Participation in work-based learning high but partly under pressure

Apprenticeships, internships and volunteering play an important role in the skills development of young people.

Apprenticeships are those forms of Vocational Education and Training (VET) that formally combine and alternate company based training with school-based education, the successful completion of which leads to a nationally recognised qualification. An Internship/Traineeship is defined as a working practice that includes an educational/training component but which is limited in time. They are predominantly short to medium-term in duration (from a few weeks up to six months, sometimes a year). Volunteering is defined as unpaid, non-compulsory work where individuals give their time without pay to activities in an organisation or directly to others outside their own household.

In a given year there are estimated to be: between 2 to 4 million apprentices in the EU; 4 to 6 million interns; and around 1.5 million volunteers aged 15-30 years. While the number of volunteers has remained stable over recent years, for internships participation is increasing, but for apprenticeships it is declining.

A stepping stone to ease the transition from education to work

Work-based learning provides a stepping stone to ease the transition from the world of education to that of work.

• It is the combination of learning and working that confers particular benefits on apprentices with regard to the value they hold in the labour market. Apprenticeships lead to formal (VET) qualifications and apprentices acquire occupation-specific learning outcomes, plus transversal skills applicable across a range of jobs. There are good employment outcomes for those who complete their apprenticeships.

• Internships do not lead to a qualification (though companies can certificate it), but they can sometimes be part of a broader (VET) qualification. The learning is often less pronounced and structured compared with apprenticeships and the subsequent labour market entry rate is strongly related to the type of internship. Open-market internships show the least positive outcomes with regard to labour market entry.

• Volunteering does not lead to a qualification; but the skills it provides can be captured in a certificate. Employers report being positively disposed towards young people’s involvement in volunteering when considering job applications.

Challenges

In apprenticeships systems, apprentices are employed by the company training them, they receive a wage, and they are protected by employment regulations. The learning component is assured through VET governance systems, with learning outcomes described in the apprenticeship agreement/individual learning plan. Although there is no evidence of systematic misuse of the apprenticeship system with respect to either the terms and conditions of employment, or the use of apprentices as a source of relatively cheap unskilled labour, there are potential issues relating to apprentices receiving relatively low rates of pay in some countries and sectors not reflecting productivity increasing over time.

Internships are often not regulated to any significant extent and usually consist solely of an agreement between the employer and the participant (i.e. an open-market internship).
These schemes can be unpaid with the intern not having the same rights as employees. The learning element is the least assured in open-market internships such that there is more scope for these types of internship to be misused.

The rights, obligations and remuneration of volunteers depend on the agreement between the organisation and the participant. The learning that takes place is not usually made explicit and there is no underlying learning plan.

The following cross-cutting challenges face WBL:

- **Cheap labour and substitution of regular employees**: there is the risk that certain forms of WBL result in the provision of cheap labour or the replacement of existing employees. It is in the case of open-market internships and volunteering, given that these are least regulated, that this risk is highest.

- **Lack of learning taking place or training being not being validated**: learning is best assured when there is a learning agreement in place. Such an agreement is less likely to be in place in the case of open-market internships. And in relation to volunteering, there are typically few opportunities for any learning to be validated.

- **Equal access to work-based learning and equal opportunities in the labour market**: WBL, especially when individuals receive no wage or remuneration, runs the risk of being accessible only to those who can afford to work without being paid. This challenge is pertinent to internships and volunteering.

**Suggestions**

All types of work-based learning have the potential to provide a valuable contribution to the skills development of young people. Evidence demonstrates their importance in assisting young people to successfully enter the labour market. This finding needs to be borne in mind when considering further policy developments. That said, the study has identified a number of aspects that warrant further attention. These relate mainly to providing assurances about the volume and quality of skills training provided such that the various schemes meet both the needs of the individual learners / participants, and the organisations providing the apprenticeships, internships, and volunteering opportunities. The following suggestions indicate where improvements might be made.

**Suggestion 1: Apprenticeships lead to good employment outcomes**, so it is suggested that participation in this form of training be further stimulated. If this were to be adopted the following actions are needed:

- ensure that the term ‘apprenticeship’ is used as a brand, associated with quality learning and working environments. This requires an agreement on a core definition at European level. Currently, definitions and practices are inconclusive, in particular as regards the existence of an employment contract and the proportion of work-based learning.

- encourage more employers to offer apprenticeships linked to their involvement in the development of this form of initial vocational education and training (e.g. through financial incentives and support);

- ensure that apprenticeships are open to learners from groups that are currently under-represented in this form of training;
• assure the **quality of learning** in the workplace by means of establishing **learning / training agreements** between providers and employers, and ensuring that in-company trainers and mentors are suitably equipped to fulfil these roles;

• establish **agreement between the social partners** on issues related to **employment contracts** for apprentices, levels of pay / remuneration, and balancing the interests of apprentices and employers so that it is a win-win situation for all sides.

**Suggestion 2: In relation to internships**, it is suggested that a more structured approach towards (open-market) internships be adopted that encompasses **better governance arrangements**, including: spelling out the contractual status of interns, remuneration (open-market interns should be paid); guidance; and the envisaged learning outcomes. Unpaid internships can lead – but not necessarily so – to unequal access and the replacement of existing employees in an organisation. In addition, more can be done so that interns are suitably mentored.

**Suggestion 3: With regard to volunteering** it is suggested to regard volunteering first of all as a non-labour market related activity contributing to the **personal development and well-being**. It makes a contribution to the local community in which it takes place. However, the outcomes of volunteering in terms of competences and experiences gained should be accredited applying schemes for validation of informal learning so that they have currency in the labour market. Additionally, if volunteering is regarded a stepping stone into employment, some means needs to be found of helping people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds take part in this activity (e.g. by contributing to their living costs).

**Suggestion 4: in relation to research**, this study has detected a need for

• a **common definition** that can be applied in gathering statistical information on participation, thereby allowing better cross-country comparisons;

• **comparative data on employment outcomes** of apprenticeships and internships to understand better what WBL schemes work best;

• **information on** what might identify **systematic misuse** of work-based learning.

In addition, further study is required on the issue of **unequal access** to apprenticeships, internships and volunteering and the impact of this on transitions into the labour market.