

The contribution of apprenticeship to the transition from education to employment – the position of the Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of apprenticeship to the transition from education and training into employment, with a particular focus on the perspectives and policy proposals of the Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers. In contemporary labour markets marked by technological change, demographic shifts, and evolving skill demands, young people face increasing difficulties securing stable and high-quality employment. Apprenticeship, as a structured form of work-based learning that combines classroom instruction with workplace experience, has emerged as a key mechanism for supporting smoother and more equitable school-to-work transitions. The study provides a historical overview of apprenticeship as a foundational mode of vocational learning and traces its evolution into modern systems integrated within national vocational education and training (VET) frameworks. It discusses the growing emphasis placed by European and international organisations on the development of high-quality apprenticeship systems and highlights the essential features of such systems, including strong labour-market relevance, clear regulatory frameworks, social dialogue, and meaningful pedagogical support. Quality assurance is presented as a continuous cycle requiring coordination, monitoring, and feedback to ensure that apprenticeship programmes meet learners' needs and labour-market expectations. Focusing on Greece, the paper analyses the main apprenticeship schemes currently implemented in the country, outlining their structure, target groups, learning arrangements, and certification pathways. Despite significant progress and institutional improvements, challenges persist regarding programme quality, workplace conditions, supervision, and alignment with labour-market needs. In response, the Labour Institute proposes a comprehensive set of policy measures aimed at strengthening the governance, quality, and attractiveness of apprenticeship. These include establishing a registry of eligible companies, training workplace supervisors, enhancing social partner involvement, improving curriculum relevance, ensuring adequate compensation, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The paper concludes that high-quality apprenticeship is not only a tool for easing the transition to employment but also an essential component of a broader strategy for skills development, decent work, and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: Apprenticeship; Work-based learning; School-to-work transition; Vocational education and training (VET); Skills formation

1. The Transition from Education and Training into the Contemporary Labour Market

The major economic and social transformations of recent years have affected the overall stability of workers in the labour market; however, their impact has been much more pronounced on the employment of young people, whose position in the labour market has become increasingly vulnerable and their integration into it has grown more difficult and problematic. The process of fully integrating young people into adult society and the workforce is no longer automatic, nor is it clearly defined (INE GSEE, 2025). It now appears to be part of a long journey, which begins after young people graduate from the education system and certainly does not end with their initial entry into employment. Continuous upgrading of their skills is now required, aligned with the demands of the economy, society, and the local labour market.

The economic crisis resulted in a sharp rise in unemployment, especially among young people in Europe. This reignited the social and scientific debate on how to make the transition to employment more effective by developing systems aimed at upgrading the skills of the workforce. At the same time, the health crisis brought about significant changes to the digital and other skills required of the workforce. Technological developments (digitalisation, automation, artificial intelligence), climate change, ongoing globalisation, ageing population, refugee and migratory flows, all shape emerging trends that affect the organisation of work and the skills required of human resources, with consequences for the transition from education and training to employment (ILO, 2024).

At the institutional level, the skills required of the workforce are developed through initial and continuing education as well as through vocational training. The process of moving from initial education and training to employment, i.e. the initial transition, is only one of many that individuals may need to make during their working lives. The Eurofound study (2021) does not limit itself to the school-to-work transition, but includes multiple transition scenarios, which depend on each young person's background and circumstances. These include transitions from unemployment or inactivity to employment, and from temporary to permanent employment.

All forms of transition into employment are therefore recognised, covering the entire spectrum between leaving education and achieving stable labour market integration. The transition can be defined as the set of institutions, structures, procedures and policy tools linked to this process, such as education policy, education and training systems, career guidance and counselling mechanisms and the organisation of the apprenticeship systems (Smyth et al., 2001).

In the past, the transition mechanism represented the traditional pathway from graduation into the labour market, predominantly into permanent job positions. The skills acquired in the educational environment were generally sufficient for subsequent employment. Today, the transition mechanism offers a variety of pathways and alternative routes that facilitate movement into employment in a more flexible manner, responding to evolving skill requirements. We refer specifically to periods during which young people move from an educational environment to a work environment. According to OECD (1998), the transition period begins in the first year when less than 75% of a given age cohort remains in education and ends in the first year when 50% of the cohort is employed rather than enrolled in education. In practice, the transition process starts while individuals are still attending Vocational Education and Training (VET) and may extend up to the age of 30.

It has been widely documented that the transition is facilitated when students are more closely linked to workplaces through VET programmes and/or work-based learning

(apprenticeship, internship/placement, or school-based work simulations). In fact, it has been observed that in countries where work-based learning constitutes a strong component of their education policy, their capacity to respond to skill needs and to address rising unemployment is stronger. The economic crisis highlighted this issue (Cedefop/OECD, 2021), prompting renewed global attention to work-based learning as a policy instrument for upgrading skills and facilitating the labour market integration of young people (Axmann & Hoffmann, 2013).

For this reason, in recent years, governments and international organisations (EU, ILO, OECD, UNESCO, etc.) have formulated policies and invested significant resources in improving the provision of work-based learning programmes, with the aim of making these forms of programmes a conscious choice of educational and professional orientation for more learners—both young and increasingly adult. Particular emphasis has been placed on dual-system apprenticeship programmes, featuring alternating learning between school-based and workplace environments (Cedefop, 2024). Given the substantial and ongoing efforts by international organisations to define, promote, and fund apprenticeship programmes in diverse contexts, many scholars support the existence of a “global apprenticeship agenda,” despite varying priorities and approaches (Vanderhoven, 2023).

However, following the initial years of implementing the relevant institutional frameworks and making financial investments to expand apprenticeship programmes, social partners and experts have raised concerns regarding issues such as:

- programmes that did not meet expected standards,
- poorly structured programmes, programmes that were inadequate in relation to identified labour market needs,
- limited access for some apprentices to employment rights and social protection (Cedefop, 2018).

At the same time, it has frequently been observed that work-based learning is sometimes used as a pretext for providing low-paid labour or even for substituting permanent job positions. Added to this are the evolving working conditions, which have become a focal point of debate concerning the future of work and the ways in which it is shaped by technological advancements, the twin transition (digital and green), and the corresponding skill requirements (Cedefop, 2023).

2. A Historical Overview of Workplace Education

Before the Industrial Revolution, the primary mechanism through which skills were passed on across generations was apprenticeship—a relationship linking a skilled adult craftsman with a young person who was taught the trade. Apprentices spent most of their day in the workplace, learning the craft. Working alongside the master craftsman and more experienced apprentices, they gradually acquired practical skills, often through imitation and guided learning. In fact, where apprenticeship was regulated and institutionalised, it played a significant role in the Industrial Revolution, as properly trained craftsmen boosted the productive potential of their countries. A notable example is the Statute of Artisans of England (1562), which set out the parameters of apprenticeship and contributed to the production of highly skilled craftsmen fuelling industrial growth (Wallis, 2008).

During the 19th century, with the emergence of the mass compulsory education systems, a significant part of vocational skills shifted from workplace learning to school-based learning. This trend solidified in the 20th century, when specialised skills became key to economic development, leading to more structured education and training environments and less

reliance on informal workplace learning (Lintzeris, 2020). Within this context, in parallel with the development of VET, the labour market evolved into an arena in which workers could offer their labour—and therefore their skills and qualifications—in exchange for remuneration.

However, this trend is shifting once again, with work-based learning, particularly through the provision of apprenticeships, attracting the interest of most EU member states. In Greece, the apprenticeship system has been operating as a distinct form of VET since the 1950s, primarily through the programmes of the Vocational Schools (EPAS) of the former OAED, now the Public Employment Service (DYPA). In recent years this provision has expanded. Although the interest in Greece in apprenticeship can be dated back to the 1950s, it was in the mid-2010s that renewed interest, both from the state as well as from social partners, can be identified. At that time, social partners developed initiatives and acquired expertise in the field, shaping a common approach towards apprenticeship (Karoulas, et al., 2025).

3. Towards a Common European Approach to Apprenticeship

According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2024), apprenticeship is defined as *“systematic, long-term training alternating periods at the workplace and in an education or training institution.”* Compared to other forms of work-based learning, apprenticeships require a balanced distribution of responsibilities between workplace and educational environments, ensuring strong and effective connections. Companies are expected to take on educational responsibilities and to implement their share of the investment in apprenticeships (Cedefop, 2015).

Seeking to contribute to the promotion of a common European understanding, in 2018, the Council of the European Union issued a Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA), which clarifies what constitutes an apprenticeship within formal VET programmes. Such programmes must:

- combine learning in educational/training institutions with substantial work-based learning in companies or other workplaces;
- lead to nationally recognised vocational qualifications;
- be based on an agreement outlining the rights and obligations of the apprentice, the employer, and, where relevant, the VET institution;
- ensure remuneration or other compensation for the apprentice for the work-based component.

The above points do not simply summarise technical requirements, but outline the essential characteristics of genuine apprenticeship systems. Accordingly, Cedefop (2019) published the Analytical Framework for Apprenticeships, in which it examines the position of apprenticeship programmes within national VET systems compared to other forms of work-based learning. It concludes that the positioning of apprenticeship within the broader VET system largely determines participants' expectations of what an apprenticeship programme can -and should- achieve. While a common European approach provides orientation point, stakeholders within each national system need to agree within their context on what apprenticeship is and what it is designed to do.

4. A Critical Perspective on Quality in Apprenticeship

Providing high-quality apprenticeship programmes is essential for achieving the goal of facilitating young people's transition from the education system to the labour market. In particular, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017) has promoted the concept of a *quality apprenticeship system* to emphasise both the quality and the labour-market relevance of training. More specifically, quality apprenticeship is a distinct form of VET that combines workplace-based and off-the-job learning, enabling learners from all social backgrounds to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competences required for practising a specific occupation.

Quality apprenticeship is regulated and financed through laws, collective agreements and policy decisions resulting from social dialogue. It requires a written contract that defines the roles and responsibilities of both the apprentice and the employer, while ensuring for the apprentice remuneration and social protection. Within this framework, and following a clearly defined and structured period of training and the successful completion of a formal assessment, apprentices obtain a recognised qualification.

Although there are many ways in which young people can participate in a combination of workplace and non-workplace learning, the ILO's approach to quality apprenticeship systems is based on six core building blocks:

- meaningful social dialogue
- a stable regulatory framework
- clear roles and responsibilities
- fair funding arrangements
- strong labour-market relevance
- inclusion

In this way, quality apprenticeship contributes to promoting the ILO's "Decent Work Agenda" (2017, 2024), offering a mechanism for increasing young people's access to social protection, strengthening quality employment, and improving workers' bargaining power and agency in the labour market (Vanderhoven, 2023).

Apprenticeship can only operate effectively when its quality is ensured throughout all stages. Quality assurance is not a static procedure but a continuous circle of improvement. The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET), established by the European Parliament and Council (2009), introduces a dynamic quality cycle consisting of four stages: planning, implementation, evaluation, and review. This model enhances feedback mechanisms and the adaptation of apprenticeship programmes to evolving labour-market needs and learners' expectations, thus reinforcing their effectiveness.

EQAVET provides a toolkit with quality criteria and indicative descriptors at both VET system and provider levels, which each member state may adapt to its needs. The objective is to support, monitor and improve quality based on shared European references. In Greece, within the activities of the National Organisation for Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) as the National Reference Point for EQAVET, a model has been developed for assuring the quality of work-based learning certification (EOPPEP, 2017).

According to the UNESCO-UNEVOC global network (2020), for the EQAVET quality cycle to function meaningfully, it must be guided by specific principles. These include ensuring regulated learning and working conditions co-designed with social partners, relevance of apprenticeship to labour-market needs and professions, combining real work with training in

an educational institution, provision of nationally recognised certification for apprentices, systematic monitoring of programmes, promotion of accessibility and non-discrimination, continuous adaptation to labour-market shifts, and, as a result of the above, attractiveness of apprenticeship programmes to both learners and employers.

Aligned with these conceptual guidelines, the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) defines 14 quality criteria that can be used for compliance checks, self-assessment, and programme improvement. These criteria primarily concern learning and working conditions, such as a written apprentice-employer contract, the existence of clearly defined learning outcomes, pedagogical support by adequately trained mentors, learning in the workplace, adequate remuneration, social protection and health and safety provisions for apprentices.

Additionally, EFQEA includes criteria concerning the broader context, such as a regulatory framework resulting from social dialogue, support mechanisms for participating enterprises, flexible pathways and mobility for apprentices, career-guidance services, transparency in the availability of apprenticeship placements, reliable assessment of learning outcomes and tracking of graduates' progression paths. These criteria provide a basis for shaping apprenticeship policies across the EU (European Commission, 2018). In an era where labour markets are being reshaped by the green and digital transitions, as well as the need for recovery supported by quality jobs, these criteria gain even greater importance (Mella & Werna, 2023).

In Greece, the concept of quality in apprenticeship has acquired particular significance following the introduction of the "Post-Secondary Year – Apprenticeship Class" in Vocational Upper Secondary Schools (EPAL), established by Joint Ministerial Decision 26385/2017 (FEK 491/B/20-02-2017). The relevant quality framework defines the obligations of all involved stakeholders, the terms and conditions for implementing apprenticeship, as well as the mechanisms for supervision and evaluation. EOPPEP has been assigned responsibility for developing monitoring and certification systems, ensuring that learning outcomes are recognised and aligned with European standards.

However, beyond the institutional framework, the actual quality of apprenticeships depends on how programmes are implemented in practice. In this regard, analyses by the Labour Institute of the GSEE (INE GSEE) provide valuable documentation and critical insights. INE GSEE (2021, 2024) highlights that, although apprenticeship contributes to young people's transition to the labour market and despite the positive steps taken at the governance level, there are still significant challenges regarding the quality of the programmes provided, the supervision of participating enterprises and the protection of apprentices.

The Greek experience shows that quality apprenticeship cannot be guaranteed through institutional regulations alone. A culture of cooperation and trust among schools, enterprises and social partners is essential. Developing mechanisms for monitoring, transparency and evaluation, combined with empowering teachers and workplace mentors, can create a stable and equitable learning environment. Only under these conditions can apprenticeship function as a real pathway to quality education and integration into the labour market, rather than as a temporary employment measure.

5. Apprenticeship Schemes in Greece

Greece currently implements the following apprenticeship schemes:

5.1 Apprenticeship in Vocational Schools (EPAS)

Apprenticeships within the EPAS of DYPA are implemented as a pathway to obtaining a Level 3 specialty certificate under the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Practical training takes place alongside study and it is aimed at junior secondary school graduates aged 15–23. A key feature is the dual system, which combines theoretical and practical education in the classroom with learning in the workplace. The employment contract is signed by the apprentice, the employer, and the DYPA (represented by the school principal). It provides full employment and insurance rights (since 1983, under Law 1346/1983). Apprentices work 6 hours/day, earning 75% of the minimum daily wage of an unskilled worker. Therefore, there is a full correlation between salary and working hours. Work may take place 4, 5 or 6 days per week. Annual participation in this apprenticeship scheme averages 7.500-8.000 apprentices.

5.2 Apprenticeship Class of Vocational Upper Secondary Schools (EPAL)

The Post-Secondary Apprenticeship Class of EPAL targets EPAL graduates aged 18 and above. It is implemented after obtaining the Level 4 specialty certificate of NQF. The apprenticeship period runs from 1 September to 31 August, covering a minimum of 156 working days. Apprentices attend classes at the School Laboratory Centre once a week for 7 hours, while the remaining 4 days of the week are spent in apprenticeship placements in public or private-sector companies. Upon completion of the programme and following successful certification exams, apprentices upgrade their qualification to Level 5 of the NQF. Apprentices receive remuneration that corresponds to 95% of the daily wage of the unskilled worker. This apprenticeship scheme was launched in the 2016–2017 school year, with participation rates increasing yearly. According to data from the Ministry of Education, 3.500 students enrolled in 2017-2018, while 6.945 students enrolled in 2024–2025, showing a steady increase over time.

5.3 Apprenticeship and Practical Training in Schools of Advanced Vocational Training (SAEK, former IEK)

SAEK courses consist of four semesters of theoretical instruction and laboratory training in the educational institution, plus a period of practical training or an apprenticeship programme, which is a prerequisite for the successful completion of the programme and for obtaining the Vocational Training Certificate. After acquiring the certificate, trainees undergo further certification by EOPPEP to obtain a Level 5 NQF specialty certificate. Although SAEK originally planned apprenticeship to cover at least 50% of total training duration, this was not ultimately implemented. Instead, practical training/internship scheme was chosen due to its simpler administrative organisation, easier in-company implementation and reduced bureaucratic oversight in comparison to the apprenticeship scheme.

Currently, practical training lasts 960 hours, either consecutively or in segments. A contract is signed between the trainee and employer, and it is validated by the SAEK principal. The contract specifies the terms of implementation of the workplace learning programme and its duration. Trainees receive compensation equal to 80% of the daily wage of an unskilled worker (Law 3938/B/2021).

6. A Visionary Approach to Apprenticeship: Policy Proposals by the Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers for Developing Apprenticeships as a System for Enhancing Human Resource Skills

In addition to international organisations and governments, trade unions have also taken a clear position on the issue of quality apprenticeship. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, 2015) is committed to the vision of high-quality apprenticeship as a core

element of skills development for both today's and tomorrow's workforce, and as a crucial pillar for building economies that are more inclusive, fair, sustainable, and prosperous. Recognizing the differences in institutional frameworks across national skills development systems, trade unions have endorsed learning and training based on specific principles that must be met to ensure that the vision of high-quality apprenticeship benefits apprentices, the companies that employ them, and society as a whole.

Similarly, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC, 2016) advocates for the establishment of a European Quality Framework for Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning, aimed at enhancing the quality, attractiveness, and effectiveness of apprenticeship programmes across Europe. The ETUC observes that despite significant political interest in apprenticeship programmes, practical implementation often falls short, with emphasis placed more on the number of positions rather than on the quality of training. Consequently, it urges the EU and its member states to adopt a European quality framework with clear standards and criteria, to strengthen the use of European quality assurance tools, and to implement an ambitious mobility programme. This approach aims to ensure that apprenticeships in Europe provide high-quality education, protection, and future opportunities.

A key requirement in the transition from education to the labour market is the formulation of policy objectives for apprenticeship. These objectives determine whether apprentices are treated as a short-term resource, human capital for immediate employment requiring training tailored only to a specific company's needs, or as long-term capital, that is future employees equipped with strong and versatile professional qualifications and skills, capable of contributing across multiple companies or sectors. To enhance the value of apprenticeship, reinforce the relationship between employers and apprentices, and preserve the robustness and competitiveness of national development strategies, adequate resources must be directed toward governance, legislation, and the standards that applied policy should adopt.

Following bilateral dialogue between Greek and German trade unions (as part of a joint action carried out through the Future4VET programme, in which the Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers participated), quality apprenticeship has been identified as a key strategic tool for ensuring a successful transition from education to employment. Quality apprenticeship has the potential to generate substantial multiplier effects for both trainees and companies, thereby creating added value for the labour market and the real economy as a whole.

In the effort to enhance the quality of apprenticeship in Greece and address the challenges associated with its implementation, the Labour Institute puts forward the following measures (IFTP et al., 2024):

1. Creation of a Registry of Companies eligible to host apprentices. These companies must ensure that they possess the minimum level of equipment and infrastructure required to meet the conditions of the apprenticeship contract. The aim is not to introduce a formal certification or bureaucratic process, but to ensure an assessment of the company's readiness for apprenticeship, for example through a visit by a qualified official. For very small enterprises with a limited range of activities, the possibility of forming a network could be explored, enabling a trainee to complete their apprenticeship across multiple companies and to acquire expertise in different aspects of their field from each one.
2. Training of the company-based "Trainer/Supervisor" who will be responsible for guiding and monitoring the trainee's apprenticeship. The person designated to implement the provisions of the apprenticeship contract should, through a brief

training programme, be appropriately informed about the education system, the apprenticeship framework, the obligations of the company and the apprentices, and other issues relevant to ensuring effective quality assurance and evaluation.

3. The drafting of the Apprenticeship Contract should be subject to consultation and agreement with the social partners. The contract should clearly define the obligations and commitments of all parties, with respect both to the quality and to the implementation of the apprenticeship, including explicit educational objectives and responsibilities. It should ensure educational quality by guaranteeing compatibility between the training content and the position offered within the company. Furthermore, it should safeguard the rights of apprentices as well as those of existing employees in companies that undertake to serve as apprenticeship providers. The apprenticeship contract must be explicitly integrated into the regulatory framework for apprenticeships.

4. The presence of a trade union observer/representative, where available. The substitution of existing permanent positions with apprentices, or the use of apprentices as a low-cost workforce without full employment rights, constitutes a dysfunction that arises in companies which regard apprenticeship primarily as a cost-saving mechanism rather than as a productive and developmental process from which they ultimately benefit. The involvement of a trade union observer—implemented on the basis of a specific protocol—can help prevent such practices and ensure compliance with the apprenticeship contract, guaranteeing that apprentices undertake tasks relevant to their training rather than unrelated auxiliary duties. Such monitoring also increases the likelihood that apprentices will be retained in the role for which they have been trained, rather than being replaced by new apprentices.

5. The curricula of apprenticeship programmes should be developed on the basis of labour market needs, identified through a systematic needs' assessment. Where an occupational profile exists for the relevant specialisation, it is essential that the curriculum be aligned with that profile.

6. A holistic approach to the apprenticeship system—including accompanying and support services—should be adopted by all institutions that offer work-based learning as part of the educational process. Educational institutions should also enable trainees to reorient towards other fields of study, if they so wish, on the basis of the professional guidance provided.

7. There is a need to enhance the attractiveness of apprenticeship and to foster a shift in attitudes toward it at both the family and company levels. Families should not perceive apprenticeship as an inferior educational or professional pathway suitable only for “less capable” students. A change in family perceptions can, in turn, encourage companies to regard apprenticeship as a genuine educational process rather than a source of labour substitution. To this end, awareness-raising campaigns could promote apprenticeship as an educational route equal to other pathways, thereby supporting its quality implementation and raising expectations among both apprentices and companies.

8. A key element in ensuring the quality of apprenticeship is the implementation of systematic monitoring and evaluation. Quality assurance requires the consistent tracking and assessment of learning within apprenticeship schemes, using clearly

defined methodologies and tools. It is recommended that these methodologies assess learning from multiple perspectives, incorporating the views of both the school-based instructor or supervisor and the company-based trainer or supervisor.

9. It is essential to ensure—and, where applicable, to continue ensuring—that apprentices receive fair compensation across all providers implementing work-based learning as part of the educational process.

10. Effective networking and governance among all stakeholders (DYPA, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education, and other bodies that provide education or training in the form of apprenticeship) is necessary to establish a unified understanding and approach to apprenticeship-related issues. Moreover, such coordination can facilitate the dissemination of good practices already implemented by other stakeholders, particularly in professional sectors with distinct employment characteristics, such as healthcare, tourism, and shipping.

7. Conclusions

The benefits of implementing the above proposals are far-reaching, contributing to the reduction of unemployment, the enhancement of labour mobility, the protection of professional rights, the regulation of labour relations, and the strengthening of national economic competitiveness. Apprentices will gain access to the knowledge, skills, and competences necessary to respond effectively to an ever-changing productive environment, thereby reinforcing their professional identity and maturity, as well as their position in the labour market. At the same time, companies will gain access to a sufficiently skilled and capable workforce, enhancing both their productivity and adaptability.

Consequently, the effective implementation of quality apprenticeship programmes constitutes a key strategic instrument for facilitating the transition from education and training to employment, as well as for achieving a positive alignment between the supply and demand for skills in the labour market. However, beyond its role as a strategic tool for labour market transition, UNESCO's (2021) report on the new social contract in education underscores that the right to quality education throughout life is fundamental. This right applies equally and explicitly to the level of apprenticeship.

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