



Outcomes of Cedefop's 2nd European Apprenticeship Conference: Engaging SMEs in Apprenticeships

(Thessaloniki, 9-10 November 2015)

REFERENCE: ACVT meeting, 17-18 December 2015, Brussels

Conference objectives and participation

- The 2nd European Apprenticeship Conference organised by Cedefop in cooperation with the European Commission focused on how SMEs can be better engaged in apprenticeships. As part of Cedefop's support to the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, the conference gave an opportunity to participants to network and to explore ideas for cooperation on how to assist SMEs in providing apprenticeships, in particular those which have not trained apprentices before.
- The conference was an opportunity for participants to identify ideas that may be turned into cross-country co-operation projects, and find partners. Various funding avenues, including an Erasmus+ call for proposals that provides funding opportunities for European projects that support SMEs engaging in apprenticeships, were also presented at the conference.
- More than 180 participants from 28 countries (from most of the EU Member States, two members of the European Economic Area: Norway and Switzerland, and three candidate countries: The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Turkey).
- The conference benefited from the wide range of stakeholders that participated: representatives of European and international level organisations, national authorities, employers, as well as their representatives, employee organisations, think tanks and consultancies, VET providers, universities, etc.

Key messages from the plenary sessions (focus on employers' views)

- Even if SMEs are willing to engage in training apprentices, attracting young people and convincing parents that taking on an apprenticeship benefits their sons/daughters may be an issue. There is a need to change the perception of what apprenticeship is (parity of esteem with an academic pathway, as is the case in CH).
- Communicating the value of apprenticeship to SMEs is important: the message needs to be catchy and simple; SMEs themselves need to communicate it (ambassadors, apprenticeship champions, etc.) and also business organisations rather than education providers (companies do not understand the 'education speak'), as for instance in the UK where the government reached out to businesses for help.

- Address SMEs in a more targeted way by segmenting the market by sector, growth, etc., as no business identifies itself as an SME.
- Demonstrate the return on investment, and focus on business growth (e.g. training apprentices helps SMEs grow their business; main message: young people are not a cost, but an investment).
- For SMEs costs are higher than for larger businesses, but also the benefits are potentially higher.
- SMEs need support, also in countries with a well-established apprenticeships, especially from those parties that speak their language.
- Training providers need to be more flexible in the way they deliver off-the-job training (but the issue is how training providers can take up the challenge).
- SMEs expect that young people are work ready, they should have the right attitudes and behaviours when they take up placements (small businesses cannot afford to carry people as opposed to large businesses who have more resources and can cushion). Tap into more talent (attract young people by promoting working in small businesses – which is diverse, dynamic, etc.).
- SMEs like stability (this is why it is important to avoid constant changes).
- In some sectors SMEs take on apprentices because they need to survive. At EU level, the construction sector does not have a problem engaging SMEs in apprenticeships, even in countries that do not have the tradition. However, tradition also matters (in Germany apprenticeship is ‘in the businesses DNA’).

Main messages from the thematic round tables

- During the thematic round tables, participants developed approx. 30 ideas for co-operation – out of which 10 were presented in the last plenary session of the conference. Cedefop published these ideas on the conference website at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/european-conference-engaging-smes-apprenticeship/your-ideas>.
- Ideas ranged from a European network for promoting apprenticeships to training in-company trainers; and from offering would-be apprentices a taster to organising campaigns to engage small businesses. They will form the basis for developing European projects in the coming weeks and months that may be submitted for funding by the Erasmus + call for proposals (Support for policy reform - support for small and medium sized enterprises engaging in apprenticeships).

Dissemination of information and follow-up

- All conference material, including the ideas for cooperation developed during the thematic round tables, is available on the conference website: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/european-conference-engaging-smes-apprenticeship>.
- These links were sent to all participants within one week after the conference. The information will also be disseminated to everybody who expressed interest in participating in the Conference but did not manage to attend.

- Cedefop has invited everybody to use the Conference information, in particular the ideas that were developed during the Conference, as a basis for developing national and/or European projects; also as an opportunity to access funding available through the Erasmus + call for proposals (see above).
- Cedefop will continue to aid networking if requested by the participants and those who could not participate but are interested in developing a European partnership.

Satellite meeting on WBL and migration

- Immediately after the conference, Cedefop organised a round table discussion with a limited number of conference participants. They were invited to share ideas and practices on how apprenticeships and work-based learning, more generally, can help integrate refugees into the labour market. Issues discussed related to access arrangements, (insertion into) apprenticeships, skills assessment, validation. Conclusions: apprenticeship can be a one way to help integrate migrants but not the only one.
- Participants included representatives of European organisations, national employer and employee organisations, national ministries, and other relevant associations with experience in this issue. In total, 25 participants were present, representing EU institutions and more than 10 EU Member States.