



PANEL 3: Adult apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are used more and more for qualifying adults. [Cedefop's research](#) has shown that in practice, apprenticeship for adults is rarely offered in the context of separate schemes, and age per se is not a key determining factor in policymaking to set boundaries of adult participation in apprenticeship. Other characteristics such as the status of individuals in the labour market are often used, and the term 'adults' is often interpreted in a broad sense, indicating individuals who have already entered the labour market as employees or are unemployed. Several schemes that were traditionally focused on young people lift age barriers and open to adults over 18 or over 25. Some schemes that already had higher or no age limits, [see their average age of learners rising](#) to over 18. The traditional profile of apprentices is gradually changing: apprentices tend to be older, may already hold upper-secondary qualifications, and they may have a family and/or may live on their own.

The potential of apprenticeships for qualifying adults

[Adults tend to prefer hands-on learning approaches](#) compared to solely classroom training as a way for updating their skills or developing new ones. They value being trained while performing authentic tasks at the premises of a possible future employer. Apprenticeships offer daily exchange with teachers, in-company trainers and colleagues. Their guidance, support and mentoring can be significant enabling factors for adults who have found themselves out of job or the labour market and need additional motivation to find themselves back in it. Hands-on approaches are also suitable for the integration of adult migrants and refugees, who may lack the language skills required by exclusively school-based programmes.

Due to increased personal or family obligations compared to younger learners, adults may value even more the contractual and working conditions usually linked to apprenticeships: receiving remuneration while learning, complemented by social security rights and other benefits are key for adult learners and can work as strong incentives for boosting participation in adult learning. Such provisions, also listed in the [European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#), help raise the bar in relation to the conditions under which upskilling and reskilling of adult Europeans can be pursued.

Evidence from Cedefop [Policy Learning Fora](#) and its [Community of apprenticeship experts](#) show that apprenticeship programmes for adults are used in many EU countries as an upskilling and reskilling tool in the context of the twin transition. Either through new programmes or update of existing ones, employers often see in apprenticeships [a strong ally](#) in addressing acute skill needs. Responsiveness of apprenticeships is higher when labour market representatives are given the space to express their needs and work with education stakeholders in adapting the available offer.

In [France](#), the professionalisation contract is an apprenticeship scheme aiming at the integration or reintegration into employment of young people from 16 to 25, jobseekers aged 26+, and income support beneficiaries. In 2020, more than one third of participants was aged from 26 to 44. Among its strengths,

the scheme manages to combine reintegration into employment through long periods of training (average 12 months) that lead to formal qualifications, with the ability to meet the short-term needs of businesses in a context of labour shortage.

In [Denmark](#), various types of IVET apprenticeship programmes are available for adults over 25 (EUV). Training programmes are adjusted to previous experience, learning, and employment of adult learners - based on an individual assessment. This usually results in shortened duration of the school-based component (normally one third of the programme), depending on the length of prior employment. 89% of adults participating in the programme find employment within 6 months from graduation. In [Sweden](#), the rapidly growing needs of the solar energy sector led to the development of a new apprenticeship-like programme for Solar energy managers at tertiary level (under higher VET - Yrkeshögskolan apprenticeship-like scheme). The programme offers adult learners a fast way to reach tertiary (NQF/EQF level 5) qualifications on this area, while working. Its learning outcomes should be based or clearly linked to the standards set in the Swedish Qualification Framework – this is a way to ensure quality that makes the programme valued by the labour market and adult apprentices.

Opening apprenticeships to adults also addresses the preferences of several employers to train adults instead of younger apprentices. Adult apprentices may be considered by companies as more mature, – and they may already have some theoretical and practical background on the occupation.

Flexibility can boost participation of adults in apprenticeships

Irrespective of the age of apprentices, apprenticeships should offer them a quality pathway to a formal qualification. This also includes that the content of the apprenticeship programme is not too company-specific and not exclusively focused on current skill needs, so that the qualification has a current and future value for the whole occupation or sector. The criteria laid out in the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships should apply to both young and adults.

That being said, policy interventions that inject greater flexibility in apprenticeship design, organization and delivery are needed for adults to benefit more from this learning option.

Institutional barriers may exist for adults to enroll to apprenticeships, and even if these are lifted, programme features may be blocking: some may require full-time training, fixed timetable and compulsory attendance to the full programme – such factors do not always fit realities of adults. Instead, recognition of prior learning and work experience, skills assessment, modularised training, digital options for certain parts of a programme, flexible alternation schedule or examination processes are factors that can make apprenticeships an appealing learning pathway for adults towards formal qualifications.

The heterogeneous characteristics of adults also need to be considered: the life stage they find themselves in, the importance they place to remuneration, but also the non-financial support, guidance and outreach or support which are essential for certain adult groups, especially those in the verge or outside the labour market.

Companies too may need similar support: to understand the value and benefits of training adult apprentices, to receive guidance on what to train and how, to direct their existing staff to this formal type of upskilling and reskilling, or to invest in training of unemployed adults. Cost considerations are often brought up as a challenge for SMEs engagement in training, but the non-financial incentives and support can make a difference.