologies – in cooperation with higher-level VET institutions and universities.

Overall, apprenticeships in Greece have now become a stable and recognised pathway within the education and training system – a genuine, structured route leading from school-based VET to skilled employment and, increasingly, to higher qualifications. With continued attention being paid to quality assurance, relevance and permeability, the system is well positioned to build on the progress achieved in recent years. By maintaining strong cooperation among ministries, social partners and education providers and by pursuing the priorities outlined above, apprenticeships can further consolidate their role as a core pillar of Greece's vocational and lifelong learning landscape, contributing directly to the Member State's green, digital and social transitions.

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Chapter 5.

Ireland: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Breda McNally, SOLAS and Dublin City University

5.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

The national apprenticeship system in Ireland is a formal, statutory and regulated part of what has recently been referred to in policy documents and legislation as the tertiary education system (e.g. [DFHERIS, 2023, 2025](#)). Tertiary education comprises the further education and training (FET) system and the higher education and research system ([Ireland. Higher Education Authority Act 2022](#)). VET does not form a significant part of post-primary/secondary-level (junior or senior cycle) education, and statutory apprenticeships operate outside it.

In Ireland, a statutory apprenticeship is defined as ‘a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in an education or training centre. It is a dual system, a blended combination of on-the-job employer-based training and off-the-job training’ ([Generation apprenticeship, 2024a](#)) ⁽⁹⁾. It involves earning and learning, and apprentices are considered employees ⁽¹⁰⁾. A minimum of 50 % of the learning must be on the job and there can be only one, national-level, apprenticeship for any occupation. All apprenticeships must lead to a qualification in the 10-level Irish national framework of qualifications ([NFQ](#)), and these may be academic and/or professional qualifications. For example, successful completion of the three-year insurance practitioner apprenticeship leads to an undergraduate level 8 bachelor’s (honours) degree in insurance practice and other industry-mandated professional qualifications at various stages throughout the apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships form a key element of Irish government education policy, including in relation to establishing and significantly increasing WBL ([DES, 2017](#)) and to ‘significantly increase the footprint of apprenticeship within the education landscape’ ([DFHERIS, 2021a](#)).

⁽⁹⁾ See also [Generation apprenticeship, 2024b, 2024c](#) and Government of Ireland (2020), and www.apprenticeship.ie, for further information.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For most purposes, with some specific arrangements allowed relating to, for example, dismissal and pay.

Over the past 50 years or so, the national apprenticeship system has gone through several formal national-level reviews that have led to major changes in the way in which apprenticeship is designed, developed and delivered. Concerns related to on-the-job quality assurance, the limited number of sectors involved and the high cost of apprenticeship ([Thoma, 2016](#)) were among the reasons for the 2013 review, which led to the introduction of the new consortium-led model that is more 'enterprise-led', 'employer-led' and more 'flexible and responsive' ([DFHERIS, 2021a](#)).

Statutory apprenticeships currently include a) a 'craft' model introduced in the 1990s, when apprenticeships in Ireland changed from time served to standards based and b) a 'consortium-led' or 'enterprise-led' model first implemented in 2016 (following a 2013 review of apprenticeship training in Ireland). Non-statutory apprenticeship-type models of teaching and learning are also prevalent in areas such as law, medicine (including nursing since 2002) and primary and secondary school teaching.

The craft model of apprenticeship operates primarily in construction-related occupations, is targeted mainly at school leavers and leads to a FET award at level 6 of the NFQ (EQF level 5) (Table 1). All 25 craft apprenticeships are four years in duration.

The consortium-led model, which includes a new system of governance, leads to both further and higher education awards at level 5 (certificate) to level 10 (doctoral degree) in a wide range of industries and occupations (EQF levels 4–8) (Table 1). Most of the consortium-led apprenticeships are targeted at a wider range of participants including, in some cases, people who are already employed, and the duration varies between two and four years. Unlike the craft model, in which the state pays an allowance to apprentices during the off-the-job phases of the apprenticeship, in the consortium-led model, the employer pays the apprentice throughout the apprenticeship.

Table 1. **Apprenticeships in the NFQ and education system in Ireland**

National framework of qualifications (NFQ levels 1–10)									
1	2	3	4	5	6 ⁽¹¹⁾	7	8	9	10
Post-primary/secondary-level education									
Junior cycle		Senior cycle Leaving certificate (three routes: established, applied and vocational)							
Further education and training (FET) NFQ levels 1–6									
					Higher education (HE) NFQ levels 6–10				
				Statutory apprenticeship levels 5–10					
					Craft model				
					FET award NFQ level 6				
				Consortium-led model					
				FET awards, and higher education awards NFQ levels 5 and 6, and NFQ levels 6–10					
1	2	3	4	5	6		7	8	
EQF levels 1–8									

Source: Adapted from [McNally, 2025](#).

There is a commitment to creating a single integrated statutory apprenticeship system during the lifetime of the [national action plan for apprenticeship for 2021–2025](#) (DFHERIS, 2021a). Work is ongoing in this regard and on the development of a new national apprenticeship plan for 2026–2030, with the [commencement of a public consultation](#) on the new plan taking place in December 2025. In addition, a plan to undertake an economic assessment of the mechanisms currently employed by the state to incentivise participation in national apprenticeship programmes, targeting both employers and prospective apprentices, was announced in January 2026 ⁽¹²⁾.

Entry to a statutory apprenticeship, whether leading to a FET or higher education award, is based on an employer employing an individual as an apprentice. It requires the statutory approval of the employer and the registration of the apprentice for that specific apprenticeship by the statutory and regulatory authority for apprenticeship in Ireland (SOLAS), followed by a separate registration of the student apprentice with the relevant FET or higher education provider. Access to apprenticeships in higher education is separate from and outside the

⁽¹¹⁾ Programmes leading to awards at level 6 are provided by both FET and higher education providers (which award advanced certificates and higher certificates respectively).

⁽¹²⁾ [Research Ireland](#) – Ireland's competitive research and innovation funding agency' – has issued an [invitation for applications for researchers](#), including a post in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which will involve assessing incentive elasticity in apprenticeship demand.

Central Applications Office process that forms the basis for access to most undergraduate programmes in Ireland; it is largely based on performance in the leaving certificate examination taken at the end of post-primary/secondary-level education.

There are three programmes or pathways that lead to the leaving certificate award – [established](#), [applied](#) and [vocational](#) – but most students undertaking the leaving certificate programme choose the established route. For example, in 2018, some 121 274 students undertook or repeated one of the leaving certificate pathways and, of these, 83 113 (69 %) undertook the established programme, 31 411 (26 %) the vocational programme and 5 939 (5 %) the applied programme ([Oireachtas Research and Library Service, 2020](#)).

5.2. VET in Ireland

Activity that is defined as VET in a European context is generally referred to as FET in Ireland ([Cedefop, 2025](#)). FET in Ireland is ‘education and training at levels 1–6 on the National framework of qualifications (NFQ) outside the traditional post-primary and Higher Education Institute trajectory’ ([SOLAS, 2017](#)). FET provision consequently includes initial VET, including some of the industry-led and all the craft apprenticeships; ‘second chance’ education and training in areas such as literacy and basic education; professional or vocational provision for people in employment or re-entering employment; and community and other adult education and training. FET is delivered primarily by 16 education and training boards (ETBs), funded by SOLAS in its capacity as the national FET authority, through a network of contracted training or community education and training providers, and independent community and voluntary secondary schools. These deliver post leaving certificate courses ([SOLAS, 2020a](#)), most of which include a work experience element. The ETBs also deliver [traineeships](#). Traineeships last between 6 and 20 months. They combine classroom learning and workplace experience, must have a minimum of 30 % on-the-job learning and lead to awards between levels 4 and 6 on the NFQ. Participants are considered trainees. At its core, FET in Ireland is focused on skills development, learning pathways and inclusion, and it is perceived as addressing both labour market and social inclusion agendas.

The demarcation between FET and higher education is increasingly being challenged at the policy level in Ireland. This is reflected, for example, in the dissolution of the Department of Education and Skills in 2020 and the creation of the specific Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the separate Department of Education. Notable

developments in this regard include the subsequent establishment by DFHERIS of a national tertiary office in 2022 – which is jointly managed by the Higher Education Authority and SOLAS ([NTO, 2024](#)) – and the imminent publication of a national tertiary education strategy. The Higher Education Authority, in its submission to the development of the DFHERIS statement of strategy for 2021–2023, stated that ‘apprenticeship is the one true vehicle of further and higher education collaboration and should be governed as such and promoted as a mode of learning that spans both further and higher education’ ([DFHERIS, 2021b](#)).

Data shared by DFHERIS in the preparation of its statement of strategy for 2021–2023 ([DFHERIS, 2021c](#)) and by the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) ([NAO, 2024](#)) provide a useful basis for comparing enrolments in apprenticeship and in other FET and higher education provision. For example, the reported apprenticeship population in 2019 was 17 829. Total new apprentice registrations that year reached 6 177, which represents 1.5 % of the total 414 755 enrolments in (full-time and part-time) FET and higher education reported for 2019–2020 in the statement of strategy. When compared with only the part-time enrolments (since the off-the-job element of apprenticeships is recorded as part-time study), the 6 177 new apprentice registrations in 2019 represent approximately 4 % of the 147 856 part-time enrolments in FET and higher education (102 063 in FET and 45 793 in higher education).

The majority of these 6 177 enrolments were in craft apprenticeships (5 271 (85 %)) ⁽¹³⁾. Since then, apprenticeship registration figures have increased: there were 8 712 new apprentice registrations in 2023 ([NAO, 2024](#)), with craft apprenticeships accounting for 6 588 (76 %) of these, and 9 352 new apprentice registrations in 2024 ([NAO, 2025](#)), with craft apprenticeships also accounting for 76 % (7 113) of new apprentice registrations that year. Figures relating to the end of November 2025 ⁽¹⁴⁾ report an apprenticeship population of 31 169, with 8 884 new apprentice registrations at that point, and craft apprenticeships accounting for 75 % of these registrations (Table 2). In addition, the percentage of female apprentice registrations increased from less than 1 % in 2014 to 12 % (1 165) in 2024, with 84 % of these (973) in consortium-led apprenticeships and 16 % in craft apprenticeships.

⁽¹³⁾ It should be noted that the data on FET enrolments included in the statement of strategy do not include apprentice registrations. This is because the programme and learner support system, which is the source of these data and most other FET-related data published by SOLAS, does not include information on apprenticeships ([SOLAS, 2020b](#)).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Presented at the 11 December meeting of the [Oireachtas Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science](#).

Table 2. **Annual apprentice population and new registrations**

Year	Apprentice population	New apprentice registrations
2019	17 829	6 177 (85 % craft)
2023	27 470	8 712 (76 % craft)
2024	29 772	9 352 (76 % craft)
2025 (end of November)	31 169	8 884 (75 % craft)

Source: NAO reports (see text).

These data show the relatively large scale of activity in craft apprenticeships compared with consortium-led apprenticeships, increasing apprentice registrations overall, relatively small but incremental increases in consortium-led apprentice registrations over time (Table 2), and a small but increasing number and proportion of female participants in apprenticeships, particularly in consortium-led apprenticeship occupations.

5.3. The changing position of apprenticeships in Ireland

As a result of the 2013 review, apprenticeships now lead to awards in the NFQ from levels 5 to 10 (not just level 6). Some 40 (51 %) apprenticeships, including the 25 craft apprenticeships, lead to FET awards, and 38 (49 %) lead to higher education awards in the NFQ (Table 2).

Apprenticeships are now between two and four years in duration (not four years only) and offered in a wide range of sectors and occupations, including biopharma, finance, health, hospitality and food, information and communications technology, insurance, logistics and recruitment.

One of the most significant aspects of the recent reforms is that, for the first time, all HEIs, including publicly funded universities and ‘independent’ (including private) HEIs can be involved in the development and delivery of apprenticeships leading to higher education awards up to and including those at the doctoral degree level.

Between 2016 and 2020, some 34 new apprenticeships were developed and came into operation, in addition to the existing 25 craft apprenticeships. At the end of 2023, an additional 14 apprenticeships were reported to be in operation (total of 73, 25 of which were craft and 48 consortium-led apprenticeships). An additional 4 apprenticeships were reported to be in operation in August 2024, and a further 1 in 2025, giving a total of [78 statutory apprenticeships](#) (25 craft and 53 consortium-

led) in September 2025 (Table 3), with another 28 apprenticeships being in development at the time of writing (April 2026).

Table 3. **Number of apprenticeships leading to FET and higher education awards (September 2025)**

National framework of qualifications (NFQ levels 1–10)									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
40 (51 %) leading to FET awards (NFQ levels 5 and 6)									
Craft (25; 32 %)					25 (32.0 %)				
Consortium led (15; 19 %)			2 (2.5 %)	13 (16.5 %)					
38 (49 %) leading to higher education awards (NFQ levels 6–10)					12 (15.0 %)	10 (13.0 %)	9 (11.5 %)	6 (8.0 %)	1 (1.2 %)
Consortium-led (38; 49 %)									
Total (78)				2 (2.5 %)	50 (64.0 %)	10 (13.0 %)	9 (11.5 %)	6 (8.0 %)	1 (1.2 %)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
European qualifications framework (EQF levels 1–8)									

Source: Generation Apprenticeship [directory / list of apprenticeships](#) on www.apprenticeship.ie.

Apprenticeships leading to FET awards are delivered primarily by the ETBs, while Quality and Qualifications Ireland (the state agency responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training in Ireland) makes the awards. Apprenticeships leading to higher education awards are delivered primarily by HEIs ⁽¹⁵⁾. In September 2025, 9 HEIs were the coordinating providers – meaning the ‘ultimately responsible’ providers – for 33 of the 78 apprenticeships, including the 6 apprenticeships at level 9 and the 1 at the doctoral level.

5.4. Progress and plans

Research involving apprenticeships in Ireland is scarce. Apart from a small number of studies on consortium-led apprenticeships (e.g. [Giblin, 2020](#); [QQI, 2022](#); [McNally, 2025](#)) and research in the FET or higher education sector that refers to apprenticeships in these broader contexts, research on apprenticeships in Ireland relates primarily to the period leading up to and following the formal review in the

⁽¹⁵⁾ Teagasc – the state agency providing research, advisory and education services in agriculture, horticulture, food and rural development in Ireland – is the coordinating provider for four apprenticeships leading to higher education awards. Accounting Technicians Ireland is the coordinating provider for one.

late 1980s to mid 1990s, when the apprenticeship model changed from time served to standards based. Similarly, publicly available data on apprenticeship activity are limited and largely relate to the number of new apprentice registrations and the proportion of female participants in individual apprenticeships annually ⁽¹⁶⁾. It is therefore difficult to determine who (in terms of age, entry qualification level and employment status, for example) is participating in which apprenticeships, who and how many are completing which apprenticeships, what they are doing post-apprenticeship in terms of employment and further education, and to what extent policy aims with respect to access to and the impact of apprenticeships in Ireland are being achieved. Progress is being made, and many issues to be addressed are targeted by specific actions in the government's action plan for apprenticeship for 2021–2025.

Notwithstanding this, and while specific industry requirements or other capacity constraints may exist for some apprenticeships with respect to numbers of apprentice places available, new apprentice registration data for consortium-led apprenticeships between 2019 and 2024 show that relatively high apprentice registration figures have been consistently reported for some new apprenticeships ([NAO, 2024, 2025](#)). Relatively modest but steady or incrementally increasing apprentice registration figures have been reported for other apprenticeships, while relatively low figures have been consistently reported for still others. In addition, some apprenticeships are reported to have had very low or no apprentice registrations for several years.

The issue of lower-than-anticipated apprentice registrations has been considered by the National Apprenticeship Alliance ([Generation Apprenticeship, 2024d](#)) but has not been deemed to be a cause for concern. The alliance also acknowledged that a number of apprenticeships that have not attracted the expected level of demand from employers have been paused to enable a review of the content and format, that there might be additional scope for the apprenticeship proposal process (step 1 in the [10-step apprenticeship development process](#)) to 'test' the viability and sustainability of new apprenticeships, and that apprenticeships with low registration numbers will be reviewed periodically by the alliance.

A subsequent discussion on the matter in March 2025 ([Generation Apprenticeship, 2025](#)) reiterated that there are instances where a lower number of

⁽¹⁶⁾ Findings from the recent [National Survey of Apprentices](#) are likely to be informative in this respect (the [infographic](#) summarising the survey's results will be followed by a full report). The Central Statistics Office released information in 2025 on the [outcomes for apprentices](#) two years after qualification, mainly concerning craft apprenticeships who qualified in 2020. This publication, which also draws on datasets that include [apprentices' ages at the time of qualification between 2010 and 2020](#), shows very positive outcomes for these apprentices in terms of employment and education, with 78 % in (only) employment and 14 % in employment and education.

registrations is valid and provision should be maintained, but that there are also programmes where low participation is not viable. Members of the National Apprenticeship Alliance supported a case-by-case approach to the evaluation of small-scale apprenticeships by the NAO, focusing on employer support levels and the strategic national importance of the apprenticeship in question. Members also noted the importance of employer engagement throughout the apprenticeship development process and recommended further initiatives to streamline the onboarding and support processes for employers, to increase and maintain their engagement. The value of research into national and international skills needs was also emphasised, as it can support the development of a more structured, targeted apprenticeship development strategy, and recommendations were made regarding enhanced guidance and support for groups working on apprenticeship proposals, and related to financial support structures for craft and consortium-led apprenticeships to ensure long-term sustainability.

Findings from recent research on experiences of the consortium-led model of apprenticeship do not provide a sufficient basis to conclusively determine the factors that contribute relatively more or less to the demand for and success (or otherwise) of individual apprenticeships, including with respect to the number of employers and apprentices involved ([McNally, 2025](#)). The findings do indicate, however, that consortium-led apprenticeships that are considered to be successful in terms of consistently relatively high apprentice registrations do have a solid and supportive industry and/or sectoral infrastructure, and involvement in identifying and addressing employer needs, and that, where relevant, the programmes are aligned with professional, regulatory or statutory bodies' requirements.

5.5. Conclusions

Much progress has been made in the development of a new model of statutory apprenticeships in Ireland, and there is a commitment now to creating a single integrated statutory apprenticeship system. The intention is to create a system in which all apprenticeships, including the 25 craft apprenticeships, will be organised around industry-based consortia, grouped into 'families' based on a combination of factors, including industry/sector and programme similarity, with each family overseen by a consortium.

Recent debates and discussions, including at recent meetings of the [Oireachtas Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science](#) and meetings of the National Apprenticeship Alliance, highlight some of the progress, plans and current challenges related to statutory apprenticeships in Ireland. Among the stated challenges are the sustainability of

the consortium-led model (particularly with respect to the stated need for clarity regarding roles and responsibilities), and the funding model, including a desire for ‘parity’ with the current craft apprenticeship model.

A review of the 2021–2025 action plan for apprenticeship is currently being undertaken by the OECD and will inform the forthcoming 2026–2030 action plan, and a separate [review of the process](#) for developing and approving new apprenticeships is also under way. The [consultation document](#) for the new apprenticeship action plan seeks to gather views on ‘how the system can be improved, made more inclusive, and better aligned with national skills needs’, and the government’s stated objective in all this remains to position apprenticeships as a first-choice pathway for learners and employers and a system that is inclusive, innovative and underpinned by quality at every stage.

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Chapter 6.

Italy: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

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6.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

In Italy, apprenticeships are regulated by a national legislative framework, defining three schemes of apprenticeship, namely:

- (a) apprenticeships for the vocational qualification and diploma, upper secondary education diploma and high technical specialisation certificate (type 1);
- (b) professionalising apprenticeships (type 2);
- (c) higher education and research apprenticeships (type 3).

Type 1 and type 3 are aimed at pursuing a qualification that is regulated within the national education system and that can be obtained through full-time school paths as well. For this reason, they are also known as 'formative apprenticeships'. Meanwhile, type 2 follows from a long tradition of apprenticeships being exclusively regulated by craft corporations, without any public intervention. Nowadays, the national legislative framework dictates the main principles and criteria for this type's implementation; however, there is still significant space for collective bargaining, distinguishing it from formative schemes. Type 2 apprenticeships lead to occupational qualifications at the sectoral level, which have no educational value and are therefore not included in the [Cedefop European Database on Apprenticeship Schemes](#). In line with the scope of this contribution, the following analysis will be focused only on type 1 and type 3 apprenticeship schemes.

6.1.1. Type 1 apprenticeships

Initially introduced in 2003 and currently regulated by Legislative Decree 81/2015, type 1 apprenticeships aim to cover all vocational qualifications offered in the second cycle of the education system: the vocational qualification and diploma, upper secondary education diploma and high technical specialisation certificate.

In Italy, upon completing lower secondary education at the age of 14, students are required to continue their studies until the age of 18 to fulfil their right/duty in

relation to education and training. They may choose to progress to state-run or region-run upper secondary programmes for vocational education and training (*Istruzione e Formazione Professionale* (leFP)) (see Box 1).

Box 1. The state-run and region-led VET strands in Italy

leFP provision was established in the early 2000s with the aim of tackling early school leaving. It emerged from a gradual process of the homogenisation of the initial VET programmes traditionally offered by the regions at the upper secondary level, through the introduction of national standards and the guarantee of nationwide recognition of the related qualifications. At the same time, a major school reform ([Law 28 March 2003, No 5](#)) redefined upper secondary education as being composed of two main streams, namely:

- a state-run sector, fully implemented nationwide, with uniform characteristics and based on the traditional tripartite structure of upper secondary schools (lyceums, technical education and vocational education);
- a region-led option, consisting of leFP courses.

Source: Author.

State-run provision is made up of five-year courses leading to an upper secondary education diploma at NQF/EQF level 4, which gives direct access to all tertiary education options. It is organised into three main streams: (a) lyceums, providing academic education, (b) technical schools and (c) vocational schools, offering VET courses with a solid cultural and scientific background.

Region-run provision, known as leFP, consists of two programmes: a three-year course awarding a vocational qualification corresponding to EQF/NQF level 3, which may be followed ⁽¹⁷⁾ by a fourth-year course leading to a vocational diploma corresponding to EQF/NQF level 4 (see Box 2). The additional fourth year, which awards a level 4 qualification, is considered a specialisation within the same occupational area. The leFP pathways do not provide direct access to tertiary education; students with a vocational diploma must complete one year in a post-secondary, non-tertiary higher technical education and training (*Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore* (IFTS)) programme (EQF 4) to enter higher technical institute (ITS) academies, which are positioned at the tertiary level.

Type 1 apprenticeships can be offered to obtain any of the aforementioned qualifications: the upper secondary school diploma (EQF 4), the leFP EQF 3 vocational qualification and leFP EQF 4 vocational diploma, and the IFTS certificate (EQF 4).

⁽¹⁷⁾ A minority of courses, existing in a limited number of regions, have a duration of four years and lead directly to the achievement of a vocational diploma.

Box 2. leFP programmes: the region-run strand of VET provision

The establishment of the leFP programmes entailed a lengthy and gradual phase of implementation, marked by different speeds of development across regions. Nowadays, three-year courses are available and well established in all regions, while one-year programmes leading to a vocational diploma exist in 17 out of 20 regions. IFTS courses are available in 11 regions ⁽¹⁸⁾.

In the 2022/2023 school year, overall leFP provision covered approximately 210 000 students nationwide (of whom 67 026 were new enrolments in the three-year programmes), compared with the 2 637 000 students enrolled in general, technical and vocational schools. Among leFP learners, the vast majority participated in three-year programmes, and only 16 881 attended the fourth year to obtain a vocational diploma (INAPP et al., 2025).

Most students attend full-time school-based courses; overall, in the 2022/2023 school year, 7 589 learners participated in the leFP pathways through a type 1 apprenticeship (INAPP et al., 2024). The share of apprentices among all participants is higher in programmes leading to a vocational diploma (20.5 %) than in the three-year courses (2.1 %).

Source: Author.

In the Italian education system, leFP courses are the learning option with the strongest vocational orientation at the upper secondary level that always combines VET with a cultural and general education component. Access to the three-year programme is open to all students who have successfully completed lower secondary school, usually at 14 years of age. However, many young people enter at a later stage due to discontinued or irregular educational trajectories. Apprentices can participate in leFP courses by entering at the second or – most frequently – third year as well. This may occur when students who dropped out of other school programmes enter leFP, benefiting from the recognition of prior learning and competences acquired elsewhere, or when students enrolled in full-time school-based leFP courses secure an apprenticeship placement in a training company only during their second or, more commonly, third year.

Attending leFP through full-time school-based pathways is by far the most popular option. Students' choices are largely influenced by the limited availability of companies willing to offer apprenticeship placements to young people of this age, despite the significant financial incentives associated with type 1 apprenticeship contracts. Companies tend to prefer hiring people aged at least 18, who are subject to fewer legal restrictions for work activities, and in forms of apprenticeship with lighter training obligations (type 2).

After obtaining a vocational diploma, young people wishing to continue their studies must either attend a post-secondary IFTS course and pass an entry exam

⁽¹⁸⁾ The figure refers to the year of 2023. INAPP (2024). [Rapporto di ricerca – Monitoraggio IFTS](#).

to progress to ITS, or complete an additional school year in a technical and vocational school and successfully pass the state exams (*Maturità*) to access university.

Inspired by the German dual model, the introduction of type 1 apprenticeships was intended to reduce early school leaving and the number of people not in employment, education or training. However, despite many efforts mainly by the Ministry of Labour and Regions, participation remains very low. A recent study on European dual systems concluded that the design of type 1 apprenticeships, as adapted to the Italian context, reflects a model rooted in an outdated past: today's apprenticeships, rather than mitigating the social inequalities generated by schooling, seem to amplify them, adding the effects of school selection to the discriminatory mechanisms operating in the labour market (D'Agostino & Vaccaro, 2021). The high levels of youth unemployment in Italy generate strong competition for the available job positions, so companies may select the young people with the highest skills levels and educational attainment, contributing to a structural phenomenon of overeducation.

6.1.2. Type 3 apprenticeships

Similarly to type 1, higher education and research apprenticeships (type 3) are regulated as alternative paths to qualifications that are usually acquired in the full-time school-based programmes offered in higher education. All tertiary education qualifications, whether issued by universities or by other tertiary institutions like ITS academies, can be obtained through type 3 apprenticeships: higher technological diplomas (released by ITS academies – NQF level 5), bachelor's degrees (NQF level 6), master's degrees (NQF level 7), doctorates (NQF level 8) and one-year post-degree university programmes (Master programmes at levels I and II – NQF levels 7 and 8).

There are subtypes of type 3 apprenticeships, which are provided for in the legal framework but rarely used by companies. They are intended either to train researchers within private firms or to enable access to regulated professions. These apprenticeships are positioned outside the education system; they grant qualifications regulated by collective bargaining, which are not included in the NQF. For this reason, these subtypes are not considered in this paper.

Type 3 apprenticeships were first introduced by the same decree, [Legislative Decree 276/03](#), that established type 1 apprenticeships, drawing inspiration from the French model rather than the German one. However, despite the efforts made over the past 20 years by the Ministry of Labour and Regions through the launch and support of several pilot projects, type 3 apprenticeships still struggle to gain traction. Various factors have been put forward to explain these results: limited

information on this scheme; the tendency of young people to postpone access to employment after completing their studies; and the difficulties educational institutions face in organising dual programmes, including due to the low flexibility of many tertiary-level curricula. In 2023, type 3 apprenticeships involved approximately 1 400 apprentices (INAPP et al., 2024), with a highly uneven territorial distribution, concentrated mainly in the large northern regions and almost absent in the south.

Most type 3 apprentices are enrolled in ITS academies and in one-year university programmes (INAPP et al., 2024), which are the shortest offers available at the tertiary level. In recent years, efforts to promote the development of this type of apprenticeship have focused particularly on ITS academies, with clear results: in 2023, apprentices enrolled in ITS academies accounted for more than half of all type 3 apprentices. Conversely, efforts to expand type 3 apprenticeships in the public sector are proving difficult, mainly because of the challenge of reconciling the apprenticeship regulatory framework – which assigns employers the primary role in selecting apprentices, supporting their training and potentially hiring them on a permanent basis upon completion of the qualification – with the constitutional rules governing access to public employment ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The requirements for accessing higher education programmes are the same for apprentices as for full-time students and vary based on the type of programme. For example, passing the *Maturità* exam is required to enrol in a university bachelor's degree programme (awarding an EQF 6 qualification). Learners who have completed a four-year leFP programme followed by a one-year IFTS course (EQF 4) are eligible to enter ITS academies.

Access to type 3 apprenticeships is possible up to the age of 29. As for type 1 and except for the short university programmes, young people wishing to obtain a tertiary-level qualification through an apprenticeship usually find a place in a training enterprise after at least one year of full-time study in the corresponding programme.

Apprentices in higher education pursue the same qualifications as students enrolled in full-time programmes, which remain fully valid for continuing their studies and progressing to further cycles of higher education. An individual plan, set out at the start of the apprenticeship as an annex to the labour contract, identifies the exams to be passed, the time devolved to on-the-job and off-the-job learning, and the credits that may be acquired through projects carried out in the workplace.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Article 97, paragraph 4, of the Italian constitution establishes that 'access to public sector employment is granted through a competitive examination' ([La Costituzione – Articolo 97](#)).

6.2. Reforms affecting the position of apprenticeships

In recent years, only limited changes have been introduced to the legislative framework for formative apprenticeships. Most efforts have focused on type 1, primarily aiming to increase its attractiveness by introducing additional tax incentives for training companies. These reforms have not altered the position of type 1 and type 3 apprenticeships within the education system.

Conversely, the recent establishment of the technological–vocational education supply chain ⁽²⁰⁾ – which will become an ordinary part of the education system from the 2026/2027 school year ⁽²¹⁾ – represents a much broader intervention, with significant implications for the position and role of type 1 and type 3 apprenticeships. This is part of a major initiative to align technical and vocational education with the new skills demanded by industry (reform 1.1 of the national recovery and resilience plan). The rationale behind the introduction of this new education supply chain is to expand the availability of all vocational programmes through the establishment of networks of providers operating at the upper secondary and tertiary levels, while promoting participation and improving quality. Each network must include a state-run technical or vocational institute, a training agency delivering leFP programmes and an ITS academy; it should also involve one or more companies, groups, consortia or business networks. The network must offer a comprehensive array of vocational programmes within a specific sector and across different qualification levels, including the new four-year technical or vocational education programmes and the leFP, IFTS and ITS programmes.

The technological–vocational education supply chain is structured around a 4 + 2 model, intended as a sector-specific continuing education pathway, consisting of a four-year programme at the upper secondary level followed by a tertiary-level two-year course. For the state-run sector, this requires the introduction of a new four-year programme delivered by technical and vocational schools, followed by an ITS course. The new programme must include the adoption of innovative teaching methods and tools, an enhanced focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines, strengthened laboratory-based and vocational content, and expanded WBL opportunities – including apprenticeships. The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System is responsible for approving the new programmes. Although it is conceived as a single pathway, students may leave the education supply chain

⁽²⁰⁾ See Law of 8 August 2024, No 121, establishing the [filiera formativa tecnologico-professionale](#) [technological–vocational education pathway].

⁽²¹⁾ See [Ministerial Decree No 221 of 14 November 2025](#).

upon completion of the four-year programme to enter the labour market or access universities. For this purpose, the curriculum must ensure that students achieve the same learning outcomes as those completing the traditional five-year programmes. To test the new four-year programmes, the Ministry of Education launched a national pilot project in the 2024/2025 school year, involving 176 technical and vocational institutes.

The reform reshapes the architecture of upper secondary and tertiary education and the options for transitioning between pathways. Students enrolled in the new programmes will be able to directly access the state exam (*Maturità*) required to enter higher education at the end of their four-year path, with no need to undertake any additional programme. Similarly, graduates who obtained an *leFP* vocational diploma can directly access ITS academies, without first completing an IFTS course or other one-year bridging option, as was previously the case (INAPP et al., 2025).

A further law ⁽²²⁾ approved in 2024 introduced an ‘apprenticeship supply chain’, enabling learners to progress from a type 1 apprenticeship to a type 3 apprenticeship. This allows young people who obtain a qualification accessible through a type 1 apprenticeship to continue their studies at the tertiary level while maintaining the same apprenticeship relationship with their employer through a type 3 contract. The apprenticeship supply chain is therefore intended to support young people throughout their learning path across upper secondary and tertiary education by establishing a single employment relationship that may last up to six years. However, experts estimate that, in practice, the total duration of apprenticeships will rarely exceed three or four years, given that learners typically enter apprenticeships after completing at least one or two years of full-time education (Massagli & Colombo, 2024).

As anticipated by the minister’s address at the senate ⁽²³⁾, a major revision of the Apprenticeship Regulation is currently under way, which might have far-reaching effects on formative apprenticeships and on their position within the education system. According to some views, the reform will remove the current age limits for access to apprenticeships, thereby opening this learning opportunity up to adults as well as young people. Furthermore, it is expected to broaden the scope of both types of formative apprenticeships (type 1 and type 3) to include the acquisition of microqualifications. In addition, the range of qualifications achievable through type 3 apprenticeships is expected to expand to include vocational

⁽²²⁾ See Law of 13 December 2024, No 203, paragraph 18.

⁽²³⁾ See the address at the senate on 20 February 2025, [‘Scheda di attività di Marina Elvira Calderone – XIX Legislatura’](#).

qualifications at NQF levels 5–8, issued by the regions and listed in the National Qualification Register (Tiraboschi & Colombo, 2025).

6.3. Conclusions

The reforms affecting the position of apprenticeships within the education system are still under way and are part of a broader renewal process that involves the upper secondary education sector.

It is too early to consider the final outcome of the introduction of the new technological–vocational supply chain with any certainty.

The renovation of the technical and vocational education sector to bring it closer to the labour market's needs is widely regarded as a shared objective, given that it seems extremely difficult to argue for a systemic logic in vocational education owing to the disparities and disharmonies that prevent adequate linearity, consistency and homogeneity in the distribution of the educational offering (Salerno, 2024). In practice, strengthening the WBL component within the new pathways might foster the wider uptake of type 1 apprenticeships leading to the new four-year qualification. However, state-run upper secondary schools tend to rely on WBL forms not regulated by an employment contract, such as traineeships. To date, the diffusion of type 1 apprenticeships within upper secondary education pathways has encountered several obstacles: in the 2022/2023 academic year, only 1 335 apprentices were enrolled in state-run schools to obtain a diploma, accounting for just 14 % of overall type 1 apprentices.

By contrast, regional leFP provision appears to be the preferred domain for type 1 apprenticeships, although its further development could be hindered by the introduction of the new four-year vocational programme. This programme constitutes a potential alternative to leFP and may appear more attractive for several reasons. While both pathways have the same overall duration – although leFP allows for the acquisition of a qualification after three years – the new programme is delivered by state-run vocational schools, which are well established locally, disseminated in all territories, governed by uniform national regulations and supported by stable state funding. leFP, by contrast, is delivered by accredited training centres, which are private providers dependent on periodic regional funding allocations. Moreover, the reform may reduce the appeal of IFTS programmes, as they would no longer be necessary for access to tertiary education, thus eliminating another area where type 1 apprenticeships had been expanding.

The introduction of an apprenticeship supply chain aims to promote the formative apprenticeship schemes and strengthen cooperation between the

education and employment systems. Although this objective has long been pursued by different governments and is widely supported by stakeholders, the new measure does not appear to directly address the critical issues that have so far limited the spread of type 1 and type 3 apprenticeships; it only introduces a new incentive for companies to use apprenticeships.

The intervention most likely to reshape the apprenticeship landscape is the anticipated reform of the overall regulatory framework, although the timing of its adoption remains unclear. Within this forthcoming revision, the proposed reform of the type 3 scheme has raised concerns regarding the extension of its scope to include regional occupational qualifications alongside tertiary-level qualifications (Tiraboschi & Colombo, 2025).

Nevertheless, the removal of age limits for entry into type 1 and type 3 apprenticeships (currently set at 25 and 29 years respectively) could have a significant impact, facilitating the expansion of these apprenticeships. This objective is aligned with the approach promoted by the [International Labour Organization in its quality apprenticeships recommendation, No 208 of 2023](#), which identifies both adults and young people as potential beneficiaries of high-quality apprenticeships.

Extending access to the adult population would have the clear advantage of making an additional training option with proven value available to those beyond the youth population. Nevertheless, the mere removal of age limits is not sufficient to ensure that adults access apprenticeship schemes. A recent study analysing Member States where adult apprenticeships are well established identified several enabling factors, the most significant being a dedicated legal framework ensuring flexible learning arrangements and renewed collective bargaining mechanisms capable of setting wages that adequately reflect the financial needs of adults (D'Agostino et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the ongoing renewal of education and training policies demonstrates a sustained commitment to formative apprenticeships, grounded in the recognition of apprenticeships as an alternative and effective learning pathway across multiple levels and qualifications.

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Chapter 7.

Lithuania: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

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7.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

In Lithuania, apprenticeships are offered through programmes leading to a qualification [at levels 1–5 of the NQF/EQF](#). According to the Lithuanian Labour Code, an apprenticeship labour contract can be concluded with a person only if they have a basic (lower secondary) education diploma (i.e. [basic education that covers the 5th to 10th grades, from ages 10/11 to 16/17](#)) and that person has found an employer to participate in the apprenticeship programme. Once an employer is found, the apprentice typically concludes two contracts: a training contract with a VET provider and an apprenticeship labour contract with their employer. Enrolment in higher education programmes is possible after graduation (a maturity diploma is usually required). If there is an agreement between the VET provider and an HEI, apprenticeship graduates may receive additional points to allow them to enrol in higher education programmes.

In 2024, 3 550 students, or 19.8 % of all VET students, were in programmes that included an apprenticeship contract (ŠVIS, 2025), exceeding the 15 % target by 2030 set in the [national progress plan for 2021–2030](#) ⁽²⁴⁾. However, this indicator is misleading. The main reason for this is the low threshold for work-based training required by the programmes (OECD, 2025). Currently, apprenticeships may be applied to at least one module of a formal or non-formal VET programme or for as little as two months of the total programme duration. The [procedures for the organisation of VET in the form of apprenticeship](#) (Article 12) set a legal threshold of 5 % for one indicator that monitors the [performance of VET providers](#), titled ‘proportion of apprenticeships’ (i.e. the number of students with an apprenticeship contract for at least one module or two months per year divided by the number of students who obtained a qualification that year). The [Labour Code](#)

⁽²⁴⁾ However, for some reason, this target disappeared in the [November 2024 update of the national progress plan for 2021–2030](#). The indicator was equal to 21.8 % in 2023, 16.7 % in 2022, 12.9 % in 2021, 12.9 % in 2020 and 13.7 % in 2019 (MoESS, 2025).

[\(Article 84, point 5\)](#) states that in-company training in an apprenticeship labour contract that are required by regulations to be concluded together with a training contract (formal apprenticeships; see Section 7.2) should not make up less than 70 % of the total duration of an apprenticeship employment contract. However, this requirement can be bypassed because the Labour Code does not regulate what the overall duration of the apprenticeship labour contract should be. VET providers and employers are free to determine this within the above limits set by legal acts. Thus, the actual share of apprenticeship time may not even exceed one module of a VET programme.

7.1.1. Apprenticeships at the post-secondary level

At the post-secondary level, since July 2017, following amendments to the Law on Employment (*užimtumo įstatymas*), the public employment service (PES) – operating under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour – has implemented the measure ‘Employment based on apprenticeship contract’, which is funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility. This represents an expansion of the existing apprenticeship approach to cover unemployed adults. Apprenticeships in this measure require a training contract and can be provided through formal VET or non-formal continuing training / adult education programmes. In 2024, 425 individuals and 202 employers participated in this measure. Most (81.3 %) of the contracts were for formal VET programmes, while non-formal VET programmes and non-formal adult education programmes were significantly less popular (10.3 % and 8.4 % respectively) among participants. According to an interview with a PES representative for this paper, one of the reasons why the apprenticeship option became more popular was administrative simplification: instead of collecting documents proving labour costs from participants, the PES obtained this information directly from the board of the State Social Insurance Fund under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.

There are a few factors limiting participation in the PES apprenticeship measure.

- (a) Financial support to employers cannot exceed a financial ceiling set out under the *de minimis* rule applied to state aid in this measure. The maximum amount set includes not only any labour costs that are compensated but also other expenses such as training costs. More active employers reach the maximum financial ceiling rather quickly and are thus no longer able to participate.
- (b) Despite the above simplification of how labour cost information is processed, the administrative burden is still high, as there are still many legal acts regulating how apprenticeships are implemented in the Member State. This

- prevents some employers (especially SMEs) from even trying to join apprenticeship training.
- (c) There is also an opinion that training costs are not fairly shared between VET providers and employers. Apprenticeship programmes are more expensive than school-based VET programmes. The PES compensates VET providers for some training costs, for example part of the apprentice's salary, organising and coordinating costs incurred by in-company trainers, travel and accommodation costs for apprenticeships and the costs of health check-ups. Therefore, the PES does not control whether or the extent to which VET providers share the PES compensation with employers also contributing to apprentice training.
 - (d) Finally, the current PES system lacks flexibility. For example, the system focuses on short-term, one-off training based on modules and limited access, but it requires a long interval to pass after receiving support for a (partial) qualification ⁽²⁵⁾ before someone is eligible for support to continue in an apprenticeship programme or change the initially selected programme if it no longer suits them.

7.2. Other forms of VET/WBL at the same level

At the upper secondary level, Lithuania also has a school-based VET option that leads to the same qualifications as the ones provided by apprenticeship training programmes.

Apart from apprenticeship labour contracts concluded together with legally regulated training contracts, Lithuania has another type of apprenticeship labour contract without a training contract ⁽²⁶⁾. The latter may be regarded as an 'informal apprenticeship' and is of particular interest in relation to the attempts to introduce apprenticeships at the post-secondary level. In this type of apprenticeship contract, the employer may train the apprentice without collaborating with a VET provider, based on a non-formal training programme that the employer prepares. However, such training cannot be longer than six months and does not lead to a formally recognised qualification. Another limitation is that the number of such apprentices (people with apprenticeship labour contracts, but without training contracts) in the company cannot exceed a 10th of all employed staff. That is, if an employer has

⁽²⁵⁾ Currently, individuals who acquire part of their qualification during a PES-supported apprenticeship programme cannot reapply for support less than one year after acquiring the partial qualification. Individuals who acquire a full qualification cannot reapply within three years.

⁽²⁶⁾ See the Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania (especially Article 81) and ['Pameistryste'](#) ['Apprenticeship'].

10 employees, it can train only 1 apprentice through such an apprenticeship contract.

In Lithuania, there is low demand for informal apprenticeship schemes, since formal and non-formal programmes cover the varying needs of all stakeholders, including apprentices and employers. However, larger employers with sufficient administrative resources establish their own 'academies' in different sectors (e.g. IT, engineering). These academies are very informal, do not lead to any diploma or certificate and are used primarily for selecting staff with high potential. Their number could be used as an indicator of certain problems: the higher the number of such academies is the more it is a sign of issues (e.g. differences between employer expectations and the formal VET offer) within the formal VET system, including apprenticeships.

7.3. Reflections on the position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

Apprenticeships are still very much underdeveloped in the Lithuanian education and training system. First, the overall concept of apprenticeships is diluted by programmes with a limited work-based element, which do not help to make clear the real value of apprenticeships. Second, the quality of apprenticeships is not sufficiently ensured. Last but not least, enrolment in apprenticeships is likely to plummet due to decreasing EU financial support, changes in secondary education examinations and a persistent negative image of VET. These arguments are discussed further in the rest of this section.

The concept of apprenticeship is discredited. The fact that an apprenticeship programme could comprise as little as one module (or two months per year) of WBL could be interpreted as a certain form of 'apprenticeship whitewashing' in the Member State. This phrase essentially means that the brand of apprenticeships is being diluted by VET programmes with a very small workplace training element. This negatively affects both current apprentices (e.g. employers are not happy with such limited practical training and therefore the obtained qualification may not necessarily guarantee a skilled job) and future apprentices (e.g. enrolment in relevant apprenticeship programmes plummets due to negative reviews from past apprentices and participating employers). A recent OECD report also concluded that '[a]pprenticeships lack a distinct identity and role compared to school-based programmes' (OECD, 2025, p. 11) and that 'this loose interpretation ... makes it more difficult to establish a clear mechanism by which to formally encourage them [VET providers and employers] at system level' (OECD, 2025). The OECD report recommended that the related legislation 'add the condition that a minimum of

50 % of an entire programme should be work-based' in 2025–2026. In this respect, it would be important to ensure a legally set requirement for a substantial minimum share of workplace training.

The quality of apprenticeships is insufficient. Before increasing enrolment in VET in general and in apprenticeships in particular, there is a significant need to develop a clear quality assurance framework for apprenticeships in Lithuania. Current regulations (especially the [VET Law](#) and the [procedures for the organisation of VET in the form of apprenticeship](#), the latter not changed since 2019) do not set detailed quality requirements for apprenticeships, do not stipulate mechanisms by which VET institutions should assess the quality of apprenticeships and do not set any formal reporting requirements for the assessment of apprenticeships. The 20th government of Lithuania (as of 2025) has carried over the [apprenticeship clause](#) of the previous government in relation to developing apprenticeship programmes and promoting vocational career guidance in schools and gymnasiums. Currently, the Ministry of Economy is implementing the 2025–2028 project under the Lithuanian–Swiss cooperation programme on the development and piloting of a workplace-based mastery qualification model ⁽²⁷⁾. The project should, among other things, develop a quality standard for WBL that could be used for apprenticeships as well. The government also plans to (a) integrate clauses related to the quality of apprenticeships into the abovementioned relevant regulations and (b) set up a specific training programme providing pedagogical competences for in-company trainers. The idea is to develop an online programme consisting of short modules (e.g. organisation of training, communication with apprentices) that could be launched on existing platforms such as [Kursuok.lt](#). Despite these initiatives, there is a need for an overarching quality framework for apprenticeships that systemically integrates European standards (e.g. European quality assurance in vocational education and training, in general, and the [European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships](#), in particular) with relevant national laws and structures. A recent OECD report (2025) recommended developing a quality framework for apprenticeships in 2027–2028, introducing audits on apprenticeship data (to be done by the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre (QVETDC)) and including quality assurance of WBL through regular evaluations of VET providers.

Enrolment in apprenticeship programmes is likely to decrease due to a number of factors. European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) support for

⁽²⁷⁾ See '[Development and piloting of a workplace-based mastery qualifications mode](#)' and '[Šveicarijos Konfederacijos ir Lietuvos Respublikos bendradarbiavimo programos Profesinis rengimas ir mokymas projektų įgyvendinimas](#)' [Implementation of projects under the cooperation programme between the Swiss Confederation and the Republic of Lithuania on VET].

training is likely to significantly decrease in 2028–2034. Large apprenticeship projects running between 2021 and 2027 are also coming to an end (e.g. the largest European Social Fund Agency (ESFA) project, [the apprenticeship – a new opportunity for me!](#), ended in April 2026). The ESFA project (ESFA, 2025) and the abovementioned PES measure were relatively more successful in attracting additional students mainly because of a large influx of external (mostly ESIF and Recovery and Resilience Facility) funding. A significant decrease in EU funding will have a drastic negative effect on enrolment in apprenticeship programmes that up until now have been significantly supported by the ESIF. Stakeholders and in particular the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MoESS) are concerned that apprentice numbers will drop substantially because of this. According to the MoESS representative interviewed for this paper, the key questions will be how to boost apprenticeships without EU funds and how to ensure support for apprenticeship programmes without state funds.

Enrolment in apprenticeship programmes is also likely to decrease due to the negative effects of secondary education examination reforms. In 2025, changes in the [legal act for organising and conducting the State Matura examination](#) introduced a number of requirements for these exams, with the aim of increasing the quality of education ⁽²⁸⁾, but these resulted in large numbers of secondary students failing the exams. The problem was so acute that the state [decided](#) to add 10 points to all exam results and reduced the pass threshold to 25 (from 35), at least for 2026 – a very controversial and publicly contested decision. Those who fail the State Matura exams cannot complete those VET programmes that require State Matura certification (EQF level 4 programmes, most VET programmes). This is likely to have drastic negative effects on level 4 VET apprenticeship programmes, including much larger numbers of dropouts, larger numbers of people not in employment, education or training, and a worse image of VET.

Furthermore, as of 2026, all 10th-grade learners are required to pass basic education exams in order to obtain the corresponding certificate (EQF level 3), which provides them with the right to enter upper secondary education or vocational training programmes. Candidates who do not score 4/10 or higher (even after completing the possible retake of examination) and do not have an annual grade of 4 or higher do not receive a basic education certificate ⁽²⁹⁾ and may need

⁽²⁸⁾ A single exam replaced the two previous types of exams (an easier school-level exam and a more difficult state-level exam); a minimum mark of 35 points (out of 100) to pass any exam was set, and a mandatory requirement to pass the mathematics exam to enrol in higher education was introduced.

⁽²⁹⁾ See '[Patvirtinti kitų metų pagrindinio ugdymo ir nacionalinių mokinių pasiekimų patikrinimų tvarkaraščiai](#)' ['Schedules for next year's basic education and national student achievement assessments have been approved'] and [Isakymas dėl pagrindinio ugdymo pasiekimų patikrinimo organizavimo ir vykdymo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo](#) [Order on the approval of the description of the procedure for organizing and conducting the basic education achievement assessment].

to repeat the whole 10th-grade course, try obtaining a basic education certificate in a VET EQF level 3 programme or enter a VET EQF level 2 programme that does not require a basic education certificate. This may significantly affect VET apprenticeship programmes in terms of increasing numbers of dropouts and further diminishing enrolment in VET. The further development of VET in a country requires scale, but the recent examination reforms are likely to reduce the number of students entering VET.

The final factor that limits enrolment in apprenticeship programmes is a persistent negative image of VET. Although both higher VET and higher apprenticeships are promoted at the European level, the perceptions of both are poor in Lithuania. Theoretically, short-study-cycle programmes and professional bachelor programmes exist ⁽³⁰⁾, but they are not popular ⁽³¹⁾. One of the major reasons is that colleges that are in a good position to further boost higher VET in Lithuania are instead positioning themselves as academic institutions (e.g. calling themselves ‘universities of applied sciences’) and establishing stronger links to higher education rather than VET. Up until 2006/2007, advanced VET (*aukštesnysis mokslas*) was a form of higher VET ⁽³²⁾. Since its abolishment, the potential of more prestigious higher VET, which could lead to an additional influx of students, has remained untapped.

To sum up, for Lithuania, the challenge is less about the education level at which apprenticeships are placed and more about identity, quality and accessibility issues.

7.4. Conclusions and recommendations

The MoESS plans to initiate round-table discussions on the above topics in 2026, including amending the procedures for the organisation of VET in the form of apprenticeship and addressing key questions such as how to improve the quality of apprenticeships, boost enrolment without public funds and prevent any negative effects of examination reforms.

The search for a perfect recipe to boost ‘healthier’ apprenticeships continues. It is doubtful that this process will ever end. However, four keywords should guide efforts to achieve significant progress in improving the position of apprenticeships in Lithuania.

⁽³⁰⁾ See [‘Education in Lithuania – Higher education’](#) and [‘Short study cycle’](#).

⁽³¹⁾ For example, the public safety professional bachelor’s programme is offered by Mykolas Romeris University.

⁽³²⁾ See [‘Education in Lithuania – Higher education’](#).

- (a) **Integration.** The aim should be the integration of separate initiatives, actions, financial incentives (often led by separate ministries) into one systemic policy vision and roadmap; the integration of all guidance on how to implement apprenticeships into one easy-to-navigate format; and the integration of various fragmented apprenticeship channels to allow for sufficient flexibility in using them.
- (b) **Quality.** There should be further development of the quality assurance framework for apprenticeships, including increasing the threshold requirement for the share of WBL in a programme from 5 % to 50 %, introducing regular audits and assessments of apprenticeship quality, and strengthening the role of the QVETDC in ensuring the quality of apprenticeships and developing the apprenticeship quality assurance system.
- (c) **Scale.** Efforts should focus on developing a systemic strategy for promoting apprenticeships (and increasing the overall scale of VET), with the largest part of this aiming to increase the influx of young people into apprenticeships. This could be done by providing more VET-related vocational guidance to secondary education students and running sector-specific promotion initiatives (Cedefop, 2025).
- (d) **Consistency.** Consistency is crucial for the education system, including apprenticeships, as any effects mature over a longer period of time. The key missing elements in this respect are a longer-term education strategy that could 'survive' different governments, systemically planned changes across the whole education system and, critically, the assessment (and possibly prevention) of any negative effects of these planned changes across different levels of education.

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- (b) Interview with a representative of the QVETDC, 2025, November 19.
- (c) Interview with a representative of the PES, 2025, November 26.
- (d) Interview with a representative of ESFA, 2025, December 12.

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Chapter 8.

Norway: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Margareth Haukås, Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills ⁽³³⁾

8.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

The Norwegian apprenticeship scheme is an integral part of upper secondary VET, most commonly following the '2 + 2 model' (two years in school followed by two years as an apprentice). Upon completion, candidates receive a craftsperson's or journeyman's certificate at NQF/EQF level 4, ISCED 353. The legal basis is provided by the [Education Act](#). The typical entry age is 16. The completion of 10 years of compulsory schooling (up to the level of lower secondary education) is required for entry to upper secondary VET and the apprenticeship pathway. The scheme is available to those of all ages and, in 2024, the number of apprentices totalled 51 212. Of those, 25.7 % were aged 16–18, 54.0 % were 19–24, 8.2 % were 25–29, 4.8 % were 30–34 and 7.3 % were 35 or older ([SSB, 2025](#), Table 2). [Statistics Norway](#) shows that 71.1 % of apprentices complete the programme within five or six years ⁽³⁴⁾.

After achieving a craftsperson's/journeyman's certificate (EQF 4), graduates can progress to higher vocational education (*fagskole*) (EQF 5), take a bridge year of supplementary studies (a statutory right) to gain general university entrance qualifications or, in some cases, gain direct access to bachelor's programmes through an alternative admission pathway for applicants with vocational qualifications ('vocational pathway' (*Y-veien*) for admission to higher education).

While the 2 + 2 model (two years in school plus two years of apprenticeship) is the most common structure, Norway also offers alternative apprenticeship models. These include models such as 2 + 2.5, 3 + 2 and 3 + 1, depending on the

⁽³³⁾ For this paper, social partner representatives were consulted: Are Solli, National Secretary, Norwegian Union of Electrical and IT Workers; and Kristian Ilner, advisor, United Federation of Trade Unions.

⁽³⁴⁾ Statistics Norway uses different follow-up periods to ensure a realistic measurement of completion, including when programmes take longer than their nominal duration.

trade and programme. All models lead to a final craftsperson's or journeyman's examination at EQF/NQF 4.

Norway also offers a combined model that leads to double qualification. In these programmes, VET and general studies are integrated, allowing learners to obtain both a craftsperson's/journeyman's certificate and general university entrance qualifications, typically in four years. Training alternates between school-based learning and in-company training from the first year at the upper secondary level. This option is quite popular, but nevertheless less common than the basic 2 + 2 model, as it requires considerable motivation and engagement from learners, country authorities and VET providers regarding their collaboration with local enterprises.

8.2. Other forms of VET/WBL at the same level

Alongside the main 2 + 2 apprenticeship model, Norway offers several alternative VET and WBL pathways.

- (a) Some vocational programmes are organised as fully school-based pathways, with three years of training in school.
- (b) Training in school (*videregående 3 (Vg3) i Skole*) is a scheme for learners who have completed two years of school-based VET but have not gotten an apprenticeship contract to continue their studies in the form of an apprenticeship for the third year of studies (Vg3). For these learners, practical training is provided in schools or simulated workplaces, and sometimes supplemented with shorter company placements.
- (c) There are also alternative schemes like the training candidate scheme (*lærekandidatordningen*), which is an alternative for learners aiming for a certificate of competence (partial qualification) rather than a full craftsperson's/journeyman's certificate. Candidates work towards learning outcomes within one part of the relevant curriculum. The training is provided at NQF/EQF level 4, but the outcome is not a full qualification. The scheme is designed for learners, who follow a customised curriculum adapted to their particular needs.
- (d) Modular vocational training for adults (*modulstrukturert yrkesopplæring*) is a flexible, competence-based scheme allowing adults to complete upper secondary VET in modules that can be combined and put towards a full craftsperson's or journeyman's qualification at NQF/EQF 4. The structure enables learners to combine training with work or other commitments (Udir – Directorate for Education and Training, 2025a). The scheme is offered in selected trades and is being gradually expanded in response to labour market

- needs. The entry requirement is lower secondary education or the validation of prior learning.
- (e) The practice candidate scheme (*praksiskandidat*) is for adults with sufficient, relevant work experience to take the craftsperson's/journeyperson's certificate without following the main 2 + 2 model. No classroom or theoretical training is required. In practice, candidates must have worked in the relevant vocational field for at least five years (depending on the length of the model) and must pass a written exam in the subject ([Udir, 2021](#)).
 - (f) Craft certificate while working (*Fagbrev på jobb*) is a scheme designed for adults already employed in a relevant field who do not hold a formal vocational qualification. Training is individually tailored based on an assessment of prior learning and work experience, with possible crediting against the standard four-year training requirement. Training is carried out alongside paid employment, requires a minimum duration of 12 months and concludes with the same craftsperson's or journeyperson's examination as other pathways.

8.3. Reflections on the position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

Apprenticeships sit within an organised tripartite governance structure. At the national level, the National Council for VET and the vocational training councils advise on the content, structure and capacity. This cooperation between the social partners and education authorities is long-standing and central to day-to-day system function and development. There have been no recent reforms repositioning apprenticeships at new (higher) qualification levels. The scheme is located at the upper secondary level (NQF/EQF 4). Over the years, adult-oriented alternatives have complemented the main model (2 + 2), with increased flexibility regarding implementation and the possibility of adapting to the multiple responsibilities and obligations that often accompany adult life. Stakeholders note that new or smaller trades, such as recycling-related occupations or bicycle mechanics, are often first developed through alternative adult pathways, including the practice candidate scheme, rather than through traditional apprenticeships. In some occupations, this reflects a gradual shift away from the apprenticeship model towards practice-based alternatives for adults.

Enrolment in VET has been increasing in recent years, and this aligns with Norway's labour market demand for more skilled workers across several sectors. According to the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet (Udir)), 54 % chose a VET programme in the first year of upper secondary VET in 2025/2026, up from 52.6 % in 2024/2025 ([Udir, 2025b](#)).

In 2024/2025, a total of 31 882 candidates completed a craftsperson's or journeyman's examination, with around 48 % aged 25 or older ([SSB, 2026](#)).

Overall, national objectives, particularly regarding completion and the transition to employment, are partly being met. According to Udir, 85.5 % of learners who started VET in 2019 completed their programmes within five years. Employment is also strong: among learners completing VET in 2023/2024, 83.1 % were in employment in 2025 (Udir, 2025c).

Despite strong overall outcomes in terms of labour market transitions, access to apprenticeship placements remains a challenge. Approximately one third of the learners enrolled in VET do not get an apprenticeship contract. Stakeholders point to different reasons for this, including strategic allocation (dimensioning or *dimensjonering*) and a mismatch between learners' choices and company demands.

Completion rates have improved over time. According to Statistics Norway, 71.1 % of learners in VET completed upper secondary education within five or six years in 2018–2024, which is an increase from the 65.3 % reported for 2010–2016 ([SSB, 2025](#)). Additionally, the [social contract for apprenticeship placements](#) (2022–2026), the basis for national cooperation between the government and social partners, aims for all qualified applicants to receive an apprenticeship.

However, not all learners complete the apprenticeship route. Some learners switch from the vocational pathway after the first two years. Udir reports that, in 2024, 24.7 % of VET learners transferred to general studies by choosing the bridge year (*påbygg*) instead of progressing into an apprenticeship ([Udir, 2025b](#)).

Stakeholders view increasing VET enrolment as a positive but underline that increasing the share of those who continue into and complete apprenticeships is essential if Norway is to meet future demand for qualified skilled workers.

Moreover, several stakeholders advocate for targeted adjustments to ensure that apprenticeships continue to meet labour market needs. Social partners and county authorities emphasise the need for greater flexibility in apprenticeships to better accommodate the needs of adults seeking vocational qualifications, particularly those already in employment, who require more flexible pathways to complete a craftsperson's or journeyman's certificate.

There are alternatives to apprenticeships, but they are not considered more successful or preferred. One example is the school-based VET pathway (*Vg3 / Skole*), which provides a structured alternative for learners who do not secure an apprenticeship contract.

8.4. Conclusions

Norway has not undertaken recent reforms to reposition apprenticeships at new or higher qualification levels, and the system continues to operate firmly as upper secondary VET at EQF level 4. The model remains robust and stable and is accepted among stakeholders. Strong outcomes in both completion and employment indicate that the national policy objectives are being met.

At the same time, systemic challenges and opportunities persist. Stakeholders highlight the need to strengthen progression into apprenticeships after the first two years of school-based VET, particularly given the proportion of learners choosing the bridge year to general education instead of continuing on the vocational pathway. For adults, increased flexibility, better support measures and clearer pathways may reinforce the apprenticeship model's relevance and help address shortages in key sectors.

The recent Education Act, introducing an extended statutory right to complete upper secondary education, is expected to influence participation in and the completion of VET and apprenticeships. However, as the reform has only recently entered into force (August 2025), its effects on apprenticeship participation and outcomes remain to be seen.

Social partners play an integral role at all levels of development of VET. Norway's long-standing tripartite cooperation aims to ensure that the training provided meets labour market and skills needs. It informs changes to the VET structure, curriculum development, the regional structure and capacity planning, the framework for craftsperson's/journeyperson's examinations and quality assurance at all levels.

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Chapter 9.

Spain: the changing position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

By Guillem Salvans, Fundación Bertelsmann

9.1. Current position of apprenticeships in the education and training system

Spain had already been strongly promoting collaboration between companies and VET schools within its VET system prior to the approval of the first [regulation introducing apprenticeships in 2012](#) (Ministry of the Presidency, 2012). Later, in 2022, [a second reform](#) established the dual nature of all VET programmes at EQF levels 4 and 5, describing internships and apprenticeships as the pathways to achieving this model and increasing the amount of in-company training time (Head of State, 2022). Although collaboration between companies and VET schools still faces various challenges, it is now well established at the upper secondary and post-secondary levels.

Parallel to this development, the university ecosystem has also made efforts over the last decade to implement programmes that enable university students to undertake substantial training within companies – beyond the internships that have existed in some universities for several decades – within the framework of institutionalised and officially recognised bachelor's or master's programmes. Here, the focus lies on programmes corresponding to EQF levels 6 and 7. The aim of this paper is to describe this change, examine the factors shaping it and outline possible future scenarios regarding higher apprenticeships in Spain.

9.2. The expansion of apprenticeships at higher education levels: higher apprenticeships

9.2.1. What is leading Spanish universities to introduce higher apprenticeships

Three underlying factors are acting as key facilitators of this process.

- (a) Discussions with representatives of Spanish universities suggest that the universities perceive higher apprenticeships as a mechanism to ensure that

- their graduates are better prepared for labour market entry, equipping them with relevant skills, practical experience and greater alignment with companies' needs.
- (b) Universities perceive higher apprenticeships as a tool to attract students at a time when Spain is experiencing a significant decline in the population of those of typical university entry age. Over the past two decades, the population in the 18–24 age group has declined by 23.7 %, representing more than 1 million fewer young people.
 - (c) Higher apprenticeships constitute a strategy to ensure that students receive their training and later find employment within their territories. The earliest higher apprenticeships initiatives in Spain originated in regions far from major metropolitan areas such as Madrid or Barcelona (Almeria, Lleida, Castelló, Castille-La Mancha)⁽³⁵⁾. Therefore, in these areas, apprenticeship is understood as a mechanism to mitigate the talent drain that already affects these regions.

9.2.2. From early dual training initiatives to the 2021 regulation of higher apprenticeships

Before higher apprenticeships were formally regulated, various initiatives had emerged independently through agreements between universities and companies, pilot programmes and extended internships that combined academic instruction with workplace training. Although valuable and useful for students' acquisition of applied skills, these initiatives were highly heterogeneous in duration, intensity and academic recognition, which hindered comparison and long-term consolidation. Nevertheless, they evidenced the value of university–industry cooperation and contributed to laying the foundations for the subsequent official validation of apprenticeship pathways within universities. These initiatives were consistently implemented in the Basque Country and occasionally in Catalonia and Andalusia, with many still operating today – for example, at the University of Almería (Andalusia).

Spain regulated higher apprenticeships in 2021 with [Royal Decree 822/2021](#) (Ministry of Universities, 2021). This regulation introduced the dual track (*Mención Dual*), an optional pathway within university programmes with the following characteristics:

- (a) a percentage of credits (20–40 % in bachelor's degrees and 25–50 % in master's degrees) must be completed in a training company;

⁽³⁵⁾ The Basque Country, where higher apprenticeships have the highest level of implementation in Spain, should therefore be analysed as a separate case.

- (b) students must be remunerated and linked to the company through the Spanish training contract (which is a specific type of labour contract), therefore acquiring worker status;
- (c) a company training plan must be established;
- (d) a collaboration agreement must be signed between the university and a training company, specifying responsibilities and operational conditions, including supervision, tutoring, evaluation and other aspects necessary to ensure proper implementation.

This new and official pathway coexists with the earlier options found in several Spanish universities, as mentioned already. Students enrolled in higher apprenticeships do not see this reflected on their bachelor's/master's diploma, but it is included in the accompanying European diploma supplement.

The Fundación Bertelsmann has published a [report](#) (Fundación Bertelsmann, 2025) analysing the development of higher apprenticeships in Spain. Data collected from 62 of the 92 active Spanish universities (67 %) indicate that these programmes are still underdeveloped, although there is growing interest in expanding them. Among the 62 universities with data available, 50 % have some form of higher apprenticeship in place, 31 % plan to introduce such initiatives and 19 % do not intend to introduce them.

Although higher apprenticeship programmes embedded within bachelor's or master's degrees account for only 1.6 % of the total academic provision offered by Spanish universities, these programmes experienced growth of 25 % in bachelor's degrees and 29 % in master's degrees during the 2024/2025 academic year compared with the previous year. Higher apprenticeships are being introduced mainly in technical fields (especially engineering) and, to a lesser extent, in economics and business management.

9.3. Barriers to expanding higher apprenticeships

9.3.1. Barriers for universities

Universities can provide higher apprenticeships in Spain; however, programmes seeking to obtain the official *Mención Dual* must undergo an *ex ante* evaluation process conducted by the Spanish national quality assurance agency or, in many regions, by the corresponding regional quality assurance body.

The accreditation process begins when a university submits a programme report detailing all the components that constitute the apprenticeship programme. This report must specify aspects such as the percentage of credits to be completed in the training company, the working conditions offered to students and the

supervision and tutoring mechanisms provided by both the university and the company. The plan is evaluated by a committee of experts appointed by the relevant quality assurance agency. This process is lengthy and entails demanding requirements that, in some cases or regions, are difficult for universities to fulfil, which may be contributing to the limited expansion of higher apprenticeships.

The expansion of higher apprenticeships is also limited by a series of university-related constraints that affect their implementation and long-term consolidation. The workload involved in supporting students, coordinating with companies and managing administrative agreements often receives no formal recognition or additional incentives, which in turn discourages the sustained engagement of academic tutors. These responsibilities require time, continuity and specialised knowledge, yet they are frequently treated as peripheral tasks rather than core academic contributions. The absence of specific training for university teaching staff – training that should include dual pedagogy methodologies, workplace learning supervision and effective collaboration with industry – further reduces the potential for high-quality academic guidance. As a result, tutors in some programmes end up prioritising administrative compliance over pedagogical oversight, limiting their ability to ensure consistent integration of learning across academic and workplace settings. More broadly, many universities lack the human and organisational resources needed to manage dual learning pathways effectively, which poses significant barriers to scaling up higher apprenticeships.

9.3.2. Barriers for companies

A further critical factor concerns the degree to which companies are aware of and actively engage in these programmes. For higher apprenticeships to operate effectively, employers must not only understand the model but also recognise its value and commit to taking an active role in students' training. However, despite the proven potential of higher apprenticeships as a tool for talent development and workforce renewal, there remains a substantial lack of awareness among companies. This disconnection points to the need for widespread dissemination efforts, especially as the number of dual programmes expands and the demand for placements increases.

Moreover, apprenticeship programmes aligned with the 2021 regulation require a clear and explicit commitment from companies to ensure a high-quality training experience. This includes hiring and remunerating students – at least at the level of the Spanish minimum wage – and formalising the relationship through the Spanish training contract. Yet this contractual mechanism remains unfamiliar and administratively burdensome for many employers, particularly SMEs, which constitute most of Spain's business landscape. Participation also requires

dedicated time and resources from qualified personnel, such as company tutors or trainers, who must guide apprentices, coordinate with universities and contribute to evaluation processes.

In this context, the promotion of targeted incentives for companies, especially smaller firms, and for the initial cohorts of implemented programmes could play a decisive role in increasing employer participation. Financial support, tax incentives, technical assistance and intermediary structures that help companies navigate administrative requirements could significantly broaden the number of organisations willing and able to host apprentices. Without such measures, the capacity to scale up higher apprenticeships will remain limited, constraining their potential impact on skills development, innovation and employability.

9.4. Success factors for the sustainability and expansion of higher apprenticeships

Pioneering and long-standing experiences in Spain demonstrate that the success of higher apprenticeships relies, first and foremost, on determined and sustained support from university governing bodies. The active involvement of leadership teams, the development of internal regulations and the integration of apprenticeships into strategic plans ensure stability, coherence and a long-term vision. This institutional commitment prevents these programmes from becoming isolated or short-lived initiatives and enables their gradual consolidation over time. It also helps overcome internal resistance, fosters a shared understanding of the model across departments and provides the organisational structure needed to facilitate a controlled and sustainable expansion. In every case analysed, apprenticeships have been deployed progressively and strategically, prioritising quality, monitoring and gradual upscaling over rapid, large-scale implementation.

A second key element is the role of higher apprenticeships as a lever for strengthening and deepening the relationship between universities and the business sector. Close collaboration with companies – based on continuous dialogue, the co-creation of training plans and an adaptation to their dynamics and capacities – helps build long-lasting links that transcend the simple hosting of students. Through this partnership, companies position themselves as training agents within their territory, assuming shared responsibility for skills development and contributing actively to curriculum design and competence definition. This shift not only fosters deeper engagement and greater loyalty among companies but also enhances their capacity to attract talent, stimulate innovation and reinforce local ecosystems of knowledge and employment.

Finally, higher apprenticeships consolidate themselves through their capacity to generate flexibility and pedagogical innovation within academically robust models. The joint definition of activities and competences, the adaptation of learning experiences to diversified professional environments, the use of competence-based assessment systems and the establishment of mechanisms for continuous monitoring and coordination all help ensure coherent, meaningful and integrative learning pathways. The combination of academic rigour, curricular adaptation and close collaboration between academic and company tutors allows the training experience to respond effectively to real contextual needs without compromising academic integrity. This pedagogical innovation reinforces the relevance of university education and strengthens its alignment with changing labour market demands, ultimately contributing to the sustainability and long-term expansion of the model.

9.5. Conclusions

The 2021 framework (*Mención Dual*) (Ministry of Universities, 2021) establishes a formal regulatory basis for higher apprenticeships, including accreditation procedures and recognition within university programmes. While this demonstrates national-level support, the degree of prioritisation and active engagement at the regional level varies. Some regions have integrated higher apprenticeships into broader education and workforce development strategies, while in others policy attention is primarily focused on other dimensions of university bachelor's and master's programmes. A similar observation applies within universities across regions. The development of higher apprenticeships is strongly influenced by the factors outlined in this discussion and by the strategic decisions taken by individual institutions. Recognising this heterogeneity is essential for understanding the conditions under which higher apprenticeships can expand sustainably and for identifying where additional policy measures or incentives may be needed.

For higher apprenticeships to expand meaningfully within the Spanish university system, several structural, organisational and regulatory conditions need to be reinforced. First, universities must consolidate clear institutional strategies that situate dual learning as a long-term commitment rather than an isolated innovation. Experiences from pioneering institutions show that sustained leadership, dedicated organisational units and stable internal regulations are essential to embed higher apprenticeships in curriculum planning, quality assurance processes and relations with employers.

At the same time, the accreditation procedure to obtain the *Mención Dual* requires further streamlining. While the 2021 regulation has provided much-

needed clarity, the current procedures remain demanding and resource intensive for universities, discouraging broader adoption. A more agile and predictable evaluation process – coupled with clearer guidance from quality assurance agencies – would allow institutions to plan dual pathways with greater confidence and reduce the administrative burden currently associated with the *Mención Dual*. Strengthening support for academic staff is equally critical: expanding dual programmes will only be feasible if tutoring, coordination and collaboration with companies are formally recognised, incentivised and supported through appropriate training in dual pedagogies.

Employer engagement constitutes another decisive factor. For higher apprenticeships to grow, companies – especially SMEs – must perceive the model as accessible, valuable and manageable. This will require wider dissemination, the simplification of contractual procedures and the introduction of targeted incentives that help employers shoulder the costs and responsibilities associated with hosting apprentices. Investing in intermediary structures or university-led support services could also facilitate the matching process and reduce barriers for companies unfamiliar with the model.

By meeting these challenges, Spain can enable higher apprenticeships to realise their full potential and become a powerful source of value for all stakeholders across the education and employment ecosystem.

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The changing position of apprenticeships in education and training systems

Papers by Cedefop's Community of apprenticeship experts

Standing at the crossroads of education and the labour market, apprenticeships offer opportunities for agile policy responses to dynamically changing skills and qualification needs. While the position of apprenticeships is changing to meet such needs, the results do not always match policy intentions.

This collection of papers, drafted by members of Cedefop's Community of apprenticeship experts, helps navigate common challenges and identify the conditions for the successful introduction or repositioning of apprenticeships in education and training systems.

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