

Apprenticeship and its special role in the transition from school to employment: necessary conditions

The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) considers that quality apprenticeship is a key strategic tool for the successful transition from education to employment, but also to create a positive balance between supply and demand for skills in the labour market.

As such, apprenticeship is a strategic tool for combating juvenile, structural and long-term unemployment, which is of critical importance in Greece given that:

- nearly 1 in 2 (49.1%) young people are out of work,
- 26.6% of the age group 15-24 are long-term unemployed and
- 17.2% of the age group 15-24 are recorded as NEET (not in employment, education or training), facing intense threat of irreversible social and professional marginalization.

In Greece, apprenticeship and traineeship have been serving as an institution and are successfully implemented since 1952. Focusing on the dual apprenticeship system that Manpower Services (OAED) is offering at their Apprenticeship Schools, it is highlighted that there is a high professional absorbency index of their graduates from the enterprises in which they are apprentices.

In this context, we would like to underscore certain points of the law 4336/2015 -following the relevant provisions of the law 4186/2013-, and the establishment of an additional apprenticeship year for graduates of Vocational Upper Secondary Schools (EPAL) that lead to EQF specialty degree 5 instead EQF 4 attributed to the completion of three years of study in EPAL.

So far apprenticeships are only the output from the Vocational Schools of OAED. As such, both the number of positions of apprenticeship as well as the quality standards have been sufficiently ensuring the necessary balance and proper functioning of the labour market.

Given, however, the current deregulation of the labour market, the prospect of providing more apprenticeship positions raises strong concerns, risks and associations for the operation of the apprenticeship system:

- either as a replacement lever for existing work or needs for workforce with cheaper and without full employment rights individuals
- either as a means of circumventing the fundamental labour and social security rights.

The huge increase in apprenticeship positions generates intense concerns, especially given that more institutions other than OAED will now be involved in the implementation of apprenticeship.

In addition to the above and in order to allow active participation of the civil society, whichever reform of vocational education and training presupposes and requires the active role of the social partners throughout the whole process, from consultation regarding the aims, to design, implementation and evaluation.

The need to upgrade the institution of apprenticeship and internship is a demand, not only of GSEE, but also of all the national employers' organizations.

Quality apprenticeship, with the appropriate planning, has the potential to generate multiple benefits for learners and businesses, with added value for the labour market and the real economy market.

Necessary components of apprenticeship, among others, are:

- the consolidation of a new culture around apprenticeship, in the logic of investing in people, and not that of cheap or inexpensive coverage of personnel needs,
- the institutionalization of terms and conditions that will guard the content of apprenticeship from abusive practices
- the existence of a clear institutional and legal framework,
- the control, quality assurance and evaluation of businesses' capacity to serve as places of learning,
- the respect of and observation of labour rights,
- the recognition and certification of vocational qualifications.

In this way:

- Trainees will gain access to the relevant knowledge, skills and abilities that are required in order to successfully meet the constantly changing production context by strengthening their professional identity and maturity, as well as their position in the labour market.
- Businesses will gain access to an adequately skilled workforce, capable of enhancing productivity and adaptability.

These benefits tackle unemployment and the threat of unemployment, enhance mobility, consolidate professional rights, regulate labour relations, and enhance the healthy growth of competitiveness of the national economy.

As part of the quality improvement of the OAED apprenticeship system, but also addressing the difficulties presented in its implementation, we propose the following:

1. The development of a **Business Registry**, which would include businesses suitable for accepting apprentices. These companies should ensure a minimum of equipment and other facilities to meet the terms and conditions of the apprenticeship contract. It should be clear that this registry does not involve a certification process or a bureaucratic process. Entry in it would only require a visit from an appropriate official or otherwise verifying the company's readiness for learning. In the case of very small enterprises with small range of activities, we could explore the possibility of creating a network of companies, so that a learner can implement his/her apprenticeship in a series of enterprises, acquiring different experience in several fields from each company.
2. The **training of "Trainer / Supervisor"** from within the company who would provide guidance and monitoring of the apprenticeship trainee. The person who will undertake to implement the content of the apprenticeship contract should have a few hours training to be properly informed about the education system, apprenticeship, enterprise liabilities and trainees and other issues that would facilitate quality control and evaluation.
3. The drawing up of **an apprenticeship contract shall be the subject of dialogue and agreement amongst the social partners**, in order to highlight the obligations and commitments of the parties to the qualitative elements of the contract and the apprenticeship process, with clear learning objectives and tasks. Moreover, the contract would ensure educational quality, including compatible matching between the apprentice's educational subject and his/her position in the company. Additionally, the apprenticeship contract would safeguard the rights of both learners and those already employed in the enterprises that act as learning spaces. This apprenticeship contract needs to be included explicitly in the institutional framework for apprenticeship.
4. The presence of an **observer - representative of the labour union**, in the case of unionised sectors. The substitution of existing permanent jobs by apprentices, as a replacement of workforce with cheaper and without full rights work, is a dysfunction which tends to occur in companies that do not see the internship as a production and development process whose benefits will return to them, but as an opportunity for labour costs reduction. The presence of observers from trade

unions, which could be implemented under a specific protocol, would prevent such phenomena, ensuring compliance with the content of the apprenticeship contract, meaning that the apprentice would work and would be trained in specific labour tasks rather than be assigned to secondary tasks than those linked to their apprenticeship. On a second level, this monitoring of apprenticeship would contribute towards creating the possibility for apprentices to be later absorbed in the field of their apprentice, possibly in the company in which they implement their apprenticeship, rather than be further substituted by new apprentices.

5. The **curricula** should be the outcome of labour market needs' investigation. In case there is a professional profile for a particular specialisation, there needs to be a link between the curriculum and the professional profile.
6. A holistic approach to the apprenticeship system, which includes **Accompanying and Support Services**, needs to be taken up by all actors with apprenticeship programmes as part of the educational process. Importantly, and based on the professional orientation provided by each respective educational institution, apprentices should be given the opportunity for educational reorientation to other objects if they so wish.
7. There is a need to make apprenticeship more attractive and to change the attitudes towards this educational stream, both at family level and at enterprise level. More specifically, we need to change families' perception of apprenticeship as an inferior educational and professional choice for the 'less able' pupils. This would also help change companies' mentality towards apprenticeship from that of job substitution (cheap labour) to that of learning. In order for this to be realized, one could implement a **media campaign for apprenticeship**. Thereby, apprenticeship would be promoted as an equal educational path to all others. Moreover, this would endorse quality implementation of apprenticeship, as both learners and businesses will have raised expectations regarding apprenticeship learning.
8. A key element for ensuring the quality of learning is to implement a **structured monitoring and evaluation of apprenticeship**. The monitoring and evaluation system of learning through apprenticeship needs to be **based on a specific methodology and tools**. It is suggested that the methodology would monitor and evaluate learning from different perspectives - that of the trainer / supervisor of the school unit and that of the instructor / supervisor of the company.
9. It is important to ensure **decent financial compensation for apprentices** for learners of all types of educational providers as part of the educational process.
10. **Networking and governance** among all stakeholders (Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education, Manpower Services, and other organizations that provide education or training in the form of apprenticeship or internship) is crucial, so that though a structured relationship, will be formed a single concept and mode of operation in matters of apprenticeship. Additionally, the creation of a National Commission for Apprenticeship, involving stakeholders -public bodies and social partners- would assist this governance.