

European Apprentices Network

Key Priorities for Quality Apprenticeships

Introduction

The European Apprentices Network (EAN), established in 2017 by the European Youth Forum and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), with the support of the European Commission, brings together apprentices, and young people working for organisations representing the interests of apprentices. The members of the EAN come from twelve European countries (eleven EU Member States and one EU candidate country). The EAN meets in the framework of the meetings of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA).

Apprenticeships are often presented as an invaluable opportunity to ease the transition from education to the labour market, as they have the potential to help young apprentices as well as older workers to acquire new skills and develop their competences, while also increasing their employability. However, in many instances such potential is not harnessed, as quality of apprenticeships is lacking, the learning value of apprenticeships is not prioritised and apprentices' rights are not upheld as they should. The EAN aims to provide a space for apprentices, a group that, historically, has always been underrepresented, to have their voice heard and provide their contribution to improve apprenticeship systems in Europe.

As a first step, **the EAN has identified seven key priorities for the years to come and encourages all stakeholders, particularly policy makers at all levels, to shape apprenticeship programmes on the basis of these priorities.** From the need to ensure a much stronger focus on quality of work-based learning, as well as on the right to decent working conditions to be recognised in written contracts, to the need to advocate for more inclusive apprenticeships, including by demanding more accessible information and equal access to educational and training opportunities for all, the EAN calls for **apprenticeships to be considered more than a quick fix to youth unemployment, but rather learning opportunities to be tailored to the needs and rights of apprentices themselves.**

The seven key priorities of the European Apprentices Network:

- 1. Quality education and quality assurance**
- 2. Rights, responsibilities and protection**
- 3. Legally binding agreements**
- 4. Representation**
- 5. Promoting apprenticeships**
- 6. Anti-discrimination**
- 7. Accessible information**

Priority 1 – Quality education and quality assurance

1 priority



QUALITY EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Due to the competitive nature of modern societies, there is an increasingly strong focus on portraying apprenticeships as a tool for apprentices to acquire the skills they need to successfully enter and navigate the labour market. This has resulted in apprenticeships being perceived merely as a means to build a bridge between school and the world of work, and boost employability, completely disregarding their educational value.

The EAN, while recognising that apprenticeships have the potential to increase employability, **advocates for a shift in mentality to ensure that a learner-centred approach to apprenticeships is prioritised**, and for their educational value as learning opportunities to be placed back at the core of apprenticeships programmes. Apprenticeships should be shaped around learners and their needs, capacities and possibilities, to ensure that apprentices reach their full potential and achieve their learning objectives.

A learner-centred approach to apprenticeships would, on the one hand, result in increased quality, and therefore, in better outcomes for apprentices. On the other hand, a stronger focus on apprenticeships as good quality learning experiences would contribute to busting the preconception that they constitute a less prestigious educational path. To succeed, efforts to increase apprenticeships' quality should be paired with equally strong commitments to invest all the necessary resources to achieve these goals, including by investing in monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms.

Recommendations:

- Vocational Education and Training (VET) and apprenticeship programmes should be based on a learner-centred approach, and be shaped around the best interests of the learner rather than just on the needs of the labour market.
- VET providers should support students looking for suitable apprenticeships and ensure that the latter match their interests and capabilities.
- Educational systems should provide apprentices with the opportunity to enter higher education after their apprenticeships.
- European countries, EU institutions and social partners should establish legal quality frameworks for apprenticeships, along the lines of the European Youth Forum's European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships¹ and ETUC's European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships.²
- All apprenticeships providers should commit to quality standards and apply a clear code of conduct.

¹ European Youth Forum, European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2013/10/0595-10_European_Quality_Charter_Internships_Apprenticeships_FINAL.pdf

² ETUC, A European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships, 2017. Available at: <https://www.etuc.org/publications/european-quality-framework-apprenticeships#.Weg92BN-q9Y>

- Apprentices should be involved in the planning of their apprenticeship from the very beginning, and should have a say in the learning objectives of their placement, which should be clearly outlined in written agreements.
- Mentoring by a competent supervisor should always be provided to apprentices, before, during and after their apprenticeship, to make sure that learning objectives are achieved, the rights of the apprentice are upheld, and quality is ensured.
- Apprenticeship providers should put in place evaluation systems to monitor the progress of the apprentices in reaching their learning objectives, as well as the quality of the learning experience. The results of such evaluation process should be shared with the apprentices for them to improve.
- Apprenticeship programmes should provide in-work training. Trainers should be provided with the necessary skills, both pedagogical and practical, to train an apprentice. Apprenticeship providers should ensure their trainers and mentors have access to continuous re-training in accordance with the principle of life-long learning.
- Internal evaluation mechanisms should be established by apprenticeship providers to monitor the quality of their apprenticeship programme. The latter should be periodically reviewed according to the results and feedback received through such evaluation mechanism.
- Public bodies (e.g. a “working group” on apprenticeships) should be established at national level with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders (e.g. educational providers, employers, youth organisations, trade and student unions) to monitor apprenticeship systems.
- A good quality and safe working environment should be always guaranteed, and all apprentices should be provided with relevant health and safety at work training.
- Apprenticeship programmes should lead to official qualifications, recognised at national, European and international level, to enhance apprentices’ mobility.

Priority 2 – Rights, responsibilities and protection

Apprenticeships should always be a safe and fair experience for those who undertake them. Too often, however, apprentices are exploited as cheap workforce and their rights are not recognised and upheld as they should.

To counter the current lack of protection, **the EAN strongly believes that institutions at all relevant levels** (European, national, regional or local), **should work together with social partners and youth organisations, to implement a rights-based approach to apprenticeship programmes**, recognising that **apprentices have a dual status both as workers and students, and that this special status should not undermine their access to social and labour rights.**

Ensuring apprentices’ access to and enjoyment of their social and labour rights, as well as ensuring their access to social protection is not only crucial to address the current practice of taking advantage of apprentices as cheap labour, but it would also represent another key step towards better quality apprenticeships.

2 priority



**RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES
AND PROTECTION**

Recommendations:

- Apprentices should be entitled to social and labour rights, including but not limited to the right to decent remuneration and access to social protection. These rights should be clearly outlined in legally binding agreements.
- Apprentices should be entitled to decent remuneration to be negotiated through collective agreements. Reimbursement of other costs incurred during the placement (e.g. public transportation to reach the workplace) should also be provided.
- Apprentices should be informed at the beginning of their apprenticeship experience of their social and labour rights, workers representatives, as well as of their duties and responsibilities as apprentices, and of any health and safety risk posed to them while undertaking their position. Such information should be accessible and understandable.
- Apprentices should be covered by health and safety regulations in the workplace.
- Apprentices should be informed at the beginning of their apprenticeships experience of any mechanism available to them to report and address violations of their rights.
- Monitoring bodies should be established at the relevant level (national, regional or local) to ensure that apprentices' rights are respected and, in case of violations, sanction employers (e.g. by banning them from hiring apprentices for a fixed period of time).
- Apprentices should be given the right to be timely informed about the employment and educational opportunities available to them upon the completion of their placement.

Priority 3 – Legally binding agreements

Lack of a written contract clearly setting out what the rights of apprentices are and what is expected of them in their position, results in increased uncertainty and insufficient protection.

3 priority



**LEGALLY BINDING
AGREEMENTS**

In order to minimise the risk of violations of the rights of apprentices, and to ensure better quality of their apprenticeship experience, **the EAN strongly advocates for apprenticeships to be always regulated in the framework of a written and legally binding agreement between the educational institution, the apprentice and the employer** offering the placement.

Legal agreements should serve as a measure to protect apprentices from any form of exploitation, and therefore should always include a detailed description of the apprenticeship (e.g. length, working hours, rights recognised, tasks expected), for apprentices to be informed about the specific conditions of their placement from the very beginning.

Recommendations:

- The rights and duties of the apprentice should be set out in a written agreement, legally binding all parties (educational institutions, apprentices, and employers) involved to fulfil its terms. Such rights and obligations should be clearly formulated and enforceable.

- Legal agreements should be negotiated with the participation of all relevant stakeholders: educational institutions, apprentices and their representatives, employers, social partners.
- Legal agreements should recognise apprentices' right to decent remuneration not below the EU poverty line of 60% median income or national minimum wage, if more favourable, in accordance to the tasks which are performed by the apprentice and to working hours.³ Remuneration should be regulated either by law or according to collective agreements, as outlined in ETUC's European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships.⁴
- Legal agreements should include as an attachment an individual learning plan, providing a detailed description of the learning objectives of the apprenticeship and the tasks expected, as agreed by all parties involved. As part of the learning plan, legal agreements should also include the provision of compulsory supervision and mentorship throughout the entire duration of the apprenticeship.

Priority 4 – Representation

As apprenticeships systems are complex and diverse, and vary considerably depending on the national context, representative structures for apprentices are not common in Europe. Lack of representation hinders apprentices' chances to have their voices heard in decisions that may directly affect them and their rights.

4 priority



The EAN strongly advocates for individuals undertaking an apprenticeship to have structures for representation available to them at all levels of government (European, national, regional and local).

If apprenticeship systems are to be improved and apprentices' rights to better recognised and protected, it is necessary to provide spaces for apprentices to highlight the steps to be taken and issues to be addressed in order to achieve these goals. These spaces should come in the form of institutionalised working structures, with clear processes and roles to influence decision-making bodies.

Recommendations:

- Representative bodies, run by apprentices for apprentices, should be set up in every country in Europe, according to the structure that would work best in the given political and social context.
- Public authorities and employers should encourage and support the establishment of representative bodies for apprentices.

³ European Youth Forum, European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2013/10/0595-10_European_Quality_Charter_Internships_Apprenticeships_FINAL.pdf

⁴ ETUC, A European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships, 2017. Available at: <https://www.etuc.org/publications/european-quality-framework-apprenticeships#.Weg92BN-q9Y>

- Representative bodies should be included in all decisions processes on school curricula to ensure a good balance between work-based and school-based learning.

Priority 5 – Promoting apprenticeships

5 priority



In many instances, apprenticeships are perceived as a less attractive or less prestigious path, particularly for young people: parents often do not consider apprenticeships as quality learning opportunities for the future of their children.



The EAN states that, to counteract such negative perception, on the one hand, **it is necessary to provide better guidance to students, and promote apprenticeships as a valuable choice.** On the other hand, a holistic approach is essential: **promoting a better narrative** around apprenticeships and encouraging their take-up **will only succeed if paired with efforts to increase the quality and accessibility of programmes, ensure better learning outcomes and foster a broader recognition of apprentices' social and labour rights.**

Increasing the attractiveness of apprenticeships requires all relevant stakeholders to work together. From policy makers, to social partners, employers and educational institutions, everyone can play a crucial role in promoting a more positive image of apprenticeships.

Recommendations:

- Efforts to increase the attractiveness of apprenticeships should be based on a coordinated approach: promoting apprenticeships must go alongside improving quality of programmes, which includes, but is not limited to better working conditions, stronger focus on their educational value, and broader recognition of apprentices' rights, as well as more accessible information.
- All stakeholders should work together to encourage the take up of apprenticeships, also by ensuring that apprenticeships match the interests and needs of apprentices whilst implementing better and fairer working conditions: apprenticeships should provide access to fulfilling work that ensures a decent standard of living.
- Public authorities should invest more resources in promoting apprenticeships, including but not limited to investing in better training of teachers in schools, and implementing measures (e.g. school visits, events and fairs) to reach out to everyone, starting from those most marginalised.
- Promoting apprenticeships should be paired with efforts to address gender stereotypes based on traditional social roles, which still negatively affect apprenticeship placements and take-up, as well as their promotion and advertising.

Priority 6 – Anti-discrimination

6 priority



Discriminatory practices negatively affect access to and take up of apprenticeship opportunities, and can impact on apprentices' ability to fully enjoy and make use of their apprenticeship experience.



ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

For instance, poor quality working conditions for apprentices and lack of remuneration constitute a discriminatory practice, as they result in vulnerable people coming from more modest socio-economic backgrounds being prevented from taking up apprenticeships, as their families may not possess the financial means to support them during their position.

Discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation, moreover, is another staggering example of how, in many cases, equal access to apprenticeship opportunities is still not a reality for all. For example, there is still a widespread tendency to advertise and promote apprenticeships placements on the basis of gender stereotypes, which perpetuate traditional roles and tasks.

The EAN strongly believes that there is a compelling need to address discriminatory practices and cultures, which still prevent groups of people from accessing and fully taking advantage of the possibilities offered by apprenticeships programmes.

Recommendations:

- The most vulnerable people in our society should have access to 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 (European, national, regional and local) to tackle discrimination based on migrant, socio-economic background, ethnicity, religion, age, gender or any other status, hindering equal access to VET and apprenticeship opportunities.
- Apprentices, regardless of their background, should be able to undertake an apprenticeship corresponding to their choice of professional path.
- In order to ensure everyone's access to apprenticeships, apprentices should be fully entitled to social and labour rights, including the right to fair remuneration, as required under the European Youth Forum's European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships,⁵ and ETUC's European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships.⁶
- Institutions at all levels (European, national, regional and local) should implement measures to tackle gender stereotypes which still negatively affects the promotion and take up of apprenticeship placements.

⁵ European Youth Forum, European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2013/10/0595-10_European_Quality_Charter_Internships_Apprenticeships_FINAL.pdf

⁶ ETUC, A European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships, 2017. Available at: <https://www.etuc.org/publications/european-quality-framework-apprenticeships#.Weg92BN-q9Y>

Priority 7 – Accessible information

7 priority



In many cases, low take up of apprenticeship opportunities is linked to lack of information on what apprenticeships are and what they entail and what they can bring to those who undertake them. Better, more accessible and understandable information, paired with policy and legislative efforts to increase the quality of the programmes, can help to fighting prejudices that are still attached to apprenticeships.



Accessible and understandable information on apprentices' rights, for instance, would allow individuals to make better informed choices on whether or not undertaking an apprenticeship placement. Apprentices have a right to a better understanding of what, in concrete terms, are the implications of becoming an apprentice in relation to their rights and obligations, as well as in relation to their future educational and career opportunities.

The EAN believes that providing accessible information on VET and apprenticeship programmes is a cross cutting priority and a key instrument towards both implementing better quality apprenticeship and countering the current negative narrative, according to which VET students and apprentices are often labelled as low achievers.

Recommendations:

- All relevant stakeholders (education providers, employers, public authorities) should join efforts to provide better information on apprenticeship programmes. Information should not be exclusively demand-based: concrete, proactive efforts are necessary at all levels to reach out to everyone and promote apprenticeships.
- Information should be clear, accessible and readily available. Specific measures should be implemented to reach out to particularly vulnerable groups. To this end, the key role played by youth organisations and youth workers should be recognised.
- Apprentices should be informed about and have a clear understanding of their rights, tasks, responsibilities, access to social protection, from the beginning of their placement, through the establishment of legally binding, written agreements. Information should also be provided to apprentices on mechanisms to report cases of violations as well as on available structures for representation.
- Information should be duly provided to apprentices on the opportunities available to them after the completion of their placement: in particular, opportunities for mobility, further education, and career prospects.

Follow up

The 7 Key Priorities identified in this paper will form the basis of the work of the EAN in the upcoming months, both at national and European level.

As a first step, the EAN and its members commit to advocate for the priorities identified in this paper, both in their everyday work as apprentices or as youth representatives, as well as in their role as ambassadors for the Network, in order to improve the quality of apprenticeships and ensure a rights-based approach to VET and apprenticeship programmes. As the EAN strongly believes in a participatory, bottom-up approach, members will join forces to raise awareness on apprenticeships and quality standards first and foremost among young people, including by communicating in a more accessible, youth-friendly way the priorities outlined in this paper, aiming to reach out to as many young apprentices.

The EAN will also take advantage of the momentum that VET and apprenticeships are gaining both at EU and national level, to be part of the conversation. At European level, the EAN will ensure that the close cooperation with the European Commission will be translated into further opportunities to influence VET and apprenticeship policies, such as the EAN's contribution to shaping the upcoming European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships, and the participation of members in key high-level events, such as the European Vocational Skills Week.

Moreover, the EAN's strong role in the EAfA will provide a chance to engage with decision makers, help bridging the gap between countries with different levels of respect and recognition of apprentices' rights, and foster the exchange of good practices. The EAfA will also provide a platform to build a closer relationship with employers, and encourage them to match their pledge to the Alliance a clear commitment to comply with the EAN's Key Priorities.

Furthermore, the EAN will continue to reach out to public authorities at national level to influence the public discourse around apprenticeships and contribute to improving the narrative around this form of work-based learning. The EAN, in line with the call for better and stronger representation, will start a conversation with social partners, student unions and youth organisations to encourage the set up of representative bodies for young apprentices.