



# Live Discussion: Promoting apprenticeships to SMEs

European Alliance for Apprenticeships | 14 December 2022

On 14 December 2022, a Live Discussion was hosted by the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) to shine light on policy, campaigns and different instruments used to involve small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in apprenticeship programmes across Europe. In this context, panellists from across Europe gathered representing social partners, regional authorities, and SMEs.

## INTRODUCTION BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND INCLUSION (DG EMPL)

Welcoming the audience, **Ana Carrero**, Deputy Head of Unit – Vocational Education and Training at DG EMPL, European Commission, highlighted the pivotal role of SMEs in the European economy, employing around two thirds of the European workforce and representing 99 % of EU businesses. SMEs add value in every economic sector, bringing innovative solutions to challenges such as climate change, resource efficiency and technology adaptation. In this context, apprenticeships have potential to facilitate the green and digital transitions and to improve competitiveness by securing SMEs with skilled workers.



*'Quality apprenticeships can be an essential tool for European SMEs to acquire the skills they need in view of the digital and green transitions.'*

**Ana Carrero**, Deputy Head of Unit – Vocational Education and Training at DG EMPL, European Commission

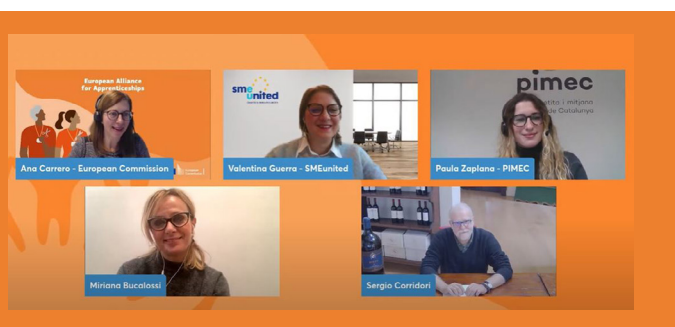
Additionally, they allow the employer to shape a young person's work habits and to retain, over time, a motivated and qualified employee. Before introducing the panellists, Mrs Carrero also put the spotlight on the [European Social Fund \(ESF+\)](#), the main EU instrument to invest in human capital at national and regional levels, as well as the upcoming [European Year of Skills 2023](#), which will put focus on upskilling and reskilling in the labour market. The aim of this year will be to promote inclusive investments and ensuring that people's aspirations and skill sets are matched with labour market opportunities. Another objective will be to attract people from third countries with the skills needed in the EU by strengthening mobility, and facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

## EXAMPLES OF PROMOTING APPRENTICESHIPS AMONG SMES

Kicking off the first part of the panel discussion, **Valentina Guerra**, Policy Adviser for Social Affairs and Training at SMEunited, shared concrete examples from several EU Member States (DE, EL, FR, HR, IT, LU) of how apprenticeships facilitate school-to-work transitions and provide a supply of skilled workers to SMEs. SMEunited has recently collected these examples in a [best practice compendium](#) that illustrates how their members encourage young people to enter the job market through apprenticeships. **Paula Zaplana**, Technical policy officer in European Projects, PIMEC, Spain, presented the [Apprenticeship Inter-Network](#), an Erasmus+ funded platform (to be launched in 2023) that will connect businesses, students and VET centres at a European level. As an innovative element of the project, established professionals, employers, or other business staff members will be able to become 'business ambassadors' to inform students about labour market needs and trends and guide them in their career choices. **Miriana Bucalossi**, Head of Apprenticeship, WBL Policies and EU Project Management Unit, Tuscany Region, Italy, stressed the important role the wine sector holds in Tuscany, a region that hosts more than 12 700 wineries, most of which are SMEs. Considering the strategic importance of this sector, the region

has set up a dual apprenticeships programme to train wine technicians, with the aim of reinforcing the collaboration between the educational system and companies. Results showed that a majority (71 %) of the employers that participated were SMEs and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, indicating that 9 out of 10 (87 %) employers benefited from the apprenticeships programme. Representing one of these employers, **Sergio Corridori**, *Head of HR Department at Marchesi Mazzei, Italy*, stressed how his winery puts a strong focus on transmitting knowledge from one generation to another, and how apprenticeships are an important tool to facilitate this process. Apprentices in his SME are included in the production teams all around the winery under the supervision of their teachers and local tutors, who have been trained in the local teaching institute.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS SMES FACE IN APPRENTICESHIP



A virtual group photo of the panellists and the Moderator. From the top left: **Ana Carrero (Moderator)**, **Valentina Guerra**, **Paula Zaplana**, **Miriana Bucalossi**, **Sergio Corridori**

more complicated for employers to hire apprentices. Another challenge concerns ensuring a high standard of teaching and pedagogy, directly influencing the quality of apprenticeships. Finally, **Sergio Corridori** emphasised that while theoretical knowledge is required, apprentices also need to be equipped with the right practical skills that allow them to directly take up their profession once their studies have been completed.

## SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the third and final part of the Live Discussion, **Sergio Corridori** highlighted the importance of involving SMEs in vocational training courses from the very beginning of the learning process to ensure that apprenticeships become as relevant and successful as possible. From a regional perspective, **Miriana Bucalossi** called for further strengthening the coordination between SMEs, VET schools and public authorities, and for involving employment agencies, where needed, to alleviate the administrative burden that SMEs often struggle with. **Paula Zaplana** highlighted on the one hand that apprenticeships arouse great curiosity and interest among many SMEs, suggesting that this type of training is highly valued, and on the other hand that the image of apprenticeships still needs to be improved. Finally, **Valentina Guerra** stressed how higher VET – in particular – can be further promoted in many Member States as an alternative to higher education, providing students with high-level managerial skills.

## CONCLUSION

This Live Discussion illustrated how apprenticeships can be promoted to SMEs in Member States and regions across the EU. Real examples were shared of how apprenticeship programmes can be financed and co-designed to meet labour market demands. It also became evident that barriers remain for SMEs to effectively engage in apprenticeships – including complicated legal frameworks, human and material resource limitations, financial shortcomings, skill mismatch, and a lack of capacity to manage bureaucracy. This Live Discussion also highlighted potential solutions that may lower these barriers, such as offering advice on how to secure funding, simplify administrative procedures, and providing support on how to carry out in-company training. Looking towards 2023, the European Year of Skills represents an opportunity to promote the supply, quality and image of apprenticeships, while strengthening the skills in essential European SMEs.

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