



APPRENTICESHIPS FOR ADULTS

Helping secure good jobs for people and skills for businesses and labour markets

As European countries are gradually resuming business exiting the most stringent measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, many are warning that some effects of the crisis will be sustained. In some countries, concerns have been raised about the slump in numbers of apprenticeship places, partly due to provisional or permanent company closures. Projections in Austria point to a potential lack of 7 500 apprenticeship places in autumn 2020, while France has been ramping up promotion of its apprenticeship centres (CFA) across the country to mitigate the expected surge in unemployment.

The crisis has exacerbated an existing situation. EU-wide, there are around 128 million adults with potential for upskilling or reskilling, according to Cedefop estimates ⁽¹⁾. At the same time, in countries with long apprenticeship traditions such as Germany, the numbers of companies providing apprenticeships and of young people looking for them have been falling. Adult participation in apprenticeship is seen as one possible policy solution to the need to support adults willing to train while broadening the skills base of the working population across Europe.

All EU Member States have begun taking steps in this direction and adult participation in apprenticeships is clearly on the rise. This does not imply new types of apprenticeship or radically new concepts. It is rather about policies and initiatives facilitating adult participation in apprenticeship, including promoting more flexible learning options considering their life situations and learning needs ⁽²⁾.

In Austria, adult apprentices account only for 6% of all apprentices, while in Germany they account for 12%, in Denmark for 35% and in Finland for a stun-

ning 85% ⁽³⁾.

The average age of people starting an apprenticeship in Austria is around 16; in both Denmark and in Finland it is over 20. In Germany, more than 60% of first year apprentices are between 19 and 24 years of age and more than 10% are older than 24 ⁽⁴⁾.

This links in with findings of a 2020 Cedefop report on VET in Europe 1995-2035 which shows that VET, including apprenticeships and other forms of dual studies, has expanded considerably in recent years into post-secondary and tertiary education, hence to higher age groups ⁽⁵⁾.



Cedefop, 2019/Sakke Cioumpatis

APPRENTICESHIPS IN EUROPE: ONE DEFINITION, TWO APPROACHES

Across Europe, apprenticeships are defined by some common, 'age-neutral' characteristics:

- they are underpinned by a legal framework;
- they lead to a formal qualification;
- they rely on a structured alternation between work-based and school-based learning;
- they imply a commitment of two to four years;
- there is a contract between learner and company;
- learners receive a remuneration.

⁽¹⁾ Cedefop's calculation is based on Eurostat's labour force survey 2016, CSIS 2015 and OECD PIAAC 2012 and 2015. More information is included in Cedefop's 2020 publication *Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways*.

⁽²⁾ The 2020 Cedefop report *Apprenticeship for adults* offers a comprehensive overview of European countries' different approaches.

⁽³⁾ Source: National statistics and Muehlemann, S. (forthcoming), *The economics of apprenticeships for adults*, OECD Publishing.

⁽⁴⁾ Source: Cedefop database of apprenticeship schemes.

⁽⁵⁾ A briefing note titled *What future for VET in Europe?* offers a shorter read.

Despite these similarities, national policy approaches to apprenticeship organisation vastly differ including in how policies are shaped for the purpose of adult participation. EU countries can be divided into two main groups in terms of their policy approaches ⁽⁶⁾.

1. A system at upper secondary level

In one group of countries, which includes, Denmark, Germany, Ireland and Austria, the apprenticeship system is distinct from school-based VET (with or without compulsory work placements).

Apprenticeship tends to be either the predominant model of initial VET or to exist side by side with school-based VET. In the latter case, the systems differ in governance, scope (apprenticeship being in principle restricted to nationally defined occupations or trades), output (apprenticeship qualification), and content/organisation (apprenticeship curricula or training standards and apprenticeship programmes).

The apprenticeship qualification, such as a journeyman or tradesman certificate, attests to the successful completion of an apprenticeship. It is a trademark with a distinct labour market value (though not a mandatory requirement for employment in these trades). Apprenticeship certificates conclude well-structured apprenticeship programmes, without ruling out some adaptability to learners' needs.

2. A separate track within VET systems

In the second group, which includes, Spain, France, Hungary and Finland, apprenticeships are delivered as one type of VET alongside school-based VET, both within IVET and adult VET, and at various education levels. The latter has contributed to the expansion of apprenticeship to post-secondary and tertiary levels.

Apprenticeships have been introduced or reintroduced in traditionally school-based VET systems as an additional track for young and adult learners leading to a VET qualification. While qualifications are equal in both tracks, apprenticeships may be a more attractive option especially for adults, owing to their remuneration and in-company placement prospects. Most commonly, apprenticeships are delivered as individual learning pathways, with various degrees of flexibility.

Apprenticeships tend to be seen as a second-chance option.

ADULTS NEED ACCESS

Adults have had access to the apprenticeship system in the first group of countries but, in practice, programmes are traditionally designed for young people

⁽⁶⁾ Source: *Apprenticeship schemes in European countries: a cross-nation overview* (Cedefop 2018).

in their teens. In recent years, adult participation in such apprenticeships has been widely discussed with a focus on what it means for adults to return 'to the school bench' and what is needed to empower them to pursue an apprenticeship qualification.

In the second country group, adult access to apprenticeship is determined by the structure of the VET system. A (non-skilled) adult qualifying for initial VET has, in principle, access to both the apprenticeship and the school-based track. For adults looking to obtain an upper secondary qualification within adult VET, access to apprenticeship depends on whether it is offered as a distinct track within a country's adult VET system.

BOX 1. EXAMPLE FROM A COUNTRY OF GROUP B: FINLAND

Finland introduced an apprenticeship track in vocational education and training for adults. Both adult VET tracks, the apprenticeship and the school-based one, have equal value: both open the door to a labour market-relevant qualification to those who otherwise could not afford it. The main incentive of the apprenticeship track, both in initial and adult VET, is the remuneration paid by the employer to the apprentice.

ADULTS – A DIVERSE GROUP

Unlike teens, who embark on a learning journey for an IVET qualification at around the same age and with a similar experience horizon, adults largely differ in terms of age, experience, life situation and expectations. Many have prior learning and working experiences. Some may be reluctant to go back to school or receive instructions from a person younger than themselves. Many have life responsibilities (a family, a bank loan) and all need to understand the labour market value of the qualification their training journey will offer them.

Policies encouraging adult learning, including participation in apprenticeship, have to focus on candidates' needs and motivations more than their age.

POLICIES TO EMPOWER ADULTS

While adults in the first country group are encouraged to take up regular apprenticeship programmes, it is a fact that these cannot always cater to their needs, entailing compulsory school attendance and strict timetables.

This is why countries have devised measures and policies with validation of prior learning and work experience at their heart, including shorter apprenticeship programmes, direct access to the final apprenticeship exam and access to short courses preparing for the final exam. Incentives are either financial (paid to the individual or the company) or concern the du-

ration of a programme, which can be shortened depending on the candidate's prior knowledge.

BOX 2. ADAPTING APPRENTICESHIP TO ADULTS' NEEDS: DENMARK

Denmark has introduced special conditions to adapt apprenticeships to adults' qualification needs; they are part of the legislation regulating VET for adults (*erhvervsuddannelser for voksne*, EUV). They foresee that adults above 25 must be offered more attractive, predictable and targeted apprenticeship programmes than young people. The rules ensure that the programmes take as a starting point every individual candidate's education and experience. (Notwithstanding these conditions, adult learners may still enrol in apprenticeship on the same terms and conditions as young people).

In all countries of this group, apprenticeship has a distinct educational, economic and social identity and recognised labour market value attested by an apprenticeship certificate, widely acclaimed for the employability it grants. The link between apprenticeship qualifications and skilled occupations is clearly identifiable by society. This strong exchange value, combined with financial support and flexible time arrangements, may well trigger an adult's decision to undergo (further) training.

BOX 3. SUPPORTING ADULT APPRENTICES: GERMANY

The *Zukunftsstarter* (future starter) initiative of the Family Ministry and the National Employment Agency supports non-qualified or low-qualified adults between 25 and 35 who want to engage in apprenticeship or other IVET training. The initiative foresees subsidies for 120,000 candidates in 2020-22 and is specifically designed to help disadvantaged adults into skilled work.

Since January 2020, *part-time VET provision* has been made more flexible to allow more adults, such as those with a health-impairment or caring for children or other family members, as well as refugees and other vulnerable groups of adults, to choose this option. The basic condition is that the apprenticeship candidate and the company interested in him/her agree on the practical terms of the part-time work.

In the second country group, a contract, remuneration and a high amount of practical training distinguish apprenticeships from other VET tracks, benefiting both adult and young apprentices. Additional elements of adult empowerment, such as validation, modularisation, and competence-based qualifications, are system-embedded and apply both to school-based VET and apprenticeship tracks, warranting their equal value.

Overall, however, apprenticeships' specific labour market value is difficult to determine, compared to that of other VET options. While the wage and the in-company training are its selling points, they only ensure an individual's buy-in once he/she has already decided to undergo training.

FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY: IMPORTANT ASSETS FOR ADULTS

How do I want to learn? What do I need to learn? Country experience shows that, in the context of adult participation in apprenticeships, these questions tend to apply more to the school-based than the in-company part of training.

Besides looking at adult learners' work experience and prior education and training, VET teachers need to understand their motivation. A higher degree of individual variation needs to be addressed, from gaps in literacy and numeracy skills to a lack of practical work experience. Depending on learners' needs and motivations, training plans for adults tend to focus on general skills and knowledge more than subject-specific training (although some adults may need and appreciate it). Teachers dealing with adult apprentices usually give and expect from learners more responsibility. Also, they tend to share knowledge based on demonstrations rather than theory.

As some adults are reluctant to return to school, distance learning schemes could be boosted to cover adults' needs. Recent Covid-19 experiences have highlighted how this potential could be better exploited in the future:

BOX 4. DISTANCE LEARNING IN FRANCE AND GERMANY

In France, distance learning for apprentices is foreseen by the labour code. If their company provides distance learning, they can learn from home or their company's premises, depending on availability of equipment. The aim is to ensure the continuity of a maximum of apprenticeships.

In Germany, due to closure of VET schools, apprentices may access school training resources while at the workplace. In fact, the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts recommended companies to give their apprentices extra training time at the workplace to process material provided by their school, encouraging both employers and schools to find the best individual arrangements.

GREATER ADULT CONTRACT PROTECTION

Covid-19 experience shows that where apprentices are treated as students and not protected by the labour code, they are vulnerable in case of suspension

or termination of their contract, receiving at best a State allowance.

BOX 5. COMPENSATION SCHEMES IN SLOVENIA, MALTA AND PORTUGAL

In Slovenia, apprentices receive an apprenticeship allowance only for the days they actually work. They are not included in the COVID-19 compensation scheme since they are considered as students with an apprenticeship contract. Those whose contracts have been suspended owing to the pandemic are not entitled to compensation.

In Malta, apprentices are not paid by their employer in case of suspension of contract; however, they are entitled to the stipend issued by the government. In Portugal, apprentice absences during the suspension period are considered as justified and social benefits continue to be paid, with some exceptions, under the following terms: the training/ professionalisation grant is paid according to the working days falling in the suspension period, regardless of if they were full- or part-time work. Additionally, apprentices receive their welcome and accommodation allowance as well as a refund of transportation costs upon proof of expenditure.

Since adult apprentices often have life responsibilities, they are most vulnerable to such limbo situations.

In countries where apprentice contracts are covered by the labour code, they enjoy the safety nets guaranteed by the State for regular employees.

BOX 6. SAFETY NETS: AUSTRIA, GERMANY AND IRELAND

In Austria, apprentices in companies which had to close for some weeks could apply for *Kurzarbeit* (reduced working hours), a scheme whereby the training company pays 100% of apprenticeship wages while being reimbursed for the major part of these expenses by the State (the scheme is limited until the end of September 2020).

In Germany, similar conditions apply to *Kurzarbeit*. If training time is reduced, wages can be adjusted. In Ireland, apprentices who are in the school-based phase of their apprenticeship, receive an off-the-job training allowance from the State throughout the pandemic emergency. However, when apprentices are laid off, their only choice is to apply for unemployment benefit.

WHY WOULD EMPLOYERS CHOOSE ADULT APPRENTICES?

First, because they need skilled workers. However, adult apprentices may actually be a better bet for employers than young people:

- employers may use apprenticeships to upskill the one or the other of their own employees (this scheme is known as ‘conversion’ in the UK).

It allows them to upgrade their workforce while strengthening employees’ ties with the company and offering them future career progression prospects (7);

- adult apprentices have work experience and life skills and are often highly motivated, which makes them more rapidly productive and often more reliable;
- considering their life responsibilities, adults are potentially stable, long-term employees.

A PROMISING BUT ROCKY ROAD

Politically, it is important to preserve the brand name of apprenticeship by further strengthening its quality and identity. To be an attractive VET option both for adults and young people, apprenticeship must be regulated and clearly linked to skilled occupations.

Adult participation needs to be supported, in the first place by removing age limits. Second, by building flexibility into apprenticeship provision while promoting its distinct value. Third, by offering incentives to individuals and employers, encouraging employers to use apprenticeship as a way to upskill their workers and offering them career advancement opportunities. And adults need to be well prepared to take up an apprenticeship; guidance is crucial in this respect.

To preserve or strengthen the distinct identity and labour market value of apprenticeship, policy needs to delimit it against other forms of work-based learning by labelling these differently (they should not be called apprenticeship when they are not) and by helping scrap ‘fake’ apprenticeships.

The EU could encourage its Member States to take this route, considering the new cycle of European cooperation on VET which will be inaugurated in autumn.

(7) The system needs safety valves preventing relabelling of existing posts or training for low-skilled jobs labelled ‘apprenticeship’.