

Remote learning: Challenges and opportunities for the VET sector posed by the COVID-19 pandemic

European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) – 2nd Live Discussion

— 17 June 2020 online event

The second EAfA online live discussion took place on 17 June 2020. Building on the results of a global survey on the impact of COVID-19 on apprenticeships, the discussion focused on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but also on the opportunities for the VET sector created by the need for a fast response to the social distancing measures. Five speakers representing European and international organisations joined the discussion moderated by expert **Andrew McCoshan**. The live discussion was attended by 216 participants including EAfA members and representatives from international organisations and EU-level institutions.

Impact of COVID-19 on the VET sector

Opening the live discussion, **João Santos**, DG EMPL, presented some of the measures taken by Member States and the European Commission to ensure the continuous provision of quality VET despite the crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has instilled a sense of urgency in VET reforms, but despite the challenge of shifting towards distant learning, adapting to digital technologies has been positive overall, bringing encouraging ideas to the forefront. In response to school closures, Member States have, for example, put together online and distance learning [resources](#).

In order to inform support measures and policy reforms, the European Commission, together with a range of key international and regional partners, launched a global [survey](#) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the training and development of employees, apprentices and interns. The ultimate aim of the survey was to help to identify challenges, good practices and potential support measures to mitigate the crisis. Presenting the preliminary results of the survey, **Ashwani Aggarwal**, ILO, provided an indication of the size of the disruption to VET: nearly nine in ten apprentices and interns have experienced an interruption in their training, and around one third of surveyed enterprises or organisations stopped the paying wages of apprentices and interns. Looking at the future, it is expected that apprenticeship placements will be reduced by over 20% due to financial constraints after the crisis. The survey also showed support measures most sought after by respondents, including policy measures such as wage subsidies, payments for social security contributions, tax reductions for employers or extensions of the training periods with wages.

PANELLISTS

Nazrene Mannie - Executive Director - Global Apprentices Network (GAN);

Ramona David Craescu - Expert - European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP);

João Santos - Deputy Head of Unit - VET, Apprenticeships and Adult Learning;

Manuela Prina - Policy Advisor - European Training Foundation (ETF);

Ashwani Aggarwal - Senior Skills and Employability Specialist - International Labour Organization (ILO).



Challenges

- Instructors not being properly trained to deliver online courses
- Difficulties in adapting VET curricula to online formats
- Lack of access to the internet and ICT equipment to carry out training and learning
- Many learners are unable to access the online training because they are not familiar with online platforms



Solutions

- Increase investment in distance learning, especially web conferencing, online courses and podcasts
- Introduce or intensify blended training methodologies
- Enable staff to deliver distant and online training by acquiring equipment and software
- Policy measures including provisions for apprentices and interns

Private-public partnerships to fight the crisis

"GAN is seeing this crisis as an opportunity to highlight the fact that vocational education continues to be feasible. Public-private partnerships could ensure widespread and effective learning through digital skilling. Sharing among companies and countries will create a larger positive impact by building synergies and leveraging the experience and expertise of different stakeholders to scale-up learning." – **Nazrene Mannie, GAN**

Companies across the world have, however, also shown resilience and great capacity for adaptation during this crisis. **Nazrene Mannie**, GAN, presented examples of how GAN member organisations have implemented effective solutions to ensure the continuous provision of distance learning through collaboration, demonstrating that the provision of quality VET training is still feasible despite challenging circumstances. For example, partnering with UNESCO's Global Education Coalition, Microsoft provided learners and institutions access to multiple courses for free. Ms Mannie highlighted the role of public-private partnerships to deploy effective methodologies for the development of digital skills. She also noted the need for more research to help orient upskilling and re-skilling solutions matched to labour market needs.

Public sector response

The event was also a chance to discuss the experiences of Member States supporting remote learning due to the closure of VET providers. **Ramona David Craescu**, CEDEFOP, highlighted different countries' approaches to deploying responses to the crisis including incentives for employers not to make apprentices redundant in the UK and information support for apprenticeships through a hotline in Austria. The crisis has demonstrated the vulnerability of apprenticeships to fluctuations in the labour market and the often limited social protection granted to apprentices. Although the crisis has affected apprentices and workers in more or less the same ways, apprentices often do not qualify for the same financial support measures put in place for workers.

"The COVID-19 crisis has underlined the importance for the in-company training part of apprenticeships to apply a structured approach to training, facilitating a better provision of distant working and learning, as well as monitoring of progress." – **Ramona David, CEDEFOP**

"The COVID-19 emergency poses the opportunity to see the importance of innovation in the development of new approaches to teaching and training. Going forward, we need to ensure systems will learn from this experience and use it to deliver what really matters most: quality learning for all." – **Manuela Prina, ETF**

Manuela Prina, ETF, further discussed the trends in European neighbouring countries and central Asia. Presenting key findings from research conducted by ETF on [distance and digital learning](#) and [country responses](#) since the beginning of the pandemic, she highlighted different examples of how countries have responded to the crisis to ensure a continuation of learning practices. Indeed, innovation seems to be the common denominator in the approaches implemented in several countries, with an array of innovative ideas and actions taking place even in the most conservative companies.

Challenges and opportunities in the shift to online learning

Although distant learning and digital technology offer potential solutions to cope with the impact of COVID-19 on VET, these also pose their own challenges. Access to technology and effective online learning methodologies are two of them. In countries where the economic system is more fragile, SMEs might experience difficulties in implementing support measures and shifting to digital learning. Even where digital tools are implemented, their availability is not sufficient. Firstly, there is a need to ensure that all learners can benefit equally from the new learning modalities and technologies. Secondly, the broader deployment of digital technologies and virtual reality simulations in VET cannot be disconnected from the need to train teachers and trainers to use these tools. Ultimately, the shift towards online learning methodologies should still be based on the development of pedagogies adapted to the online context, as opposed to just the implementation of technology, which aims to support the learning experience.

"We need to ensure pedagogy is not simply driven by, but improved by technological innovations. In doing so, it can provide us with the tools that will not only improve the delivery of vocational education and training, but also improve the learning experience and ensure people's access to quality education, training and lifelong learning." – **João Santos, DG EMPL**

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