



Engaging SMEs in Apprenticeships: An Opportunity for Growth or Corporate Social Responsibility?

by Meysam Salimi

The [second European apprenticeship conference](#), held in Thessaloniki, Greece on November 9-10, 2015 hosted by Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) brought together over 180 professionals from 28 countries across Europe, to share their experiences, to learn from one another and to debate the future development of apprenticeship training. The conference addressed a wide range of stakeholders with a role in helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to boost their offer on apprenticeships. Participants basically got informed about **success stories** on how SMEs take the lead and set apprenticeship programmes; **national practices** by industry, social partners, public authorities, and other bodies that have a role in supporting SMEs and finally **messages brought forward by the employers' representatives** at European and national levels. The event also offered participants an opportunity to identify ideas that may be turned into cross-country partnerships, find partners, and understand how they may finance their ideas and turn them into reality.

The conference was structured around presentations at a special symposium on the first day to allow all participants to enter into practical discussion followed by small, facilitated round tables. Speakers from European commission namely DG employment, EACEA and Cedefop provided particularly interesting insights into how to support SMEs in taking leadership role in apprenticeship programmes in widely varying cultural contexts. Moreover, the meeting gave voice to leading SME employers namely British entrepreneur Jason Holt, Chairman of the Apprenticeship Stakeholder Board at the UK's [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills](#) who had won awards and honours for his contribution to promoting apprenticeship.

The meeting started with a welcome message of James Calleja, the Cedefop Director, and the [video message of Marianne Thyssen](#), European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. The Cedefop Director sparked the debate stating “*two thirds of the European workforce are recruited by SMEs while only less than one thirds offer apprenticeship*”. Subsequently the EU commissioner highlighted “*excellent providers of work-based learning, including via apprenticeships should give our jobseekers the skills that are really needed in today's and tomorrow's labour market.*” Ms Thyssen argued that SMEs could make major gains with the right organisation and incentives. For example, in Austria, two thirds of apprentices are in SMEs; and in Germany, nearly 30% are in micro-companies, she added.

Cedefop expert Ramona David, who organised the conference, stated: “*data show that SMEs are more reluctant to engage in training apprentices than larger companies. The challenges they face are known, but ways to overcome them may be less so. The conference is an excellent occasion to discover opportunities and create partnerships to support SMEs in this endeavour.*”

Subsequently Mr.Holt who introduced himself as the SME voice, the CEO of the [Holts academy](#) who led a review on the UK's apprenticeship in 2012, employing more than 500 apprentices in the jewellery sector, highlighted that in the UK *"85% of SMEs say they can't grow because they can't find talent."* Then, he added, we must focus on what small businesses want, concentrating on **apprenticeship as a means of growing SMEs not only corporate social responsibility (CSR)**. The statement received many acknowledgements by other keynote speakers and participants.

Subsequently a number of funding opportunities namely an **"Erasmus+"** call for proposals, aiming at [supporting SMEs engaging in apprenticeships](#); European Social Fund (ESF) and [European Investment Bank \(EIB\)](#) were presented by the representatives of the EC delegation, the ESF and the EIB.

From the participants' side, they mainly came up with cooperation ideas discussed various ways of working together to help SMEs increase their apprenticeship offers around the ten different round tables. The proposed ideas were mainly intended to form a basis for the development of European projects in the coming months, ranged from a **European network for promoting apprenticeships to training in-company trainers**, and from **offering would-be apprentices a taster to organising campaigns to engage small businesses**.

To be more precise there were 15 cooperation ideas namely: Community colleges European Style - Involve more SMEs in practical components for VET- 4 and SCHE; Creating a Network(s) of SMEs; Cultivating apprenticeship practices in SMEs; Developing e-learning environments for Master Craftsman and apprentices training based on the Ask-System methodology; Enabling micro SMEs to engage in apprenticeship; European network of intermediary organisations and training providers - Focus on apprenticeships; Fostering cooperation between academic research and SMEs; Integrating refugees and immigrants through apprenticeship; Materials for training in companies; Mentorship - what makes it work?; Promoting apprenticeships in the employment services portfolio; SMECOA - SMEs commitment in apprenticeship; SMEs and inter-company training centres go hand in hand; Transnational cross-sectoral network; Cost-effectiveness: the business case for apprenticeships.

Concerning the round tables, they were organized on the second day of the conference around ten major topics where each participant had to take part at least two topics to share their ideas and experiences. The final results of each round table were then presented at the main hall before ending the conference when all participants got the opportunity to vote for the best ideas. To get a comprehensive overview on each round table the presented ideas were as follow:

Round table 1: Designing apprenticeships to involve SMEs.

The proposed idea was to design a model called **"Life App"** to ensure outcomes for lifelong learning and professional, local/national/cross-border mobility. It focused not only on outcomes as a starting point for lifelong learning/CVT, but also on technical and transversal skills offering a flexible model that provides a win-win situation for enterprise and apprentice.

Round table 2: Supporting SME engagement: how social partners, and other relevant organisations can help.

Out of four cooperation ideas concerning the topic namely: Apprenticeship Platform; Permanent Dialogue and Exchange; European Network of Business Support Organisations; **Apprenticeship Pla-NET**, the latter was selected for the presentation in the main hall. It aimed to connect SMEs and youth directly by opening a virtual platform, meeting the gap between app. D/S. According to the proposal, the platform should be easy to use, friendly, interactive and modern which connects

SMEs and youth in a maximum 3 steps or 8 seconds. The idea also called for a supporting network at the EU-level, to engage youth and SMEs.

Round table 3: Increasing SMEs' capacity for learning provision.

The proposed idea was “**I-AM: Innovative, Intercultural and Internet-based Apprenticeship Master**” which aimed at cross-border collaboration within single sectors; identifying commonalities in learning content and delivery; sharing knowledge and know-how and developing common tools and approaches; accessing local networks and making use of new technologies. Based on the recommended idea, stronger profiles as part of a network of SMEs are involved in delivering apprenticeships (bottom-up approach), sharing the wealth and tackling the challenges together. The idea suggested a better cooperation network of chambers of commerce, training centres (in contact with a group/network of SMEs) and regional governments so that effectively implement the proposal.

Round table 4: Exploring ways larger companies can support SMEs.

Out of two cooperation ideas on the table, the project idea called “**LAR-SMEs-Alliance 1 for AP**” was selected to present the round table in the main hall. The main objectives were to increase motivation and awareness of SMEs on business case of apprenticeships (starting from best practices to peer learning) and to improve overall training capacity. The idea suggested the collaboration between large companies and sub-contractors (SMEs), cluster of SMEs from one sector (e.g. automotive, food) and the involvement of chamber of commerce and universities.

Round table 5: Investigating SMEs' perception of apprenticeships.

The selected idea at this round table was “**Investing in your Future**”. It was intended to generate a new business culture embracing apprenticeships by raising the awareness and profile of good training opportunities and also by enhancing the prestige of apprenticeships. The idea suggested that changing perception of apprenticeships is the joint effort of organisations with excellent networks, VET providers, universities, trade unions and municipalities that are interested to develop a transferrable model. The selling points of the idea were to have a new, simple language, person-to-person contact (word of mouth) and more Jason Holts or ambassadors to promote the idea.

Round table 6: Managing apprentices: a bottom-up approach.

At this table the selected idea was “**T³: Train the Trainers**”, aiming at competence development of SME owners and managers namely how to manage their people, including apprentices. The idea suggested the stronger cooperation among SMEs clusters, professional organisations (motivational experts) and VET providers. It also advocated the idea that taking apprentices into company is an investment in business if manager teach them how.

Round table 7: Strengthening school – enterprise cooperation.

For this round table the selected idea called “**Moving Apprenticeship from Theory to Practice**”. The idea set out to exemplify demonstrable benefits of apprenticeship on all sides; to motivate apprenticeship members; to align roles within apprenticeship delivery model; to identify training needs (analysis) and to develop a toolkit and transferable model of delivery (that can be adopted to suit local conditions). According to the idea, partners are local authorities, employer organisations, providers of training and the mode of cooperation should be based on service level agreements corresponding to respective model of delivery.

Round table 8: Training in-company trainers.

At this table the recommended idea was “**Quality Online Course for Trainers in Small Business**”. It was intended to provide an online tool for in-company trainers assisting them to perform their tasks more effectively through learning online and communicating with peers;

creating a community of practice among the trainers, where content is developed in cooperation and members share; developing a common core but adapt the content in the national context. Moreover, the online tool based on the suggested idea should be flexible, time-effective, and user-friendly providing task related training. The idea recommended a quality label for small businesses engaging in training (recognition of their work) and peer learning from own and/or other countries. The idea also advocated the combined effort of national authorities, representatives of companies and VET providers as means for successful implementation of the idea.

Round table 9: Organising campaigns to engage SMEs.

The selected idea at this round table was “**European Network for Promoting Apprenticeships**” aiming at promoting two campaign strands to inform SMEs about the benefits of apprenticeships and an opportunity for growth on one hand and convincing students and their parents to take the new pathway of study on the other hand. According to the presented idea, the campaign should be web-based (sharing success stories through multimedia, graphic novels) combined with F2F targeted at and partnering with schools, social partners, companies, young people and their parents. The idea recommended the creation of transnational apprenticeship communities to bring together potential employers and apprentices for one day or one week (this event could be organised in a different country each year) to give real experience to young people.

Round table 10: Recruiting apprentices: alternative approaches.

Last but not least table 10 proposed the idea of “**Tasting Apprenticeship**”, aiming at creating a structured preparation to ease the school to work transition and to develop materials and events that can support this phase. The objective was on one hand, to give to learners, their parents and teachers the possibility of seeing in first-hand what an apprenticeship looks like; to impart work ethics to future applicants and ensure a proper matching between their skills and expectations with the needs of the SMEs. On the other hand, to bring employers and trainers more close to the school life and the needs of learners. The idea suggested the joint effort of different stakeholders namely schools, employment agencies, regional government, guidance centres, learners, parents, teachers, trainers, SMEs for developing activities such as Handbooks, open-days, meetings, networking and so on. It tried to avoid drop-out which usually occurs in the beginning of an apprenticeship having negative consequences for both employers and apprentices; ensure more informed and motivated applicants who will make the right choice; match apprentices skills and expectations with the right apprenticeship; increase productivity and success in SMEs

The recommended motto for the idea was “**Recruit me for a day!**”

The meeting ended with the announcement of the voting results. Based on the participants’ choice round table 2 (**Apprenticeship Pla-Net**), round table 5 (**Investing in your future**), round table 9 (**European network for promoting apprenticeships**) and round table 10 (**Tasting apprenticeship**) received the highest vote.

The full video of the first day of conference is available at: <https://goo.gl/ba37kr>

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