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Apprenticeships and Workplace Learning

How do apprenticeships and other forms of workplace learning help people to make a successful transition from school to work?

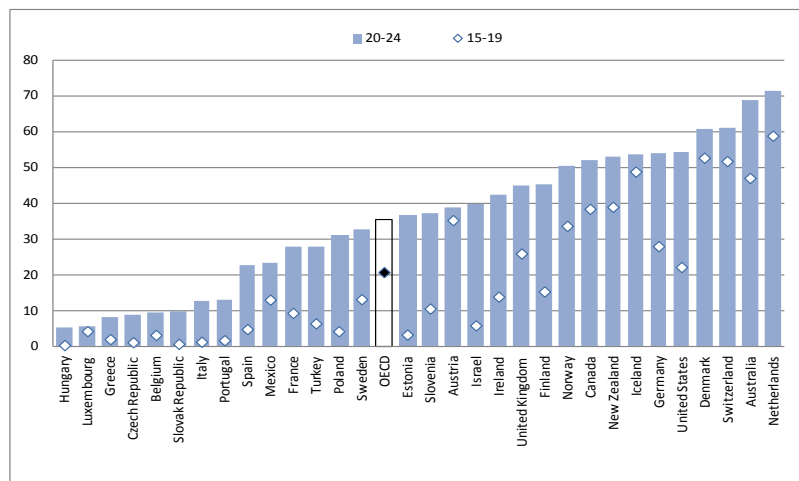
Global economic competition requires a labour force with a range of mid-level trade, technical and professional skills alongside the high-level skills typically associated with university education.

Good-quality workplace learning in vocational education and training programmes, internships and other forms of on-the-job learning give students some valuable labour market experience before graduation. And combining work and study during a transition phase typically yields better labour market outcomes for people. This Spotlight uses the results of the recent [Learning for Jobs](#) survey of vocational education and training (OECD, 2010a) and the [Jobs for Youth](#) study of youth labour markets (OECD, 2010b) to provide some key policy messages.

Workplaces can provide a strong learning environment, by enabling trainees to develop technical skills using modern equipment as well as gain real world experience in skills such as teamwork, communication and negotiation. Workplace learning can also be less expensive than off-the-job training, especially when it provides access to expensive equipment.

Employers' willingness to offer work placements for trainees also provides a concrete expression of employers' skill needs and can help to ensure relevant skills are taught. Workplace training also facilitates recruitment by allowing employers and potential employees to get to know each other, while trainees contribute to the output of their firm.

Combining study and work across OECD countries
Percentages by age group, 2008



a/ Data for Mexico refer to 2004.

Source: European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) for European countries; OECD Education database for all others.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are one of the longest-established arrangements for education and training where work placements play a significant part. Today, apprenticeships are a core element of initial vocational education and training programmes (VET) in many countries and can combine on-the-job training with classroom-based learning in a variety of ways, ranging from apprentices attending school one or two days a week (e.g. in Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Germany, Switzerland), to alternating periods of several months on the job and in the classroom (e.g. in Ireland), to school-based learning followed by workplace training (e.g. in Norway).

Apprenticeships are found in the traditional trades and also increasingly in the service sector and in more highly skilled areas such as laboratory and hospital technicians. In Switzerland, for example, a new "IT engineer" occupation was designated in the 1990s with an associated apprenticeship.



April 2013

What practices are most important for effective apprenticeships and workplace learning?

A high-quality learning environment

Workplace training should offer a high-quality learning environment that enables students to acquire practical skills on up-to-date equipment with trainers familiar with the most recent working methods and technologies.

It should also allow students to develop key soft skills – such as dealing with customers – in a real-world environment. Also, it is very important to highlight that whether in the workplace or the classroom, a high-quality learning environment requires well-prepared trainers and teachers.

“Employers’ willingness to offer work placements for trainees also provides a concrete expression of employers’ skill needs.”

Balance students’ preferences with employers’ needs

Workplace learning should facilitate a two-way flow of information between potential employers and employees, making later recruitment more effective and less costly. Very importantly, employer provision of workplace training should provide a signal that a programme is of labour market value. At the same time, employers should be involved in developing the learning objectives to ensure that they are both relevant to their immediate needs and balanced by sufficient emphasis on transferable skills for future employability.



A clear contractual framework

Apprenticeships and other forms of workplace learning must operate within a clear contractual framework. This framework should encourage employers to help trainees to make a productive contribution, ensure that trainees receive effective learning opportunities and protect trainees against exploitation at work. An apprenticeship or traineeship contract that sets out the rights and obligations of both trainees and receiving firms also underpins the quality of workplace training. Special contracts for apprentices or trainees exist in many countries. In some countries (*e.g.* Germany, Austria and Switzerland) students are responsible for finding a company that will provide them with workplace training. Conversely, in Hungary, VET institutions often help students find apprenticeship places and the contract is then typically signed between the firm and the apprentice. Some countries (*e.g.* Australia and Norway) involve third partners in the apprenticeship.

Effective quality assurance mechanisms

To assure quality in apprenticeships and other workplace learning practices, an effective national standard framework need to clearly identify both learning and labour market outcomes, provide reliable and accessible information for both students and employers across different sectors and locations and focus on identifying areas for improvement and not serve as a means of punishing poor performers.



April 2013

Examples of contracts for workplace training

In **Australia**, the Apprenticeship/Traineeship Training Contract is concluded between the employer and apprentice. A representative of the Australian Apprenticeships Centre advises both parties on their rights and responsibilities and ensures that the apprenticeship is appropriate to both parties. The contract outlines the employer's obligation to employ and train the apprentice, pay wages and ensure that the apprentice receives adequate facilities and supervision. Employers must submit a training plan, endorsed by the concerned training provider (VET institution). The contract stipulates a probation period, during which either party can terminate the agreement.

In **Belgium-Flanders**, an apprenticeship contract is signed between the employer, the apprentice and for apprentices under 18, their parent or guardian. It must be concluded through an "apprenticeship counsellor" to be recognised. Apprentices receive an apprentice allowance from their employer (the amount depends on age and year of training).

In **Austria**, a training contract is between the employer, the student and their legal guardian. The apprentice receives health, accident, pension and unemployment insurance. The training relationship is regulated by the labour and social law, as well as particular employee protection regulations for young people. Apprentices are entitled to a salary determined through collective negotiation, which varies among occupations.

What are the challenges often encountered?

Finding effective incentives for employers' engagement

Incentives for adequate employers' engagement might include a number of financial incentives, including direct subsidies, special tax breaks and arrangements to share the burden of training between groups of enterprises. Incentive arrangements should recognize that employers might gain both a production and a recruitment benefit from apprenticeships and other forms of significant workplace training.

Both benefits and costs are hard to estimate

But the willingness of employers to provide workplace training places also depends on how they perceive the benefits and costs of doing so. In Switzerland half of firms with apprentices either have formal mechanisms to monitor the cost/benefit ratio of their training, or were about to introduce such mechanisms in 2004.

But many firms lack such mechanisms and rely instead on more subjective perceptions of the utility of training. Systematic studies have been undertaken in Germany and Switzerland into the costs and benefits to employers of taking apprentices: these can be used as a means of encouraging employers to take trainees and apprentices by demonstrating to them the real economic returns.

"A high-quality learning environment requires well prepared teachers and trainers."

Making the apprenticeship system attractive to potential apprentices

Apprentices normally receive a wage and they may also get some type of government grant or subsidy. In return they should receive good-quality training and the reasonable prospect of a smooth entry into the target occupation. From the apprentice's point of view, the appeal of this form of training depends on what other opportunities s/he has, typically involving the relative attractiveness of an academic track in tertiary education, or alternatively, of direct entry into the labour market.



April 2013

How governments and employers support workplace training

	Public funding		Firms' collective contribution (e.g. training levy)	Employers' contribution to VET		
	Direct subsidy	Tax reduction		Training equipment	Salaries of trainers	Trainee travel expenses
Australia	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Austria	Yes	Yes	In some sectors	Yes	Yes	Yes
Belgium (Fl)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denmark	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Finland	Yes	No	No	-	-	-
France	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Hungary	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Norway	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Netherlands	No	Yes	In some sectors	Yes	Yes	Yes
Switzerland	No	Yes	In some sectors	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Kuczera, M. (2010), *The OECD International Survey of VET Systems*, OECD, Paris.

References

OECD (2010a), *Learning for Jobs*, OECD Paris.
 OECD (2010b), *Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth*, OECD Paris.

To find out more

• OECD, Skills beyond School	www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/skillsbeyondschool.htm
• OECD Skills Strategy	skills.oecd.org
• OECD, Learning for Jobs	www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/learningforjobs.htm
• OECD, Jobs for Youth	www.oecd.org/els/offtoagoodstartjobsforyouth.htm
• OECD Note on Quality Apprenticeships	www.oecd.org/els/emp/OECD Apprenticeship Note 26 Sept.pdf
• OECD PowerPoint presentations on skills	www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/tag/skills

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