

SUPPORTING APPRENTICESHIP AND WORK-BASED LEARNING SCHEMES THROUGH STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR IN-ENTERPRISE TRAINERS / SUPERVISORS AND HIGHER EDUCATION TUTORS / TRAINERS

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ABSTRACT

ApprEnt addresses the challenges of high youth unemployment and the shortage of skills required by employers. It intends to help learners to bridge the gap between the world of education and the job market, fostering their chances of acquiring the skills required by companies through the promotion of work-based learning and apprenticeship schemes. Integration in the labour market of new or returning learners could be strengthened if universities enriched their current HE activities by consolidating existing or new Business-University cooperation and offered more work-based learning and apprenticeships schemes. ApprEnt intends to improve this by enhancing partnerships that involve companies, HEIs as VET providers, and other relevant stakeholders such as public bodies and learners, with the aim of promoting work-based learning and apprenticeship.

Among some of the main specific challenges for setting up or strengthening apprenticeships or work-based learning, ApprEnt identified the role of in-enterprise trainers / supervisors and of HE tutors / trainers as a key component and factor in success. For this reason, the project will undertake staff development workshops for in-enterprise trainers / supervisors and for HE tutors / trainers, designed to support them in working with apprentices. A generic prototype of an agreement and a training model will also be produced.

The project will also develop a prototype model of apprenticeship agreement and an advocacy pack including lines of action addressed to 4 different target groups: education stakeholders, enterprises, public authorities and learners.

The expected overall result of the project will be the establishment of a new and improved concept of partnerships between HEIs and business, aiming to increase apprenticeships and work-based learning schemes amongst the partner institutions and the linked enterprises at regional and local level in order to produce concrete results on the ground.

Key words

Apprenticeship, work-based learning, in-enterprise mentors, higher education supervisors, staff training, university-business partnerships.

BACKGROUND AND INITIAL WORK

Two of the key challenges for education and training in Europe today are **high unemployment among young people** and the **shortage of higher level skills** required by employers. ApprEnt intends to bridge the gap between the world of education and business, enhancing partnerships that involve companies, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as VET providers, and other relevant stakeholders (such as public bodies, representatives of learners and representatives of VET providers) with the ultimate aim of promoting the establishment of work-based learning and especially apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships – and work-based learning schemes in general – help learners to gain a recognised professional qualification while building up practical skills and experience in a real work environment, thus increasing their chances of finding employment at a level appropriate to their knowledge and competences. For universities, apprenticeship schemes promote the value of learning at higher levels and improve the professional dimension and relevance of the curricula and teaching methods, accelerating exchanges with the business world and improving the employment prospects of the learners. Enterprises, on their side, require more highly skilled people with innovation skills and an understanding of the way business functions.

The level of implementation of apprenticeships systems at HE level across Europe is very uneven. Some of the key policy challenges in setting up and strengthening apprenticeships at university level are:

- Administration and quality arrangements associated with apprenticeships;
- Capacity of in-enterprise supervisors to take on additional and higher-level supervision;
- Skills and competences of HE staff;
- Progression from lower level apprenticeships into university courses.

Based on this, eucen launched a project involving a mixed consortium of higher education institutions and Chambers of Commerce / Associations of SMEs with the aim of fostering the sharing of good practices and maximise peer-learning. This happens transnationally in partner meetings and also in each partner country team, where learning focus groups of education institutions and business organisations work together, with representatives of public authorities and learners also contributing to the discussion.

DEFINITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION APPRENTICESHIP

The first thing the partners had to agree upon was a common understanding of what a higher education apprenticeship was. A unified definition of HE apprenticeship was proposed, including 6 main characteristics:

1. Learning alternates between the workplace and an education centre
- 2. Mentoring is a strong aspect preserved by the employer and the HEI**
3. The programme is part of a formal or continuing education training
4. Successful learners receive a recognised certificate
5. The training involves signing a contract or formal agreement by the student / apprentice
6. The apprentices receive remuneration in the form of wage or salary

The mentoring aspect is one that deserves particular attention: mentors on the company side and supervisors on the university side form the key triangle of the apprenticeship scheme, along with the apprentice / student. They support the learner and ensure s/he can be the main actor and author of the learning process. This is why one of the major objectives of ApprEnt will be the design of a generic prototype training model for in-enterprise mentors and for HE tutors / supervisors, to support them in working with apprentices.

In May 2018 the partners participated in a Learning Seminar organised and hosted by P2-UBO, where higher education apprenticeship schemes have been established for several years. During the activity, the ApprEnt partners had the chance to listen to the testimonies of all the main professionals directly involved in the design and implementation of HE apprenticeship schemes at UBO, including in-enterprise mentors and higher education supervisors. The development of the ApprEnt prototype training course will be based on this learning experience and on its adaptation in the partner countries.

THE ROLE OF IN-ENTERPRISE MENTORS AND HIGHER EDUCATION SUPERVISORS

In-enterprise mentors and higher education supervisors have an especially key role in facilitating the dialogue between theory and practice, and in order to do this they need to develop a whole range of abilities: the ability to host, the ability to contextualize, the ability to assess, the ability to provide guidance, the ability to assist, to acknowledge, to integrate. New pedagogical skills are needed by both in-enterprise mentors and higher education supervisors; both need to focus on how the learner learns. Which cognitive model does the learner naturally prefer? Auditive, visual, kinaesthetic? How can this influence the approach and method chosen to facilitate the apprentice's learning pathway?

Mentors within enterprises should be professionalised to be able to perform a set of fundamental actions:

- **They need to be able to identify the skills the learner needs at every stage and to recognise the main phases of the learning process** (assimilation phase and adaptation phase)
- **They need to use a reflective approach and learn how to debrief learning stages at intermediate phases, via face-to-face exchanges with the learner / apprentice.** These debriefing sessions are even more important if the learner starts off very well and then loses momentum / fails to progress satisfactorily
- **They need to know how to intervene and remediate if the learner is not progressing satisfactorily or is failing.** If we imagine the learner's learning process, we can see that most often it is not a linear line, it may have ups and downs, and it may have moments where remedies are needed to correct the trajectory of the process and make sure it can advance smoothly. These are the moments when the mentor should be able to intervene and offer the necessary support and guidance to the learner / apprentice

With regard to HE supervisors, their biggest responsibility and task perhaps consists in **helping the learner to constantly build and strengthen bridges between the world of theory and the world of practice**. It is fundamental to encourage learners to bring questions from the workplace to the university, and to allow for discussion of problems encountered at the workplace. It is therefore misleading to think that once the apprentice gets to the workplace theory is not needed anymore: the path from theory to practice should definitely not be considered as a one-way process.

To conclude, what is key for both HE supervisors and mentors is to have and maintain a correct understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, without falling into the misconception that theory needs simply to be applied in practice. The interplay between theory and practice should be seen as a vital dynamic tension existing between two dimensions: on the academic side, we have the learning of skills; in the workplace, skills are honed and perfected in real work life. Engagement in the workplace therefore requires a constant adaptation and adjustment to context, as well as to the apprentice's own mind-set (reflexive approach). The apprentice can grow in this tension, and through it s/he can develop his/her own professional identity. This is why this tension should not be seen as a problem but rather as a resource. Therefore, when devising and implementing apprenticeship schemes, it is very important to organise a middle space where the two dimensions - theory and practice - can meet and dialogue.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

By the end of the project (projected to be October 2019) ApprEnt will have produced the following outputs:

- A SWOT analysis and a report showing the difficulties and benefits of HE apprenticeship schemes (*already completed*)
- 32 examples of best practice and a transversal analysis (*almost completed*)
- National focus group discussions involving HE institutions and SMEs
- A prototype course and materials for training supervisors within HE and mentors within SMEs to become supervisors and mentors in HE apprenticeships
- Model agreement
- Policy paper and recommendations
- Advocacy pack including lines of action addressed to 4 different target groups: education stakeholders, enterprises, public authorities, learners.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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