



Supporting work-based learning and apprenticeships through ESF+: Concepts, tools and practices

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform

Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills

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Contact: Raphaëlle Bolognini

E-mail: Raphaelle.Bolognini@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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1. Introduction

This document was drafted for ESF+ managing authorities, intermediate bodies, and non-governmental organisations (NGO). It presents information on concepts, tools, and practices which can support stakeholders in using European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to support the quality, availability and efficiency of work-based learning and apprenticeships and enhance employer engagement. Work-based learning and apprenticeships takes place at two learning venues: schools and the workplace. This document emphasises the need of close collaboration between both sectors and underlines the role of ESF+ in developing processes and partnerships. Managing authorities and intermediate bodies are encouraged to enable strategic responses to calls for proposals e.g., through stakeholders' consortia representing the two learning venues.

1.1. What are the key priorities and objectives of the ESF+?

In recent years, the European Commission has emphasised the social dimension of the European Union, including through an action plan for the delivery of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Pillar is comprised of a set of twenty principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. It underlines the need to support citizens so they can meet challenges from societal technological and economic developments. The funding to enable the delivery of the Social Pillar is provided through the long-term EU budget for 2021-2027, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which includes updating the long established European Social Funds (ESF) with the introduction of ESF+.

ESF+ is the main European instrument for investing in people. Merging four previous funds¹, the ESF+ addresses three priority areas, each with a set of specific objectives.

¹ 2014-20: the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI).

Figure 1. ESF+ priority areas and related objectives

Social inclusion	Education and skills	Employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active inclusion • Socio-economic integration of third-country nationals • Socio-economic integration of marginalised communities • Equal access to quality services and modernising social protection systems • Social integration of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion • Addressing material deprivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better education and training systems at all levels • Equal access to quality education and training • Upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to quality employment for all, including youth employment • Modernising labour market institutions and services • Gender-balanced labour market participation • Adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change

To respond to country- and region-specific needs, managing authorities and intermediate bodies dedicate money to projects run by a range of public and private institutions. As the national public bodies designated to promoting and supporting partnership in Operational Programmes² managing authorities and intermediate bodies are responsible for selecting projects and monitoring the use of funds.

2. Work-based learning and apprenticeships are a priority in European education and training policy

In many countries, vocational education and training (VET) is traditionally mainly school-based. Over the past decade, the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) has promoted 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 through a range of large-scale policy initiatives in the 2010s.



What is understood to be work-based learning and apprenticeships in an EU context?

² European Commission (2020) Glossary - Operational Programmes, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/o/operational-programme

Work-based learning is understood as any type of learning that happens in the workplace, in initial (vocational education and training, VET) training, in an internship, during a career, in continuing (VET) training, and in other contexts³.

Apprenticeships is 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 contracts are often based on a tripartite agreement that is part of the social dialogue in the country⁴.

Following the financial crisis and the ensuing economic downturn in the past decade, apprenticeship sparked interest among policymakers across the EU Member States. 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'.

The 2020 '[Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#)' presents a comprehensive 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.

Because of the above-mentioned EU policy initiatives, policymakers across the EU have significantly invested in the quality, availability, and efficiency of apprenticeships in recent years. Across Europe, many new work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes emerged; with a variety of different purposes, including enhancing youth employment, short-term skills development, social inclusion, or offering second-chance pathways for low-skilled adults, VET dropouts and other vulnerable groups.

Due to the broad variety of current implementation across Europe, work-based learning and apprenticeships can contribute to several objectives of ESF+.

³ Terminology of European education and training policy: A selection of 130 key terms. Cedefop 2014. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/4117>

⁴ *ibid*

3. Work-based learning and apprenticeships can contribute to achieving the objectives of ESF+

3.1. Work-based learning and apprenticeships can help to improve access to quality employment for all

Work-based learning and apprenticeships are commonly regarded as a successful way to facilitate the transition of a learner between education and the labour market. Therefore, they feed into the ESF+ priority area 'employment', in particular the objective *Access to quality employment for all, including youth employment*.

Evidence shows that graduates from vocational apprenticeships and work-based learning schemes that fully prepare learners for an occupation indeed have a comparative advantage over graduates from similar, school-based schemes and unskilled workers. Between 2015 and 2018, [Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training](#) implemented a multi-faceted research project on the 'Changing nature and role of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe'. The purpose of the project was to investigate the challenges and opportunities for the VET sector in the EU countries. The research paper '[Education and labour market outcomes for vocational education and training graduates in different types of VET systems in Europe](#)' shows that vocational upper-secondary education – particularly apprenticeships and work-based learning – is highly effective in facilitating transitions into employment: vocational education and training can protect labour market entrants against unemployment and unskilled work (the 'safety net effect')⁵.

In countries with dual apprenticeship systems⁶, positive impacts on the labour market entry of vocational training graduates are measurable. The combination of the two learning venues – school and workplace – allows for a combination of theoretical learning and practical experience and brings about real added value for the learner. Graduates transition from training to employment easily, and, throughout their career, seem to be better protected against unemployment and unskilled jobs than graduates from school-based paths. Hence, 'dual apprenticeship systems' and combined work- and school-based vocational secondary education appear to have a long-term 'safety net function'⁷.

In countries that use work-based learning and apprenticeships with a short-term employment goal, work-based learning schemes are often designed as a tool to support (young) people finding a job. Experiences from the Youth Guarantee show that such measures – for instance in form of traineeships – are observed to have positive effects in the short-term, especially for young people who are considered vulnerable⁸.

Other countries have strengthened the social inclusion function of apprenticeships and have used it as a tool to successfully integrate vulnerable groups - such as young people NEET

⁵ Measured as avoiding the risk of unemployment/low-skilled employment at labour market entrance

⁶ The term 'dual apprenticeship system' refers to two things: 1) apprenticeships are part of the education and training system, hence are a regular form of VET 2) learning takes place at two learning venues: at school/at the workplace.

⁷ 'Education and labour market outcomes for vocational education and training graduates in different types of VET systems in Europe. Cedefop 2017. Page 6-8

⁸ Activation measures for young people in vulnerable situations – experiences from the ground. European Commission 2018. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20212&langId=en>

or migrants and refugees - in the labour market⁹. This may include the development of measures that address 'special needs'.



Using ESF to improve access to quality employment for all

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.

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.

In **Slovakia**, the managing authority is planning a call to target young people not in employment, education or training (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.

3.2. Work-based learning and apprenticeships can help to improve the quality of education and training systems

Work-based learning and apprenticeships have an obvious relation to the ESF+ priority area of education and skills, and the objective of developing '*Better education and training systems at all levels*'.

With quality criteria set out in the 2018 [Council Recommendation on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships \(EFQEA\)](#), EU member states are invited to ensure that apprenticeship schemes are responsive to labour market needs and provide long-term benefits to both employers and apprentices. The EFQEA sets out quality criteria related to the learning and working conditions of apprentices as well as for systemic framework conditions related to the education and training system: Apprenticeships should be available as a regular VET pathway, leading to a qualification. The learner 'alternates' between two learning venues (VET school and company). Learning outcomes to be acquired at the two learning venues are pre-defined through training regulations, and regularly reviewed and updated in dialogue with sector organisations. Apprentices are usually contractually bound to their training company and contracts are often based on a tripartite agreement that is part of the social dialogue in the country¹⁰.

Work-based learning and apprenticeships that prioritise short-term goals such as labour market integration, can result in 'light' versions of apprenticeships, with limited requirements as to training content, especially for the workplace part, and little, if any, participation of social partners in their design. This may undermine the value stakeholders attribute to apprenticeships and weaken the employability of graduate apprentices in the long term.

⁹ Cedefop Briefing note: Apprenticeships: A pill for every ill? Cedefop, March 2021. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/9155#group-downloads>

¹⁰ Cf: EFQEA

From the employer perspective, this means that apprenticeships may no longer be regarded a useful response to companies' skills needs in the longer term.

Where apprenticeships are primarily used as a route into work rather than further study, attention needs to be given to long-term effects: without opportunities for progression, such 'integration' pathways can restrict the range of occupational opportunities available in the long-term (e.g., in any other company than the one they were trained in). Consequently, the extent to which apprenticeships lead to skilled positions on the occupational ladder and provides career prospects as well as access to further education is an important indicator for its attractiveness.

A decision for a certain training pathway should not 'divert' young people from further (tertiary) education. The quality of education and training systems benefits from progression routes between different types and levels of education and training. To ensure long-term career opportunities and sustainable employment prospects, apprenticeships and work-based learning should be embedded in National Qualification Frameworks, so that they grant access to further training¹¹.



Using the ESF to improve the quality of education and training systems in Italy and Lithuania

In **Italy**, the managing authority 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, to provide opportunities for them to get work experience and acquire labour-market relevant skills. 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.

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

3.3. Work-based learning and apprenticeships can facilitate upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning

As stated above, apprenticeship schemes are more successful in the long run when they are embedded in National Qualification Frameworks and are a steppingstone for lifelong learning. Ideally, graduates should be able to progress towards further learning opportunities or change jobs within their sector or beyond. Where this is the case, work-based learning and apprenticeships can also help to achieve the ESF+ objective of *Upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning for all*.

¹¹ *ibid*

Many of the countries that offer apprenticeships as a distinct mode of VET delivery¹², have introduced a range of inclusive policies broadening its purpose in recent years: for instance, they have been opening up apprenticeship, traditionally anchored in initial VET, to adult learners, as an opportunity to achieve a qualification later in life, thereby creating upskilling and reskilling opportunities that lead to better chances on the labour market later in life, and for people with low or no (recognised) qualifications¹³.

Flexible transitions between the world of education and training and the world of work should also be possible. Some countries offer apprenticeships as further training at higher education level (higher VET)¹⁴, to account for the rising demand for workers with a high level of technical skills, e.g., due to technological progress and increasing automation and digitalisation.



Using the ESF to facilitate upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning in Greece

In **Greece**, ESF funding has been supporting the piloting of a post-secondary apprenticeship programme since 2016. 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. 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.

4. ESF+ can support the quality, availability and efficiency of work-based learning and apprenticeships

As shown in the previous section, there is a broad range of work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes with different purposes. When preparing Calls for Proposals, ESF+ managing authorities and intermediate bodies should carefully consider the purpose of the intervention they are planning.

For instance, it should be asked what national stakeholder attitudes and goals concerning apprenticeship are. Do they see it as a VET subsystem supplying specific qualifications, a real alternative to other forms of VET, where vocational training fully prepares learners for an occupation? Or is it merely a way to provide learners with working experience? And what needs of society and the labour market should be addressed by apprenticeships?¹⁵ Clearly setting out the parameters for the type of input, processes and output that beneficiaries will be required to deliver, will help beneficiaries in the project planning phase.

¹² In its 2018 Cross-nation overview of apprenticeship schemes in European countries, Cedefop grouped the countries of Europe in clusters based on the types of apprenticeships offered by their VET systems. See also Cedefop's 2020 Briefing note on apprenticeship for adults.

¹³ See Cedefop's 2019 report on Apprenticeship for adults. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4179>

¹⁴ For example, in France, Italy and the UK.

¹⁵ Cedefop Briefing note: Apprenticeships: A pill for every ill? Cedefop, March 2021. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/9155#group-downloads>

In the previous programming period (2014-2020), Member States used a total of EUR 7 billion from their ESF resources to strengthen vocational education and training systems, including dual learning and apprenticeship schemes, for instance to promote dual VET and developing pilot projects (e.g., to provide more apprenticeship places, improve material conditions of training, raise awareness, support companies, broaden partnership between VET institutions and companies, or improve the quality and effectiveness of work-based learning and apprenticeships).



Examples of using ESF to promote work-based learning and apprenticeships 2014-2020

In **Belgium-Flanders**, the ESF has supported policy reform in the area of dual learning. In the 2014-2020 period, the ESF financed several pilot projects for the development of new dual learning pathways in secondary education and more recently also in higher education¹⁶.

In **Spain**, the ESF project 'Technical support to improve the quality of dual VET in the Spanish education system' has aimed to create expertise and support Spanish authorities to define and implement appropriate processes, methodologies, and data collection strategies.

In **France**, the 2014-2020 ESF operational programmes have provided support to the development and improvement of the quality of apprenticeship schemes under the investment priority 10.3.

In **Germany**, the ESF has supported young people in taking up apprenticeships through various measures both at federal and regional level, including a programme to integrate asylum seekers and refugees through apprenticeships¹⁷.

In **Latvia** the ESF has supported the increase of the number of students in qualified educational institutions following their participation in work-based learning or employer-led practical training and training placements¹⁸.

Feedback from managing authorities and intermediate bodies show that this tendency continues: ESF+ funding continues to be 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.

Several member states reported using the ESF+ for the project 'Support for the system of dual education' (2020-2023), which targets schools in dual system that receive financial support for training in foreign languages and design of training programmes, pedagogical support and involvement of social partners. The ESF+ has provided resources for training apprentices, apprentices' salaries, providing apprentices with social security, covering travel costs from VET institution to companies, etc. For example, in Croatia, it is currently implemented through the Operational Programme 'Promoting education for the related crafts based on the apprenticeship system – PHASE II', and in Romania, through the 'Professional Scholarship' project, implemented by the National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development.

¹⁶ <https://www.duaalleren.vlaanderen>

¹⁷ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Putting into practice the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships – implementation of the Council Recommendation by member states, page 17

¹⁸ *ibid*



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 Training Cycle in Renewable Energies (NQF 3)¹⁹. 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:

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).

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 target²⁰. The dual training course on renewable energies fitted with very well in the company's need to train and recruit new staff.

Another area where ESF+ funding can have a positive effect is the mitigation of negative effects of the COVID-crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has put an additional strain on employers,

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ [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. \(elperiodicodelaenergia.com\)](#)

and, consequently, the availability of apprenticeships. Employers need support to continue their engagement following the pandemic.

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 - 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.

One of the suggestions from the European Commission online survey ‘Fight against COVID-19²¹’, 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 private²².’*

ESF+ funding can help to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on youth employment and apprenticeships and make them more resilient. For instance, ESF+ can be used to:

- ensure the continuity of initiatives and reforms, e.g. by funding pilot initiatives to trial and test new approaches.
- prevent a decline of apprenticeship places through financial support to training companies, including the substitution of apprenticeship wages and other costs
- develop hybrid learning formats that include face-to face learning in school and at the workplace as well as distance learning using digital tools. For instance, in Belgium-Flanders, a call was launched in 2020 on developing such forms of hybrid learning. Inter alia, this resulted in an e-learning platform on cultural diversity in the care and welfare sector that is integrated into a blended learning approach²³. Finland has invested in using virtual reality and simulator technology in VET, for instance in the practical training of timber truck drivers.

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/social/vocational-skills-week/fight-against-covid-19_en

²² Quality Apprenticeships: A need for ESF Transnational Cooperation. ESF Transnational Cooperation Network ‘Learning and Skills’, 12th meeting results and recommendations. Final paper: September 2020

²³ <https://www.vivosocialprofit.org/cultuursensitief-omgaan-met-clienten-en-collegas>



Finland: A timber truck driver education development project²⁴

Savo Vocational College and Upper Savo Vocational College worked together between 2019 and 2021 to develop digital learning opportunities for timber truck drivers. Training in a virtual learning environment is offered before learners go into face-to-face learning, using the trucks and other equipment. The project helps to boost learners' confidence and create a safer training environment: when they start using the equipment, learners already have a certain level of experience.

The project has produced content for virtual reality learning environments using extended reality techniques. This included producing virtual reality content in the Wonda virtual reality platform, which can be accessed by smart phones, tablets, computers, and VR glasses. The application is being integrated into the college's learning environments. Artificial reality software enables learning materials and tests to be accessed in real environments, such as in trucks, and it is possible to use web links, images, PDFs, text, voice or video and the results from the tasks can be transferred to the learning environment. The project has also produced 3D modules, e.g., of trucks, using drone and modelling software. The models can be incorporated into learning materials and tests.

Feedback from teachers has shown that it takes time and extensive training to get fully acquainted with the new methods: not only do they need to be able to deliver this new type of training and support learners, but they also need to have the skills required to update the training content and carry out maintenance tasks on the software and equipment. In addition, there is a need for coordination at national ministry level so that content produced by different educational institutions can be shared and a common understanding and innovations can be developed.

The anticipated project results include better retainment of learners, more effective training and shorter learning cycles, better opportunities for career progression and, eventually, a better image of the log transportation sector.

5. ESF+ can support employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships

High-quality apprenticeships require a high level of employer engagement. The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) 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

²⁴ [Upper Savo Vocational College](#), a video example can be found [here](#) (in Finnish language)

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 feedback²⁵;
- 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;
- 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).

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 companies²⁶. 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 machinery²⁷.
- Image problems, which can be either related to apprenticeships as a form of VET training, or to specific crafts or sectors with high skills demands, yet low interest among young people to start an apprenticeship (possibly aggravated by gender bias). This can be addressed by large-scale communication campaigns, addressing young people and their parents.

5.1. How to use the ESF+ to support employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships

ESF+ can be used to support employer engagement in work-based learning and apprenticeships, particularly through encouraging strategic responses to Calls for Proposals for employer engagement. Advantages can be achieved by establishing consortia to deliver projects by a multitude of stakeholders representing the two learning environments of work-based learning and apprenticeships: schools and the workplace. For

²⁵ Cf: Criteria 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the [Recommendation](#).

²⁶ Liliane Volozinzkis, Director for Social Affairs and Training Policy, SME United, at the joint [EaFA-ILO High Level Conference organised on 15-16 March 2021](#).

²⁷ *ibid*

instance, ESF managing authorities and intermediate bodies can design Calls specifically to:

- Encourage sectoral organisations to establish strategic partnerships with the education and training sector
- 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, especially between schoolteachers and 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.

Managing authorities may find it beneficial to establish close work relationships with employers and social partners to build structural collaboration.

There are many stakeholders involved in work-based learning and apprenticeships and it is important that they work together. As stipulated in the Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA), measures to facilitate better understanding and collaboration between the two worlds are needed. Yet, building such professional relationships and coordination structures take time and resources to develop.

Much effort is already made in the EU countries to establish strong relationships between key stakeholders and to strengthen work-based learning and apprenticeships with the help of the ESF+. Managing authorities can help to facilitate commitment at structural/stakeholder level and bring the world of work and the world of education closer together. 'National apprenticeship coalitions', hence partnerships of all relevant stakeholders, especially VET providers, and social partners at regional and local level have proven particularly useful. Experiences show that programmes are more easily accepted when social partners and sectoral organisations are involved. Moreover, partnerships and coalitions at regional and local level ensure that programmes and learning outcomes are in line with the needs of the labour market.

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.

Examples of managing authorities that coordinate with stakeholders to develop joined-up approaches and synergies are manifold.



Examples of managing authorities and intermediate bodies coordinating with stakeholders

In **Belgium-Flanders**, 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 the training of mentors in 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. The ESF+ managing authority supports the development and implementation of such trainings.

In **Bulgaria**, apprenticeships were implemented only recently. Schools and companies have started offering dual vocational training after the amendments to the VET Act in 2014. Furthermore, under the amended VET Act, the dual training system is a specific form of VET based on a signed contract between one or more employers and a VET institution. The 'Domino' pilot project (2015-2019) was launched with the aim of introducing dual training in Bulgaria based on the Swiss model. At the beginning of 2020, the project 'Support of dual system of training' started under the ESF/ERDF Operational Programme 'Science and Education for Smart Growth'. The activities of this project target schools in-company trainers and teachers in the dual training system and focus on trades protected by the state and sectors with labour market shortages.

In **Czechia**, cooperation structures between central administrative bodies, relevant ministries and social partners are being set up. Moreover, the cooperation developed between schools, companies and partners led to the elaboration of school education programmes.

In **Latvia**, in the next financial period (2021-2027), it is planned to further increase the involvement of social partners by strengthening the capacity of Sector Expert Councils (SECs), that can feed into the sectoral methodological capacity of VET institutions. Under the envisaged college reform, it is foreseen to introduce apprenticeship (work-based learning) also at a college level (EQF level 5) in Latvia.

5.2. Consortia bidding

As stated in the previous section, managing authorities can help to facilitate commitment to work-based learning and apprenticeships at structural/stakeholder level and bring the world of work and the world of education closer together. For instance, they can encourage existing partnerships such as 'national apprenticeship coalitions', to strengthen their partnerships through consortia bidding.

A consortium in the context of ESF+ consists of two or more potential suppliers coming together to bid during a procurement exercise launched by a managing authority or intermediate body. There is no limit to the number of potential members, this should be determined by the requirements of each Call. The consortium should include sufficient expertise to deliver the services required to an appropriate level of quality and avoid duplication through ensuring that individual supplier organisations have a specific and unique contribution to make to a project. This makes consortia bidding an ideal instrument for the area of work-based learning and apprenticeships.

5.2.1. When and why should consortia bids be encouraged?

Work-based learning and apprenticeships are based on the idea of shared responsibility and a division of tasks across a variety of stakeholders. The idea of shared responsibilities should be imminent to any ESF+ Calls for Proposals in this policy area, which means that individual organisations may not be able to individually meet all the relevant requirements.

Depending on the exact topic and focus area, beneficiaries may be required to collaborate with some, or all the stakeholders involved in work-based-learning and apprenticeships: VET-providers, employers and their organisations (including sector organisations and social partners), but possibly also teachers and students' organisations. Collectively, they will be able to develop stronger and better-quality bids than any single organisation working in

isolation. Consortia may also benefit from a strong regional or local focus, e.g., to ensure that programmes and learning outcomes are in line with the needs of the local/regional labour market.

In practice, execution of the project and dialogue with the managing authority can be more efficient and productive where one organisation takes the role as lead supplier to manage negotiations with the managing authority on behalf of the consortium²⁸.

5.2.2. What should be covered in consortia bids?

The details of a consortium bid will be determined by the requirements of a managing authority or intermediate body, the specific Call, and the characteristics of the organisations participating in the consortium. However, there are several subjects which would be expected to be covered. To help the managing authority or intermediate body in assessing the bid against criteria as set out in a Call, the response from a consortium to Calls for Proposals should, as a minimum, describe the following:

- **Roles and responsibilities:** A description of the roles and responsibilities of each supplier organisation for delivering specific services.
- **Risk management:** An assessment of the risks to successful delivery, and what mitigating actions are being taken to reduce the potential impact of these.
- **Allocation of resources:** A presentation of the share of resources allocated to each consortium partner and/or individual expert (if applicable).
- **Cost allocation:** A description of the cost allocation mechanism for all consortium members.

As an example, in the case of a bid to support a certain sector introducing new apprenticeships schemes, this would mean that the consortium will be required to set out clearly 1) who does what and how does that fit with the achievement of the overall objectives, 2) what type of risk management process and procedures did the consortium put in place to ensure the achievement of the project objectives; e.g. what is done when too few employers are volunteering to host apprenticeships, 3) the share of money each organisation receives, and 4) the process set up for the internal transfer of money and the time reporting system between the consortia partners.

5.2.3. Determining roles of each consortium member

As part of the selection process the managing authority or intermediate body will also need specific information from a consortium including:

- Details of each consortium member (name of the organisation, mission/function)
- The scale and scope of delivery obligations assigned to each member (similar to point 2 and 3 above)
- Each staff member's technical or professional input to service provision (as demonstrated through their bio and CV)

²⁸ See European Commission (2019) Decision of the European Parliament and Council amending Decision No 573/2014/EU on enhanced co-operation between Public Employment Services (PES) COM 2019 620 final 2019/0188 (COD) European Commission

- The capability and experience of each supplier organisation contributing to the bid (how are they qualified for the tasks ahead – for instance, as demonstrated through previous projects).

6. Conclusions

This document was drafted for ESF+ managing authorities, intermediate bodies, and non-governmental organisations (NGO) to support them in using European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to support the quality, availability and efficiency of work-based learning and apprenticeships and enhance employer engagement.

Over the past decade, the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) has promoted work-based learning – especially apprenticeships - as a key component of a wider strategy to improve the quality of VET, tackle youth unemployment and social exclusion through a range of large-scale policy initiatives.

Policymakers across the EU have significantly invested in the quality, availability, and efficiency of apprenticeships in recent years. Across Europe, many new work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes emerged; with a variety of different purposes, including enhancing youth employment, short-term skills development, social inclusion, or offering second-chance pathways for low-skilled adults, VET dropouts and other vulnerable groups. Evidence shows that results are promising.

In the previous programming period (2014-2020), Member States used a total of EUR 7 billion from their ESF resources to strengthen vocational education and training systems, including dual learning and apprenticeship schemes. ESF+ funding continues to be 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.

In the current programming period, this tendency continues: ESF+ funding continues to be 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.

Work-based learning and apprenticeships can contribute to several objectives of ESF+ related to the priority areas 'Education and Skills' and 'Employment':

- Access to quality employment for all, including youth employment (Employment)
- Better education and training systems at all levels (Education and Skills).
- Upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning for all (Education and Skills).

The range of work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes is broad and serves different purposes, depending on countries' needs and starting points. When preparing Calls for Proposals, ESF+ managing authorities and intermediate bodies should carefully consider the purpose of the intervention they are planning, and how this links with ongoing national developments.

For instance, it should be asked what national stakeholder attitudes and goals concerning apprenticeship are. Do they see it as a VET subsystem supplying specific qualifications, a real alternative to other forms of VET, where vocational training fully prepares learners for

an occupation? Or is it merely a way to provide learners with working experience? And what needs of society and the labour market should be addressed by apprenticeships?²⁹ Clearly setting out the parameters for the type of input, processes and output that beneficiaries will be required to deliver, will help beneficiaries in the project planning phase.

For work-based learning and apprenticeships to be successful, the two learning venues – schools and the workplace – need to collaborate closely. Managing authorities and intermediate bodies can help to develop the collaboration through strategic Calls for Proposals, encouraging responses from consortia representing a multitude of stakeholders from the two learning environments.

Advantages can also be achieved by encouraging employer engagement³⁰ – from individual employers, but also on a broader scale, by engaging sector organisations.

²⁹ Cedefop Briefing note: Apprenticeships: A pill for every ill? Cedefop, March 2021.
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/9155#group-downloads>

³⁰ Further information can be found in the 'Engaging employers in work-based learning and apprenticeships: A recommendations paper, available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/publications/engaging-employers-work-based-learning-and-apprenticeships-recommendations-paper>

7. Further resources

Cedefop resources

Cedefop (2021) Cedefop Briefing note: [Apprenticeships: A pill for every ill?](#)

Cedefop (2021): [EFQEA implementation: a Cedefop analysis and main findings](#)

Cedefop (2020) '[How European countries are managing apprenticeships under the current global health emergency due to the COVID-19 crisis](#)'. Synthesis report based on information provided by Cedefop community of apprenticeship experts.

Cedefop (2017) '[Education and labour market outcomes for vocational education and training graduates in different types of VET systems in Europe](#)'.

Cedefop (2018) [Apprenticeship schemes in European countries: A cross-nation overview](#).

Cedefop (2013): [Benefits of Vocational Education and Training in Europe for People, Organisations and Countries](#). Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Cedefop: [European database on apprenticeships schemes](#)

Cedefop: [Financing apprenticeships database](#)

European Commission resources

European Commission, DG EMPL: [COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Putting into practice the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships – implementation of the Council Recommendation by member states](#), September 2021

Declaration of the Ministers in charge of vocational education and training of the member states, the EU Candidate Countries and the EEA countries, the European social partners and the European Commission: [The Osnabrück Declaration on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies](#), November 2020

Council of the European Union: [Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships \(EFQEA\)](#), March 2018

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform and Thematic Networks

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform, Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills: Engaging employers in work-based learning and apprenticeships. A Recommendations paper. (Forthcoming in 2022)

ESF Transnational Cooperation Learning and Skills Thematic Network: Quality Apprenticeships: a need for ESF Transnational Cooperation. 12th meeting results and recommendations - Final paper. September 2020

Other European resources

European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA): [Apprenticeships online library](#)

Other resources

European Training Foundation (2018): [Work-based learning: A handbook for policy makers and social partners in ETF partner countries](#)

International Labour Organization (2017): [ILO Toolkit for Quality Apprenticeships - Guide for Policy Makers](#)

Dionisius R, Muehlemann S, Pfeifer H, Walden G, Wenzelmann F, Wolter SC (2009): Cost and benefit of apprenticeship training: a comparison of Germany and Switzerland.

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