

ETUC Position Paper on renewing the European Alliance for Apprenticeship

Adopted at the virtual Executive Committee Meeting of 28-29 October 2020

A [Communication](#) and [proposal for a Council Recommendation](#) on *Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation*, published as part of the new policy package of the European Commission on 1 July 2020, announced the renewal of the **European Alliance for Apprenticeship (EAfA)**. ETUC's response to the proposals of the European Commission on apprenticeship are outlined hereunder.

The COVID-19 crisis had a detrimental impact on apprenticeships. In many economic sectors affected by the lockdown, apprentices had to postpone their apprenticeships or even become redundant while in other sectors apprentices continued their apprenticeships via home-based project work or simulations. However, many governments did not adapt quickly to this change in circumstances and therefore failed to provide training, tools, and internet access to the VET learners, teachers and trainers in order to shift the theoretical and practical learning, apprenticeship, and assessment to a digital setting. The **drop-out rates from VET schools and apprenticeships** have been considered the highest. ETUC is concerned that the increased numbers of **NEETs¹ should receive immediate support to reintegrate them to VET and apprenticeship**. Therefore, the European Commission should start conducting a European-level research on the real impact of the COVID-19 crisis on VET and apprenticeship and develop effective policy strategies to tackle its impact.

ETUC reminds the European Commission that the EAfA is a social partners' initiative which was adopted as a [Council Declaration on the European Alliance for Apprenticeships in 2013](#). At that time the aim was to ensure permeability from VET to the labour market after the 2008 financial and economic crisis, and it aimed at engaging companies and other stakeholders (VET schools, social partners, etc) to provide quality apprenticeship placements to young VET students. The European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship, which was adopted in 2018 as a [Council Recommendation](#) based on the proposal of the social partners and governments, gave a new impetus to the EAfA. It underlined that increasing the number of apprenticeship places via pledges of companies is not enough, but **quality** of apprenticeship should be also ensured via the implementation of this framework. For revisiting the European Alliance for Apprenticeship, effective involvement of the European-level social partners is necessary as it was the cross-sectoral social partners who initiated this alliance. ETUC believes that instead of renewing the initiative it should be further enforced.

We welcome the increased focus of the Commission on **apprenticeship in digital and green sectors** and apprenticeships in relation to digital and green skills provision. However, a renewed focus on the European Alliance for Apprenticeship (EAfA) also needs to tackle the enormous impact of the COVID-19 crisis on apprenticeship provisions. From one hand

¹ People who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training"

apprenticeships had to stop, on the other hand many apprentices were asked to continue and stay beyond their apprenticeship period to help within the emergency sectors. Sometimes these requests did not respect collective agreements and the apprentices did not receive their full salary as workers. We continue demanding the full implementation of the [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#) (EFQEA) within **effective national VET policies agreed within social dialogue**. Most importantly apprentices need to be seen having a double status as learners and workers within the companies. Thus, **collective agreements and labour rights** must be respected in relation to the supply of apprenticeship at sectoral and company levels and the European Commission should take further steps towards the full implementation of the EFQEA to ensure that apprentices are **not exploited as cheap labour**.

We urge the European Commission to implement the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and its first principle to also apply to apprenticeships: *“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market”*. Member states should be asked to report on how they ensure that access to fair and quality apprenticeship is a right for all young and adult learners and how the European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship (EFQEA) is be enforced in national laws and at company level in order to ensure fair pay and working conditions for the apprentices.

Apprentices should not be considered a replacement of full-time workers. Furthermore, in the current climate whereby, due to the pandemic, companies have reduced capacity to offer apprenticeships, it is appropriate to expand the system of **“collaborative apprenticeship”**. This system, which already exists, allows apprentices to obtain their apprenticeship in 2-3 companies so as to receive all the necessary professional skills when one single company cannot ensure training all these skills. The European Commission should recommend the introduction of such systems to member states where such a provision does not exist. The introduction of such a system should be done in agreement with the social partners through social dialogue to ensure that collective agreements and labour rights of apprentices are respected in each of the companies participating in collaborative apprenticeship.

We request the European Commission to ask member states to renew **their national commitments** to the EAfA and to clearly state how the Social Pillar and the [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#) (EFQEA) are implemented in their countries. In addition, we ask the European Commission to require all stakeholders, in particular the companies, VET providers, cities, and regions to revise the pledges they submitted to the European Commission since 2013 and include what actions they are taking in implementing the Social Pillar and the 14 quality criteria of the EFQEA within their capacity. We require to give equal value to qualitative and quantitative pledges of companies and stakeholders on apprenticeship provisions and systems. We remind that quantity shall be aligned with improvement and assurance of quality.

Apprentices are not only young people. Apprenticeship is an important tool in continuous VET for upskilling and reskilling employees and also the unemployed, it supports skills assessment and upskilling of the migrants and refugees in several countries, and helps people with low-qualifications to integrate in the labour market. We remind that the very first

paragraph of the European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship underlines this double focus of apprenticeship, saying that: “Quality and effective apprenticeships that lead to a combination of job-related skills, work based experience and learning, and key competences **facilitate young people’s entry in the labour market, as well as adults’ career progression and transition into employment**. They are part of the formal vocational education and training (VET) systems and they exist in parallel to other work-based learning and/or vocational pathways.” We therefore regret that apprenticeship was put into the Youth Employment Support policy document because this makes a shift in the understanding of the apprenticeship making it exclusively for young people. Apprenticeships for adults that lead to professional qualification, a high school diploma or a tertiary education qualification need to also be of high quality and inclusive and covered by the EAfA.

ETUC regrets that the European Commission suggests an **indicator on attendance in work-based learning (WBL)** of 60% for VET graduates in the VET Recommendation. The CEDEFOP definition within the Riga Conclusions² defines VET targets for 2015-2020 clearly explaining that WBL as a definition includes school-based workshop practices and apprenticeships in companies. Therefore, the European Commission in fact does not motivate the member states with this indicator to offer quality and inclusive apprenticeships and does not suggest to monitor apprenticeship offers in companies. In fact, the EFQEA recommends that **at least half of apprenticeship should take place in companies**, this could be an indicator to be monitored in line with suggesting **collaborative apprenticeship** possibilities to companies. This indicator, which was suggested in 2018 by the employers, may therefore contribute to a great drawback in the achievements of the EAfA.

Concerning the indicator on **VET learners’ mobility abroad (8%)**, it is important to ensure the health and safety and good learning and working conditions within the school and company of the host country via well-defined agreements based on the European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship and ECVET and to ensure the recognition of studies abroad.

We request that the European Commission enforces the implementation of the EFQEA within the application procedure and awarding conditions of the European Commission’s yearly **EAfA Awards to big and SME companies** that started in 2016. We demand that the European Commission analyse the applications in great details and request feedback from the national and local trade unions, with the support of ETUC and European sectoral trade unions, on the credibility of the content of the applications of companies. The European Commission should monitor that the **applicant companies ensuring they have adequate industrial relations, respect trade unions in the workplace, and ensure fair pay and working conditions** to the apprentices in line with collective agreements and by respecting the 14 quality criteria of the EFQEA.

Concerning the suggestions of the Youth Employment Support - Bridge to Jobs policy document, we support **further mobilising local and regional authorities** as catalysts for apprenticeships within local companies, since matching apprenticeship places with VET students is still a problem in many countries. Also, many companies still do not publicise

² https://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf

their apprenticeship places. In particular **public employment services** should play a better role in supporting VET schools, students and teachers trying to find practical learning places.

We welcome the European Commission's suggestion for the need of **strengthening social dialogue** through a more active involvement of national social partner organisations. The European Commission should provide further **capacity building possibilities** by better access to **social partners to Erasmus+ and ESF funds** on improving apprenticeship systems and by enhancing the Apprenticeship Support Services to match governments with social partners to enhance social dialogue where needed. While already several sectoral social partners had pledged to the EAfA, we underline the autonomy of the European sectoral social dialogue committees which define the work programme for themselves according to agreed joint priorities. Therefore, we ask the European Commission to respect the work of the **sectoral social partners** concerning their focus on apprenticeships.

In relation to relaunching the **European Apprentices Network** we ask the European Commission to support the network in defining a clear mandate in order to assist apprentices in line with the EFQEA, and regularly report about the actions of the network to the ACVT. We request that the network shall be supported by EU-financed research on an opinion survey among apprentices on the quality of apprenticeship schemes.