



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Apprenticeships – a bridge from education to work

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Launch of European Alliance for Apprenticeships
Leipzig, 2nd July 2013

Dear Minister Wanka, Minister Pabedinskiene

Mr Franco Bernabè,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

VASSILIOU: Together with my colleague Laszlo Andor, I am delighted to welcome you to the launch event of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. Since we first announced our plans to launch this Alliance last autumn, we have been working closely together to deliver this joint initiative. It is our pleasure to now take the next step to bring the Alliance to life and launch it in your presence.

ANDOR: Europe is going through the worst economic crisis in living memory with unemployment at an all-time high, currently reaching 10.9 % in the EU – and 12.1 % in euro area.

Young people are bearing the brunt of this crisis: the unemployment rate of those under 25 has risen from 15.7% since before the crisis to the new historic high 23.5% in February 2013.

More than one in five young people on the labour market cannot find a job, which means that almost 5.7 million young people are unemployed. In some countries worse hit by the crisis, such as Spain and Greece, the situation for young people is even more distressing and many just don't have the opportunity to work.

A particular concern for us is the growing number of people that are neither in employment, nor in education and training, the so-called NEETs - 7.5 million under the age of 25, and 14 million under the age of 29. Many of them have simply lost all hope and stopped searching for a job altogether - a worrying sign of mistrust in our society and institutions.

VASSILIOU: These numbers tell us not only about the economic crisis but also about the challenges faced by our education and training systems. Too many young people today leave the system either with no qualifications, or with skills which do not match those expected and required by employers. This is particularly evident in certain sectors, such as ICT, the green economy and the health sector. The gap between the worlds of education and work is still too big.

This is where vocational education and training and especially work-based learning have a really crucial role to play. Strong "on-the job" learning provides apprentices with a number of advantages, such as acquisition of practical hard skills and professional experience, the development of soft skills such as teamworking or an entrepreneurial spirit and a real understanding of the day-to-day reality of the world of work.

To reap the benefits of work-based learning, very close collaboration is needed between all actors involved, notably the companies and the schools where the education and training takes place, and social partners. Teachers and trainers are of course also at the heart of this; they need the competences to deliver high quality teaching and guidance in classrooms and in companies.

ANDOR: By alternating between the worlds of education and work, apprenticeships provide a perfect preparation for the labour market. Evidence shows that countries with strong apprenticeship systems tend to perform better in terms of youth employment.

Improving the ties between vocational education and the labour market will help to tackle high youth unemployment, whilst also contributing to better skill matching, social inclusion and economic competitiveness in the longer term.

Employers therefore have everything to gain from investing now in a highly skilled workforce for the future.

A key problem across the EU is that there are not yet enough quality apprenticeship programmes: to this end, the Commission proposed country-specific recommendations on apprenticeships and reforms in vocational training to no less than 16 countries.

The Alliance for Apprenticeships is thus of highest political importance for the Commission.

Let's be clear: developing dual learning systems will not be an immediate solution to the youth employment crisis, but it is a very important structural reform for the medium term, with which we must start now.

VASSILIOU: We believe the European Alliance for Apprenticeships can contribute to all tackling these challenges. To achieve this, the Alliance will focus on two specific aims:

Firstly, the Alliance aims to improve the quality and supply of apprenticeships across Europe. By sharing experience of what works and making smart investments, more apprenticeship places can be created which deliver high-quality training, meeting the needs of both learners and the labour market.

Secondly, the Alliance aims to change the mind-sets towards apprenticeship-type training and work-based learning. For too long, vocational education and training has been perceived as a "second choice" option, inferior to academic education. This must change.

ANDOR : More and better apprenticeships will also ensure delivery on one of the main elements of the Youth Guarantee: together with a high quality job offer, continued education and a traineeship for all young people up to the age of 25.

The Commission has urged Member States with regions experiencing youth unemployment rates above 25% to present detailed implementation plans by October this year, in line with their country-specific situation and challenges.

Apprenticeship reforms should be part of such a plan, and EU funding needs to be mobilised to support this objective. Our aim is to make the Youth Guarantee a reality as from 1st January 2014.

VASSILIOU: Together we can reach concrete results within the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, including:

- Reform of national VET systems for setting up or strengthening apprenticeship type schemes,
- Increased quality and net supply of apprenticeships,
- Easier transition from education to work for learners enrolled in apprenticeship type schemes,
- Leverage of public and private funding to support the set up and functioning of apprenticeship-type schemes,
- And lastly, an improved image of apprenticeships through an increased awareness by businesses and the general public about the benefits and functioning of this type of training

ANDOR: Our plans are ambitious but in line with the size of the challenge. More importantly, these are not only words but detailed actions to reach ambitious goals.

VASSILIOU: Let me give you a few examples of the Commission's action for the next months.

- We will support policy reform in Member States, through peer learning activities and policy guidance. We will set up a dedicated Thematic Working Group, which – among other activities - will help Member States implement the country specific recommendations proposed by the Commission on apprenticeships and work-based learning. In this respect, we would like to call upon all Member States to firmly engage in the necessary reforms to introduce more and better work-based learning.
- We will increase the evidence-base on the costs and benefits of apprenticeship schemes in different national systems to develop a deeper understanding of the return on investment of apprenticeships. For instance, a preliminary study by the European Expert Network on the Economics of Education shows that the benefits of training apprentices go well beyond productivity gains, and include factors such as a better skills mix within the firm and increased reputation of the firm.
- We will ensure European funding to support the objectives of the Alliance by making apprenticeships and work-based learning one of the priority topics under the new education and training programme for 2014-2020, Erasmus Plus.
- Among other actions, the programme will support Sector Skills Alliances, which address vocational skills mismatches and shortages in specific sectors and occupations. Alliances will develop and adapt curricula and training methods to meet emerging skills needs. 4 pilot Alliances are already up and running in sectors including elderly care and green construction.
- Moreover, with a significantly increased programme budget, more young VET students, including apprentices, will benefit from European learning mobility and particularly on-the-job mobility. Through the future Erasmus Plus programme, the Commission aims to help around 100,000 VET students each year to spend part of their training abroad.

ANDOR: We are also exploring how to increase mobility of apprentices, in the framework of EURES, the European network of employment services. The Pilot Action 'Your first EURES job' is broadening its scope to help young people aged 18-30 to find not only jobs but also traineeships and apprenticeships across borders.

- The Commission and a selected group of Member States are examining how to develop a common approach to sharing information on apprenticeships and preparing transnational placements.
- Second, we are attaching strong importance to social dialogue on apprenticeships, backed today by the joint declaration with social partners that we will sign in a moment.
- Thirdly, we have set up a helpdesk consultancy service for Member States and social partners on how to develop effective apprenticeships and traineeships.
- This will allow the European Social Fund to contribute optimally to developing new schemes or funding specific features in existing schemes. What is important is that one carefully considers how the ESF can contribute to the wider reforms in each particular country. Just financing separate small-scale projects would not give the necessary leverage and coherence.

VASSILIOU: And lastly, we will explore new ways to use the European Social Fund and the Erasmus Plus programme so that they better complement each other in supporting the increased provision of apprenticeships for young people.

But even though the Commission can kick start the work of the Alliance, it cannot make it work alone. Real progress will come only if all key actors are ready to together in partnership on the objectives of the Alliance. This is why we are particularly pleased to see such a wide representation of different stakeholders here today, including public authorities, employers' and worker's representatives, business representatives, chambers of commerce, industry and crafts, youth and students' organisations, VET providers, and employment services. On this occasion, on behalf of Commissioner Andor and myself, I would like to thank all stakeholders who have submitted a pledge for their support to the Alliance.

- We have a number of chambers of commerce, industry and crafts making pledges, including the European level organisation, Eurochambers and national and regional chambers from Austria, France, Spain and our local host Leipzig.
- We have representatives of business who are making pledges to support the Alliance, including Siemens, Nestlé, Cisco, Repsol and the joint pledge by Microsoft and the European Youth Forum.
- We welcome also ERT initiative for the set up of a network of business Ambassadors to spread out the key messages we are passing on today
- And, we welcome pledges from VET provider associations, that place a strong emphasis on the enhanced cooperation between education institutions and businesses

However, as President Barroso said, more stakeholders will be needed to make this Alliance a success. Hence, we would like to invite other stakeholders, interested in joining the Alliance to take this opportunity and show their support through pledges that can be submitted via the Alliance's website.

ANDOR: I am also very pleased to welcome the first time-ever joint declaration of the EU Social Partners, the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council, and the European Commission.

It is a strong political signal that this "historic", first joint declaration concerns apprenticeships: It signals the importance that the signatory parties pay to youth employment, and in particular, to a specific pathway to employment which can only be successful if it involves all stakeholders around the workplace and the training institutions.

I trust that the European Social Partners will now mobilise their national members in support of apprenticeships.

This should in turn encourage enterprises to offer good-quality learning places, with sufficient staff and funding for the training component.

European Sector Skills Councils will further contribute to precisely pointing out the needs in each sector. And finally, social partners will be crucial to oversee the quality of apprenticeships in terms of working conditions.

Let me add that the EU Social Partners are closely following on the footsteps of our international social partners who, just two weeks ago, agreed on a first time declaration on quality of apprenticeships, in the context of the International Labour Conference in Geneva.

VASSILIOU: I would like to conclude by warmly inviting all of you to the VET Business Forum next year. The Forum will be an excellent occasion for us to take stock of the progress made so far and to assess what should be the next steps on the road of the Alliance.

ANDOR: We will also report back at political level to the respective employment and education Councils.

I am particularly grateful to the Lithuanian Presidency, which will take forward our work on apprenticeships in the second half of 2013 and give it the high political visibility it deserves.

And last, but not least, I will take the baton to our Berlin event tomorrow, where the EU Labour Ministers and the European Network of Public Employment Services will step up their cooperation in fighting youth unemployment.

I am confident that today's timely signal on the importance of apprenticeships will be heard.

Let me thank you for your attention.