



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**SOC/569**

**EU Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships**

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective  
Apprenticeships**

[COM(2017) 563 final – 2017/0244 (NLE)]

Rapporteur: **Imse SPRAGG NILSSON**

Co-rapporteur: **Vladimíra DRBALOVÁ**

Consultation	European Commission, 17/11/2017
Legal basis	Article 29 (1) of the TFEU
Plenary Assembly decision	17/10/2017
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	27/03/2018
Adopted at plenary	19/04/2018
Plenary session No	534
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	194/0/4

## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC appreciates the timeliness of this Recommendation, as significant apprenticeship reforms are taking place in most of the Member States and commends the European Commission's desire to establish a European common understanding of what constitutes a quality and effective apprenticeship.
- 1.2 The Committee concurs that the European Commission's chosen legal instrument encourages the coordination of a common effort to improve the quality and effectiveness of apprenticeships. At the same time it leaves flexibility at national level.
- 1.3 The EESC notes that the definition and criteria drawn up by the European Commission in the proposal for a Council Recommendation respect the diversity of the national schemes in the field of apprenticeships.
- 1.4 The EESC welcomes the fact that the proposal for Recommendation invites Member States to promote the active involvement of social partners in the design, governance and implementation of apprenticeship schemes in line with national industrial relations systems and education and training practices.
- 1.5 The Committee believes that the design, governance and implementation of apprenticeship schemes should also include the active involvement of those who are not traditionally seen as natural stakeholders in this field, but are equally relevant to the process, such as youth and parent organisations, students' unions, and apprentices themselves.
- 1.6 The EESC acknowledges the positive role that apprenticeships can play in increasing skills and employability, particularly for young persons, but highlights that unemployment is a complex phenomenon and a holistic approach is needed to tackle its root causes beyond the issue of skills mismatch.
- 1.7 The EESC believes that the proposal for Recommendation should have a stronger emphasis on the ways in which apprentices can foster greater ownership of the design and governance of their apprenticeship pathways. Giving apprentices an ability to influence their learning experience would create more productive learning experiences, which also benefits the placement provider.
- 1.8 The Committee calls for clear links and effective coordination and synergies with the initiatives already launched by the EQAVET<sup>1</sup> network and related to EURES<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.9 The EESC calls for initiatives that explore the potential of transnational mobility of apprentices in the EU. These should take into account progress made in Member States, particularly with regard to the challenges involved in creating the necessary conditions for supporting apprentices' mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> [EQAVET](#) - the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.

<sup>2</sup> [EURES](#) – the European job mobility portal.

1.10 The EESC welcomes the intention to monitor the implementation of the Recommendation with the support of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT), as well as through the European Semester, and suggests the development of indicators to assess the impact at national level. The Committee stands ready to assess the implementation of the Recommendation in Member States, from the perspective of organised civil society.

## 2. Context of the proposal for a Council Recommendation

2.1 The proposal for a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships follows up on the 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe<sup>3</sup> and contributes to the implementation of EU's priority on jobs, growth and investment. The proposal complements the principles enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights and supports its implementation at national level. Quality and effective apprenticeships are also crucial to the successful implementation of the Youth Guarantee, and the proposal is a response to the increasingly pressing call to ensure better quality placements under the Youth Guarantee initiative.

2.2 In the framework of the EU social dialogue programme of integrated projects 2014 – 2016, the European social partners undertook separate projects on apprenticeships: the ETUC focused on the quality of apprenticeships and BusinessEurope, UEAPME and CEEP focused on cost-effectiveness. Their work resulted in a joint statement, "*Towards a Shared Vision of Apprenticeships*"<sup>4</sup>, expressing the importance of both the quality and cost-effectiveness of apprenticeships.

2.3 In July 2013 the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) was established as a unique platform which bring together governments and stakeholders (businesses, social partners, chambers, VET providers, regions, youth representatives and think tanks) with the goal of strengthening the quality, supply and attractiveness of apprenticeships in Europe<sup>5</sup>.

2.4 The proposed instrument, a Council Recommendation, respects the principles of both subsidiarity and proportionality. As a legal instrument, it signals the commitment of Member States to the measures laid down in the Recommendation and provides a strong political basis for cooperation at European level in this area. Since apprenticeships are usually underpinned by a work contract or other contractual relationships, apprentices are therefore considered both work-based learners and workers. Therefore, the legal basis for this initiative lies in Articles 153, 166 and 292 TFEU.

2.5 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*"<sup>6</sup>. The specific objective is to "*provide a*

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3 [COM\(2016\) 381 final](#)

4 [European Social Partners, Joint Statement, Towards a Shared Vision of Apprenticeships, 30 May 2016.](#)

5 [European Alliance for Apprenticeships.](#)

6 [COM\(2017\) 563 final](#)

*coherent framework for apprenticeships based on a common understanding of what defines quality and effectiveness, taking into account the diversity of vocational education and training (VET) systems in Member States".*

- 2.6 For the purpose of the Recommendation, apprenticeships are understood as follows: *"formal vocational education and training schemes that combine substantial work-based learning in companies and other workplaces with learning based in education or training institutions, that lead to nationally recognised qualifications. These are characterised by a contractual relationship between the apprentice, the employer and/or the vocational education and training institution, with the apprentice being paid or compensated for her/his work."*
- 2.7 To ensure that apprenticeship schemes are responsive to labour market needs and provide benefits to both learners and employers, the proposal establishes and recommends criteria for quality and effective apprenticeships in two complementary areas. In the first area, "learning and working conditions", the specific criteria are: written contract, learning outcomes, pedagogical support, workplace component, pay and/or compensation, social protection, and health and safety conditions. In the second area, "framework conditions", the specific criteria are: regulatory framework, involvement of social partners, support for companies, flexible pathways and mobility, career guidance and awareness raising, transparency, quality assurance and graduate tracking.

### 3. **General comments**

- 3.1 The EESC welcomes and supports the proposed Recommendation that follows on from and completes recent initiatives at all levels focused on the re-launch of quality and effective apprenticeships in the European Union.
- 3.2 In the 2017 Rome Declaration, the Heads of State and Government pledged to work towards a *"Union where young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the continent"*. An essential part of the pledge was to provide young persons with skills that can ease their access to the labour market. An effective way to do this is through apprenticeships.
- 3.3 It is clear that apprenticeships cannot be the solution to unemployment. Apprenticeships can be useful to upskill / reskill unemployed persons of all ages with a view to reintegrate them into the labour market. Apprenticeships should also be offered to persons of migrant background as an effective policy approach of promoting social inclusion and an integrated workforce. At the same time, it should be avoided that the apprenticeships are geared towards low-skilled jobs and poor training - that could damage the reputation of apprenticeships.
- 3.4 As a form of work-based learning, apprenticeships allow individuals to acquire formal qualifications, as well as trade-specific skills and competences that match the needs of the labour market, thus enhancing their employability and employment perspectives<sup>7</sup>. The learning experience should result in resilient skills and competences that can be used beyond the specific

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<sup>7</sup> EESC opinion on "Improving the performance of national dual training systems", [OJ C 13, 15.1.2016, p. 57](#).

apprenticeship placement. It is a way to support the personal development of individuals and help them to acquire technical, digital, soft and social skills in an integrated way.

- 3.5 They can be particularly effective tools to ease the transition from education and training into work<sup>8</sup>. This transition period is increasingly lengthy for many young persons, and greater attention should be given to shortening it. Therefore, training opportunities such as apprenticeships should be made even more relevant, by laying down quality standards and introducing effective schemes.
- 3.6 While apprentices are most often young learners, the Committee would like to emphasise that apprenticeship schemes should be designed to make them appealing to adults. Apprenticeships for mature learners provide the possibility to gain qualifications that increase employability and create new opportunities for career development.
- 3.7 Employers face increasing shortages of workers with relevant skills to fit their needs and stay competitive. Apprenticeships can equip apprentices with the skills that enhance their employability, and which at the same time are needed by the labour market. If there is a match between the skills that are needed by both apprentices and employers, the apprenticeship schemes can be attractive for both parties. Furthermore, apprenticeships allow employers to train and invest in people, and to retain, over time, qualified and motivated employees<sup>9</sup>.
- 3.8 The EESC acknowledges that companies are analysing the ways in which they can engage in apprenticeship schemes to make them more attractive and beneficial for them. Furthermore the Committee underlines that effectiveness of apprenticeships is a multifaceted concept, not solely a cost-benefit analysis. On the one hand, effectiveness is about recognising that apprenticeship providers invest in creating a learning experience, and "expect return on investment over time in terms of a better skills fit, which encourages and fosters the supply of apprenticeship places"<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, it is about effectively transferring persons into the labour market in a qualitative manner.

#### 4. **Design and implementation of apprenticeship schemes – a partnership approach**

- 4.1 In many countries, existing apprenticeship systems and their attractiveness need improvement. Challenges include negative public perception of apprenticeships, learning value, lack of attractiveness for employers, and limited or absent partnership with organised civil society in the design, implementation and evaluation of schemes.
- 4.2 Apprenticeships are first and foremost an educational opportunity and should therefore be based on a learner-centred approach, and be shaped around the best interests of learners, their capacities and possibilities, while also taking into account the needs of the labour market. This

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<sup>8</sup> Evidence shows that 60-70% of apprentices move directly into a job following their apprenticeship, and in some cases this increases to 90%. ([EC page](#) on apprenticeships).

<sup>9</sup> Cedefop, 2015, [Briefing note](#) - Making apprenticeships work for small and medium enterprises.

<sup>10</sup> [ACVT opinion on "A shared vision for quality and effective apprenticeships and work-based learning"](#), 2 December 2016.

would mean ensuring that apprentices reach their full potential and achieve their learning objectives, which would also benefit employers.

- 4.3 The views of apprentices should be taken into account in decisions that may directly affect them and their rights before, during and after their placements. They should have a say in the learning objectives of their placement, and have the opportunity to give feedback on the quality and effectiveness of their apprenticeship. The lack of representative structures hinders apprentices' opportunity to have their voices heard.
- 4.4 Apprenticeships have the potential to help young persons, as well as adults, to acquire full competency and capabilities in an occupation or profession and enhance their employability. However, in many cases such potential is not harnessed, as the quality of apprenticeships is lacking, its learning value is not prioritised and apprentices' rights are not upheld as they should be.
- 4.5 Moreover, the EESC believes that a dynamic labour market needs competences more than skills. Therefore, learning outcomes should be focused on resilient competences, rather than short-term skills.
- 4.6 Apprenticeships should include a strong work-based dimension, where at least half of the educational time is spent on practically learning the specifics of the trade, and whenever possible this should be coupled with international experience.
- 4.7 Work-placement trainers, mentors or supervisors should be duly certified and provided with the necessary skills, both pedagogical and trade-specific, to train apprentices. Furthermore, they should be provided with access to continuous training in accordance with the principle of life-long learning.
- 4.8 A synergy between the quality, effectiveness and attractiveness of apprenticeships can only be ensured through close cooperation amongst all relevant stakeholders – training providers, social partners and other civil society organisations, apprentices, at national, regional and local levels.
- 4.9 Structures should be set up at all levels of government, with the involvement of all relevant socio-economic stakeholders (e.g. apprenticeships providers, employers' organisations, trade unions, chambers, youth organisations, students' unions, apprentices), with clear processes and roles aimed at influencing and taking part in decisions related to the design, implementation and monitoring of apprenticeship schemes.

## 5. **Promoting apprenticeships**

- 5.1 To counteract the fact that apprenticeships are perceived as a less attractive or less prestigious educational path, particularly for young persons, it is necessary to promote apprenticeships as a valuable choice and as a learning opportunity of equal quality and not as an active labour market instrument.

- 5.2 Promoting apprenticeships should be paired with efforts to address gender stereotypes based on traditional social roles, which still negatively affect apprenticeship placements, take-up and promotion and advertising.
- 5.3 All relevant stakeholders, from policy makers to social partners, civil society organisations and educational institutions, play a crucial part in increasing the attractiveness of apprenticeships and they need to work together. Promotion of a better narrative concerning apprenticeships must go hand-in-hand with, and be conditional on, improving the quality and effectiveness of the schemes.
- 5.4 Public authorities should invest more resources in implementing measures to promote apprenticeships at the local level to potential apprentices and encourage employers to provide apprenticeship opportunities.
- 5.5 The EESC considers that there is the possibility to use the ESF to help establish or further develop quality and effective apprenticeship schemes in Member States which require greater financial and technical assistance to achieve the objectives of the framework.
- 5.6 It is fundamental to provide employers, and in particular SMEs and micro-companies, with the financial and non-financial support they need to establish quality and effective apprenticeship placements and schemes.
- 5.7 The process of building a new image of apprenticeships should be based on a fair, inclusive, non-discriminatory and innovative approach. The most disadvantaged persons in our society should have access to the best support and guidance to a quality education and work-based learning that fits their interests and aspirations. Measures should be put into place at all levels to tackle discrimination based on migrant status, socio-economic background, ethnicity, religion, age, gender or other status, hindering equal access to apprenticeship opportunities.

## **6. Learning and working conditions**

- 6.1 The EESC believes that apprenticeships should be underpinned by a written and legally binding document, be it a learning agreement or written contract, between the employer, the apprentice and the educational or training institution. This document should clearly outline rights and obligations of all parties, and include a description of the learning objectives, tasks, as well as other relevant information on the placement (including but not limited to length, working hours, remuneration, etc.).
- 6.2 The EESC strongly believes that apprentices have a right to decent remuneration and/or compensation, to be negotiated through collective agreements or in line with national or sectoral requirements. Adequate pay or compensation can enable more people to take up apprenticeships, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, and can help avoid the misuse of apprenticeships as unpaid, excessively flexible employment.

6.3 The EESC reiterates the importance of ensuring that apprentices are adequately and promptly informed of any health and safety risk posed to them while undertaking their apprenticeship, and that apprentices are fully covered by health and safety regulations.

7. **Monitoring and evaluating apprenticeship schemes**

7.1 All apprenticeship providers should commit to quality standards. Mentoring by a competent supervisor should always be provided to apprentices before, during and after their apprenticeship, in order to make sure that learning objectives are achieved, the rights of the apprentice are upheld, and quality is ensured.

7.2 A monitoring system should be put in place to observe the progress of apprentices in reaching their learning objectives, as well as the quality and effectiveness of the learning experience. The results of such an evaluation process should be shared with the apprentices and the apprenticeship providers to enable them to improve if needed. Where possible, this monitoring system could be utilised as a method of measuring the amount of apprenticeships that later lead the learner into employment.

8. **Recognising qualifications**

8.1 Apprenticeship schemes should lead to official qualifications, recognised at national, European and international level, in accordance with the European Qualification Framework. Recognised qualifications would enhance apprentices' employability and mobility in the country and within the EU. They should offer permeability and allow apprentices to enter higher education after their apprenticeships are concluded.

Brussels, 19 April 2018

Luca JAHIER

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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