



APPRENTICESHIP: A PILL FOR EVERY ILL?

Apprenticeship should not just be about bringing people into employment, but about securing their long-term employability

Following the financial crisis and the ensuing economic downturn in the past decade, apprenticeship sparked renewed interest among policy-makers both in Brussels and the EU Member States. Since, European and national crisis management strategies have advocated apprenticeship both as a short-term solution to youth unemployment and a useful response to companies' skill needs in the longer term.

Increasing the uptake of apprenticeships has consequently been at the heart of a massive policy effort that has resulted in a proliferation of apprenticeship schemes with different purposes: vocational training fully preparing learners for an occupation, short-term skills development, social inclusion, and offering second-chance pathways for VET dropouts and other vulnerable groups.



However, after the initial years of policy implementation and financial investment to increase apprenticeship numbers, social partners and experts have been raising grievances: not all schemes called 'apprenticeships' merited their name, not all ensured high-quality training (or any training), and not all 'apprentices' were entitled to employment or social protection rights. Some were simply used as low-cost workers.

In the past five years, emphasis has shifted to reinforcing the distinctive features of apprenticeships and improving their quality – two sides of the same coin. In this context, the [2018 Council recommendation on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships \(EFQEA\)](#) has been hailed as a major

reference point for countries' initiatives in this field ⁽¹⁾.

WHAT IS APPRENTICESHIP? WHAT SHOULD IT BE? WHAT COULD IT BE?

With quality criteria set out in the EFQEA, the Council invited EU Member States to ensure that apprenticeship schemes are responsive to labour market needs and provide long-term benefits to both employers and apprentices.

Outlining the broad array of purposes apprenticeships can serve, and the potential for coordinated and targeted action to improve their labour market outcomes, the EFQEA has helped inform debate on apprenticeship quality and bolster national policy action.

On the face of it, quite a few countries meet – and have met in the past – the criteria set out in the EFQEA. Yet appearances can be deceptive. This is why Cedefop has embarked on a 'reality check' of systemic features of apprenticeship schemes in several countries,

⁽¹⁾ Policy background:

- [Opinion of the advisory committee on vocational training \(ACVT\) on A shared vision for quality and effective apprenticeships and work-based learning](#), December 2016.
- [Joint statement by the European social partners](#) (Business-Europe, CEEP, ETUC, UEAPME), June 2016.
- Two 2017 hearings with European cross-industry and sectoral social partners and contributions of the European VET Provider Association and other stakeholders to the [European Alliance for Apprenticeships](#) and the [European Apprentices Network](#).
- [Council recommendation on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships](#), March 2018.

unearthing some unexpected gaps along the way ⁽²⁾.

BOX 1. SOME EFQEA CRITERIA DEFINING APPRENTICESHIP: QUESTIONS TO ASK (CEDEFOP ANALYSIS)

Structures enabling tripartite stakeholder participation in apprenticeship design and implementation seem to exist in all countries. However do social partners and other key stakeholders have a say in instrumental, strategic decisions, such as defining the occupations for which apprenticeship is offered?

Written agreements between employers and apprentices exist, but to what extent are they binding on apprentice status and associated rights, obligations and working and learning conditions?

Time spent at the workplace usually makes up more than 50% of the total apprenticeship duration. But is the total duration enough to cover the needs of the sector and the apprentice's own learning needs?

Requirements for in-company trainers usually exist, but do they include pedagogical and/or occupational qualifications making a person a qualified trainer? And do they enable trainers to cope with a variety of roles, such as liaising with VET providers?

The qualifications obtained through an apprenticeship are usually described in terms of learning outcomes and registered in national qualification frameworks. But are they adequately structured and expressed to guide the design of the workplace training component? Do they ensure comparability of workplace training?

Source: Cedefop (forthcoming).

Cedefop is asking these questions to understand better national stakeholder attitudes and goals concerning apprenticeship. Do they see it as a VET subsystem supplying specific qualifications, a real alternative to other forms of VET? Or is it merely a way to provide learners with working experience? And what needs of society and the labour market are addressed by apprenticeship?

CLARIFYING IDENTITY AND PURPOSE OF APPRENTICESHIP MATTERS

Cedefop's *thematic country reviews on apprenticeships* (TCRs) have already suggested challenges in relation to uncertainties concerning apprenticeship identity and purpose ⁽³⁾. For example, the 2018 *Flash TCR in Sweden* found that apprenticeships in the country do not have a clear identity in relation to school-based VET. Both tracks, dual and school-

based, have a workplace learning component as part of the programme. Students enrolled in a three-year school-based VET programme can take up an apprenticeship and return to school-based VET at any point of the programme. As a result, students and employers struggle to distinguish apprenticeships from other forms of work-based learning embedded in school-based VET and to compare the available options, not least in terms of costs and benefits (such as their respective labour market value).

The socioeconomic function of apprenticeship as seen in *Italy, examined in a 2017 TCR*, is representative of many countries. Formally, the purpose of 'apprenticeships for vocational qualification and diploma' ⁽⁴⁾ is to deliver alternative learning pathways to school-based VET at upper or post-secondary level, leading to formal qualifications. However, the scheme has primarily been perceived as a standard open-ended employment contract, rather than a training investment. As a recruitment option, though, it has turned out to be less attractive than other forms of recruitment. Ultimately, its use has remained limited across the country.

The 'new modern apprenticeship' was introduced in *Cyprus* ⁽⁵⁾ to train (young) people to allow them to enter the labour market. Originally conceived as a specific VET track placed outside formal secondary education, it failed to deliver the hoped-for results and has since been brought under the Ministry of Education to improve its quality, relevance and image as a distinct education and training option. Nevertheless, many still perceive it as a second-chance pathway. This raises the question of what it takes to change people's perceptions of apprenticeship.

In the German-speaking countries, plus Denmark, Norway and others with a long apprenticeship tradition, there is a deeply rooted shared understanding of its purpose and identity in society: it is designed to equip learners fully with qualifications which are obtained only or primarily through apprenticeship, in contrast to other VET options.

Many of the countries that conceive apprenticeship as a distinct mode of VET delivery ⁽⁶⁾, have introduced an array of policies broadening its purpose: they have been opening up apprenticeship, traditionally anchored in IVET, to adult learners, reacting to societal, demographic and economic changes. And

⁽²⁾ Publication forthcoming in 2021. The analysis, carried out in 19 EU countries and Iceland, covered apprenticeship schemes with a stable legal basis leading to a formal VET qualification. In this context, Cedefop also conducted an initial exercise referencing its own European database on *apprenticeship schemes* to the EFQEA criteria (Cedefop, 2020).

⁽³⁾ Between 2014 and 2018, Cedefop carried out thematic country reviews on apprenticeships in nine countries: Belgium (fr), Greece, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, and Sweden – available on Cedefop's *apprenticeship project page*.

⁽⁴⁾ *Apprendistato per la qualifica e il diploma professionale, il diploma di istruzione secondaria superiore e il certificato di specializzazione tecnica superiore*.

⁽⁵⁾ *Νέα σύγχρονη μαθητεία*, see TCR published in 2019.

⁽⁶⁾ In its 2018 *Cross-nation overview of apprenticeship schemes in European countries*, Cedefop grouped the countries of Europe in clusters based on the types of apprenticeships offered by their VET systems. See also *Cedefop's 2020 Briefing note on apprenticeship for adults*.

they have strengthened the social inclusion function of apprenticeships, such as to integrate migrants and refugees in the labour market.

STATUS OF APPRENTICES

The status of apprentices is probably the best illustration of different approaches to apprenticeship. A glance across EU countries reveals that an ‘apprentice’ may be a learner (but not a regular one), an employee (but not always a regular one⁽⁷⁾), both a learner (when at school) and an employee (when at the workplace⁽⁸⁾), or have an actual apprentice status⁽⁹⁾.

The unsettled status of apprentices in the first three cases stems from the ambiguity surrounding the term ‘apprenticeship’ in specific countries. This, in turn, has implications for apprenticeship quality and effectiveness.

For example, whether apprentices are seen primarily as workers or learners affects the benefits they may be entitled to (social security rights) and the requirements set for employers (as in the nature and level of financial compensation). Confusion may also arise when apprentice status differs within the same scheme owing to different types of contracts used, for example in Belgium (nl) or in Spain. Apprentices may be employees if they sign an ‘apprenticeship contract’, or students if they have a ‘cooperation agreement’ with their company.

WHAT IS ‘APPRENTICESHIP’? LOOKING FOR THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

To help promote a common European understanding, Cedefop has identified the basic features a work-based education and training scheme should have to be called ‘apprenticeship’⁽¹⁰⁾. It suggests countries agree on a common denominator made up of the following features:

- the scheme is backed by a legal framework;
- it leads to a formal and portable qualification;
- it relies on a structured alternation between work-based and school-based learning;
- it implies a commitment for a minimum duration that makes the training alternation meaningful;
- company and learner sign a specific type of contract;
- the learner receives a remuneration.

⁽⁷⁾ For example, in Bulgaria, Lithuania and Malta.

⁽⁸⁾ As in Italy, Hungary and Finland.

⁽⁹⁾ As in Germany, Greece and the Netherlands, among others: in these countries, apprentices sign a specific type of contract with the company responsible for training them. They have a well-defined status and follow regulated curricula.

⁽¹⁰⁾ See Cedefop’s 2020 [Briefing note on apprenticeship for adults](#).

Rather than a sum of technical aspects, this list reflects what should be the true nature of apprenticeship. It is in this spirit that Cedefop, in its 2019 [Analytical framework for apprenticeships](#), has examined, as a baseline, the place of apprenticeships in countries’ education and training systems, compared to other work-based education and training schemes. It concludes that position within the overall system largely determines user expectations as to what it can – and should – do.

While a common European approach offers countries an orientation aid, stakeholders need to agree within their own national context on what apprenticeship is and does.

In its 2018 [Cross-nation overview of apprenticeship schemes](#), Cedefop had observed trends in EU Member States that narrow down the purpose of apprenticeships. Most of the schemes analysed were primarily associated with the short-term employment goal of helping people find a job. While this may be important, especially in times of crisis, it should not jeopardise the distinct function of apprenticeship as a strong education and training tool, laying the groundwork for (young) people’s further learning and employability in life.

In many countries, apprenticeship has evolved into a stepping stone enabling participation in life-long learning. Apprentices can progress towards more advanced learning opportunities or change jobs within their sector or beyond. Also, accommodating increasing numbers of adult learners⁽¹¹⁾, apprenticeship offers opportunities for people to qualify for the labour market later in life. And it leads to, or is offered at, higher education level⁽¹²⁾, securing medium and long-term benefits for individuals, societies and economies.

This raises the question of whether different criteria may need to be applied to measure the quality and effectiveness of apprenticeships with different purposes.

Short-term goals such as labour market integration, can be met by ‘light’ versions of apprenticeship, with limited requirements as to training content, especially for the workplace part, and little, if any, participation of social partners in their design. Ultimately, however, such slimmed-down schemes may lead to company-specific apprenticeships, training content and outcomes being defined by each employer. This poses a risk in terms of comparability of learning experiences; it may undermine the value stakeholders attribute to apprenticeship and weaken the employability of graduate apprentices.

⁽¹¹⁾ See Cedefop’s 2019 report on [Apprenticeship for adults](#).

⁽¹²⁾ For example, in France, Italy and the UK.

For example, in Lithuania and Romania, where the social partners have only an advisory role in low-level decisions or technical aspects linked to the scheme implementation, the regulatory framework foresees that apprenticeship contracts are agreed at company level.

Other schemes, while focusing on education goals, may also lack essential features of apprenticeship, such as social partner involvement or an apprentice contract and compensation. In schemes such as the **Foundation apprenticeships** in Scotland and the **Unified model of education** in Croatia, educational goals are clearly stated and pursued but learners are simply considered as students, rather than student-employees, employees or, ideally, apprentices.

A COMMON VISION OF APPRENTICESHIP

‘Light’ apprenticeship schemes are tempting: they allow employers to reap immediate benefit from apprentices’ contribution to firm productivity; apprentices may see them as a way to enter the labour market and have an income; and countries may use them to boost employment rates. While such apprenticeships may benefit all stakeholders in the short term, they do not meet a series of second-level long-term goals:

- ensuring learners’ full qualification and long-term employability, supported by non-company-specific occupational skills and strong transversal competences, empowering them to find jobs beyond specific companies and sectors;
- allowing learners to choose among quality and fairly paid jobs in dynamic business sectors with long-term career prospects;
- providing the labour market with a well-trained workforce that can lead innovation, cope with change and boost competitiveness, especially in the context of the green and digital transitions;
- enabling countries to meet employment and inclusion goals in the longer term.

Besides the above, a common vision of apprenticeship should comprise the following dynamic quality features:

- the learning process should encompass both theory and practice as an integrated unit, both at school and the workplace, without separating the one from the other (as in theory at school, practice at work);
- a qualified trainer should be able to accompany an apprentice or a group of apprentices in a guided reflection on what is taught and what is being learned;
- apprenticeships should not be certified by a company-specific diploma but lead to a recognised qualification.

The road ahead is long. To endorse a common European vision, stakeholders across the EU need to reflect on the distinction between employment and employability goals, directly linked to the long-term benefits of apprentices. This is all the more important at a time when European labour markets are being reshaped by green and digital transitions and a need for a job-rich recovery.

TAKING POLICY TO THE NEXT LEVEL

To be sustainable, apprenticeship policies must be backed by evidence. Only solid estimates of quantitative and qualitative policy outcomes, based on a shared understanding and comparable data, will enable stakeholders to assess the value and return on investment of apprenticeship in a long-term perspective. Only when employers are reassured that their investment is worth the time and effort, will ‘real’ apprenticeship make a difference.

European countries need to be clear on the goals they set for apprenticeship: this will determine whether apprentices are seen as a resource (an extra pair of hands that just needs some company-specific training) or capital (future workers with solid, broad qualifications, able to work across companies or sectors). To strengthen the value of apprenticeship with a view to supporting employers and apprentices and sustaining robust and competitive national labour markets, countries need to increase investment in governance, regulation and standards.

Europe does not – and should not – have a single model of apprenticeship. Similarly, no model can simply be copied: the conditions enabling quality apprenticeships differ from country to country. They not only relate to the structure of national industry, social partnership and economic governance models, but also to shared social and cultural values and the existence of a social contract between the different labour market actors. Cedefop is widening and deepening its understanding of these conditions in their respective settings, to help step up transfer and adjustment of best practices in the future.



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