



The voice of apprentices in the European Year of Youth 2022

European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) | March 2022

INTRODUCTION

Europe needs the vision, engagement and participation of all young people to build a better future that is greener, more inclusive and digital. By declaring 2022 the European Year of Youth, the EU aims to put the spotlight on young people, the challenges they are facing, and the strength they are demonstrating to overcome them by stimulating action from all stakeholders to provide more and better opportunities in the future. High quality apprenticeships can play an important role in providing youth with the skills they need to be successful and access quality employment opportunities.

APPRENTICESHIPS AND APPRENTICES' REPRESENTATION

Apprenticeships are recognised as a successful pathway for young people in the transition from school to work. However, there have been limited opportunities for apprentices to be represented in national structures such as trade unions or youth organisations, or to contribute to policy discussions at the European level. A [study on the representation of apprentices in Vocational Education and Training \(VET\)](#), published by the European Commission in 2019, identified only 13 structures in EU Member States directly representing VET students, and only 6 representing apprentices. Most commonly, representation of apprentices is only indirect, passing through structures representing students or youth and therefore resulting in an imbalance in the participation of apprentices compared to other students.

The study identifies a number of **barriers** that prevent the development of strong apprentice representation structures. These structures tend to be rare in countries that **lack a consolidated tradition of student/youth representation**, or where the apprenticeship system overall is less developed and participation is low. **Legal requirements** might also hinder apprentices' ability to join a representative body. For example, where a minimum age or the status of an employee is required to join trade unions. The **lack of political support** or encouragement to apprentices' representation or to civil society organisations in the country seems to be a factor limiting apprentices' representation. Similarly, the **lack of financial support** and access to adequate funding streams is an obstacle to the creation and sustainability of these organisations. Finally, particular focus should also be placed on implementing activities aiming to **raise awareness** about participation opportunities and **build capacity** among apprentices that might lack the required knowledge and competences to make their voice heard.

These barriers need to be addressed in order to create the conditions for the development of apprentice representation structures across the EU. Key stakeholders such as trade unions, employers, VET providers and public authorities could and should play a fundamental role in supporting apprentices' representation.

The European Commission, the Directorate General for Vocational Education of the Regional Government of Catalonia, Fundació Bertelsmann, and the European Apprentices Network (EAN) have come together to organise a relaunch event for the EAN (which was originally launched in 2017), and to create momentum among key stakeholders to support the development of a stronger representation of apprentices across the EU.



THE EUROPEAN APPRENTICES NETWORK

The European Apprentices Network (EAN) is a network of apprentices, youth organisations and other bodies related to apprenticeships at European level. The EAN was established in April 2017 to ensure that young apprentices in both secondary and third-level education were shaping discussion and policymaking related to VET, particularly apprenticeships. The network benefited from the organisational structures and expertise of the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), as well as the institutional and political support from the European Commission.

The EAN identified [seven key priorities](#) which called 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'. These founding principles of the EAN were:

- 1. Quality education and quality assurance:** Favouring a learner-centred approach to apprenticeships and shaping programmes around learners and their needs, capacities and possibilities would result in increased quality, ensuring that apprentices reach their full potential and achieve their learning objectives.
- 2. Rights, responsibilities and protection:** The dual status of apprentices, being both workers and students, often leads to legal uncertainty, and can hinder access to social and labour rights. A rights-based approach to apprenticeship programmes would lead to better quality, more opportunities for young people and fairer apprenticeships.
- 3. Legally binding agreements:** In line with the criteria established by the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships, apprenticeships should be based on a written and legally binding agreement between the educational institution, the apprentice and the employer offering the placement.
- 4. Representation:** The existence and prevalence of representative structures for apprentices in Europe is fundamental to ensure opportunities for apprentices to be consulted in relation to decisions that may directly affect them and their rights.
- 5. Promoting apprenticeships:** A holistic approach should be implemented to promote apprenticeships as a viable, quality, prestigious, and rewarding choice. Among others, this approach should encompass improving apprenticeship quality, addressing gender stereotypes and reducing social stigma towards apprenticeships.
- 6. Anti-discrimination:** Addressing discriminatory practices and cultures (at all levels and in all forms) is essential to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access and fully take advantage of the possibilities offered by apprenticeship programmes.
- 7. Accessible information:** Better, more accessible and understandable information can help to reduce the prejudice and stigma still attached to apprenticeships.

In 2020, the EAN set up a new structure to expand its membership and become a representative voice towards institutions and stakeholders at all levels on issues concerning apprenticeships. So far, the EAN has been composed of individual members only. Aiming to be representative, innovative, inclusive and accountable, the new structure is going to be based on three levels (European, national and individual). The next main steps for the network are to:

- Continue to actively supporting individual apprentices coming from different countries, and potentially contribute to setting up national structures to represent apprentices;
- Engage existing national representation bodies;
- Engage European organisations active in the field of apprenticeships in capacity building and advocacy.

In 2022, the EAN launched a position paper in the context of the European Year of Youth, which reiterated the key challenges in terms of ensuring apprentices' representation in decision-making, while also highlighting the importance of flexibility and digitalisation in apprenticeships and VET. This includes global citizenship competences in curricula, and protecting work-life balance and apprentices mental health.



THE EUROPEAN ALLIANCE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS AND APPRENTICES' REPRESENTATION

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) unites governments and key stakeholders with the aim of strengthening the quality, supply and overall image of apprenticeships across Europe, while also promoting the mobility of apprentices. Since its launch in 2013, the EAfA has developed into a wide and active community of stakeholders, and a platform for sharing experiences and learning from best practices across Europe.

In July 2020, the European Commission launched the renewed EAfA as part of the Youth Employment Support Package. The

reinforced Alliance calls for additional focus on [six priorities](#) spanning from promoting national coalitions, supporting SMEs, reinforcing the involvement of social partners, and mobilising local and regional authorities. The sixth priority (answering the need for stronger representation of apprentices) is centred around supporting the relaunch of the EAN, the creation of which was already supported by the European Commission back in 2017.

Through the Apprenticeship Support Services, the EAfA has also produced several resources that aim to put the spotlight on apprentices' perspective:

- [Webinar: Representation of apprentices in vocational education and training](#)
- [Webinar: Career guidance and awareness raising on apprenticeships as the first choice](#)
- [Live Discussion: What does quality mean in practice? Integrating the apprentice's perspective](#)
- [Live discussion: How can apprenticeships be used as a tool for social inclusion?](#)
- [Online training: Apprenticeships: A first choice for all?](#)

EVENT OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

The [event will take place in Barcelona](#) on 24 and 25 March 2022, and includes two site visits to vocational schools in Barcelona: **Institut Bonanova** and **Institut Escola del Treball**.

The three main objectives of the event are:

Official launch of the renewed EAN

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the network has not yet had the opportunity to meet physically. This event will be an opportunity to not only meet, but to officially launch, the renewed EAN. During the event, participants will hear about the EAN and its contribution to the 2022 European Year of Youth.

Awareness raising on apprentices' representation

During the event, examples of good practices concerning apprentices' representation in national and regional structures will be presented with the aim to encourage member states, regions, social partners and youth organisations to address the issue.

Discussion on how to increase apprenticeships' attractiveness

Topics such as how to make apprenticeships more attractive for young people will also be addressed during the meeting. The event will provide insights into Spanish efforts to promote dual VET and include site visits providing participants with the opportunity to exchange information with local VET institutions with identified good practices.

Find more information about the event [here](#)

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