



Summary Report

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

The Peer Review provided participants with an opportunity to explore and exchange on efficient ways to manage European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programmes, calls and funding in the context of work-based learning and apprenticeships. The virtual Peer Review was hosted by La Rioja, Spain, and attended by 18 participants, who represented managing authorities (MA), intermediate bodies (IB) and project promoters¹.

The Peer Review explored how Spain and its regions have used ESF funding to improve the quality of dual vocational education and training (VET) in the Spanish education system, including through enhanced employer engagement. In particular, the Peer Review looked at 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 also looked at how ESF funding is used to support employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships, including through financial support and incentives, and support to strategic partnerships. The Peer Review additionally discussed how the ESF can be used to secure the continuity of reforms and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. The Peer Review included inputs from Italy, Greece and Lithuania to explore different types of ESF actions around employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships.

Work-based learning and apprenticeships have been a policy priority at EU level over the last decade. There is considerable evidence that dual learning is effective in helping people into sustainable employment. However, there are different understandings of the terms. For this event, work-based learning was 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. In addition, 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.

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 have mixed education and employment functions.

¹ Representatives of the European Commission were joined by managing authorities/intermediate body representatives from Belgium-Flanders, Czech, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia and Spain (national level and from the La Rioja region).

Using ESF funding, the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia VET provider has developed several dual training pathways in the renewable energy sector and worked with employers to develop innovative research projects. The Higher Degree of Renewable Energies has been implemented since 2015. The project was born by an initiative of the teaching staff of the centre I.E.S Rey Don García who realised that there was a need by the sector and companies in the region for trained workers and apprentices. Companies within the region offered to collaborate and were able to host 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. 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 different companies, relevant to the topic. Learners get the opportunity for several months of work-based learning in each sector through three placements (one per sector).

In contrast, the managing authority in Italy has launched two calls for proposals, in 2017 and 2018, on work-based learning. The calls target VET colleges (ITS, in Italy) and Italian high schools to provide work-based learning to students in the last three years of schooling or who are in VET colleges. The calls for proposals provide funding for four types of work-based learning:

- activities concerning the production chain;
- establishment of networks;
- interregional work-based learning experiences; and
- work-based learning placements abroad.

The activities have an overall budget of EUR 190 million. The managing authority has an agreement in place with the Federation of Italian employers and the Italian chambers of commerce. They also involve social partners through the design of the calls for proposals.

A different approach has been taken in Greece where they have used ESF funding to support their pilot post-secondary year apprenticeship programme since 2016. The programme is available to students who have a secondary education diploma, who are generally aged over 18 years old. The programme is led by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The approach has involved social partners from the start, and they have had several meetings with large companies to promote and secure their involvement in the programme. The apprenticeship programme was introduced to boost popularity of VET, as university tends to be the first choice for many young learners although there is a need for trained, skilled staff with VET qualifications.

In Lithuania the managing authority has published two small calls for proposals to promote employer engagement in two-year apprenticeship programmes. To apply, VET training institutes must be in a partnership with an employer. Five VET schools have been awarded funding, and the projects deal with sectors including welding, construction, catering and the automotive sector. The ESF funds are used to cover:

- learners' allowances, which are a maximum of 40% of the national minimum wage;
- travel;
- accommodation (if needed);
- insurance; and

- other expenses.

Within the programme, identified staff within the employer attend a 'train-the-trainers' course.

The rest of the meeting was spent on comparing experiences and discussing how to put ESF funding to good use in this context. The examples included in this report represent the discussions from the Peer Review, and present approaches undertaken by other countries who were not present during the Peer Review.

How can managing authorities help to create the conditions for successful employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships?

How can managing authorities and intermediate bodies develop activities so that they are in line with the labour market developments?

Managing authorities and intermediate bodies can, for instance, work closely with VET providers, employers and social partners to develop calls for proposals that are in line with labour market needs. To do this, managing authorities and intermediate bodies can encourage partnerships between VET centres and employers that meet the current and future needs of the labour market.

In La Rioja, the intermediate body has used a bottom-up approach to support work-based learning and apprenticeship programmes. Teachers from the I.E.S Rey Don Garcia VET centre identified a skills gap within the renewable energy sector (wind, solar and energy distribution) spoke with employers to find out more about their needs as it was a growing sector within the region but there was a lack of skilled workers in the region. Together, they contacted the public authorities and intermediate body about the need to develop an upskilling programme that addressed the sector's needs. The idea has resonated with the wider labour market needs and need for reskilling and upskilling as the national unemployment rate for those under 25 years old is almost 40%.

The La Rioja intermediate body provided funding to I.E.S Rey Don Garcia VET centre to work with employers to provide a two-year work-based learning programme. During the programme, students learn about the theory at the VET centre and undertake practical work experience in different companies, relevant to the specific topic that they are covering. Employers are engaged at all stages of the project lifecycle as they are involved in selection interviews for the students as well as the final assessment of each student. This helps the employer to become familiar with the students before they may wish to offer them employment. Employers are not obliged to offer employment to students, but in practice the students often get an offer from one of the employers they met during the placements, or from other participating employers in the sector, as the skills acquired are in high demand in the region. It is worth noting that the programme has so far trained three cohorts of students and all of those who have completed the course have entered employment.

What is the role of trainers and teachers in companies and how can ESF support teachers and trainers?

The broad variety of work-based learning and apprenticeships systems and schemes across Europe leads to differences in the understanding of the role of in-company teachers, trainers and mentors. In some countries, the company 'mentor' role is defined by training regulations; in other countries/ schemes, the role is more informal.

As a minimum, the company 'mentor' role includes:

- the practical training of the learners at the workplace

- an informal assessment at the end
- developing learning plans and learning outcomes (in some countries)
- monitoring the correct completion of the training booklet (in some countries)
- carrying out a formal assessment of 'their' students (in some countries).

Successful models tend to be based on close collaboration between VET provider and company. A clear allocation of roles and responsibilities between company 'mentors' and school 'tutors' is also important so that both sides can learn from each other. In the most successful approaches, VET teachers and employers have a close collaboration from the start, and they work towards a holistic, student-centred approach. In the example in La Rioja, each student is assigned a dedicated in-company mentor in each of the three companies they get to know, as well as a mentor/tutor within the VET school who coordinates the communication with the in-company mentors. There is regular contact with each other and the assessment of the work-based learning is counted into the final assessment.

In Belgium, dual VET is relatively new. VET schools, employers and sector organisations have consultations early in the planning process and VET students have a right to a mentor, no matter the size of their host employer. Sector-specific organisations are responsible for training mentors in the companies within their sector as they have specialist knowledge of the working conditions and labour market needs. This can lead to specialised training and variations in the content and quality and the managing authority.

In comparison, in Lithuania, there are two defined roles as tutors are based within VET schools while mentors are within companies and it is important for each of them to understand each other's perspectives so that they can develop the work-based learning programme from a holistic perspective. It was recognised that school-based tutors need to understand the requirements of employers and a scheme was introduced for VET tutors to be able to gain experience within the private sector, and thus develop their understanding of employers' needs. In addition, the training for company mentors is funded and organised by ESF and the Lithuanian Ministry of Education.

Support for in-company teachers, trainers and mentors is usually required, and covered by the ESF, in two aspects. Firstly, some managing authorities (such as in Lithuania) provide financial support for companies, especially SMEs, with regards to:

- financial compensation for training efforts;
- wage substitution for staff that cannot be fully utilised by the company due to training obligations; and
- financial compensation for apprenticeship remuneration.

Secondly, some managing authorities also provide financial support for tailored training for in-company teachers, trainers and mentors. For example, this can cover training related to pedagogical skills needed to work with young learners and learners who have additional needs such as students with disabilities or those who may be at risk of social exclusion. By providing training for in-company teachers, trainers and mentors, the latter can develop the soft skills required to work with young people as well as up-to-date information about the labour market. Well-trained in-company trainers, teachers and mentors may therefore be more competent at the job, be more motivated and better equipped to support students through their work-based learning and apprenticeships.

How can managing authorities help to secure the involvement of SMEs in work-based learning and apprenticeships?

In many regions and countries, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) make up a large percentage of the labour market. Their involvement is important so work-based learning and apprenticeship programmes can incorporate their specific needs and so that they can become more familiar with potential recruits. In many countries, such as in Belgium-Flanders and Finland, SMEs – particularly very small enterprises - may be less likely to participate in activities as the financial and administrative burden is high and they may not be in the financial position to offer training instead of billable activities. In contrast, in countries with very mature apprenticeship systems like Germany and Austria, SMEs are the main promoters and beneficiaries of dual VET.

Financial incentives to cover activities such as training or wage subsidies are useful to attract SMEs. However, managing authorities could also work with employers to promote involvement in work-based learning and apprenticeships within the context of corporate social responsibility and as a way to work with the next generation of workers.

How can in-company teachers and trainers be supported to train young learners in behavioural/motivational aspects related to the job (soft skills)?

The training offered to in-company teachers and trainers should cover technical content as well as communication skills, interpersonal and pedagogical skills that are specific to working with young people without prior work experience. For example, this can include aspects such as time-keeping; dealing with difficult situations; and age-specific learning processes. Such ideas have been captured by the managing authority in Finland as there is no overall system to train in-company teachers and trainers.

In addition, there can also be an individual who works closely with the in-company teachers and trainers and provides support to them to provide high-quality apprenticeships and work-based learning. For example, in Spain there is a 'prospector' - a person who knows the students, inspects the employer to assess their potential for a high-quality apprenticeship or work-based learning experience, and supports the in-company teacher and trainer. In Belgium-Flanders, some schools ask their students to evaluate their workplace as well, which often provides new insights and perspectives for employers. This close collaboration between the VET provider and employer is important to support the in-company teacher or trainer, and the overall quality of the experience.

How can Managing Authorities support the creation of partnerships to facilitate employer engagement?

How can managing authorities strategically work with other actors to develop joint calls for proposals that are relevant to labour market needs?

Managing authorities can work with other ministries and labour market actors to develop a greater understanding of labour market needs, with a view to using the information to develop joint calls for proposals that facilitate employer engagement.

There are examples of managing authorities that coordinate with (other) ministries so that they can develop joined-up approaches and synergies. Such coordination and professional relationships can take time to develop. For example, in Lithuania, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports has worked together with other ministries to develop calls for proposals, which provide an attractive financial support package to employers that would like to engage in work-based learning. This collaboration took approximately a year to establish before any activities took place. This can be even longer, especially if there is

a traditionally competitive environment between ministries, rather than a culture of collaboration.

Managing authorities reported that they see benefit in working with relevant labour market actors to develop knowledge of the labour market needs and current work-based learning provision, and its' challenges. Such labour market actors include:

- schools
- VET institutes
- employer representatives – either individual employers or chambers of commerce
- sector representatives
- trade unions

For example, the Italian managing authority engages with national social partners via an open national consultation whereas Lithuania engages in a year-long consultation with employer associations and trade unions, as this balances the interests of stakeholders. In some countries, such as Greece, there are changes taking place to involve social partners within the development of VET policy and activities around work-based learning under ESF. The current VET reforms in Greece will give social partners, such as the Greek General Confederation for Labour, a role within the national education coordination body, and they will be consulted more systematically. By consulting with labour market actors in the preparation of calls for proposals, managing authorities can develop calls for proposals that are in line with labour market needs and wider social context. It can also raise awareness of the calls for proposals within the VET and employer community.

Managing authorities can stipulate in the calls for proposals conditions for involvement for certain organisations. For example, in Lithuania there is a requirement that VET schools and employers have established a partnership and jointly submit a proposal.

How can Managing Authorities support the attractiveness of work-based learning e.g. using funds to support participation of specific target groups?

The negative image of VET and apprenticeships in certain countries and certain sectors remains an important challenge for managing authorities. By launching calls for proposals around work-based learning, managing authorities can contribute to wider actions to support the attractiveness of work-based learning. This can include supporting groups at risk of social exclusion to take up and complete apprenticeships and work-based learning; supporting actions that can contribute to improving the image and enhancing attractiveness of VET and certain sectors; and supporting gender parity in specific sectors.

How can groups at risk of social exclusion be supported to take up apprenticeships and work-based learning?

Groups at risk of social exclusion can include, amongst others: learners that have learning difficulties or other barriers to their learning and participation such as:

- persons with mental or physical illness
- persons with disabilities
- migrants
- young people that were previously not in employment, education or training (NEETs)

Managing authorities can support their participation in apprenticeships and work-based learning through supporting calls for proposals, providing financial support and exploring the possibilities of pre-employment pathways for those furthest from the labour market.

In terms of calls for proposals, managing authorities can launch calls that aim to increase participation of certain groups such as NEETs. In Slovakia, the managing authority is planning a call to target NEETs as VET providers typically find them hard to reach. By reaching out to civil society stakeholders, the Slovak managing authority has built a national network of organisations implementing upskilling pathways. They are undertaking a one-year consultation process, including holding regular meetings, to define the exact target group, activities and outcome indicators.

Other managing authorities, such as Finland and Italy, use funding to provide additional support to individual learners which is flexible to their individual needs. For example, in Italy disadvantaged learners are provided with two tutors – one from the education provider, and one from the employer – as well as additional assigned support hours.

It is worth noting that some groups at risk of social exclusion, such as NEETs, are likely to require more preparation before entering the workplace during their training. In Belgium-Flanders, a 'pre-placement pathway' was created to prepare young people who are not yet ready for a full dual learning experience, for example young people who are NEET. However, many employers have had a negative reaction to this approach as they prefer to receive young people who are ready for the dual learning system, and who do not need additional time (or costs) for preparatory training.

There is room for managing authorities to work further with youth organisations, public employment services and NGOs, who will have access to (outreach) and in-depth knowledge of groups at risk of social exclusion (including NEETs), as well as employers.

What can be done to improve the image and enhance the attractiveness of VET and certain sectors, so that learners (including high-performing students that would otherwise enter Higher Education) are more motivated to take up apprenticeships and work-based learning?

There is a great deal of variation across countries when considering the attractiveness of VET. For example, in countries such as Austria and Germany there is a higher take up of work-based learning and apprenticeships. There are often negative misconceptions about VET within society that are not in line with the latest labour market information and there is a lack of knowledge about modern high-quality VET systems, including among parents.

Within some countries, ESF funding has been used to facilitate national VET reforms. In 2015 VET was made compulsory as part of the final years of compulsory education within Italy. Work-based learning is provided to develop students' transversal skills and an experience within a work setting. It was originally foreseen that students would need to cover between 200 to 400 hours within 3 years, however this has been reduced in recent years as education providers and employers found it difficult to implement as they did not have the expertise, equipment or networks. It was the responsibility of schools to facilitate the matching process between learners and employers and employers' associations, however this was time and resource intensive for schools. In addition, there were some regional differences as it was easier to match schools and employers in the north of Italy, as the south of Italy is predominantly composed of small and medium enterprises, and not as economically successful as the north of Italy.

ESF funding has also been used to improve the image and enhance the attractiveness of certain sectors in several countries with mixed success. For example, in Belgium-Flanders ESF funds were used to experiment with work-based learning as part of wider reforms in the education system. All sectors were invited to submit a project proposal. In one project, the managing authority worked closely with the textiles industry as the sector had a skills shortage and within Flanders there was an outdated view of the sector. However, in this project a much lower number of applications were received than had been expected. Less

interest was received due to outdated views of VET, including parents' holding negative views of VET and career prospects, and even academic teachers not being aware of the possibilities and positive aspects of VET. Wider activities are being undertaken by the Flemish government to improve the image of VET. In contrast, the Italian managing authority has contributed to a national level VET project to promote work-based learning within the metal industry. The project involved around 50 organisations from 18 regions over a two-year project, but activities were curtailed by the pandemic.

On a smaller scale, activities can also be undertaken to support individual employers, usually larger employers, to address any staff shortages. Managing authorities may wish to take ideas from activities that are not funded by ESF to consider the types of support that could be provided by ESF in the future. For example, in Belgium-Flanders, the postal service BPost were experiencing staff shortages. They collaborated with an adult education provider to deliver work-based learning to reach people who are far away from the labour market. The approach integrated multiple services, including the public employment services and driving schools, since the employee training included a driver's licence. The positive experience has raised interest for adult VET in other sectors and could be used for awareness-raising activities.

Lastly, there is further work that can be undertaken to promote the outcomes of VET so that it is more attractive to learners and potential employers. The collection of data can be useful to show the advantages of work-based learning to specific audiences, such as parents/potential learners and employers. In Greece, they are introducing a VET school of excellence which will have two observatories – one to monitor inequalities and one to monitor learning pathways for students. It is hoped that the observatories will collect data so that information on trends, case studies and success stories can be used to inform and influence change of mindsets about work-based learning.

More widely, managing authorities can also collaborate with employers to develop national or regional communications campaigns using radio, TV and social media. The communications activities can showcase success stories of previous work-based learning and apprenticeship graduates who are now on an attractive and established career path. Such activities can help to correct negative perceptions of VET and contribute to recruitment drives.

What activities could ESF funding be used for to support the attractiveness of VET?

The discussions during the Peer Review showed that ESF funding is primarily being used to support reforms in VET (including building partnerships); piloting approaches; providing subsidies for students and employers; and providing funding for specialist equipment by VET providers.

Firstly, certain countries have used ESF funding to support specific actions or aspects within the roll out of new programmes or reforms around VET policy. For example, ESF funding has underpinned several aspects of the new Italian approach to work-based learning including funding the establishment of new VET colleges. The new VET colleges are central points to the practice, and they bring together schools and employers. They also offer more flexible learning pathways as students can move onto university education after they have completed their studies at VET colleges. In addition, a large proportion of ESF funding has been used to provide mobility opportunities to students, inter-regional and to other European countries. These mobility periods are a way of making work-based learning pathways more attractive to learners and to parents.

Secondly, some countries have used ESF funding to pilot programmes involving employers and new pedagogical approaches. ESF funding can support new, or innovative, approaches to working with employers to deliver work-based learning before they are further rolled

out. For example, in Finland most of the activities under VET are financed by national means and ESF funding is used to develop and enhance programmes within VET studies and for trialling new pedagogical approaches. In addition, in La Rioja ESF funding has been used to support the piloting of new VET programmes (such as the approach taken by the I.E.S Don Garcia VET provider).

Thirdly, ESF funding is also being used to provide subsidies and incentives to students, employers and VET providers to attract them to apprenticeships and work-based learning. In countries where work-based learning is newer ESF funding can be used to attract employers – and students – to take part. For example, in Greece their apprenticeship programme is relatively new. Employers receive funding from ESF as wage subsidies for apprenticeships. In other countries, certain sectors have well established VET programmes and there is a need to use ESF funding as incentives to VET staff in the public sector to ensure a high quality of teaching. In Czechia, the automotive industry has been successful in attracting students to undertake VET programmes, particularly Skoda and Volkswagen, who have their own funding and are able to provide higher quality education than other VET schools. The Czech government has implemented a national campaign to make the VET sector more attractive to young generations with limited success. Hence, there is a need to use ESF funding in VET education to pay higher salaries to VET providers to improve the quality of the education.

In this respect, some managing authorities also noted that it is important for ESF funding to be used to provide VET centres with up-to-date equipment. This is important to ensure that learners can develop skills using equipment that is similar, if not the same, as the equipment that they will use in the workplace. Having the latest, or at least modern, equipment can contribute to raising the attractiveness of work-based learning and apprenticeships. A small number of managing authorities and intermediate bodies are providing funding in this way, for example in La Rioja they have provided funding to VET centres so that they can install the latest tools and equipment for their learners. Lastly, ESF funding could also be used for groups of SMEs to provide joined-up upskilling activities. For example, a group of SMEs could identify that they have the same need to provide training, or upskilling.

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?

What sectors have been hit the hardest by the impact of COVID-19, and what was the effect on their ability and motivation to train young apprentices? How have learners been affected?

Though there were slightly different phases and timings of the intensity of the COVID-19 outbreak within European regions, apprentices, including vulnerable young people, were hard hit across Europe.

Hard hit sectors include tourism, hospitality (hotels, catering, gastronomy) and health and social care services as those sectors were closed during national lockdowns. Close contact services, such as hairdressing and physiotherapy were also impacted by closures during different phases of the pandemic. In many countries, schools/VET centres and companies were partly or completely closed.

The closures across schools/VET centres and companies had an impact on the delivery of work-based learning and apprenticeships as learning was interrupted (in the best case) or not delivered at all as it was not viable to offer work-based learning experiences in alternative settings. In many countries ESF-funded activities were suspended or cancelled. In Greece, the 2020 cohort of apprentices were cancelled. In Italy, the managing authority

undertook a survey with funded projects to understand the impact of the pandemic. Some work-based learning mobility projects were able to adapt by undertaking mobility within a different region within Italy, but other projects were not able to start. The managing authority is now working with the projects that have not started to see if they would like to continue or close their projects. The remaining funding may be used to launch a call in September to look at new ideas on work-based learning and digital learning.

Have digital solutions been put in place? How can these solutions be taken forward in the future?

In many cases distance or online-learning was offered to some students, but it was not possible in all apprenticeships as it depended on the sector and if the employer was able to support distance learning. In sectors such as manufacturing, catering and hairdressing, for example, online learning was not necessarily possible. For some apprentices, this meant that their apprenticeships were suspended, not started, or had to be ended early. In other countries, it took time to set up digital learning experiences, which means the continuity of learning was interrupted and learners were not able to progress.

Digital solutions proved to be problematic for apprentices and learners that were in vulnerable situations or did not have access to digital learning. This was a challenge across Europe across different education levels and in some countries, such as Czechia, national-level efforts were necessary to raise funds to provide IT equipment to learners. Certain groups such as Roma communities, who may not have internet access, and learners from large families or multi-generational households, where there may have been limited devices/access to computers, were particularly affected.

Overall, the pandemic has brought digital learning to the forefront and it prompted some countries to reconsider their curricula. For example, in Estonia, Italy and Slovakia reviews and reforms are on-going around curricula development to account for digital learning delivery.

How can the ESF help to mitigate the impact of COVID-19?

Going forward, ESF can be used to fund programmes that help those at risk of social exclusion (i.e. school leavers with no work experience) so that they can gain labour market experience and integrate into the labour market with dedicated active labour market programmes.

Several countries are considering launching calls to support learners who are at risk of social exclusion, for example graduates that have not yet entered the labour market or those who were unable to finish their work-based learning studies. For example, Czechia and Slovakia are both planning to use ESF funds to develop active labour market programmes that provide target groups with a lack of experience in the workplace (such as recent graduates) with opportunities to gain practical skills so that they can integrate into the labour market.

Some countries were not able to fully utilise their budgets due to cancelled activities. These countries are planning to launch calls for proposals addressing emerging issues around integration into the labour market and the future of work. In Slovakia, the managing authority is going to launch a call for proposals later in 2021 using the remaining funds under the current programming period. The call for proposals will target the third sector (particularly NGOs) to undertake outreach and social work with young people who are not in employment, education or training to help them (re-)enter the labour market. The anticipated result is that participants will enter employment, traineeships or apprenticeships. In contrast, the Italian managing authority is considering a future call around supporting VET students to prepare for agile working² and the new characteristics

² Agile working aims to create more responsive, efficient and effective organisations based on balanced, motivated, innovative and productive teams and individuals. It brings people, processes, connectivity and technology, time and place together to find the most appropriate and effective way of working to carry out a task. (Source: <https://www.agile.org.uk/what-is-agile-working/>).

of the labour market. Funded projects will help to equip young people for the future labour market, or for their future job search.

Importantly, future solutions will need close cooperation between employers, VET providers, youth organisations and public employment services. Future ESF-funded activities should support the development of employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships so that learners are ready for the post-pandemic work environment.

Summary

It can be concluded that ESF managing authorities can be key players in developing and strengthening partnerships with employers to support the development, quality and attractiveness of work-based learning and apprenticeships at the national and local level . Specifically, managing authorities can create activities that overcome employers' barriers to involvement, which may have reduced their involvement in work-based learning and apprenticeships in the past. The ESF can be a highly valuable instrument to support the development of new and innovative approaches, support learners, engage new sectors and enhance the quality and attractiveness of work-based learning. Examples have shown that strategic collaboration with labour market stakeholders is of great added value.

It was discussed at the Peer Review that ESF funding has proven useful to:

- Support awareness raising for the opportunities of VET and work-based learning in particular;
- Support cooperation between stakeholders at national and local level;
- Provide financial support and incentives to companies to facilitate their engagement in work-based learning;
- Help to develop tailored training for in-company trainers and mentors;
- Support VET providers and VET teachers to stay abreast of innovations and technological developments in their sector;
- Help put in place new qualification schemes in innovative sectors, e.g. by funding pilot projects or innovative approaches);
- Help develop work-based learning schemes that are closely tailored to the needs of the regional/local labour market;
- Help with the implementation of national VET reforms;
- Support groups at risk of social exclusion to enter and complete work-based learning and apprenticeships through tailored support; and
- Help to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on apprenticeships, e.g. ensuring the continuity of initiatives and reforms.

Managing authorities' role can go far beyond providing financial incentives. They can act as a broker between key actors in the labour market and the education and training sectors. For instance, they can facilitate the collaboration between public employment services, sector organisations, education and training providers by sharing knowledge and connections. In that sense, they can act as 'learning organisations', testing what works and what doesn't, communicating about lessons learnt and promoting successful and innovative approaches to help achieve higher quality in work-based learning and apprenticeships.

Further information and resources

[Council Recommendation for European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships \(2018\)](#)

[Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience \(2020\)](#)

[European Alliance for Apprenticeships](#)

[CEDEFOP 'VET in Europe' database](#)

[Quality Apprenticeships: a need for ESF Transnational Cooperation \(2020\)](#)