



**EAfa**

# High-Level Event

Brussels, 17-18 June 2024

Event report

*Employment,  
Social Affairs  
and Inclusion*

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# Introduction

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) High-Level Event took place on 17 and 18 June 2024 at the Thon Hotel EU in Brussels, Belgium and was also broadcast online. The event aimed to:

- raise awareness of the importance of quality and effective apprenticeships in developing skills and addressing labour shortages;
- provide EAfA members with an opportunity to network and exchange good practices;
- encourage members to upgrade their commitments and motivate potential members to join EAfA;
- promote key EAfA stakeholders, such as the European Apprentices Network (EAN), the Fundación Bertelsmann, and the French youth association *Association des Apprentis de France* (ANAF) (Show Your Job Contest), among others.

The event brought together 150 in-person participants in addition to the online web-streaming. These numbers included EAfA members, 15 EAN representatives and other key stakeholders from around Europe. The event was opened by Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.

The two-day discussions were divided into four panels covering key topics such as:

- the importance of apprenticeships in addressing labour shortages;
- apprenticeships as a quality offer under the Youth Guarantee;
- guidance as a key to anticipation;
- the value of adult apprenticeships in unlocking opportunities.

The following sections summarise the main highlights and the discussions that took place at the two-day event. The article about the event and short report are available on the website of the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and can be found [here](#).

# Day 1

# 17 June 2024

## Welcome Ceremony

**Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights**, opened the event by reflecting on the key role of apprenticeships in addressing labour shortages in the European market, boosting innovation, facilitating the twin green and digital transitions, and overall shaping Europe's social and economic future. Following the end of the European Year of Skills in May 2024, continued emphasis will be placed on upskilling and reskilling at EU level, with numerous initiatives supporting this, such as Erasmus+ Centres on Vocational Excellence, the Pact for Skills, and the Youth Guarantee. The



latter in particular supports young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) to achieve their full potential through offering a variety of opportunities, including vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships. In this context, EAfA represents an important platform for actively engaging young people, promoting the exchange of inspiring practices among Member States and relevant stakeholders, and fostering excellence in VET. Through its 440 pledges and national commitments from 40 governments, EAfA has contributed to creating 2.5 million apprenticeships and work-based opportunities across Europe.

Following his opening speech, Commissioner Schmit welcomed 14 new members of EAfA and thanked the 17 EAfA members who have chosen to renew their pledges and the nine governments that have reaffirmed their national commitments. The new EAfA members are:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Vocational School of Patras (CY)
- *Agence nationale pour la formation professionnelle des adultes – Afpa* (FR)
- AnciLab (IT)
- *DLR Projektträger* (DLR Project Management Agency) (DE)
- EDUNAUK (PL)
- ENGIM (IT)
- IDEC S.A. (GR)
- IDESCOM (PT)
- IMPACTsci (PT)
- *ITS Turismo Puglia* (IT)
- Kimitisik B.V. (IT)
- LEONARDO S.p.A. (IT)
- Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Crete (GR)
- Rural NEET Youth Network (ES)

The list of organisations that have renewed their pledges is available [here](#).

## Panel 1: Apprenticeships to address labour shortages



The first panel discussion was moderated by **Chiara Riondino, Head of the VET Unit at DG EMPL**. The moderator introduced the topic, emphasising the importance of motivating individuals to pursue their passions and take advantage of upskilling and reskilling opportunities, especially through apprenticeships. The main elements discussed by the panellists are summarised below.

**Ludovic Voet, Confederal Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)**, underlined the importance of recognising that apprentices are both

learners and workers, and that it should therefore be ensured that their remuneration is fair and that their working conditions are safe. This can increase the appeal of apprenticeships and enhance the attractiveness of their learning methods. He noted that both schools and administrative authorities play a role in enforcing good labour conditions. Apprenticeships are crucial in terms of addressing skills shortages, but they have limitations and cannot single-handedly solve broader labour shortages. In particular, social partners and employers need to ensure that apprentices are not treated as a source of cheap labour, and therefore effective monitoring and action to address labour market abuses, such as low wages and poor working conditions, is vital. Mr Voet also emphasised the importance of mentorship and combating discrimination in making apprenticeships a more attractive and viable pathway for skills development and entry into the workforce.

**Valentina Guerra, Policy Director for Social Affairs and Training, SME United**, highlighted the significance of [apprenticeships for small and medium enterprises \(SMEs\)](#) in recruiting and retaining skilled employees, particularly in sectors facing skills shortages. She emphasised that apprenticeships increase the likelihood of long-term employment within the company and allow SMEs to train apprentices according to their specific needs. Ms Guerra shared good practices from Spain, highlighting the role of joint mentors representing both education institutions and employers in helping to guide apprentices. She also noted an example from Finland, where apprentices work closely with entrepreneurs to create professional networks and expand apprenticeship opportunities.

**Guillaume Afellat, Senior Policy Advisor, SGI Europe**, highlighted that SGI Europe promotes apprenticeships to address skills mismatches and fulfil new skill demands, particularly those arising from the green transition. This gives companies greater flexibility to create specific positions based on their needs and train future employees accordingly. Mr Afellat presented an example from Spain, where organisations have developed their own VET programmes to identify and cultivate the essential skills required for the green transition in their respective sectors. Turning to services of general interest, he emphasised the importance of prioritising education and training at all levels, particularly in the context of the digital and green transitions. This requires maintaining high-quality education and VET and supporting SMEs through collaboration with social partners and other stakeholders.

The session concluded with **Maxime Cerutti, Director of Social Affairs, BusinessEurope**, who outlined the role of apprenticeships in contributing to the long-term development of a skilled and adaptable workforce. Looking to the future, he called for a strengthening of adult participation in apprenticeship programmes and the engagement of unemployed people in reskilling and upskilling initiatives, supported by the social partners. Mr Cerutti provided examples of apprenticeship practices in EU Member States. In Finland, for example, apprenticeships are structured in a way that most training is conducted in companies rather than in educational institutions. In Austria, initiatives have been implemented to specifically attract unemployed women into apprenticeships, thereby equipping them with new skills and opportunities.

## Panel 2: Apprenticeships as a quality offer under the Youth Guarantee



The second panel discussion was moderated by **Manuela Prina, Head of the Skills Identification and Development Unit, European Training Foundation**. The moderator briefly introduced the topic and invited the speakers to discuss the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and the ongoing challenge of attracting and motivating young people and NEETs to join apprenticeship schemes. The main elements discussed by the panellists are summarised below.

**Manuela Geleng, Director for Jobs and Skills at DG EMPL** explained the widespread labour shortages that are affecting all sectors across the EU, including the [42 occupations currently named as “in shortage” by the EU](#). She emphasised that 11% of young people are currently defined as NEET and it would be beneficial both for these individuals and the economy if they were to join sectors experiencing skills shortages. She underlined the importance of inclusiveness and outreach activities to ensure that no young person is left behind, a principle also emphasised by the reinforced Youth Guarantee. Therefore, in the current programming period, prioritising apprenticeships will be crucial in integrating young people into the labour market. Ms Geleng noted how Member States such as Germany, Austria, and Italy have made significant efforts to attract and hire young NEETs through the Youth Guarantee.

**Bernardo Sousa, Executive Director of the Youth Guarantee in Portugal, Portuguese Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP)**, highlighted the challenges that young NEETs face, such as high unemployment rates in Portugal and entry-level barriers when joining the labour force. To address these challenges, Mr Sousa suggested that the Youth Guarantee’s ability to reach its target group and young NEETs could be enhanced by involving new stakeholders in outreach activities and young people in the design of communication activities. He emphasised that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution is not feasible for the diverse NEET group. Mr Sousa also shared how the International Labour Organisation has helped IEFP to assess outreach options for NEETs through the implementation of a new digital platform allowing young people to communicate and explore opportunities. To address the digital and green transitions, IEFP is developing a training centre focusing on teaching green skills and reviewing the Portuguese National Qualification Framework to promote the importance of VET.

**Miquel Carrion Molina, Deputy Director on Youth Employment and Qualifications, Public Employment Service of Catalonia**, highlighted the disconnect between companies seeking qualified candidates and candidates searching for quality jobs, noting that the two often fail to find each other. In this context, apprenticeships should be leveraged as a recruitment strategy aiming to support NEETs and employers alike. In Catalonia, only 400 out of 20,000 young people are registered with the Public Employment Service (PES). To address these challenges, the PES implemented the Youth Employment Super Programme, under which individuals from the Catalan region, alongside regional networks, work together to encourage young people to register with the PES. The PES also collaborated with the local educational systems to prevent and manage dropout rates.

**Albert Janssens, Board Member of the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) representing the European Apprentices Network (EAN)**, underlined the importance of the Youth Guarantee in helping young people to find employment. He noted that no young person chooses to become part of the NEET group, adding that the current rate of 11% of NEETs in the EU is still too high. He emphasised the need to analyse the root causes of this issue to reduce NEET numbers and advocated for a holistic approach to the Youth Guarantee. In the long term, he noted that stakeholders need to collaborate to prevent school dropout rates and to decrease the number of NEETs across the EU.

## Presenting the 2024 EAfA Champions

**Vicki Donlevy**, Director at **Ecorys**, presented the EAfA Champions, an initiative aimed at increasing the visibility of EAfA on social media and strengthening the EAfA community. Four highly engaged and dedicated members were selected due to their contributions to apprenticeships and skills development. The EAfA champions selected are:

- Bart Denys, Chief Teacher, Ter Duinen Hotelschool
- Natalija Klepej Grzanic, Researcher, Association of Slovenian Higher Vocational Colleges (VSS)
- Immacolata Petio, Communications Manager, ITS Turismo
- Susi Galasso, Head of Education & People Development, Leonardo

**Bart Denys** presented successful examples of apprenticeships from his **Ter Duinen Hotelschool**. His school has expanded networking opportunities thanks to its EAfA membership, fostering collaboration with other stakeholders to share good



practices and address challenges in apprenticeship implementation. He also noted the importance of VET students' participation in mobility programmes, which provide students with needed tools and skills. **Natalija Klepej Grzanic** emphasised the value of visibility that comes with being an EAfA member, focusing on the ability to collaborate with and learn from other members. Building on this, **Immacolata Petio**, discussed **ITS Turismo**'s ability to collaborate with various industry partners through its EAfA membership. EAfA membership also facilitated the implementation of apprenticeships at her organisation, resulting in 25 students completing their apprenticeships and

successfully entering the workforce. Lastly, **Susi Galasso** spoke on behalf of a large company, **Leonardo**, that offers apprenticeships. She presented Leonardo's on-site training, which focuses on digital skills as a way to attract VET students. In line with earlier speakers, Ms Galasso stressed the importance of collaboration between the industry, schools and training providers to make apprenticeships more attractive.

The first day of the EAfA High-Level Event concluded with a celebratory cocktail for all members present. The winners of the [Show Your Job contest](#) were announced and congratulated.



**Day 2**  
**18 June 2024**

## Updates on EAfA, Pact for Skills, and EAN

**Anna Barbieri, Team Leader for Apprenticeships and Erasmus+, Unit B3, DG EMPL**, welcomed participants to the second day of the EAfA High-Level Event with an update on the Alliance's latest achievements and activities, as well as future initiatives. Over the past year, EAfA has provided key information on relevant topics to its members through webinars, toolkits, and factsheets. Among others, the [factsheet on Erasmus+](#) provided EAfA members with information on the relevance to apprenticeships of Erasmus+ programmes, the [leaflet on micro-credentials](#) examined how this can bring value to apprenticeships, and [a toolkit on apprenticeship mobility](#) was launched to provide customised guidance to those interested in mobility opportunities. EAfA has also hosted several webinars on topics such as [apprenticeships in the tourism and hospitality](#) sector and [in the construction sector](#). In 2024, four EAfA Communities were launched. Led by EAfA members, the EAfA Communities enable networking and exchange of knowledge on specific themes which are of interest to their members. Currently, the four Communities are built around:

- the role of cities and regions;
- mobility of apprentices;
- social inclusion and gender equality; and
- green and digital transitions.

Over the past year, the EAfA Communities have exchanged good practices, launched mapping exercises and surveys of their members' regional apprenticeship infrastructures and held webinars on topics such as the importance of language learning in facilitating mobility. Ms Barbieri highlighted the diversity of EAfA's membership and activities and encouraged members to take full advantage of EAfA's resources and engage in exchanges with other members.

**Diana Spiridon, Team Leader for Pact for Skills, Unit B2 of DG EMPL**, introduced the [Pact for Skills](#) and presented its recent progress and activities. The Pact for Skills is a flagship initiative under the European Skills Agenda and includes over 2,500 members who are committed to taking concrete actions related to the up- and re-skilling of European citizens. The Pact also includes 20 Large-scale Skills Partnerships representing the key industrial ecosystems of the EU, as well as five Regional Skills Partnerships. Together, the members of these Partnerships have pledged to provide skills development opportunities to over 25 million workers by 2030. Ms Spiridon also explained the key synergies between the Pact and EAfA, including the promotion of investment in training and education, the encouragement of stakeholder cooperation, and support for wider EU strategies, for example on social inclusion and the green and digital transitions. These synergies are further seen in the fact that 100 organisations are members of both initiatives. While encouraging other EAfA members to join the Pact, she stressed that they can benefit from the Pact for Skills' [additional resources and events](#), such as the Pact for Skills Forum, which took place in March 2024, and the Pact for Skills Networking Event, which took place in June 2024.

**Albert Janssens**, Board Member at OBESSU, provided an overview of the European Apprentices Network's (EAN) role and recent activities. The network has a key responsibility to advocate for European apprentices at regional, national and European levels, ensuring fair working conditions and remuneration for apprentices. Mr Janssens presented the EAN's recent activities, including a study on the mental health and wellbeing of apprentices. He also encouraged attendees to contact and join the EAN.

## Panel 3: Guidance – the key to anticipation!

The third panel of the event was moderated by **Ana Carrero, Deputy Head of the VET Unit, DG EMPL**. The moderator provided an overview of the topic, highlighting the importance of tailored and relevant guidance in enhancing the attractiveness of VET, reducing the social stigma often associated with apprenticeships, and preventing early school leaving. The main elements discussed by the panellists are summarised below.



**Laila Hove, Head of the Development and National Youth Guarantee Team, Norwegian Directorate of Labour and Welfare**, promoted the importance of including young people in decision-making processes, which can facilitate their labour market integration. For example, the Norwegian Directorate of Labour of Welfare has collaborated with mental health organisations and youth organisations to conduct a survey aiming to understand which mental health issues of young people may create barriers to entering the labour market. The survey underlined the importance of involving young people and youth organisations in policy-making and co-creating public services tailored

to their needs, such as, for example, those provided through the Youth Guarantee. National agencies, such as this Directorate, can also play an important role in promoting apprenticeship opportunities and offering guidance to young people. The Directorate has established a national network of training providers that collaborate closely, sharing best practices on guidance provision to young apprentices.

**Jan Wilker, Project Manager, StartNet**, stressed the need for early, continuous, and personalised career guidance for young people throughout their education and professional development and the involvement of parents in this process. He noted that effective and personalised guidance will play a significant role in addressing the skills needs of tomorrow, for example by promoting upskilling and training opportunities which effectively address the needs of the green and digital transitions. Mr Wilker presented good practices in education and training guidance that have been developed under various Erasmus+ projects, such as [Wake up your vocation](#), which empowered teachers as key actors in helping young people to make career choices. By collaborating and promoting a unified approach, European stakeholders, agencies and parents can empower young people and implement systemic change in the field of career guidance.

**Alberto Guerra, Director of the *Fundación Empresa Familiar de Castilla Y Leon***, outlined the four pillars of its career guidance [Neolkigai](#) platform, which helps young people to make informed decisions about their future career paths: identifying what one loves, what one excels at, what the world requires, and what is economically viable. Through this programme, the Neolkigai platform aims to reduce high VET dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates and match young VET students with positions which suit their skills profile. Mr Guerra stressed the benefit of digital tools and platforms in education and training guidance, such as social media or the metaverse, as they allow training providers and employers to target and communicate more effectively with young people. He also showcased the organisation's [Hello Future](#) project, which promotes the involvement of students' families in their education and career decisions.

**Vincent Joseph, European and International Project Manager, Euroguidance France**, concluded the session by highlighting the growing demand for apprenticeships in France and the need for improved guidance to support this trend while at the same time ensuring the quality of apprenticeship opportunities provided. The Euroguidance France network offers guidance tailored to the needs of young people and working adults. Mr Joseph shared examples of the tools used, such as [information guides on internships across the EU](#) and dedicated [websites on VET systems in each EU country](#). Euroguidance also provides sources for training providers, including its latest guide "[Guidance for a Sustainable Development](#)", which offers insights into aligning the activities of guidance professionals with the green transition.

## Panel 4: Apprenticeships for adults: unlocking opportunities

The fourth panel discussion was moderated by **Ramona David, Coordinator of the VET and Training Department, Cedefop**. The moderator introduced the topic by listing the various elements of apprenticeships that make them an attractive option for adults, including the fact that apprenticeships are remunerated, the on-the-job training they provide, and the formal qualifications granted upon completion of an apprenticeship. The main elements discussed by the panellists are summarised below.

**Olga Kafetzopoulou, Director for VET and Lifelong Learning Planning and Development, Greek Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports**, highlighted the benefits of adult apprenticeships for the adults themselves, employers, and society at large. Adults benefit from enhanced career advancement and personal growth, the development of soft skills, the attainment of formal qualifications, and the opportunity to earn while learning. Meanwhile, employers benefit from the higher productivity of adult apprentices, and society at large benefits from reduced unemployment and increased social mobility, as well as the promotion of a culture of lifelong learning. Ms Kafetzopoulou explained that national authorities have an important role to play in addressing the specific barriers that SMEs face when implementing apprenticeships. For example, they can support SMEs through capacity-building activities and by providing financial incentives. She also stressed the importance of a common language and cooperation between authorities and stakeholders when implementing adult apprenticeships, as was the case in Greece, where the Ministry of Education included social partners and VET centres when designing policy on adult apprenticeships.

**Vasile Gafiuc, President of the Bucovina Institute**, brought attention to the importance of providing support to vulnerable adults who pursue apprenticeship opportunities, including lone parents with childcare responsibilities, individuals with a migrant background or refugees, and individuals suffering from psychological trauma or mental health problems. Mr Gafiuc highlighted the importance of NGOs and civil society organisations in advocating for the inclusion of these target groups and fair remuneration for them, as well as in understanding barriers to social inclusion such as unrecognised non-EU qualifications or the volatile nature of migration. To help Ukrainian refugees in their region, the Bucovina Institute put into place an apprenticeship and inclusion programme for mothers and other vulnerable female migrants. Through this programme, mothers established a peer-to-peer working group where they discussed upskilling opportunities and received coaching and language training.



**Gertrud Hirtreiter, Head of Unit, German Confederation of Skilled Crafts and Small Businesses (ZDH)**, discussed initiatives to break gender stereotypes and improve gender balance in apprenticeships. For example, the ZDH launched an image campaign aimed at female apprentices, promoting female ambassadors and sharing their experiences and success stories in apprenticeships in traditional male-dominated fields such as the construction sector. The ZDH also launched a working group focusing on themes of relevance for women apprentices in the skilled crafts sector, exploring issues such as state services that are available for self-employed or pregnant women, or balancing family responsibilities with careers. Ms Hirtreiter also highlighted the importance of sectoral actors such as the ZDH in facilitating apprenticeships for adults. These actors can support groups in need of qualifications, provide information on available training, provide micro-credential training programmes, or implement Higher Education VET programmes corresponding to a Bachelor's or Master's degree.

**Alessandro Mele, President of Punto Cometa**, presented the [GIVE \(Governance for Inclusive Vocational Excellence\)](#) Erasmus+ project, which is a Centre of Vocational Excellence dedicated to the social inclusion of individuals from disadvantaged groups. The project has achieved great success and recognition in the region in which it has been implemented and has successfully integrated the apprentices with disabilities who participated in the project into the local labour market. Mr Mele stressed the importance of apprenticeships in giving a sense of belonging and achievement to workers. He also expressed the need to shift the paradigm from performance-oriented to person-focused VET, placing the individual at the centre and fostering their development and growth. Ultimately, this will help to fully integrate vulnerable groups into the labour market, society and the economy.

## Closing remarks

**Chiara Riondino, Head of the VET Unit at DG EMPL**, concluded this two-day event by reflecting on the challenges and good practices that emerged during the discussions. She noted that the event gave the opportunity to participants to reflect on topics such as the attractiveness of VET and apprenticeships, the satisfaction and wellbeing of European apprentices, the importance of social inclusion, and the need to align apprentices' skills with current and future labour market needs. Ms Riondino reminded participants of the possibilities that VET and apprenticeships offer to learners, including the skills and knowledge relevant to the green and digital transitions. She highlighted the importance of providing apprentices with individualised guidance and promoting their wellbeing, so that apprentices continue to pursue apprenticeships that fit their skills and career ambitions. Ms Riondino reflected on the positive examples of the enhanced career paths, increased skills levels, and new businesses created through apprenticeships which were discussed during the event. Finally, she highlighted the importance of cooperation, collaboration, and the development of a community in implementing apprenticeship initiatives. Challenges can be successfully addressed only through cooperation between all relevant stakeholders and EAfA plays a crucial role in bringing the diverse community of stakeholders together.

# Main takeaways

- Apprenticeships are a useful tool to address skills shortages within the labour market, especially in the context of the green and digital transitions. Quality apprenticeships underpinned by fair working conditions can be part of the solution to labour shortages.
- The attractiveness of apprenticeships needs to be well communicated, in particular to parents.
- Despite a decreasing NEET rate in recent years across the EU, European and national stakeholders should intensify efforts to achieve the long-term goal of reducing NEETs to 9% by 2030. Apprenticeships can play an important role by enabling learning in practical contexts while earning.
- Communities of apprentices and practitioners play a crucial role in the success of apprenticeships. Young apprentices transitioning between education and work can often feel isolated and therefore peer networks, mentoring, and guidance are essential to addressing these challenges.
- Apprenticeships for adults are valuable in terms of the upskilling and reskilling of European citizens. Further, recognition of adults' prior experience and qualifications is essential.
- Apprenticeships can facilitate the integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market. However, it is vital to tailor apprenticeship programmes to the specific needs and life circumstances of individuals and offer comprehensive support.

