

Opinion of the Advisory Committee on vocational training (ACVT)
addressed to the European Commission on
A Shared Vision for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships and Work-based Learning
2 December 2016

1) INTRODUCTION

Apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning (WBL) are a springboard to jobs and active citizenship; they enhance a person's employability and employment prospects through the acquisition of skills and competences that are needed on the labour markets and support personal development. Member States with well-developed apprenticeship systems as part of vocational education and training, underpinned by supporting factors such as a strong economic and industrial fabric and well-coordinated education and training and labour market structures, are usually characterised by low youth unemployment levels and high economic competitiveness. Shared responsibility is an essential element of apprenticeship and WBL.

In 2012 the Council adopted a Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee¹, to ensure that all young people up to the age of 25 receive a quality offer of a job, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. As President Juncker noted in his 2016 State of the Union speech, 9 million young people have now received an offer involving one of these four elements. Additionally, the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), a EUR 6.4 billion financial resource, has provided for the first time ever direct targeted support to young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) living in regions struggling with high youth unemployment rates.

In July 2013 the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) was launched whereby the European Commission, Member States and the European Social Partners have committed themselves to improving the quality, supply and attractiveness of apprenticeships. EFTA and Candidate countries have also joined the initiative. These concerted actions together with improved macro-economic conditions and structural reforms have contributed to reducing EU youth unemployment by 1.4 million people since the launch of the YEI.²

In May 2016, the European Social Partners concluded their respective projects on a proposal for a European quality framework for apprenticeships³ and on the cost-effectiveness of apprenticeship schemes⁴ and agreed on a Joint statement "**Towards a Shared Vision of Apprenticeships**"⁵. The Joint statement calls for a tripartite opinion of employers, trade unions and Member States, to foster quality and cost-effective apprenticeships in Europe. This will feed into the next steps for the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and contribute to the implementation of the 2015 Riga medium-term deliverable on **promoting work-based learning, with special attention to apprenticeships**⁶.

The New Skills Agenda for Europe⁷ launched by the European Commission on 10 June seeks to ensure that people develop a broad set of skills from early on in life and throughout their life thus enhancing their employability prospects, full participation in society, raising competitiveness and fuelling growth. As underlined in the New Skills Agenda, well-functioning apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning ease the transition from school to work by enhancing the employability of learners and providing them with the skills needed for the labour market. Apprenticeships provide

¹ [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0426\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0426(01)&from=EN)

² [Communication: The Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative three years on, COM \(2016\), http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16236&langId=en](http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16236&langId=en)

³ <https://www.etuc.org/publications/european-quality-framework-apprenticeships#.V8ku3-nynor>

⁴ <https://www.businesseurope.eu/publications/cost-effectiveness-apprenticeship-schemes-making-case-apprenticeships>

⁵ This statement is based on two projects conducted by social partners, on "The cost-effectiveness of apprenticeship schemes"⁵ (employers), and a "European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships"⁵ (trade unions)

https://www.businesseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/media/position_papers/social/apprenticeship_joint_statement_30may.pdf

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/2015-riga-conclusions_en.pdf

⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15621&langId=en>

benefits also for companies and society at large.

On 14 September the mid-term review of the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework was published and included a proposal for allocating an additional EUR 1 billion to the YEI between 2017 and 2020. At their meeting on 16 September 27 EU Heads of State and Government also discussed the need for further actions to reduce youth unemployment and will return to this issue at the European Council meeting of 1 December 2016.

On 25 October 2016 the European Commission published its Work Programme for 2017, which builds on the Skills Agenda by outlining initiatives that aim to address the modernisation of education; improving the quality of apprenticeships, including through a proposal for a quality framework on apprenticeships; further developing the mobility of apprentices; and tracking young people's labour market progress after completing academic or vocational training.

In view of these developments, this Opinion should help to shape EU and national policies and actions for further developing and strengthening the provision, quality and effectiveness of apprenticeships across Europe.

2) OBJECTIVES

Step up reforms and implementation for quality and effective apprenticeships and WBL

Acknowledging the efforts made by governments, social partners and other stakeholders, there is still a need to step up reforms, and to speed up effective delivery of quality and effective **apprenticeships**. The supply and quality of apprenticeships are still often insufficient, and VET and apprenticeship are frequently seen as a second choice option by young people, their parents and society at large. Further developments should also be done in preparation for a new European education and training strategy and the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework post 2020.

Improve the coordination of and support for the various stakeholder actions

Acknowledging the efforts made through the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and the variety of initiatives and actions at the local, regional, national, European, and international levels, as well as within sectors, there is still a pressing need to strengthen knowledge sharing, networking and cooperation, including enhancing transparency of quality and supply of apprenticeships offers.

3) A SHARED VISION

This Opinion highlights areas of further action to achieve a *Shared Vision for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships and WBL*.

The ACVT invites the Commission to provide a proposal on the following activities:

- i. Follow-up on its intention to make a proposal on a Quality Framework on Apprenticeships as announced in the Commission Work Programme 2017 taking into account this opinion.
- ii. Based on evidence and research⁸, further develop the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, and address challenges such as employer engagement and cost-effectiveness, digitalisation, integration of migrants, innovation, entrepreneurship and higher VET, as relevant⁹.
- iii. Develop a set of support services for knowledge sharing¹⁰, networking and cooperation to assist where needed apprenticeship and WBL reforms at national level, including by facilitating expert advice, bench-learning¹¹, clustering and cooperation between countries,

⁸ In particular the EC study on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships - Assessment of progress and planning the future, and the Cedefop studies apprenticeship (Cross national overview of apprenticeships in Europe, thematic country reviews on apprenticeships, Governance and Financing of apprenticeship etc; see also <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/apprenticeships-work-based-learning>

⁹ Following up on the Riga Conclusions and the recommendations of the "[Study on higher Vocational Education and Training in the EU](#)", COM 2016

¹⁰ Including support for the effective use of existing tools, (e.g. Digital toolbox, ILO toolbox, WBL Toolkit)

¹¹ http://www.pesboard.eu/EN/pesboard/Benchlearning/benchlearning_node.html

social partners and other stakeholders in line with existing EU policy frameworks and the Riga Conclusions. Country visits by expert peers could be organised alongside these activities.

- iv. Follow-up on apprenticeship and WBL reforms and ensure a close link between the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and related European initiatives such as the Riga Conclusions, the Youth Guarantee, the Youth Employment Initiative, and other relevant initiatives under the EU Skills Agenda.
- v. Raise the attractiveness and image of VET and apprenticeships by conceptualising high quality apprenticeships and promoting their benefits for learners, businesses and society, through regular initiatives mobilising all relevant stakeholders at EU, national, regional and local levels (e.g. European Vocational Skills Week).
- vi. Strengthen cooperation on policies and actions on apprenticeships between the European institutions and agencies (Cedefop and ETF), with international organisations and networks (e.g. UNESCO, OECD, ILO, EuroSkills/WorldSkills, World Bank, Global Apprenticeships Network).
- vii. Explore the possibility of EU funded support for apprenticeships/work-based learning exchange programmes with third countries.

Member States and Social Partners to further work on the following issues:

- viii. Mobilise actors for concrete actions at country, regional and local level. This includes facilitating the setting up of demand-driven "**National Apprenticeship and WBL Partnerships**", involving all relevant decision makers from ministries, social partners, education and training providers, intermediary bodies (chambers of commerce and industry and chambers of skilled crafts, professional and sectorial organisations), and other stakeholders.
- ix. Make further progress on establishing an appropriate **framework**, whereby the responsibilities, rights and obligations of each party involved are clearly formulated and are enforceable, including the active engagement of social partners¹². Support the establishment of **permeable pathways**, including recognition of qualifications, between education sectors, and in particular for apprentices in upper secondary level to further continue their qualifications at tertiary level.
- x. Provide appropriate support structures and measures, both financial and non-financial, and where appropriate, a cost-sharing approach between enterprises and public authorities, for the engagement of companies, and in particular small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in the provision of quality and effective apprenticeships.
- xi. Foster the development of partnerships between and with social partners and other relevant stakeholders to ensure a structured, continuous dialogue and a transparent governance on design, quality assurance, implementation and assessment of apprenticeships and WBL, according to the national framework.
- xii. Mobilise sectors with the involvement of the sectoral social partners and organisations according to the national priorities.
- xiii. Raise the quality of VET teaching and in-company training (and cooperation among these).
- xiv. Include the possibility for learner's mobility as part of apprenticeship programmes in view to achieving higher levels of mobility of apprentices across Europe complemented by financial and non-financial support.
- xv. Improve career guidance and promote apprenticeship schemes through awareness-raising targeted at young people, their parents, adult learners, education and training providers,

¹² As agreed in the Council Declaration on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139011.pdf

employers and public employment services, including the benefits of apprenticeships for employers and learners.

- xvi. Further develop the elements on apprenticeships and the partnership approach as proposed in the Annex.
- xvii. Discuss with sectoral social partners possible approaches to strengthen and diversify supply to a wider range of occupations, in particular those sectors that contributed to the European social partners' projects, those identified in the Skills Agenda and those that already took part in sector skills councils.

4) FOLLOW-UP

The ACVT invites the Council Presidency and Commission to ensure that the opportunities offered by apprenticeships in reducing youth unemployment are fully taken into account when discussing youth employment policies, including the YEI during the December 2016 European Council.

The ACVT also invites future Council Presidencies to mobilise Member States to renew and expand their pledges and commitments following the Council declaration of 2013¹³.

¹³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139011.pdf

ANNEX:

Elements on apprenticeships and the partnership approach

Based on the European social partners' joint statement of 30 May 2016, and elements of the 2013 Council Declaration on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships

ELEMENTS ON APPRENTICESHIPS

1. Apprenticeship systems require a clear and appropriate regulatory framework at the national level and are dependent upon enterprises being able to create training vacancies (and job opportunities) to take on learners.
2. Quality apprenticeships not only enhance a person's employability and employment prospects through the acquisition of skills and competences that are needed on the labour market, they also support personal development and lead to a recognised qualification.
3. Apprenticeships should cover a wider range of sectors and occupations. There is a particular need to broaden the attractiveness and supply of apprenticeships beyond the sectors that they are traditionally associated with. Apprenticeship training for a wider range of occupations would also help to increase the employability and employment opportunities for all people.
4. The status of apprentices differs from country to country and is determined by legislation and/or national industrial relations systems and education and training practices. For each apprenticeship, the contract should clearly spell out the rights and obligations of the employer and apprentice from a working conditions and training perspective, including, where appropriate, the way in which apprentices are covered by social protection.
5. A substantial part of an apprentice's training time should be spent in the workplace. A strong work-based learning and training component should complement the specific on-the-job skills with broader, transversal and transferable skills, ensuring that participants can adapt to change after finishing the apprenticeship.
6. Apprentices should receive pay or compensation, according to the level that is applicable in a given national context, where appropriate, in line with national or sectoral minimum requirements or collective agreements. It is also necessary to ensure an appropriate element of commitment of the apprentices, reflecting the benefits apprenticeships bring them in terms of future qualifications and employment opportunities.
7. It is important that apprenticeship is set up to make it cost-effective for an enterprise, enabling a return on investment, which encourages and fosters the supply of apprenticeship places.
8. A cost-sharing approach between enterprises and public authorities can help to increase the provision of apprenticeships as well as ensure adequate conditions for apprentices. In well-functioning apprenticeship systems, enterprises recoup their investments over time in terms of a better skills fit and through the partial productive activation of learners during training.
9. SMEs including micro-companies are important providers of apprenticeship placements. In order to foster apprenticeship training in SMEs, they need adequate external support services for training, recruitment and administration, and so can get a higher return on their investments.
10. With the stronger involvement of social partners and VET providers, careers advice and counselling services need to better communicate the role that apprenticeships can play in fostering employability and career progression. Such support services are also required throughout the duration of an apprenticeship.

11. Teachers, trainers and mentors, in schools and enterprises need to be appropriately supported and able to update their skills and competences to train apprentices in accordance with the latest teaching and training methods and labour market needs.
12. It is important to expand the practice of apprenticeships beyond secondary VET, including through introducing apprenticeships and the principles of dual-learning across different types and levels of education pathways, notably higher VET as well as university education, where applicable.

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

13. Partnerships are a pre-condition for quality VET and apprenticeships leading to relevant learning outcomes.
14. In order to support both the needs of the labour market as well as apprentices, apprenticeship systems need to be governed in a way that ensures labour market skills needs are sufficiently taken into account.
15. This calls for a close involvement of social partners, in line with national industrial relations systems and education and training practices, in the design, governance and implementation of apprenticeship schemes.
16. It also requires partnerships with other relevant stakeholders such as, where appropriate, intermediary bodies (chambers of commerce and industry and chambers of skilled crafts, professional and sectorial organisations), education and training providers, youth and student organisations, and local, regional as well as national authorities.