POLICY LEARNING FORUM on apprenticeships

7 and 8 September 2017
Cedefop, Thessaloniki

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European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

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Outcomes of Cedefop's policy learning forum (PLF) on apprenticeships
Thessaloniki, 7 and 8 September 2017

1. **Conference objectives and participation**

   (a) Cedefop's policy learning forum (PLF) on apprenticeships addressed countries that are either involved in different stages of thematic country reviews (TCRs) on apprenticeships or flash TCRs, or have expressed an interest in participating in a future round.

   (b) The PLF brought together for the first time stakeholders and experts directly involved in all TCR exercises. More than 50 participants from 10 countries attended:

   (i) seven TCR countries: CY, EL, HR, IT, MT, LT, SI;

   (ii) two flash TCR countries: BE-fr, SE; and

   (iii) one country interested in TCR: SK.

2. **Added value of the event**

   (a) Taking place in a new macroeconomic, post-crisis context, the PLF was an opportunity for rethinking and addressing apprenticeships as learning opportunities rather than short-cuts to solving youth unemployment.

   (b) Discussions during the PLF had a common starting point, since all participants were familiar with the TCR methodology. This allowed them to understand each other better and analyse shared challenges in depth.

   (c) Conference participants discussed shared problems and possible solutions for quality apprenticeships. They were invited to reflect on how the TCR countries have used, are using or will be using the knowledge generated by the review to devise or implement domestic policies.

   (d) Participants also had an opportunity to learn more about, and reflect on, apprenticeship cost-benefit analysis through an exercise on this topic.

3. **Main policy learning forum outcomes**

   Vision, trust and dialogue were some of the key concepts that emerged from all discussions during the PLF plenaries and parallel workshops. In brief, discussions touched on the following points.

   (a) Despite differences in systems, all TCR countries reaffirmed their common mission to increase the number and improve the quality of apprenticeships.

   (b) A clear vision of apprenticeship is needed. Today, there are many different interpretations of apprenticeships, even in the same country. Both the apprenticeship function and the stakeholders' expectations should become clear.

   (c) Trust, coordination, cooperation and responsibility of all stakeholders involved are essential preconditions for making apprenticeships work.

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(d) During the PLF, participants expressed a need for country-specific models considering: the apprenticeship schemes' place in the education system, the target groups they address, and the economic sectors that use them the most.

(e) Despite this awareness and the agreement that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution, countries still look to the German dual-system model as a possible solution to many problems.

(f) Cost-benefit analysis was deemed by most participants key to making the advantages of apprenticeships more evident, thereby engaging employers more.

(g) Improving the image of apprenticeships, which are still seen in many countries as a second-chance option – if not a last resort – remains a priority.

4. Main outcomes of the parallel workshops

Four workshops took place, focusing on the areas where TCR countries share similar challenges:

(a) place in the education and training system;
(b) governance mechanisms;
(c) training content and learning outcomes;
(d) participation of, and support to, companies.

4.1. Place of apprenticeship in the system

As indicated in a forthcoming Cedefop study ([1]) and reflected in PLF discussions, apprenticeships in Europe have two main functions:

(a) Apprenticeship is a distinct form of training (with a specific place in the VET system). This is the case in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Norway. In these countries, apprenticeship is the main form of IVET.

(b) Apprenticeship is a mode of learning. It could be part of a VET programme/general education. In some cases, apprenticeship is an alternative pathway leading to the same qualification (as in the school-based track). In this case, apprenticeship is mostly used as second-chance education (e.g. minor track or last resort for disadvantaged groups).

Another important distinction is whether apprenticeships are led by the world of education or by the world of work. In most TCR countries, companies still play a relatively minor role in activating and managing apprenticeships. This raises questions about how to increase employer engagement and ownership. This is a governance issue, but also concerns expectations regarding companies' role and trust in their training capacity.

Challenges

Different stakeholders, even within the same country, have different visions of the role and place of apprenticeships:

([1]) The study is based on the project *Apprenticeships: a cross-national overview*, whose findings will be published in the first quarter of 2018.

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(a) the rationale for investing in apprenticeships: to facilitate young people's transition to the labour market; to facilitate continuing learning; to reduce skills mismatch; to accelerate the reaction to changing labour demand (especially for new specialisations); to provide additional education opportunities; and to bring the education system closer to the labour market (including schools and employers);

(b) the status of apprentices (student and/or employee) and their remuneration/allowance;

(c) target groups (only young people or adults as well) and sectors (all sectors or only a few, where the model works well and where there is demand for apprentices);

(d) permeability to higher education and the role of apprenticeship in continuing learning;

(e) competition between apprenticeship and other routes leading to the same qualification, and clarity on the link between the two.

(f) expectations of companies in the system: learning outcomes they should contribute to; distribution of learning outcomes by venue; in-company learning outcomes assessment and its role in final school examinations.

Participants agreed that countries expect quick results from apprenticeships, while apprenticeships are still expected to safeguard the quality of learning outcomes. However, quality assurance mechanisms seem to be insufficient, and rely on education providers.

Solutions

(a) Adopt a clear vision of apprenticeship by clarifying:

   (i) what problems does it aim to solve? (facilitate school-to-work transition; address shortage of skilled workers and contribute to skills formation; anticipate changing skills demand; better cooperation and bridge building between school and work)

   (ii) what is the status of apprentices?

   (iii) which target groups and sectors does apprenticeship address and who should express interest in it?

(b) Clearly define expectations of schools and enterprises, especially what must be learned during workplace hours (identify the learning outcomes that need to be achieved as part of a formal qualification; identify additional learning outcomes; and define how assessment should be done). This should contribute to finding shared goals and building a common language between education and the labour market.

4.2. Governance

Challenges

Most challenges relate to the dominance of the education sector in governing apprenticeships.

(a) Labour market representatives do not always have a decision-making role, although they may provide consultancy or be part of advisory boards on an ad hoc basis. Their participation in attracting companies is still limited or absent in many countries, especially at local level, where schools play a leading role, not always in collaboration with employers.

(b) In many countries, companies seem to consider that their key or only duty should be offering 'work' (or work experience) to apprentices, while training is the responsibility of

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schools. This approach leads to companies focusing on apprenticeship's short-term benefits, rather than its return on education investment.

Solutions

Opinions on governance structures are varied: some countries would prefer an apprenticeship-specific structure, others advocate for a common structure for all VET pathways, including apprenticeships. In any case, it is important to address the following issues.

(a) The role of both social partners and chambers should be institutionalised/systematised.

(b) At national level, labour market representatives seem to prefer a role in the earlier stages of apprenticeship design – such as contributing to updating occupational profiles/standards, influencing curricula or approving training plans – and less at the end of the process, such as in assessing learning outcomes or issuing qualifications, etc.

(c) At local level, employer representatives need to be more active in promoting apprenticeships, while companies should have a bigger say in selecting apprentices and training trainers, and should assume clearer responsibility for on-the-job training.

(d) Participants proposed that schools focus on off-the-job training provision, developing not only transversal competences for lifelong learning, but also occupation-related (rather than company-specific) skills of a specialisation/trade. Schools monitoring on-the-job training would be welcome, especially when companies lack staff qualified to plan and manage learning processes at the workplace.

4.3. Training content and learning outcomes

This workshop focused on what learning outcomes should be achieved, who delivers the relevant training, and how to assure the quality of the learning outcomes.

Challenges

(a) Although participants agreed that learning outcomes and training standards should be common/shared at national or sectoral level, views differed regarding curriculum design. While some were in favour of broad curricula that can be tailored at local and company level, others argued that curricula should be stricter, with fewer learning outcomes and less scope to diversify them at the workplace.

(b) Legislation/statutory requirements do not always define or specify clearly what competences should be developed at the enterprise as opposed to schools. More clarity on this would be conducive to cooperation between schools and companies to develop, implement, and assess apprenticeship learning plans together. Apprenticeship learning plans are instead generally defined by the education system without proper company involvement. Similarly, the role of companies in learning outcomes assessment and how this is reflected in final school examinations, is not always clear.

(c) Qualifications systems are not flexible or adaptable enough; as a result, it often takes too long to change a qualification. This is linked to the weak and sometimes absent connection between learning outcomes and occupational standards.

(d) The role of mentor/in-company trainer is relevant but in many cases companies do not have competent staff to take this role on.

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Solutions

(a) Clear guidance on their respective expected roles may lay the basis for schools and companies to cooperate in designing learning plans at local level.

(b) A third independent awarding body could be in charge of apprentices' learning outcomes assessment.

(c) Establishment of quality assurance procedures and mechanisms, such as the verification/accreditation of 'training companies'.

(d) Measures to support and foster training for in-company trainers.

4.4. Participation of, and support to, companies

Challenges

(a) Factors psychological in nature include: lack of trust among companies and other key actors; obstacles in communication between them; low status and attractiveness of apprenticeships; insufficient information and biased perceptions of apprenticeship benefits.

(b) Insufficient non-financial incentives, such as bureaucratic simplification and information on existing opportunities (especially on SMEs), quality standards across companies.

(c) Lack of cost-benefit analyses and of knowledge about how to carry such analysis out in terms of methods, data needed, etc.

Solutions

(a) Providing more non-financial incentives: these were deemed as important as and sometimes even more important than financial incentives. To balance non-financial incentives for sectoral/regional/ local needs, approaches may include:

   (i) information and coordination: appointing an apprenticeship coordinator (in schools or independent bodies) to support companies in managing the administrative burden; establishing a 'contact channel' or so-called single contact point (institution) to address information asymmetries;

   (ii) providing training of trainers (including pedagogic competences). Possibly supporting mobility of in-company trainer to learn from experiences of peers, including in other countries;

   (iii) involving employers as early as possible in apprenticeship (e.g. in designing occupational standards);

   (iv) addressing corporate social responsibility issues and opportunities for large companies, as well as for SMEs;

(b) Attracting companies: a key strategy would be investing in good pilot(s) showcasing apprenticeship benefits. Results could be widely disseminated by employers to potential employers and other stakeholders. This could potentially trigger a competitive virtuous cycle, in which other companies follow the good practices of pioneers to attract the best apprentices.

5. Dissemination of information and follow-up

All conference material is available on the PLF's conference website. Cedefop invites all participants and interested parties to use the PLF outcomes as a reference point for long-lasting open dialogue among countries that believe in, and work for, quality apprenticeship. Cedefop invites the participants of the 2017 PLF to:

(a) assume an active role in shaping and animating such dialogue by proposing themes or ideas to be discussed in future PLFs on apprenticeships;
(b) express their needs and interests;
(c) share apprenticeship developments in their countries; and
(d) discuss with Cedefop suggestions for new initiatives.

Cedefop encourages the TCR country representatives to collaborate in order to reap the benefits of the work done so far, and to prepare for the next steps. Cedefop is looking forward to supporting efforts in this direction.