



European Committee
of the Regions

The role of regions and cities in delivering high quality apprenticeships for all

3-4 June 2021

Meeting report

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1.0. Introduction

1.1. Background

In early 2020, the European Commission (EC) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) – in collaboration with the German Delegation of the CoR, the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL), and the Basque Government – agreed to co-organise an event to explore and showcase the role of regions and cities in implementing and fostering apprenticeships.

The joint high-level in-person conference was originally scheduled for September 2020, however, the organisation and implementation of meetings and events has changed drastically after the COVID-19 outbreak. The new reality brought by the virus has changed the way we understand our daily lives, and had an important impact on our work. Because of the virus outbreak, and in order to ensure the safety of our participants, colleagues, and stakeholders, the event was postponed until June 2021.

In order not to lose momentum and to capitalise on the preparatory work already conducted, it was, however, decided that a series of online events would be organised leading up to the main conference in June 2021. These three events had the potential to explore different areas in which regions and cities play a pivotal role in fostering apprenticeships. On top of leading to the high-level conference in June 2021, the series of events unlocked further future action and activities.

- The first online meeting was held on 29 September. It explored [key challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak](#) and the strategies put in place by regions and cities to support apprenticeships during the pandemic.
- The second online meeting was held on 26 January 2021. It focused on the [role of cities in ensuring apprenticeships remain up to speed with the green and digital transitions](#). The event provided an opportunity for exploration of how cities are supporting apprenticeships by providing the green and digital which will become increasingly in demand in the coming years.
- The third online meeting took place on 23 March 2021, and revolved around the [role of regions and cities in supporting apprenticeships, upskilling, and re-skilling in the health sector](#).

1.2. Opening session

High-level interventions

Setting the scene for the first day of the high-level conference, **Nicolas Schmit**, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, began by highlighting the major technological, environmental, and demographic structural changes that economies and societies are facing, in addition to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Investing in human capital is paramount for addressing these. Ensuring social cohesion and providing opportunities for all, especially by combating poverty, exclusion, and inequalities amongst those who have been most affected by the pandemic, is equally important.

The Porto Declaration¹ placed education and skills at the centre of Member States' political actions, and reiterated the importance of investments in education and training for tackling the disproportionate effects of the pandemic and ensuring that recovery is inclusive. Furthermore, the EC's Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan placed a strong focus on skills, alongside ambitious targets for employment and poverty reduction. In particular, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and apprenticeships have proven to be a strong tool for increasing youth employment, helping young people to integrate into the labour market and find quality jobs.

The pandemic has highlighted that solutions which are limited to the national level often do no work in a globalised world. As such, the Council recommendation on VET puts a focus on the development of internationalisation strategies that support the internationalisation of VET systems and the provision of learning mobility opportunities abroad. The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships² also gives Member States the right tools to ensure that apprenticeships are constantly being adapted and improved.

Anne Karjalainen, Chair of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research, and Culture at the European CoR, reiterated that the unprecedented number of challenges posed by the pandemic (ranging from the digital and green transition, democratic changes and migration, to those related to the labour market, such as high youth unemployment) have a strong territorial dimension, with an uneven distribution of effects between regions and cities, which, if not adequately tackled, may significantly widen existing inequalities.

High quality apprenticeships should be a key element of efforts to build resilience to future crises while fostering recovery from the current one. Moreover, achieving these objectives will require strong commitment from all relevant actors, as well as the involvement of all levels of governance. In particular, local and regional authorities are a driver of growth and innovation, and provide essential public services in regional and local communities (given their role in the delivery of social and employment policies), including lifelong learning.

The importance of mobilising regional and local authorities as catalysts for developing inclusive apprenticeships was recognised, as they are key actors, and hold key responsibilities for implementing social, employment, education, and training policies, as well as delivering public services which address basic social needs. The territorial dimension was also highlighted as a key component when designing and implementing policies related to inclusive apprenticeships in order to ensure inclusive opportunities for people regardless of their social and educational background.

1 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/>

2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0502%2801%29>

2.0. Day 1

2.1. Delivering high quality apprenticeships for all

The first panel discussion on 'Delivering high quality apprenticeships for all' was moderated by **Sandra Parthie**, Head of European Affairs at the German Economic Institute.

Speakers:

- **Daniela Ballico**, Mayor of Ciampino, Italy, and Member of the European CoR
- **Stefan Enica**, Project Officer, Skills and Education, SGI Europe
- **Cristina Grieco**, Special Advisor for relations with regions, National Italian Ministry of Education
- **Mark Weinmeister**, Secretary of State for European Affairs, Hesse, and Member of the European CoR

The discussion was opened by a keynote speech delivered by **Jorge Arévalo**, Basque Regional Vice-Minister for VET, Ministry of Education, Basque Government.

The future of Europe is marked by a wider evolution process and technological transformation placing a key focus on the economy, competitiveness and geopolitics. There are three major transformations lying ahead: technological and digital, energetic and environmental, demographic and social. In a world where robotics, artificial intelligence and data connectivity are becoming increasingly important, strengthening and investing in human capital is paramount. Vocational training is thus essential in order to meet the challenges brought by future transformations. Key objectives will be to develop new methods of learning and new organisational methods, and change professional training centres to fit the needs of a future society, as well as create collaborative and strategic networks to support the work of enterprises. In particular, the vocational centres of training and excellence will ensure nobody is left behind and they will contribute to the resilience and competitiveness of society. The cooperation between the centres of excellence and the production value chains are essential for the European Union.

2.2. Accessibility and mobility for people with disabilities

While the number of people with disabilities in Europe is estimated to be over 80 million, access to work and mobility still remain a significant barrier for people facing health limitations. The degree of a person's disability is also not often considered when addressing the question for social inclusion. Furthermore, the pandemic had brought significant challenges for people with disabilities related to social distancing and isolation, but it had also highlighted that a lot of the work could be done at home and not require mobility and physical presence which could create new opportunities for disabled people.

A key initiative aiming to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities is the [European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#), which establishes equality and non-discrimination as cornerstones of EU policies. The platform of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) is also a useful tool, as it provides a network for all stakeholders involved in the apprenticeship process, including governments, local authorities, business organisations, artisan groups, social partners, and professional networks.

Despite existing national initiatives supporting people with disabilities into employment (e.g. the Italian disability fund) and transposing the European strategy for 2021-2030, a greater effort is needed to support disabled people and increase the accessibility of inclusive apprenticeships.

2.3. Role of VET in fostering employability

Apprenticeships were previously a form of work contract reserved for young people as their initial entry into the job market. In Italy, this has been updated through reform of the job market, which has included the introduction of two new types of apprenticeship, which allow apprentices to acquire qualifications up to the degree and research doctorate levels.

Focus should be placed on improving the attractiveness of apprenticeships so that they are seen not as a second choice, but rather as a pathway for entering the labour market and obtaining high quality jobs. Apprenticeships could also be a good instrument for inclusion policies that support adults with re-entering the job market after the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, more resources should be allocated to increasing VET uptake, and for this it is important to raise the image and visibility of VET in other policy areas, and to communicate its vital role as a contributor to the European Human Capital Agenda (as VET fosters employability), equal opportunities for professional development, and also innovation and growth.

Increasing the attractiveness of apprenticeships in countries looking to develop or strengthen their VET systems is particularly important in order to create equal opportunities for young people. As such, regional and local authorities could play a decisive role in analysing and addressing the training needs of each region.

2.4. Leveraging digitalisation for social inclusion

Despite the significant challenges posed by COVID-19, the pandemic has also forced systems to adapt immediately to the situation, and highlighted that a lot of work could be done from home using digital technology. The importance of digitalisation and training was also emphasised, as apprentices would need the right skills in order to be successful at adapting to the resulting societal changes.

The demand for people with digital skills is growing fast. It is predicated that in the future, 9 out of 10 jobs will require digital skills. Despite this, 169 million Europeans between 16 and 74 years – 44% – do not have basic digital skills. Redesigning training systems in Europe should thus consider the necessary development of digital skills.

3.0. Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling

The first thematic discussion on Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling was moderated by **Lidia Salvatore**, Expert Adult learning and continuing vocational training, Cedefop.

3.1. Cluj Education Cluster and the ‘Cluj- future of work’ project

Speaker: **Emil Boc**, Mayor Cluj Napoca, former Prime Minister of Romania, Member of the European Committee of the Regions

In the context of the digital transition and the digital skills gap existing at the European level, the Cluj Education Cluster provides data trends and resources to address the future challenges to education from a bottom-up perspective. ‘Cluj-future of work’ is an urban innovative action funded by the European Union which aims to tackle the risks brought by the automation process and prepare the technology and infrastructure for future jobs.

An important role that local and regional authorities can play in this process is to raise awareness within the local communities, change mindsets and promote upskilling and reskilling as a professional asset for individuals and not as a failure. Another key challenge for local and regional actors is to address the lack of motivation of adults to be involved in training programmes. Thirdly, creating an agile local mechanism to observe data at the local level could help identify changes caused by automation which can support local and regional authorities to address the risks at the early stages.

3.2. Brain drain to brain gain

Speaker: **Csaba Borboly**, President of Harghita County Council, Member of the Committee of the Regions

Upskilling and reskilling programmes as a local and regional priority contribute to unemployment reduction offering great opportunities at the local level to secure qualified workforce. It can also address the brain drain phenomenon among the young people as well as the migration of skilled labour force, which represents an important issue for Romania and a strategic priority of Harghita County.

A key issue at the local level is the mismatch between the outcomes produced by the education system and the needs of the labour market. Collaborative projects could improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the vocational training system by linking to the needs of the business community as a competent workforce contributes to the competitiveness of a region. However, an important consideration is that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be efficient, and a policy solution must take into account the regional context.

3.3. Providing training prospects to asylum seekers

Speaker: **Jochen Kriesten**, Head of the Department of Education and Trainee Programmes in the “Aus-und Fortbildungszentrum für den bremischen öffentlichen Dienst (AFZ)”

The aim of the programme is to provide training and job prospects to asylum seekers in the city of Bremen. Around 500 young refugees received German language courses, and support to deal with practical administrative questions to help them in everyday life. The project provided training with 10 professions initially (e.g. chemical lab technicians, carpenters, etc.), and worked closely with the industry involving around 100 companies. A huge success of the programme was that the majority of the young people found employment in the public or private sector after the completion of their training.

An important lesson from the project is that training needs to be recognised as an attractive option and a genuine alternative to a university degree. Encouraging young people to pursue vocational education and training could be achieved by disseminating examples of young people who've successfully completed the training, providing support to potential dropouts and promoting the value of vocational qualifications.

4.0. Promoting the international dimension

The second thematic discussion on ‘Promoting the international dimension’ was moderated by **Karen Maguire**, Head of Division for Local Employment, Skills, and Social Innovation at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

4.1. Ingredients for successful international mobility in apprenticeships

Speaker: **Ben Bruyndonckx**, Coordinator, International Mobility Projects in VET, Connectief, Flanders

Key ingredients for successful mobility include bridging common interests – both local and international – and establishing institutional partnerships built on trust and good communication. Involving young people by giving them a voice in the design and decision-making of mobility programmes is also important. By doing so, the image of apprenticeship programmes is enhanced, and they become more relevant for, and attractive to, young people. Aiming to bring together the right ingredients, the [Irish Apprenticeship Action Plan \(2021–2025\)](#) endeavours to increase the number of apprenticeships to 10,000 per year by 2025, and make international mobility a component of apprenticeship programmes, either in the workplace, or in education and training institutions. In order to make apprenticeships more accessible for young people, the plan will bring them all together under one roof in a new National Apprenticeship office.

4.2. Apprenticeships and mobility beyond the EU

Speaker: **Gillian Coughlan**, Member of Cork County Council, Member of the European CoR

To make apprenticeships more international and allow for a mobile global workforce, it is important to have mutual recognition frameworks for skills and occupations in place. Mutual recognition towards third countries, including countries such as the United States, the UK, and Australia, may also contribute to the attractiveness of apprenticeships as a career-choice, and benefit employers who are looking for specific skills. Countries in the European neighbourhood tend to have large informal sectors, however, and institutions often lack a tradition of student mobility and apprenticeships. In response to this, several regions in the Western Balkans and North Africa are increasing the attractiveness of VET by developing the policy concept of smart specialisation. This implies knowledge-based development, especially at regional level, through the identification of funding priorities that contribute to enhancing local strengths and comparative advantages³. As part of this, apprenticeships can play a key role in meeting skills needs, offering transnational knowledge-transfer, and empowering individuals to contribute to local development.

4.3. Mobility and the digital and green transitions

Speaker: **Cesare Onestini**, Director, European Training Foundation

Both the digital and the green transitions have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many workers will need up- or re-skilling in order to adapt to the new economy. Substantiating this observation, experts have predicted that Artificial Intelligence (AI) may automate, and potentially replace, 40% of jobs within 15 years⁴. The apprenticeship sector is particularly well-positioned to cater up- and re-skilling needs considering its adaptability and capacity to include large segments of the population, including adult learners and vulnerable groups. For policy makers, a key task is therefore to provide structures that allow people to up- and re-skill, and make several career transitions throughout their working lives, if required. Addressing these topics, the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recently organised a joint conference 21–25 June entitled '*Building lifelong learning systems: skills for green and inclusive societies in the digital era*'⁵. The conference offered an opportunity for joint reflection on national and international experiences in transforming education and training systems into lifelong learning, and highlighted future cooperation in the area of human capital development against the backdrop of global developments and challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Science for Policy Report. Skills and Smart specialisation. JRC. 2019. Available here.

4 Give the A.I. Economy a Human Touch. New York Times. Available here.

5 <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/events/building-lifelong-learning-systems-skills-green-and-inclusive-societies>

5.0. Day 2

6.0. Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

Setting the scene for the second day of the high-level conference, **Anne Karjalainen**, Rapporteur on ‘The implementation of the EPSR from a local and regional perspective’ at the CoR, presented the Committee’s opinion on the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. Member States, regional and local authorities, and social partners were called upon to find solutions for up- and re-skilling adults, with special attention paid to vulnerable groups and older unemployed workers. Putting people’s wellbeing and equality at the heart of policy, and making social issues an enduring priority, will depend on the commitment of all levels of government, from European to local, to build a strong and resilient social Europe. This will also guarantee that the green and digital transitions are fair and facilitate recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, both economically and socially. With the ambition of leaving no one behind, the Committee also called for re- and up-skilling to become more incorporated into the European education area. An integrated European budget is further needed to support skills and apprenticeships, allowing for widened participation of cities and regions and a territorial approach – considering this, there is no one size fit all solution.

In line with the previous speaker, **Chiara Rioldino**, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), emphasised how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital and green trends, and resulted in lasting impacts on working life, education, and social interaction. The pandemic has also deepened the digital divide, however, and exposed existing inequalities and social injustice. To tackle these challenges, the EU and its Member States have set targets which involve lifting millions of adults and children out of poverty, and provide training for 60% of the European workforce⁶. In parallel, the pandemic has also accelerated the evolution towards a greener society and made citizens more conscious and aware. In the EU alone, a greener economy could create 2 million additional jobs by 2030, depending on the availability of the right skills among the workforce. For up- and re-skilling purposes, the Commission has launched a range of policy initiatives (including Youth Employment Support), with a reinforced Youth Guarantee, an updated European Skills Agenda, and a renewed EAFA. Looking forward, European flagship funding programmes, including the historic NextGenerationEU, European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund, and Erasmus+, aim to support a green, digital, and just recovery for all.

7.0. Mobilising local and regional actors

The third thematic discussion on ‘Mobilising local and regional actors’ was moderated by **Maria Fabiani**, Advisor at the Metropolitan City of Rome.

7.1. Digital transformation and inclusion in the Brittany region

Speaker: **Georgette Bréard**, Vice President in charge of training, learning, and guidance (Brittany region, France)

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the implementation of solutions to ensure the continuity of business, work, and training, requiring a ‘fast forward’ on digitalisation. When it comes to VET, the digitalisation of training and the development of new distance courses allowed about 60%–70% of trainees to continue with their courses via distance learning after the first lockdown. This was achieved through close collaboration with training organisations, who were able to reflect on the best innovations and tools to implement, and also through supporting these organisations with implementation (by providing training skills and digital competencies for trainers, for example).

The implementation of digital solutions has raised questions surrounding the impact of such rapid digitalisation, however, and the way it affects people’s use of digital tools, as well as what sort of training is provided for those categories of trainees or job seekers that are at risk of social exclusion. The digital transformation needs to be

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/green-growth/index_en.htm

inclusive; in other words, it has to enable people to acquire the required skills so as not to be excluded by career and training opportunities.

To this end, the Brittany region has been working with social partners to identify and develop training tools adapted to the different types of target groups and digital certifications recognised at regional and national level.

Collaboration with social partners and employers' networks, in particular, has been a key success factor for the region. This cooperation is fundamental for raising awareness amongst employers to ensure that when digital techniques are deployed, it is done in a way that respects the diverse nature of those undergoing training.

Finally, the Brittany region has obtained approximately EUR 26 million through the Recovery Plan, which will be used to develop training programmes in four key sectors: digitalisation, the green transition, and the manufacturing and health sectors.

7.2. Companies involvement in Sweden

Speakers: **Anders Carlberg**, Head of the Department of Research, Development and Education, Västra Götaland; **Rasmus Flick**, Chamber of Commerce, Västra Götaland

Being heavily industrialised, especially in the automotive sector, the Swedish region of Västra Götaland is characterised by a high demand for skilled workers. The key challenge in meeting this demand is to attract people, and young people in particular, into the labour force through pathways designed to provide them with the right set of skills. Apprenticeships could be an important instrument for addressing this challenge and helping to meet the needs of the labour market. They also represent a key tool for social inclusion of those at risk of exclusion.

Apprenticeships have, however, historically seen a limited uptake by the Swedish population. The Region is now collaborating with the Chamber of Commerce in order to change this established paradigm on the basis of innovative private-public cooperation and stakeholder involvement.

Traditionally, the apprenticeship system in Sweden is centrally managed by the National Agency for Education. The agency decides on the curricula, and regional and local VET institutions implement and deliver the apprenticeship programmes. This system leaves little room for the involvement of companies, who are not involved in the selection of candidates, deciding the starting dates, or defining the learning outcomes. The curriculum is often described in technical terms which make it difficult for companies to translate it into their work and tasks.

A new project has been launched to reverse this approach and increase companies' interest in apprenticeships. Instead of asking companies to implement a specific programme, companies and their employees can indicate the typical tasks they perform during a workday, describing 'what [they] need to know to be able to perform [their] daily tasks'. Local trade unions are also involved in this process, so they can provide information about apprentices' rights and responsibilities.

All this information is then used by VET providers to inform the curricula set by the National Agency, matching specific tasks to clear learning outcomes. In this way, companies can develop a professional with the skills they need, and apprentices (once they have completed all the tasks at the end of their apprenticeship period) acquire a specific set of skills. This means VET providers have the proper information to grade the apprentice in relation to the national curriculum, and the company and the apprentice receive the skills needed for their future career. A mobile app allows trainers to consult the list of tasks and update it in line with apprentices' progress, so as to allow all parties to follow apprentices' development in real time.

7.3. The role of metropolitan cities: The experience of the Metropolitan City of Rome

Speakers: **Teresa Maria Zotta**, Deputy Mayor, Metropolitan City of Rome, Italy

Apprenticeships have the potential to be the link and create synergies between education and local and regional development, becoming an instrument of employment policy, social inclusion, and economic and social development.

Regions and metropolitan cities are in a position to make the most of this instrument, as they have an overview of the local and regional economic environment, and are in-between key stakeholders (businesses and educational providers). Hence, these authorities need to be involved in the development of apprenticeships and have the competences required to shape VET in line with local and regional needs.

In Italy, metropolitan cities, such as Rome, have a specific competence in relation to local economic and social, as well as general territorial, development. The Metropolitan City of Rome has used this competence to develop a metropolitan strategy for apprenticeships, coordinating local agencies, educational institutions, and businesses. Between 2019 and 2020, Rome financed apprenticeships programmes for approximately 16 000 young people.

At the moment, Rome is developing partnerships with sectors and professional associations to better reach out to and involve companies, and also supporting municipalities within the metropolitan area to ensure more sustainable and fair development and strengthening of the dual learning system.

The Metropolitan City of Rome is also introducing the inclusion of apprenticeships as social criterion in public procurement. This initiative is expected to pave the way for the use of public procurement as an instrument to further foster apprenticeships and encourage businesses to support the training of young people.

7.4. Innovation strategy in the Basque country

Speakers: **Rikardo Lamadrid Intxaurreaga**, Director General for New Technologies and Advanced Learning, Ministry of Education, Basque Government; **Iñigo Araiztegui Arraiz**, Director of Internationalisation, TKNKA

The Basque country has developed a clear strategy to foster knowledge creation and innovation.⁷ This strategy, which foresees a specific role for VET, is based on networking and partnership between different key stakeholders. It foresees:

- close collaboration with other Basque government departments (e.g. the economic development and employment departments), as well as local authorities (e.g. county and town councils, and regional development agencies);
- involvement of key innovation stakeholders (e.g. research and innovation centres, technology centres, and universities);
- systematic organisation of meetings with clusters and business associations, and their involvement in the learning process of students;
- active collaboration between Basque VET centres and companies (primarily SMEs and micro SMEs) through the provision of initial and continuous training, and the development of research and innovation projects.

The Basque country recognises that there cannot be innovation without inclusion and equality. For this reason, it explicitly foresees measures to ensure gender balance in training and apprenticeships. Similarly, VET centres are required to develop a strategic plan that should also foresee specific actions to foster gender balance.

As collaboration is the keyword within the regional approach, similarly, networking and cooperation have also inspired the action of the Basque country at the European level. On this basis, answering a call from the EC, the Basque region established a European Centre of Vocational Excellence in Advanced Manufacturing and Industry 4.0, with the aim of creating a platform to connect innovation centres across Europe.

7 Basque Science, Technology and Innovation Plan, <https://www.euskadi.eus/gobierno-vasco/pcti-2020/>

8.0. Encouraging cross-border cooperation

The fourth thematic discussion on ‘Encouraging cross-border cooperation’ was moderated by **Noelia Cantero**, Director of the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning.

8.1. The value of language skills – experiences from the German Rhineland-Palatinate region

Speaker: **Petra Jendrich**, Head of ‘Vocational Schools and Securing the Supply of Skilled Workers’ Department at the Ministry of Education in Rhineland-Palatinate.

In Rhineland-Palatinate, 22 VET schools are taking part in Erasmus+ (2021–2027), and 18 VET-schools have been awarded the European school label. These schools prepare young apprentices to live, work, and study across the continent, and to experience the personal and professional value of cross-border exchange. In addition, the German region organises a range of bilateral VET exchange programmes with regions abroad, including neighbouring regions in France. As part of these programmes, students are offered preparatory language courses, followed by a three to eight week internship placement abroad. A key take-away from managing these cross-border programmes has been that student success often depends on students’ ability to adapt to their host country. As part of this, language skills are fundamental, not only to learn work skills, but also to adjust to new cultural and social conditions during the exchange. At the policy level, supporting the language skills of students should therefore be made a priority, in order to enable and facilitate cross-border mobility for apprentices.

8.2. DuALplus and the Atelier of Learning – creative ways to facilitate policy learning by the Autonomous Province of Trento

Speaker: **Ilaria Mascitti**, Public Officer and Project Manager of the DuALPlus project; Francesco Pisanu, Head of the ‘Evaluation of Educational Policies’ Office and Scientific Reference for the DuALPlus project, Autonomous Province of Trento.

The Autonomous Province of Trento is running a pilot named the ‘Atelier of Learning’, which has been inspired by the academic notion of the ‘Learning Atelier’ (Engeström, Virkunen, et al., 1996). The pilot offers a workshop space for dual education stakeholders to creatively engage in knowledge-sharing and peer learning. The sessions are centred around webinars and workshops that focus mainly on learning models, motivational models, and evaluation procedures in dual education. Providing participants with more than theoretical know-how, the Atelier of Learning offers practical knowledge, such as how to identify issues in the VET sector, and build strategies to promote certain aspects of apprenticeships. A lesson learned from one workshop, for example, was that a training plan for VET teachers need to address cognitive, motivational, and evaluative aspects, and carve out a tailored path. The main structure of the Atelier is transferrable to all contexts, and allows different stakeholders to share ideas and best practices.

DuALPlus

A second example of the involvement of the Autonomous Province of Trento is the transnational DuALPlus project. This was founded by a consortium comprised of members from six Alpine countries representing SMEs, educational institutions, business support organisations, chambers of commerce, universities, design institutes, as well as regional public authorities. The project aims to increase the attractiveness of dual education in the Alpine Space at a policy, company, and school level. More specifically, the project is built around three objectives:

- 1) Improve the career guidance of youngsters and the public recognition of dual education as valuable learning path.
- 2) Promote innovation and quality in dual education,
- 3) Improve the framework conditions for innovation by increasing the horizontal and vertical permeability of the dual education system.

Current project activities include developing a multilingual career guidance toolbox for organisations, coaches, and trainers, and a handbook on innovative practices in dual education, demonstrating the innovative capacity of dual education in the crafts and trade sector in the Alpine Space.⁸

8.3. The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform – Offering shortcuts to smart solutions for European cities and regions

Speaker: **Mart Veliste**, Thematic Expert (SME Competitiveness), Interreg Europe, Policy Learning Platform

With a community of 18,000 members, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform offers the opportunity for regional and local public authorities across Europe to share practical ideas and experiences in public policy, and to improve strategies for their citizens and communities. The platform is a space for continuous learning, where the policy making community can tap into the know-how of experts and peers across four topics: enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs, supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors, protecting the environment, and strengthening research, technological development, and innovation.⁹ As part of the platform's expert support, regional policy makers facing a specific challenge can apply for a 'matchmaking session' or 'peer review', where they are offered analysis and a discussion with European peers and experts. Additionally, the Platform offers a knowledge hub and a good practice database, containing more than 2 000 best practices. As one of these practices, the Export Development Programme (which has been running since 2017) allows a graduate student to spend five months supporting an international company with their export strategy. Evaluations of the project show that it helps students to transition into the labour market, supports companies in recruiting talent, and that 40% of the trainees stay in the company after their placement.

8 <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/dualplus/en/about/aims-activities>

9 <https://www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning/what-is-policy-learning-platform/>

9.0. One year after the COVID-19 outbreak: Good practices that will remain

The last panel discussion on 'Good practices that will remain' was moderated by **Norbert Schöbel**, Team Leader for VET, Apprenticeships, and Adult Learning (DG EMPL, EC).

Speakers:

- **Vlassis Korovilos**, Expert, Department for Learning and Employability, Cedefop
- **Denis Leamy**, Chief Executive, Cork Education and Training Board, Chair of the OECD Local Employment and Economic Development Directing Committee
- **Maria Fabiani**, Advisor for the Metropolitan City of Rome
- **Mart Veliste**, Thematic Expert in SME competitiveness, Interreg Europe, Policy Learning Platform

9.1. Lessons for regional and local stakeholders

At the regional and local level, collaboration between stakeholders is crucial, and all those who have an interest in the successful delivery of VET need to be involved in ensuring its effective design and operation. From a policy maker's point of view, it is particularly important that interventions are based on the economic situation, as well as on the available resources and infrastructure. To anticipate and respond to needs, several factors need to be considered, such as digitalisation, increasing job mobility and flexibility, rising demands, globalisation, and academisation, which all affect the supply and demand of apprenticeship and may also cause mismatching.¹⁰ To facilitate a mapping of needs, an agile local mechanism that gathers data can support local decision makers to identify needs at early stages. It is also recommended that regional and local policy makers take a proactive stance and build resilience by investing in human capital that equips the labour force with the right skills. As part of this, there is a need not only to attract learners, but also to support them in their individual challenges and difficulties. This may involve addressing gaps in basic skills, such as language and math, as well as offering training in digital competences.

¹⁰ The next steps for apprenticeship. CEDEFOP, OECD. 2021. https://portal.research.lu.se/portal/files/90368493/The_next_steps_for_apprenticeship_2021.pdf

9.2. Apprenticeships and the future of learning

During the pandemic, hybrid learning has become commonplace in apprenticeships, and today, teachers and students find themselves embracing technology, as a number of digital innovations have emerged from the response to the pandemic. However, hybrid learning environments depend on qualified staff having the right mix of online and offline competences, which in turn has an influence on the design of educational programmes and educational outcomes. In addition, the pandemic has made it clear that VET systems need to become more adaptive to changing patterns of employer demand. The VET sector has also recently become more concerned with the experiences of apprentices throughout their training, and there is a stronger emphasis on more personalised learning and a shift in attention to specific learning outcomes. When changing curricula, attention should be given to 'who is taught VET, what they are taught, and how they are taught'.¹¹ Meanwhile, students expect apprenticeship qualifications to involve flexibility and trust, and provide long-term employability.

9.3. Social inclusion

Next to the green and social transition, the pandemic has accelerated inequalities, and today there is need to ensure an economic recovery that is both fair and inclusive. At the regional and local level, some municipalities are becoming more inclusive by, for example, making it a requirement for businesses taking part in public procurements to offer apprenticeships. Focusing and supporting the most vulnerable groups is also important – including migrants, refugees, young people, disabled individuals, and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners. In the process of including vulnerable groups, a challenge for apprenticeship programmes is to become more inclusive, and at the same time to avoid reinforcing social stratification between learner groups. Promoting academic excellence, a common objective in the VET sector, should therefore be rooted in fostering attractiveness for a diversity of learners, who bring with them different expectations, capabilities, and academic foundations.¹²

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

10.0. Latest developments within EAfA

The presentation on the 'Latest developments within EAfA' was conducted by **Kjerstin Torpmann-Hagen**, Policy Officer for VET, Apprenticeships, and Adult Learning (DG EMPL, EC).

Presentation of EAfA monitoring survey results

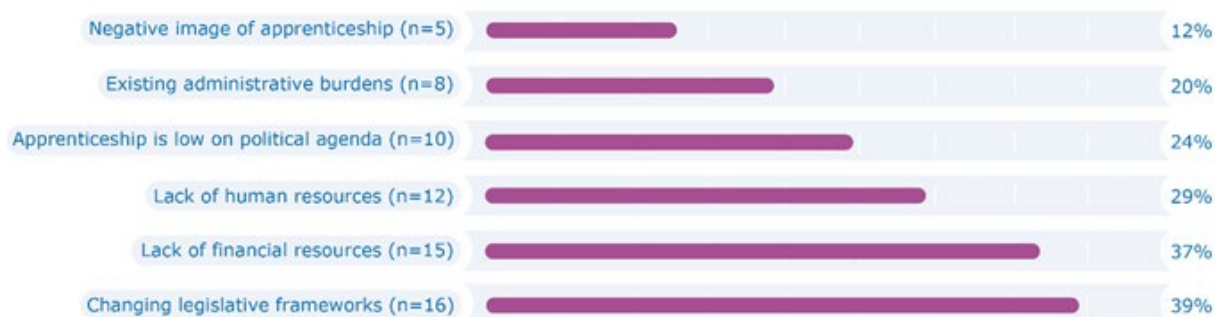
The Commission carried out a survey with the aim of better understanding the active involvement among EAfA members and the added value of the Alliance. The survey collected information on pledge implementation in the period 2019–2020, and received 115 responses from pledging organisations based in 24 different countries, including 17 Member States. Some 17 responses were received from organisations active at EU level.

Despite the pandemic causing disruption across the VET sector and work-based learning, the survey showed that the majority of EAfA members reported progress on all four of the EAfA objectives (i.e. to strengthen the supply, quality, image, and mobility of apprenticeships). Notably, 735,355 apprenticeship places were created in the period 2019–2020 by the responding organisations, which (on average) amounts to 11,490 places per organisation. Additional key findings regarding the EAfA objectives included:

- Respondent organisations were involved in at least 1,525 mobility experiences. The two main types of activities undertaken to promote the mobility of apprentices were taking part in mobility projects and initiatives, (including Erasmus+), as well as disseminating information about mobility opportunities.
- 86% reported that their organisation had made major, or some, progress on the image of apprenticeships. Next to implementing communication activities, some organisations participated in projects, including EU-funded initiatives, to improve the image of apprenticeships.
- Half of the respondent organisations implemented activities supporting apprentices to develop green and/or digital skills. For these purposes, EAfA members implemented a variety of activities, including integrating green and/or digital skills into the curriculum or training offer, carrying out digitalisation of internal processes and/or upgrading digital equipment, and greening internal processes as part of corporate social responsibility.

Providing insights into the impact of COVID-19, the survey showed that the pandemic had caused a reduction in the supply of apprentices, disrupted education and training provision, and made it more difficult to interact with apprentices. **Some 80% of the organisations involved reported that travel restrictions had had an impact on mobility. Pledging organisations also reported that the main ways of mitigating the impact of the pandemic included moving training and promotional activities online**, adapting the training environment to the new sanitary requirements, and advocating for public authorities to take action to support apprentices.

Apart from the issues emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, Table 1 summarises the main obstacles faced by responding organisations during the survey period. The top three reported obstacles were changing legislative frameworks (39%), lack of financial resources (37%) and lack of human resources (29%). Notably, nearly a fourth (24%) of the pledging organisations also reported that apprenticeships are low on the political agenda.

Table 1: Obstacles encountered besides COVID-19

Source: Ecorys EAfA monitoring survey 2019–2020 (N=41)

Finally, 89% of respondents considered the EAfA to be very valuable or valuable as a platform to boost the quality, supply, image, and mobility of apprenticeships (6% of respondents did not have an opinion and 5% consider it not as valuable).

EAfA newcomers welcome ceremony

Following the sharing of the survey results, a welcome ceremony was held for new EAfA members. Here it was announced that the following three regional and local authorities have joined the EAfA since March 2021:

- Vestfold and Telemark County Council, Regional authority, Norway
- Labora, Valencian Employment and VET Service, Regional authority, Spain
- Municipality of Livorno (Local authority), Italy

During the ceremony, the new EAfA partner country, Israel, was also welcomed. **Tair Ifergan**, Acting Director General of Labour and Head of the National Institute for Technological Education and Training, Israel, highlighted the opportunities of being a partner country to the EAfA – offering chances to share and gain knowledge of best practices in Europe and beyond. In Israel, there is a need to better align supply and demand on the labour market, and improving the quality of the national VET system could contribute to improved labour productivity and higher wages, especially for those from a weaker socioeconomic background. The main national priorities (including tackling unemployment, investing in the future and wellbeing of the economy and of individuals, and investing in apprenticeships) are efficient and proven ways to address these issues.

11.0. Closing session

Closing the event, **Thomas Wobben**, Director for Legislative Works at the European Committee of the Regions, thanked all speakers and the organisers, and praised the quality of the discussions during the two-day conference.

Mr Wobben highlighted the role of cities and regions in delivering high-quality apprenticeships. Regional and local authorities are in the driver's seat as potential employers and coordinators, and play a crucial role in enabling a sustainable and green economic recovery.

The key challenges and big transitions that are coming up can only be faced through collaboration, partnership and social dialogue. The renewed EAfA came out at the right time to help in this direction. Regions and cities are joining the partnership, and this is an essential component in achieving competitive and inclusive societies.

This collaboration is an innovative initiative. It was first started under the German Council Presidency and the CoR German National Delegation, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, it had to be adapted. It is also part of the Joint Action Plan together with DG EMPL and Commissioner Schmit. The CoR members are very motivated and active in providing input but also in promoting the renewed EAfA in the future. In order to use the momentum, the collaboration needs to become a key element for the future recovery and competitiveness. The CoR is looking forward to the future collaboration and see this as only the start. The Committee will contribute to making the EAfA a success.

