

BRIEFING NOTE

Developing apprenticeships

Despite their advantages as a way of aligning vocational education and training to labour market needs, apprenticeships are underused

To reduce high unemployment among their young people, countries are looking to others for help. During the economic downturn, some countries have performed better and youth unemployment has remained relatively low, for example in Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. This has been attributed in part to their apprenticeships or 'dual' systems and, consequently, interest in them has increased.

Apprenticeships (Box 1) and other forms of work-based learning are seen as having particular advantages as a learning method. They can provide young people and adults with the job-specific and generic skills employers need and so help smooth transition from school or other learning to work. Given that apprenticeships systems also strengthen cooperation between governments, social partners, employers and training institutions, it is unsurprising that their revival has become a worldwide trend.

Box 1 Defining apprenticeships

Apprenticeship can be defined as having the following characteristics:

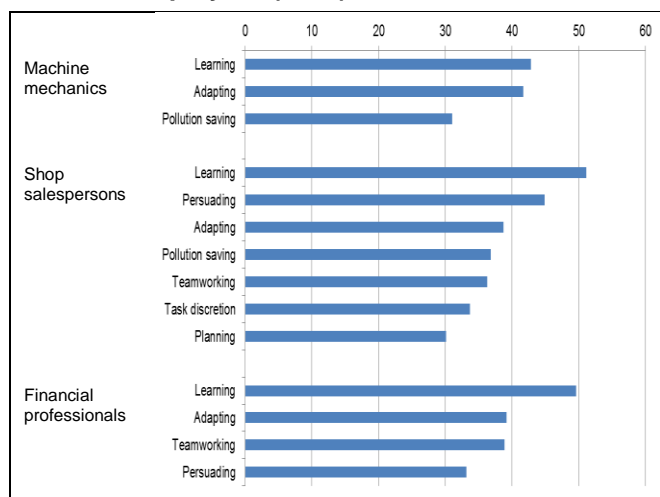
- learning that alternates between a workplace and an educational or training institution;
- part of formal education and training;
- on successful completion, learners acquire a qualification and receive an officially recognised certificate;
- apprentices usually have the status of employees and are paid for their work;
- ideally based on a contract or formal agreement between employer and learner, but sometimes, based on a contract with the education or training institution.

Transition from learning to work

Despite young people being more highly qualified than ever (by 2025 only 14% of the European labour force will have low or no qualifications compared to 31% in 2000), employers often remark that school graduates entering the labour market lack job readiness.

However, the combination of generic or 'soft' skills with technical skills that employers want (Figure 1), such as communicating with customers, teamwork with colleagues of different ages and backgrounds, are best acquired in the workplace.

Figure 1 **Skills increasing in importance, % of employers (2012)**



Source: Cedefop.

The vicious circle of lacking work experience and job readiness, but being unable to get work experience without a job presents a major obstacle to young people entering the labour market. Apprenticeships, by combining school-based learning with learning in an enterprise, can help to overcome this problem. They provide work experience and so improve young people's job prospects, as well as paying them a wage during their training.

There is evidence that, at medium-qualifications level, vocational education and training (VET) graduates generally, but especially those who complete apprenticeships, tend to make a smoother transition to work compared to graduates from general education. According to the latest data, which relate to 2009, the average employment rate of VET graduates aged 20 to 34 in the EU (excluding Croatia) was 79.1%, some 5.6 percentage points above the employment rate of general education graduates of the same age.

Apprenticeships are not just for young people. Work-based learning can also improve adults' job prospects after periods of unemployment or inactivity by updating and upgrading their work-relevant skills.

Traditionally, most apprenticeships lead to medium-level qualifications. Between now and 2025 most jobs in the European Union (EU) will require qualifications at this level. However, especially in labour markets where supply exceeds demand, employers' recruitment criteria tend to be very demanding. With many highly-qualified unemployed people looking for a job, employers look for the perfect match rather than train someone with potential. The 2013 Manpower study found only 7% of employers willing to redefine qualifying criteria, even though this would make recruitment easier. Apprenticeships and opportunities for work-based learning for unemployed adults can provide work experience and reduce risk for enterprises when recruiting, enabling them to broaden their recruitment pools and fill vacancies more easily.

Strengthening governance

Cooperation between schools, employers and trade unions, and public authorities to develop skills is a defining feature of apprenticeships and dual systems (Box 2).

Box 2 Joint management of apprenticeships in Denmark

In Denmark, social dialogue is part of all levels of apprenticeship governance.

At national level, the Council for Vocational Training comprises representatives of social partners, management, teachers, students and experts. It advises on, for example the structure of the VET system, accreditation of colleges and the framework for content and assessment.

Approximately 50 trade committees set out the detailed content of education and training programmes. This includes the duration and structure of programmes, their objectives, assessment and the division between practical training and school-based teaching.

In new job areas where there are no trade committees, the Ministry of Education can appoint development committees to develop new education and training programmes where appropriate.

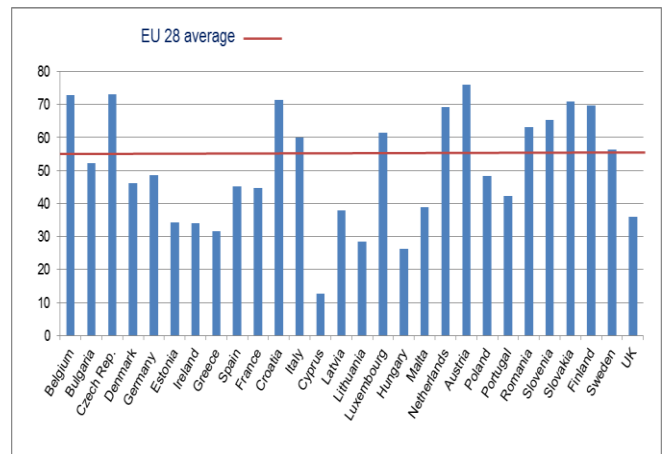
Trade committees appoint local education committees (LECs) for each programme provided by each training college. LECs advise colleges on programme planning and develop cooperation with local trade and industry.

Cooperation between all relevant stakeholders in governing and providing VET can make it more responsive to changing skill demands through continuous adaptation of curricula at medium level. Such cooperation is also increasing at tertiary level, which is important to meet current and future labour market demands for professionals and associate professionals at higher qualification levels.

Apprenticeships – yes and no

For all their advantages, apprenticeships, like VET generally, seem to have an image problem, at least in some countries. In 2012, just over half, some 50.5%, of the EU's upper secondary students were in initial VET, but there are wide differences between countries, ranging from over 70% in Austria to only 13% in Cyprus (Figure 2).

Figure 2 VET students enrolled in upper secondary education, 2012 (%)



Source: Eurostat.

Apprenticeship-type programmes exist in almost all countries. But only 27% of VET students were in vocational programmes combining school and enterprise-based learning, where 25% or more of the curriculum takes place outside the school environment. In countries such as Belgium, the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia, more than 70% of upper secondary students were in initial VET in 2012, the highest rates in the EU. Other countries, such as Denmark with 46.1 %, Germany (48.6%) and France (44.5%) are nearer to the European average.

In Denmark, however, almost all initial VET students are in some form of combined school and work-based learning. In Germany the proportion, some 88.2%, is also very high. In Austria and Slovakia the figure is just over 40%. France with around 26.9% of its initial VET students combining school and work-based learning is

very close to the European average. Belgium, despite having a high proportion of vocational students, has only 4.3% combining school and work-based learning.

For several years European countries have worked to make VET and apprenticeships a more attractive learning option. They have agreed to set up national common quality assurance frameworks for VET providers by 2015, which will also include workplace learning. They have also committed themselves to increasing numbers of young learners in apprenticeships. Apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning are part of the youth guarantees that countries have been recommended to set up to ease learning-to-work transition and reduce youth unemployment.

Learners can now progress more easily from initial VET, including apprenticeships, to higher education. More VET programmes and qualifications are offered at post-secondary and tertiary levels. National qualifications frameworks have also helped raise VET qualifications' status. Evidence from some countries suggests that promotion campaigns and skill competitions also help increase VET enrolment.

But young people and their families still need convincing that VET, including apprenticeships, is a good option. This image problem is not related to VET or apprenticeship as a form of learning. However, in some countries, VET and apprenticeships are the traditional route to jobs identified with difficult working conditions, low status and low wages. The 2011 Eurobarometer suggests that more than 70% of young people find VET attractive and useful for finding a job. The problem is that 38% of young people see the jobs and careers VET leads to as unattractive.

Parents and young people are more likely to see apprenticeships in skill-intensive sectors and occupations, which traditionally do not offer them, such as ICT, sales, health care and renewable energies as leading to attractive jobs and promising careers.

Extending apprenticeships

To boost new apprenticeship initiatives, the European Commission launched in July 2013 the European alliance for apprenticeships (Box 3).

Cedefop organises, with the European Commission, a European apprenticeship conference to support the alliance in May 2014, to bring together countries looking for advice and examples of good practice on apprenticeship systems. As well as aiming to improve quality and supply of apprenticeships across the EU, the alliance also aims to make their image more attractive.

The European Commission proposed at the end of 2013 a quality framework for traineeships not directly related to VET programmes to ensure young people can acquire high-quality work experience under reasonable working conditions throughout Europe.

Some Member States have also already taken steps to strengthen apprenticeships. Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Portugal and Slovakia signed a memorandum of understanding in 2012 promoting apprenticeships.

Box 3 The European alliance for apprenticeships

The European alliance for apprenticeships aims to increase the quality and supply of apprenticeships across Europe and to change mindsets towards this type of learning. The alliance brings together public authorities, business and social partners, VET providers, youth representatives and others, such as chambers of commerce to coordinate and improve different initiatives for successful apprenticeship-type schemes.

Key stakeholders in the European alliance, along with Member States and the European Commission include the European social partners (ETUC, BusinessEurope, UEAPME and CEEP), Eurochambres, individual businesses and the European Round Table of Industrialists. Cedefop provides monitoring and analytical support. In the European Council conclusions of January 2012, Member States committed themselves to increase 'substantially the number of apprenticeships and traineeships to ensure that they represent real opportunities for young people.'

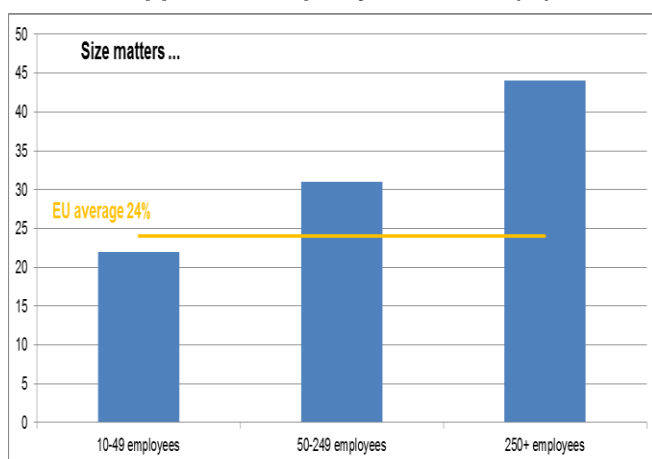
Spain introduced legislation in 2012 for VET programmes based on apprenticeship principles. Some autonomous communities have already started putting them in place in certain sectors. The legislation covers training and apprenticeship contracts and encourages enterprises to participate. The new programmes also provide opportunity for those who left the education system with no or low-level qualifications to return to upgrade their skills. Sectoral agreements also encourage participation of chambers of commerce and enterprises in helping develop and implement apprenticeship programmes. In Hungary, since autumn 2013, the share of work-based learning has been increased in three-year programmes leading to skilled workers' level. Chambers of commerce now play a key role monitoring contracts and helping learners find training places. In Greece, a law on secondary education passed in 2013 promotes VET and strengthens its work-based component. Greece's

action plan for youth employment also seeks to boost apprenticeships.

Commitment of employers

Developing apprenticeships depends heavily on employers' commitment to provide training places and in-company training and design curricula in cooperation with schools and, if needed, training centres. Across Europe, chambers of commerce manage around 900 000 apprenticeships. However, too few European enterprises offer apprenticeships. In 2010, on average in the EU around a quarter of the enterprises with 10 or more employees trained apprentices; this figure is much lower in many Member States (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Proportion of enterprises offering apprenticeships by size, 2010 (%)



Source: Eurostat.

Unsurprisingly, large enterprises train apprentices more frequently. Small, medium-sized and especially micro-enterprises need support and encouragement to engage in apprenticeships and to acquire skills and qualifications to act as trainers. Enterprises in skill-intensive sectors should be encouraged to engage in apprenticeship-type training.

Employers who train apprentices highlight the benefits (Box 4). They see apprentices making a valuable contribution to company objectives and regard them as an investment in the future.

Providing apprenticeship training can also increase an enterprise's capacity to innovate, grow and compete. For example, using senior skilled employees to train apprentices encourages inter-generational learning and stimulates companies' learning cultures, which can strengthen their ability to adapt to changing needs and innovate.

Box 4 Why enterprises train apprentices

According to the fourth continuing vocational training survey (2010), the main reasons given why enterprises train apprentices are:

- to have future qualified employees in line with their enterprise's needs (86% of respondents);
- to select the best candidates for further employment (62%);
- because apprentices contribute to company productivity, partly recovering training costs (45%).

Traditionally associated with upper secondary programmes, more apprenticeship-type learning could be offered at tertiary level. In many countries, such as Poland and the UK, internships or work placements are part of degree programmes. Romania is increasing internships for tertiary students. In Sweden, all higher vocational education combines school-based learning with workplace training. Workplace training must be organised as an integrated part of the programme. In advanced higher vocational education, at least a quarter of the education period must combine school-based learning with workplace training. The Netherlands provides short-cycle higher education (associate degrees), which usually last around two years. Associate degrees can be full-, part-time or dual programmes. Around half the students are on a dual programme, combining learning and working.

Apprenticeships are not a panacea for youth unemployment. However, where employee training is an enterprise priority and where employers believe that education and training meet economic needs, high-quality apprenticeships will ease young people's transition to the labour market. They will also reduce skill mismatch and skill gaps by aligning skills and qualifications with labour market needs.