



Input Paper

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform

Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills

Peer Review on employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships

15-16 June 2021, online event

Objectives

The Peer Review aims to develop knowledge and competencies for ESF+ programming to effectively support the development and refinement of ESF+ programmes, ESF+ calls and funding in the context of supporting employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships.

Work-based learning can be understood as any type of learning that happens in the workplace, in initial (VET) training, in an internship, during a career, in continuing (VET) training, and in other contexts.

Apprenticeships should be understood as a specific form of work-based learning, usually initial VET, usually leading to a qualification, that is characterised by alternance between two learning venues (VET school and company). Apprentices are usually contractually bound to their training company and are often based on a tripartite agreement that is part of the social dialogue in the country.

The event will provide an opportunity to explore how Spain and its' regions have used ESF funding to provide technical support to improve the quality of dual vocational education and training in the Spanish education system, including through enhanced employer engagement. In particular, the Peer Review will explore the example of the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project from the La Rioja region, which supports apprenticeships in the renewable energy sector.

The Peer Review will also look at how ESF funding can be used to can support employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships, including through financial support and incentives to work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes, and support to strategic partnerships. It will also be discussed how the ESF can help to secure the continuity of reforms and mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

'The dual learning scheme gave a boost to my career, opening new horizons and increasing my job stability. The economic crisis in 2008 hit me hard when I was young and I wanted to be ready to confront another crisis, so that it would not affect me so strongly later in my career. My self-confidence increased exponentially thanks to the dual training. Since I've graduated in 2017, I've been continuously in employment.'

Jorge, 34, graduate of the 'Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies' programme in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

Key themes

Work-based learning and apprenticeships are a key EU policy priority to enhance quality in vocational education and training

'The combination of the basic skills students receive during the school-based training and the work-based internships allows them to acquire a very specific training for the renewable energies sector that contributes favourably to their employability. In most cases, we hire the students that went through the dual training in our company'.

Ricardo, employer representative participating in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

In many countries, vocational education and training is traditionally mainly school-based. Over the past decade, the EU has been promoting work-based learning – especially in the form of apprenticeships – as a key component of a wider strategy to improve the quality of VET, tackle youth unemployment and social exclusion, taking several key policy initiatives in the 2010s after the economic crisis and its massive impact on youth employment. The European Commission's communication, [Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes \(2012\)](#) identified quality apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning as a strategic priority for the period 2015-2020.

The New Skills Agenda for Europe, launched in June 2016 by the Council of the European Union, contained a [Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships in March 2018](#), in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights. The overall objective of the recommendation is *'to increase the employability and personal development of apprentices and to contribute to the development of a highly skilled and qualified workforce, responsive to labour market needs'*.

Building on the first 2016 Skills Agenda, the European Council presented the ['Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience'](#) in December 2020, an important policy package of actions, pursuing 'a real paradigm shift in skills', a 'skills revolution', to take advantage of the green and digital transitions and support a prompt recovery from the COVID-19 crisis'. The role of work-based learning and apprenticeships in that regard was again underlined.

Yet, it is important to bear in mind that it is the combination of the two learning venues – school and workplace – in 'dual learning' apprenticeship schemes that brings about the real added value through a combination of theoretical learning and practical experience.

My company works a lot with temporary contracts and seasonal workers. They reduce the technical workforce drastically during low-season and keep only those workers with additional skills. In my case, thanks to the IT skills I acquired during the school-based part of the dual training, I can keep my job all year long.

Jorge, 34, graduate of the 'Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies' programme in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

There are three main types of apprenticeships

In a 2018 study¹, Cedefop has mapped 30 apprenticeships schemes across Europe and has identified three main types of apprenticeship schemes across Europe. Two distinct

¹ Apprenticeship schemes in European countries: A cross-nation overview. Cedefop 2018. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4166_en.pdf

purposes and functions, plus a hybrid one, are attached to apprenticeships and exist side by side:

- **Function group A:** Apprenticeships have a clear and established education and training function. They aim at providing people with full competence and capability in an occupation or trade. In this group the apprenticeship system is distinct from the school-based VET system. The apprenticeship qualification is unique to apprenticeship training and is a trademark on the labour market.
- **Function group B:** Apprenticeships have mixed education and employment functions and are a type of VET delivery within the formal VET system. In this group, apprenticeships share the same purpose and scope as other types of VET delivery and may replace or complement them, possibly to bring VET closer to the labour market. Generally, qualifications do not specify if achieved in apprenticeship or other types of VET delivery. The value of the qualification is given by its learning outcomes and not by the way the training is organised and delivered.
- **Function group C:** Apprenticeships are offered to young people (often those at risk of social exclusion) as a way of reaching a qualification by bringing them onto the labour market. Hybrid function group C combines elements of groups A and B but does not fully fall under either of the two.²

The course at the VET provider was primarily oriented around concrete work tasks. When we got to the work-based training in the company, we had at least some prior knowledge. At least I was not scared anymore of which wire to touch! Still, at first, my company tutor took me almost by the hand. But as time passed, I acquired enough autonomy to work autonomously in the company'.

Jorge, 34, graduate of the 'Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies' programme in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

High-quality apprenticeships require a high level of employer engagement

The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships emphasises the key role that employers play in achieving those goals. Inter alia, it stipulates that

- A substantial part of the apprenticeship, meaning at least half of it, should be carried out in the workplace, with the other half taking part in a VET school.
- A set of comprehensive learning outcomes defined in accordance with national legislation should be agreed by the employers and vocational education and training institutions and, where appropriate, trade unions.
- Apprentices should be paid or otherwise compensated, in line with national or sectoral requirements or collective agreements where they exist, taking into account arrangements on cost-sharing between employers and public authorities. (...) The host workplace should comply with relevant rules and regulations on working conditions, in particular health and safety legislation.
- In-company trainers and mentors should be designated and tasked to cooperate closely with vocational education and training institutions and teachers to provide guidance to apprentices and to ensure mutual and regular feed-back.¹³
- The educational value of apprenticeships should be safeguarded, and there should be a clear focus on long-term employability and lifelong learning rather than short-term employment goals.

² ibid

³ Criteria 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the [Recommendation](#). Cf:

- Apprenticeship schemes should be resilient to external pressures (e.g. be an integral part of the VET system and based on social dialogue and stable agreements between social partners).

Employer organisations have a positive view on the return-on-investment, yet, to bring both worlds closer together, support is needed for both employers as well as VET providers.

'There is a need for companies that are committed to collaborate with VET providers. In the renewable energies sector, we work with cutting-edge technology, not every VET provider is prepared for this. We have seen an increase in the number of technical VET teachers, which from our experience improves the quality of the training for students. They are much better prepared to enter the labour market'.

Ricardo, employer representative participating in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project.

Despite the demands this creates for the role of employers in vocational education and training, EU-level employer organisations (SME United, Business Europe) are positive about the return-on-investment and largely support work-based learning and apprenticeships. In their view, it is the best way to ensure a well-qualified workforce, especially in the crafts sector and for SMEs, as apprenticeships directly connect education and the labour market and facilitate the acquisition of the skills required by companies.⁴ Yet, employer organisations also underline the crucial role of support that is highly necessary for employers to engage in apprenticeships:

- In-company-teachers, trainers and mentors, especially in micro-, small and medium-sized companies, might need specific training related to teaching methods, and would benefit from extra resources to find the time needed for the training of apprentices, in addition to their job tasks;
- VET providers, on the other hand, might need financial support to acquire the latest technology that is used in real-life scenarios, and VET teachers need training to be able to operate the equipment and machinery.⁵

Another issue are image problems, which can be either related to apprenticeships as a form of VET training, or to specific crafts or sectors. This can result in low take-up of dual VET; where VET-providers as well as companies may register low interest among young people to start an apprenticeship. This is aggravated by gender bias.

The COVID-19 crisis puts an additional strain on employers, and puts the availability of apprenticeships at risk

'Dual training has brought stability to my working life and has served as an inspiration for other members of my family. For example, my sister just finished a dual training in administration'.

Jorge, 34, graduate of the 'Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies' programme in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

Employers need support to continue their engagement during the current pandemic situation and beyond. In April 2020, the Cedefop community of apprenticeship experts launched an internal consultation about ['How European countries are managing apprenticeships under the current global health emergency due to the COVID-19 crisis'](#). Responses show that due to the two learning venues involved in apprenticeships -

⁴ Liliane Volozinkis, Director for Social Affairs and Training Policy, SME United, at the joint [EAFa-ILO High Level Conference organised on 15-16 March 2021](#).

⁵ *ibid*

education and training institutions and companies – apprenticeships are put at risk by the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 is expected to have a strong impact on the availability of apprenticeships opportunities and, possibly – due to changing priorities – on the sustainability of many VET and apprenticeships reforms and initiatives that were on the agenda of countries before the crisis.

The European Commission priority is to support Member States to sustain the above-mentioned reforms and maintain a stable offer for apprenticeship placements to ensure opportunities for the young generation. It will be even more important to mobilise all available funding, including from ESF+ and the Recovery Plan for Europe. This is reflected in the [European Skills Agenda](#) which stresses the need for massive funding investment in skills, including as part of the 'Recovery Plan for Europe'. The ESF+ remains the main EU fund for investing in skills with a budget of €99.3 billion in the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. One of the suggestions from the European Commission online survey 'Fight against COVID-19⁶', launched in the framework of EU VET Week 2020, highlights the key role of ESF: *'ESF to fund educational technology, training for teachers and trainers, transfer of shared good practices in policy making and implementing e-learning, using technology in education and training. Support to boost cooperation between all sectors, public and private'*.⁷

Features of the Peer Review host country example: I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

'The key to taking advantage of work-based learning is to develop a positive attitude towards learning. The dual training gives you this opportunity and teachers are key to reinforcing that attitude through giving a sense of achievement. They play a key role in getting students to take the apprenticeships seriously'.

Jorge, graduate of the 'Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies' programme in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project

The host country Spain and its regions are well-known for having significantly invested in apprenticeships over the last years, establishing apprenticeships as an attractive individual learning pathway in the VET system. The Spanish regions have introduced a variety of apprenticeship schemes as an alternative way of VET delivery within the formal VET system, to bring VET closer to the labour market and enhance the employability of graduates. Those schemes would hence have mixed education and employment functions (cf. Type B above).

During the Peer Review, we will have the opportunity to learn about the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project. The project supports the development and implementation of dual learning schemes in the renewable energy sector. It is a good example to illustrate how dual learning can be beneficial to support the skills supply for the regional labour market as well as innovation in the education sector.

Securing skills supply in innovation sectors by providing training under real-life conditions in the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia Innovation project (La Rioja region, Spain)

The VET provider I.E.S Rey Don García in the Spanish La Rioja Region offers several dual training pathways in the Renewable Energies sector, including the Higher Degree

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/social/vocational-skills-week/fight-against-covid-19_en

⁷ Quality Apprenticeships: A need for ESF Transnational Cooperation. ESF Transnational Cooperation Network 'Learning and Skills', 12th meeting results and recommendations. Final paper: September 2020

Training Cycle in Renewable Energies (NQF 3).⁸ These courses have been implemented successfully over the last six years as Innovation Projects in Vocational Training, subsidized by the European Social Fund.

The Higher Degree of Renewable Energies was implemented in 2015. It was borne by an initiative of the teaching staff of the centre IES Rey Don García who realised the need of the sector, and by regional companies that offered to collaborate by welcoming the apprentices. Dual learning was regarded as an ideal setting as it combines the benefits of two learning venues: theoretical learning at the VET centre, and practical learning in the company.

The ESF funding is used in two ways:

- To finance the working hours of teachers working with the apprentices in the school.
- To finance activities related to the collaboration between company, teachers and apprentices, and to enhance mutual understanding and exchange.

During the two year-cycle, the apprentices go through sectors as diverse as wind, photovoltaic, electric power distribution. The course consists of several modules per year, that are shared between the VET-provider and the company as below:

First year:

- First period: from September to February. Full schedule at the VET provider.
- Second period: from March to June. 2 days a week at the VET provider and 3 days a week in the company.

Professional modules - 1 st year	Total hours	Annual hours in the center	Annual hours computable for academic purposes in the company
0668. Electrical Systems in power plants	190	135	55
0683. Management of the assembly of wind farms	200	135	65
0670. Remote control and automatisms	190	135	55
0671. Prevention of electrical risks	65	65	0
0682. Management of the assembly of photovoltaic solar installations	170	103	67
CAR025. Technical English	65	65	0
0687. Training and career guidance	90	90	0
Total hours	970	728	242

Second year:

- First period: from September to December. Full schedule at the VET provider.
- Second period: from January to May. 1 day a week at the VET provider and 4 days a week in the company.
- Third period: June. Full hours at the VET provider

⁸ Other courses include the Intermediate Degree Training Cycle in Electrical and Automatic Installations (NQF 2), as well as courses in traditional crafts, including carpentry/woodwork.

Professional modules - 2 nd year	Total hours	Annual hours in the center	Annual hours computable for academic purposes in the company
0680. Renewable energy systems	230	110	120
0681. Configuration of photovoltaic solar installations	230	110	120
0669. Electrical substations	195	100	95
0684. Operation and maintenance of wind farms	285	150	135
0688. Enterprise and entrepreneurship	60	60	0
0686. Renewable energy project	30	0	0
0689. On-the-job training			
Total hours	1.030	530	470

Graduates of the programme will be able to work as technicians in wind and solar installations (assembly and repair of wind farms and wind turbines, installer, operator and promoter of photovoltaic solar installations, incl. electrical sub-stations).

The programme accepts learners with diverse backgrounds. So far, 24 learners have graduated from the course, and 14 of them are fully employed. A typical example is Jorge, who decided to join the Higher Degree Training Cycle in Renewable Energies after losing his job in the construction sector due to the 2008 economic crisis. Following the training, he quickly found a job with a wind blade repair company in the region and has been in continuous employment ever since his graduation in 2017.

From the employer point of view, the advantage of hiring people with this degree is that they have followed a very specific training aimed at filling the gaps in this sector. For instance, Adventis, a Spanish wind energy company with branches in Morocco, Mexico and Romania, is in need of qualified workforce to meet the current EU renewable energy target for 2030 and to reach the 55% climate target⁹. The dual training course on renewable energies fitted very well in the company's need to train and recruit new staff.

Further practices to be explored

Three countries have volunteered to present their own ESF initiatives during the peer review: Greece, Italy and Lithuania.

In all three countries, the VET system is rather school-based, and apprenticeships as a form of learning in VET are the exception rather than the rule. Traditionally, in these countries, apprenticeships are regarded as a way of reaching a qualification by bringing young people into the labour market. As such, apprenticeships are used to combat early leaving from education and training, support disadvantaged young people (incl. NEET), or to support structurally disadvantaged regions.

In the three countries, ESF funding is used to support existing training initiatives, but also to extend the apprenticeship offer and to explore the interest of stakeholders and sectors that are not yet involved.

⁹ [La eólica hace saltar las alarmas en Europa: no se llegarán a cumplir los objetivos climáticos – El Periódico de la Energía | El Periódico de la Energía con información diaria sobre energía eléctrica, eólica, renovable, petróleo y gas, mercados y legislación energética. \(elperiodicodelaenergia.com\)](https://www.elperiodicodelaenergia.com/)

- **Greece:** Greece uses ESF funds to support their apprenticeship schemes, in particularly apprenticeship salaries and social security contributions. Key funding streams are:
 - According to Joint Ministerial Decision 26385/16-02-2017,¹⁰ apprentices of “Post-secondary year-apprentice class” are paid a salary equal to 75% on the minimum wage of the unskilled worker. Implementation of new law 4763/2020 will result in changing the above to 95% on the minimum wage of the unskilled worker.
 - ESF funding was used to co-financed O.P “OP Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020”, with the rest of the planned resources coming from the Ministry of Education budget. Employer charges are 9,30€ (including insurance contributions) and the 16,54 € subsidy is paid directly to the apprentice and is co-financed by the ESF.
 - Implementation of new law 4763/2020 will result in changing the above to EUR 23,43 provided by the ESF and EUR 9.30 (including insurance contributions) paid by the employer.
 - The employer’s contribution to the social security of the apprentice is equal to 37.78% of ½ of the actual wage the apprentice receives. All apprentices receive the same amount of compensation for the same amount of time spent at the workplace.
- **Italy:** the Italian Managing Authority launched two calls under ESF on work-based learning.
- **Lithuania:** Within the 2014 – 2020 programming period, Lithuania have launched actions to support work-based learning and apprenticeships. The funding was included under priority axis 9 'Educating the society and strengthening the potential of human resources' ('Support and promotion of practical skills'). The total amount of funding was roughly 1.83 million Euro. The maximum possible amount of funding for one project is EUR 300 000,00. Five projects are currently implementing, led by VET providers:
 - **Alytus Vocational Training Center:** Welder; Finisher (builder).
 - **Vocational Training Center Žirmūnai:** Chef; Massagist.
 - **Marijampolė Vocational Training Center:** Car Mechanic; Seller.
 - **Vilnius School of Automotive Mechanics and Business:** Autoelectrician; Mechanic.
 - **Mažeikiai Polytechnic School:** Welder; Technical maintenance business employee.

A new call for proposals is planned for the third quarter of 2021. Potential applicants are vocational training institutions and associations of vocational training institutions. Potential partners are public legal entities operating in the field of education, private legal entities, state and municipal enterprises. Partnership is obligatory with one or more companies that will provide practical training in the workplace for VET students. Eligible expenses include salary costs of teachers and staff, travel costs of teachers and students, costs for material and supply for practical training in the workplace, apprenticeship salaries, and insurance costs of employers.

Applications can be submitted and evaluated on an ongoing basis (as long as there are grants available).

¹⁰ Gazette: B’491 and Joint Ministerial Decision 07/158947/ΓΓ4/10-10-2019, Gazette: B’3892

Guiding questions

The Peer Review will explore several aspects of ESF Managing Authorities capacity to support quality and effective apprenticeships, including how they can help to:

- Increase the number of apprenticeships in innovative sectors, including green and digital sectors (in line with the Recovery Plan¹¹)
- Work with sectoral organisations to establish strategic partnerships
- Create the conditions for successful employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships
- Create partnerships to facilitate employer engagement (e.g. with sectoral organisations or employer organisations)
- Support the collaboration between employers and VET providers
- Support in-company teachers and trainers
- Develop new, or innovative solutions to maintain employer engagement and delivery of work-based learning and apprenticeship in the COVID-19 context

This will include a discussion of at the pros and cons on the different forms of ESF contributions to the apprenticeship systems, and the key lessons learnt, e.g. in view of evidence that ESF contributions had a leverage effect.

Concretely, the Peer Review will explore the following four key questions:

1. How can Managing Authorities help to create the conditions for successful employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships?
2. How can Managing Authorities support the creation of partnerships to facilitate employer engagement?
3. How can Managing Authorities support the attractiveness of work-based learning e.g. using funds to support participation of specific target groups? (This can include groups at risk of social exclusion as well as high-performing students that would otherwise enter Higher Education, or adult learners)
4. What new, or innovative solutions, have been developed to maintain employer engagement and delivery of work-based learning and apprenticeship delivery in the COVID-19 context?

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en