



# The future of apprenticeships in the post-COVID-19 era

European Apprentices Network (EAN) | March 2022

## European Apprentices Network

The European Apprentices Network (EAN) is a network of apprentices, youth organisations, and other bodies related to apprenticeships at the European level. EAN was established in 2017 to ensure that young apprentices in both secondary and high education are shaping discussion and policymaking related to Vocational Education and Training (VET), in particular for apprenticeships. Learn more about the network [here](#).

## Challenges to the representation of apprentices across the European Union

For many EU countries, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic represented the biggest disruption to educational continuity since the Second World War. School closures impacted over 17 million students, 8.5 million of whom were enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET). Two years on, despite colossal efforts to guarantee quality and accessible education for secondary school students, Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) participants, and apprentices, the challenges ahead cannot be minimised or left unaddressed. They need to be tackled openly and bravely in order to help build a bright future for apprenticeships in the post-COVID-19 era.

As highlighted by [President von der Leyen in her 2021 State of the Union](#), where she announced 2022 as the European Year of Youth, it is crucial that young people (and learners, in this case) are put at the centre of the process. The VET sector, at the crucible between education and the world of employment, must make the most of the paradigm shift that is currently taking place in society: a renewed commitment to achieve a just, digital and green transition.

With this paper, the EAN wants to highlight the priorities of learners in VET in relation to the future

of apprenticeships post-COVID-19. This paper is complementary to the [reaction to the Osnabruck Declaration](#) (published last year), as well as the list of [seven priorities](#) which are the founding principles of the European Apprentices Network. These key principles are:

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

## Learning methods: Flexibility and digitalisation in apprenticeships and VET

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, VET students were among those most impacted by school closures. While many general education schools had more resources and opportunities to adapt their teaching to the online environment, VET students saw their apprenticeships, work-based learning, and work placements frozen by workplace closures, and lost out on the opportunity to continue learning online due to a lack of investment in adapting and digitalising practical and workshop-based education to be suitable for an online environment.

Apprentices were among the worst impacted, but

also the least researched, groups of learners. We need to link research and collection of good practices with programme development and implementation. VET learner representation must also be present for this to truly reflect and address the challenges posed by grassroots experiences, views, and concerns.

One of the great strengths of VET has been its historic accessibility to all. As we recover from the pandemic, we would reiterate that all VET students, whether people with disabilities, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with a migrant background, or people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or socio-economic disadvantage, have the right to benefit from high quality education.

Whilst we recognise the importance of the recent Council Recommendations on the flexibility and accessibility of VET programmes (both in preventing early leaving and widening access to more remote and rural areas), this flexibility must not come at the cost of education quality. Flexibility cannot be used as a race to the bottom (pushing learners out of the classroom or workshop in order to provide a cheaper option for employers and training providers).

### **Assessment**

As a European community, it should be our utmost priority to address the issue of apprentices' rights to decent work opportunities, safety in the workplace (both in terms of physical threat and contractual obligations), wages, and lifelong learning. With a stagnating labour market where corporate greed often undermines workers' rights, guaranteeing these rights in apprenticeships should be seen as a starting point to transform the demands and imperatives of the market as a whole.

Once again, we would like to highlight the need for quality and effective representation of apprentice and VET learners in order to guarantee their support and protection. It comes as no surprise that when we look at the VET systems with the best outcomes for learners and employers, we also find strong, independent, apprentice representation.

Furthermore, while we insist on apprentices' right to participate in a just, green transition (in order to engage apprentices and VET students with efforts

to green the economy), they first need their basic needs to be met. Decent wages, good quality education, and opportunities to play an active part in society are a prerequisite to help shape a more just and sustainable transition.

Last but not least, we argue firmly that, while skills development needs to stay at the core of apprenticeships, the development of key competences for lifelong learning and active engagement in society need to take a bigger role in vocational training. It is pivotal for national and local governments to include global citizenship competences in apprenticeship curricula, and to stimulate the practice of active citizenship through direct participation in decision-making in educational institutions.

### **Work-life balance and apprentices mental health**

Stress is one of the leading causes of workplace death. The solution to the poor mental health of Europe's youth is not to try and make workers tougher or more resilient. Instead, we need to transform the way that we understand work-life balance and how this impacts mental health. For young people who are at the start of their careers, employers are increasingly willing to provide a plethora of chatbots, wellbeing apps and mindfulness exercises.

These may or may not be effective in alleviating some of the symptoms of poor mental health, but apprentices have consistently articulated that workplace precarity, isolation, poor pay and poor housing all contribute to stress and poor mental health. As one apprentice said: 'I don't need another app, I need a pay rise.'