



EAfA

9th Seminar for EAfA partner countries

Tirana, Albania
17–18 October 2024

Event report

Background

The Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) of the European Commission and the European Training Foundation (ETF) co-organised the 9th Seminar for European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) partner countries. This seminar brought together around 80 on-site participants from 27 different countries. Participants included government bodies, businesses, social partners, chambers, VET providers, regional authorities, youth representatives, and other relevant stakeholders in the European vocational education and training (VET) sector.

The event took place in Tirana, Albania, on 17–18 October 2024 and featured inspiring panel discussions and three interactive site visits over the course of two days. This provided participants with the opportunity to exchange knowledge and explore opportunities in developing and implementing work-based learning (WBL) systems and schemes, particularly apprenticeships, in EU Member States and partner countries.

Following the end of the [European Year of Skills](#) and President Ursula von der Leyen’s new EU goals established in her [Policy Guidelines for the next European Commission \(2024–2029\)](#), the European Union (EU) aims to provide support and resources in accessing the right skills and quality jobs to help the labour market address current skill and labour shortages. Quality apprenticeships play an important role in addressing these challenges and are key to reinforcing the achievements of the European Year of Skills.

In this context, themes and discussions of the 9th seminar for EAfA partner countries aimed to:

- promote more and better-quality apprenticeships and WBL opportunities in Europe and EAfA partner countries;
- explore the potential and challenges of apprenticeships for adults;
- exchange best practices to learn and implement apprenticeships in different national settings.



Day 1

1.0 Welcome and introductory remarks

The first day of the seminar was opened by the Chair, **Ms. Floriana Folisi**, Human Capital Development Expert at ETF. She welcomed participants and thanked the Albanian authorities and stakeholders, including **Ms. Olta Manjani**, Deputy Minister of the Albanian Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation, for hosting this year's event. Ms. Manjani discussed the importance of skills and human capital development, aligning with the European Commission's commitment to matching available jobs with workers equipped with appropriate skills. She outlined Albania's policy goals to enhance skills and labour policies through the [National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030](#), which aims to foster lifelong learning through two main policy goals: developing skills to balance the job demand and supply, and promoting equal employment opportunities for both women and men.

In this context, Ms. Manjani highlighted Albania's recent implementation of its dual VET system (currently piloted in six sectors) and the establishment of a national training fund. She noted the significance of private sector involvement in workforce training through financial contributions and direct training opportunities. Ms. Manjani also detailed the country's efforts to enhance youth employment through the Youth Guarantee and VET programmes, to which the Ministry has committed EUR 14 million to supplement EU contributions. The Ministry prioritises investments in VET infrastructure and schools (aiming to complete them by 2026) and plans to expand these initiatives to address both urban and rural needs.

Mr. Andrea Ferrero, Head of the Sustainable Economic and Social Development Section from the Delegation of the EU to Albania, highlighted the significance of vocational training and youth employment. He also emphasised the need for labour integration initiatives to include adults. Mr. Ferrero underscored the importance of enhancing upskilling efforts, especially in digital skills, across the Albanian workforce. This has been partly addressed through initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and InnoVET programme, which reflect the Albanian government's dedication to improving employability and addressing skills mismatches for both low-qualified and high-qualified workers through vocational education and training.



Manuela Prina (ETF), **Andrea Ferrero** (Delegation of the EU to Albania), and **Olta Manjani** (Albanian Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation)

Ms. Manuela Prina, Head of the Knowledge Hub for Skills and Jobs Unit at ETF, emphasised the importance of international cooperation, particularly in engaging young individuals in the labour market and promoting lifelong learning through apprenticeships and WBL. She highlighted the emerging challenges and complexities associated with integrating young people into the labour market amidst labour shortages and skills mismatches, which demand adaptable and resilient systems for the future. In this regard, it is crucial to be united in addressing these shared challenges faced by both EU Member States and EAfA partner countries, irrespective of their levels of advancement, to facilitate continuous mutual learning.

After welcoming the new EAfA members and Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Alliance, **Ms. Ana Carrero**, Deputy Head of Unit at DG EMPL, noted that the seminar was an opportunity to highlight apprentices and discuss recent challenges and opportunities. She emphasised the importance of learning from good practices in Albania and the collaboration with ETF. Ms. Carrero also mentioned recent initiatives by the European Commission, citing President Ursula von der Leyen’s focus on skills development, including the creation of a ‘Union of Skills’ aimed at investing in and retaining skills, and the strengthening of the Erasmus+ programme. Additionally, she referred to the development of a new European strategy for VET, to promote VET and better align skills budgets to address reskilling and upskilling needs within the context of the twin transition.

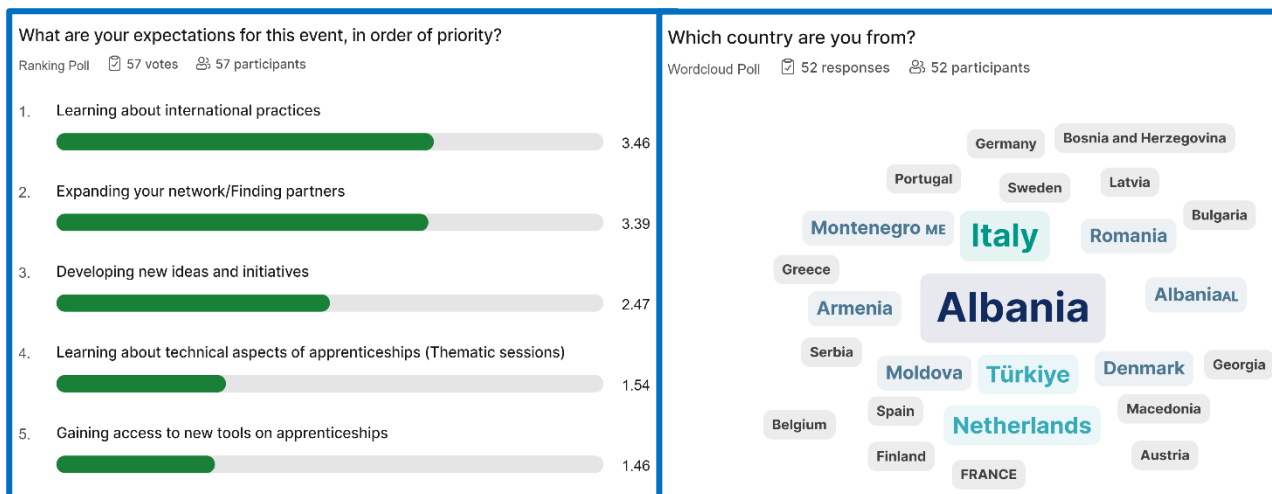
2.0 Objectives of the seminar

Ms. Floriana Folisi, Human Capital Development Expert at ETF, provided an overview of the seminar’s agenda and main objectives. She encouraged participants to engage actively and share ideas and best practices, including those observed during the afternoon site visits to three VET schools in Tirana. The event aimed to present opportunities for learning about recent developments in VET and successful practices implemented by both new and long-standing EAfA member countries, such as Spain, Moldova, Latvia, and Armenia. Moreover, the second day concentrated on two key topics within apprenticeships and VET: apprentice assessments and apprenticeships for adults.

Ms. Folisi then invited participants to introduce themselves, state their country of origin, and share their expectations for the seminar through an interactive poll, as depicted in the images below. Key expectations included learning about international practices, expanding networks, and establishing new partnerships.



Figures 1 and 2. Participants’ responses from the Slido exercises



3.0 Key messages from EU social partners

Speakers:

- **Mr. Robert Plummer**, Senior Adviser at BusinessEurope
- **Mr. Guillaume Afellat**, Senior Policy Advisor at SGI Europe
- **Ms. Agnès Roman**, Senior Policy Coordinator at the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

The session featured online contributions from representatives of European social partners, who have been key actors in the development of EAFA and are crucial in promoting quality apprenticeships. All speakers highlighted the importance of ensuring that apprenticeships cater to all age groups to effectively address skills and labour shortages.



“Apprenticeships are at the heart of what we do at European level and also for members at the national and local levels.”

Robert Plummer, Senior Advisor at BusinessEurope

Mr. Plummer underlined the crucial role of apprenticeships in tackling the current challenges related to labour and skills shortages at the European, national, and local levels. He remarked on the increasing focus on apprenticeships for adults as a vital approach for upskilling and reskilling efforts throughout the EU, particularly in addressing the twin transitions. Mr. Plummer highlighted the significance of mutual learning opportunities and the exchange of best practices for individuals and companies within EU Member States and EAFA partner countries, explaining how these opportunities support and enhance the role of apprenticeships in the evolving labour market landscape.

Mr. Afellat emphasised the importance of activating labour market opportunities and skills to address the labour and skills shortages in Europe by integrating both young people and adults into the workforce through apprenticeships, particularly for local governments, with the support of the EU social partners. Apprenticeships can enhance job matching, extend first job retention periods, and positively influence innovation. Nonetheless, challenges may arise when apprenticeship systems are introduced in new regions due to administrative complexity and costs, which can raise initial concerns. These challenges, however, can be mitigated through the establishment of partnerships and ecosystems that facilitate effective stakeholder collaboration. In this regard, Mr. Afellat underscored the significance of apprenticeships for adults, acknowledging the additional complexity they involve compared to those for young people, but also recognising the valuable range of pre-existing experience and knowledge that adults can bring to new roles.



Guillaume Afellat, Senior Policy Advisor at SGI Europe



Agnes Roman, Senior Policy Coordinator at ETUC

Finally, **Ms. Roman** highlighted the importance of distinguishing between labour and skills shortages. She emphasised the need for effective collaboration among stakeholders, as demonstrated by EAfA, to implement strong initiatives that address these issues and promote VET, which cannot happen without the involvement of social partners. Additionally, she recognised apprenticeships as pathways to jobs and the necessity of fair compensation and quality of apprentices, especially considering the changes brought by the green and digital transitions. Ms. Roman mentioned the importance of apprentices developing key competences such as creativity and language skills, alongside vocational skills, to

ensure long-term career adaptability. She also stressed the significance of employers' investment in their workforce, particularly SMEs. Furthermore, Ms. Roman stated that formal apprenticeship qualifications should be the basis for entering the workforce and securing quality work.

4.0 EAfA latest developments

Since its establishment in 2013, the Alliance has seen considerable growth. As noted by **Ms. Beatrice Biolcati Rinaldi**, Policy Assistant at DG EMPL, the EAfA membership base continues to expand, with over 460 pledges received from a wide range of stakeholders by the time of the event. Collectively, these stakeholders have committed to creating more than 2.5 million apprenticeship opportunities over the past 11 years. This year, 48 new members joined the Alliance,¹ alongside 85 existing members who renewed their pledges; 9 countries have also updated their national commitments since 2023. Bosnia and Herzegovina became the 41st country to join EAfA, joining Armenia² as one of the most recent member countries.



Beatrice Biolcati Rinaldi, Policy Assistant at DG EMPL

Ms. Rinaldi recalled the [2024 High-Level Event](#) held in Brussels on 17 and 18 June, which gathered 150 on-site and over 100 online participants, including key stakeholders such as experts, practitioners, and policymakers to discuss the pivotal role of apprenticeships in addressing labour and skills shortages. At this event, Commissioner Nicolas Schmidt emphasised the importance of reskilling initiatives, including the Pact for Skills and the Youth Guarantee.

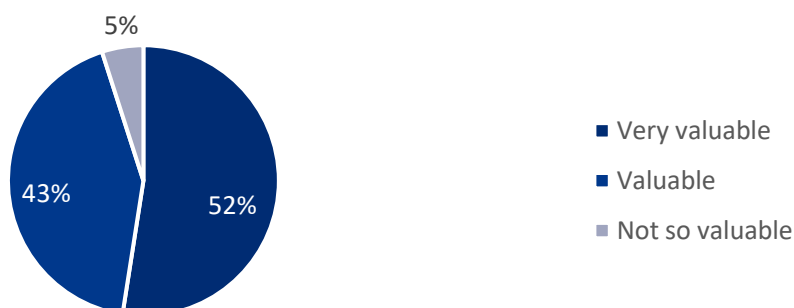
¹ By the time this report was published, the number of new members who joined the Alliance in 2024 was 59.

² Armenia was welcomed into EAfA during the eighth EAfA-ETF Seminar held in Torino in October 2023.

The event also provided an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the Alliance. Member satisfaction with EAfA has remained consistently high over the years. The results of the 2024 annual EAfA monitoring survey demonstrate that the perception of EAfA and its activities is overwhelmingly positive, with 95% of respondents finding it very valuable or valuable in enhancing the quality, supply and image of apprenticeships and promoting the mobility of apprentices. Additionally, members expressed a keen interest in attending more in-person and online events.

Figure 3. Satisfaction with EAfA and its added value

What is your assessment of the value of the EAfA as a multi-stakeholder platform to boost the quality, supply and image of apprenticeships, as well as the mobility of apprentices?



Source: 2024 EAfA annual monitoring survey

Among EAfA’s activities conducted in 2024, a [webinar exploring the role of apprenticeships in supporting tourism and hospitality](#) was held in April. Additionally, two factsheets were published in March and September, the former focusing on [transversal skills](#) and the latter on [awareness-raising and guidance](#). Several forthcoming events and resources were also announced, including a webinar in November on [apprenticeships in the renewable energy sector](#), followed by a toolkit and webinar on digital skills in apprenticeships, and a final factsheet on support for SMEs in offering apprenticeships in December.

Among EAfA’s recent achievements is the establishment of four thematic [Communities](#), which provide networking opportunities for EAfA members to discuss specific topics, such as the mobility of apprentices, the twin green and digital transitions, the role of cities and regions in fostering apprenticeships, and social inclusion and gender equality³.

³ EAfA members can join one or more Community(ies) by emailing EAfAmembers@ecorys.com.

4.1 Welcoming newcomers to EAfA

The seminar in Tirana offered the opportunity to welcome Bosnia and Herzegovina as the newest member country of EAfA, along with five new member organisations. Greeted by Ms. Beatrice Biolcati Rinaldi, **Ms. Aida Džaferović**, Advisor for Vocational and Adult Education at the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighted the nation's dedication to quality vocational education and training. This commitment is evidenced by 70% of students opting for VET pathways. She also underscored the importance of promoting WBL by making companies more attractive to students. The recently developed framework provides additional guidance on quality standards and key competences in VET, aligning with EU norms to foster economic development. Finally, Ms. Džaferović acknowledged the challenges faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, but reiterated their dedication to improving the quality and relevance of their VET system.

Additionally, the following five newcomers were welcomed into the Alliance: Bloomer House Training, Research, and Consultancy (Türkiye), Construction College 'Construct2' (Georgia), International Project Consultancy Stock Company (IPCEU) (Türkiye), Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (Türkiye), and the Danish Union of Business Students (*Landssammenslutningen af Handelsskoleelever*) (Denmark).



"Our goal is to improve VET to align with EU standards."

Aida Džaferović, Advisor for Vocational and Adult Education at the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina



From top to bottom row, left to right: **Tunahan Altundaş** (IPCEU), **Andreas Iversen Trosborg** (Danish Union of Business Students), **Ertan Ūnal** (Istanbul Chamber of Commerce), **Beatrice Biolcati Rinaldi** (DG EMPL), **Tamara Zakarashvili** (Construct2), **Beril Huri** (Bloomer House Training), and **Aida Džaferović** (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina)

5.0 Learn and exchange with new and old EAfA members

Two thematic sessions highlighted recent reforms and initiatives in both new and old EAfA members, allowing participants to learn about the latest developments in work-based learning and apprenticeships. Participants could choose between two parallel sessions, featuring presentations from Spain and Moldova, or Latvia and Armenia.

Speakers:

- **Mr. Guillem Salvans**, Senior Project Manager at Fundación Bertelsmann, Spain
- **Mr. Silviu Gîncu**, Head of Technical Professional Department at the Ministry of Education and Research, Moldova
- **Ms. Ilze Buligina**, Senior Expert within the Department of VET and Adult Education at the Ministry of Education and Science, Latvia
- **Ms. Sigita Alksne**, Executive Director at the Latvian Forest Industry Federation, Latvia
- **Ms. Lusine Kyrakosyan**, Senior Specialist within the VET Department at the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Armenia

5.1 Spain and Moldova

Moderated by **Ms. Lisa Rustico**, Human Capital Development Expert and Country Liaison for North Macedonia at ETF, the first session included presentations from Spain and Moldova. These presentations emphasised the need for support through **non-financial incentives** for companies to appreciate the potential benefit of offering apprenticeships and WBL placements. They also highlighted the importance of considering a gradual approach in establishing an apprenticeship system e.g., by sector or occupation. It was noted that policy reforms take time to deliver results and that ensuring their impacts are long-lasting is even more important.

Mr. Salvans presented the recent history of Spain's WBL reforms. These reforms have led to nearly all recent initial vocational education and training (IVET) graduates in Spain having WBL experience, the highest rate in the EU. Policies aimed at enhancing **cooperation between companies and VET providers** began with the introduction of compulsory internships in all IVET fields (1990 to 2012), followed by the introduction of apprenticeships in 2012. This resulted in regional implementation of apprenticeships tailored to each region's needs, facilitating the sharing of best practices. A 2022 legal reform further strengthened cooperation with companies, implementing the dual principle for all IVET and introducing a statutory basis for apprenticeships. These reforms have positioned Spain as one of the leading countries in Europe for IVET student involvement in WBL.



From left to right: **Guillem Salvans** (Fundación Bertelsmann), **Lisa Rustico** (ETF), and **Silviu Gîncu** (Ministry of Education and Research of Moldova)

Despite these advancements, Mr. Salvans highlighted challenges, such as the need to manage and train staff to align with legal reforms, particularly improving training for VET tutors. Businesses must also undergo a mindset shift by addressing negative stereotypes about VET and ensuring social security and good working conditions for students. This approach will better accommodate apprentices and create hands-on WBL opportunities in Spain. Lastly, Mr. Salvans stressed the need for enhanced support and non-financial incentives to encourage businesses and SMEs to engage systematically in WBL systems.

Mr. Gîncu provided an overview of Moldova's VET system and legal framework. Dual education was legally established in 2022 through the enactment of the Dual Education Law, which assigns responsibility to the Ministry of Education and Research. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Moldova has voluntarily assumed the role of guiding companies' participation in dual education. Companies participating in the dual VET system receive several incentives, both financial and non-financial. These include a 50% reimbursement of costs associated with dual education and the chance to secure a highly skilled workforce.

Over the past decade, there has been a **significant increase in the number of students enrolled in dual education programmes in Moldova**. As of 2024, 60% of students in Moldova are enrolled in dual education. The last academic year saw a notable rise in the number of students, VET institutions, and companies involved in dual VET programmes. The implementation of VET has led to increased participation from companies, and efforts will continue to disseminate information across schools, institutions and businesses to highlight the advantages of dual VET.

5.2 Latvia and Armenia

The other parallel session, moderated by **Ms. Floriana Folisi**, Human Capital Development Expert at ETF, featured a presentation by **Ms. Buligina** and **Ms. Alksne**, who provided an overview of WBL in Latvia. The Latvian long-term policy approach focuses on **modernising VET to address labour market demands** and ensure quality education for all. With 53 educational institutions implementing VET, Latvia has invested substantial European Social Fund resources to promote WBL and apprenticeships, with significant emphasis on STEM fields including engineering, manufacturing, and construction.

Ms. Buligina presented the introduction and further development of the Latvian bottom-up approach to WBL, beginning with pilot projects in 2013 and developing a legal framework in 2016 through the adoption of Cabinet Regulation No.484. This regulation introduced several compulsory components, such as WBL being a tripartite agreement between schools, students and companies, and requiring that at least 25% of the curriculum be workplace-based, along with remuneration for students. WBL tutors are also required to have pedagogical competences, which can also be acquired through a 32-hour modular and practically oriented training course. The roll-out of an ESF project supported the implementation of WBL in Latvia until 2023, involving nearly 5 000 students, of whom about 80% were employed in Latvia six months after completing their WBL programme.

More recently, the VET Law Amendments of 2022 strengthened the **flexible competence-based approach** that allows adaptable implementation of WBL through the development of IVET and continuing vocational education and training (CVET) modules. This includes the introduction of micro-credentials approach as part of sectoral qualification framework to better organise qualifications and track progress. Additionally, Latvia, in cooperation with German and Swiss partners, plans to pilot new schemes aimed at strengthening the capacity of Sector Expert Councils and developing flexible dual-based approaches to student training and adult upskilling through industry-based approaches. Furthermore, in collaboration with Baltic partners through the Baltic Alliance for Apprenticeships (BAfA), Latvia has benefited from the Erasmus+ project 'Testing New Approaches to Training VET and Workplace Tutors for Work-Based Learning' (TTT4WBL), which has trained over 800 WBL teachers and tutors in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia using a common modular programme and training methodology.

Ms. Sigita Alksne highlighted the experience of Latvian employers and the significance of training individuals in skills that meet labour market needs. She discussed the strategy of the Latvian forest industry to address the shortage of qualified workers by providing specialised training within the industry. She also shared details about an Erasmus+ pilot project, 'Skills for Baltic Wood Industry', which implemented ten modules aimed at creating a programme for employees in the woodworking and furniture manufacturing sector to actively acquire skills that are in high demand in the labour market.

The second intervention delivered by **Ms. Kyriakosyan** provided an overview of recent VET reforms in Armenia. Currently, Armenia has 63 middle vocational institutions with nearly 30 000 students enrolled, as well as 20 preliminary educational institutions with over 36 000 students enrolled. Dual education institutions primarily offer VET programmes in sectors such as agriculture, IT, winemaking, and tourism.

Ms. Kyriakosyan described the country's strategic focus on developing a national WBL framework in alignment with the 2030 Education Strategy through various measures, including the Programme of the Government of the Republic of Armenia 2021-2026, the Law on the Approval of the State Programme for the Development of Education of the Republic of Armenia until 2030, followed by an Action Plan in 2023, and the new Law on Vocational Education and Training, effective since May 2024. In particular, the latter established a **cooperative model between education providers and the private sector** aimed at further enhancing Armenia's qualifications framework and outlining the rights of VET students and trainees. During the session, a video demonstrated the hands-on training provided through several WBL projects in fields such as dairy production and veterinary sciences.



Floriana Folisi (ETF) and Ilze Buligina (Latvian Ministry of Education and Science)

6.0 WBL and apprenticeships in Albania: An introduction to the Site visits

The next session, introduced by **Ms. Iulita Osichenko**, Desk Officer for Albania at DG EMPL, provided an opportunity for **Ms. Ejvis Gishti**, Director General of the National Agency of Vocational Education Training and Qualifications (NAVETQ), and **Mr. Klevis Hysa**, Director General of the National Agency of Employment and Skills (NAES), to introduce the Albanian WBL system.

Ms. Gishti outlined NAVETQ's role in developing and ensuring the quality of VET by collaborating with businesses to enhance curriculum design, quality assurance processes, and trainer certification, focusing on sectors such as hospitality, ICT, and automotives. According to Albania's national strategy, the aim is to strengthen partnerships between companies and schools, enabling students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills to meet labour market demands, taking advantage of the increased awareness of the benefits of VET among businesses and students.



From left to right: **Ejvis Gishti** (NAVETQ) and **Klevis Hysa** (NAES)

Additionally, Mr. Hysa detailed NAES' role in coordinating employment offices, VET schools, and training centres across Albania to address employment challenges for jobseekers and students. He described a dual system that encourages collaboration between businesses and schools, involving around 6 000 students and 31 educational institutions in WBL. He also highlighted the need for more on-site training opportunities and mandatory training requirements for companies. NAES facilitates employment and monitors student employment rates, indicating an increase in employment in sectors such as hospitality and tourism. This rise in employment underscores the importance of students gaining in-house training from businesses to develop a skilled workforce that meets labour market needs.

In the afternoon of the first day of the conference, participants had the opportunity to visit one of the three vocational schools based in Tirana, Albania, which were introduced by **Ms. Floriana Folisi**: the Hospitality and Tourism Vocational High School of Tirana, the Gjergj Canco School, and the Technical Economic School of Tirana. During these site visits, participants were introduced by schools' Directors to the facilities of the three institutions, gaining firsthand insights into their efforts to promote quality apprenticeships and foster exchanges between trainers and learners. They took the opportunity to meet also with teachers, apprentices and in-company trainers to know about their experiences in WBL. They also learned about the significant role each institution plays in advancing WBL. The site visits were followed by a dinner at the seminar venue, providing participants with the opportunity to network, get acquainted with one other, and exchange ideas on the conference topics.

6.1 The Hospitality and Tourism Vocational High School of Tirana

The **Hospitality and Tourism Vocational High School of Tirana** trains professionals in the fields of hospitality, tourism, and food technology. Students start their studies at age 16 through dual education, gaining both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. In their second year, they can begin working in specific sectoral jobs such as hotel services, reception, and food service. Students can explore various specialisations and receive support from experienced teachers and instructors. The school has recently introduced Erasmus+ projects, allowing students to gain relevant experience in other European countries through apprenticeships with international companies. Participants also had the chance to speak with students about their apprenticeships, where the students shared how valuable it was to learn under the guidance of experienced teachers to develop skills and general knowledge.



6.2 The Gjergj Canco School



The **Gjergj Canco School** is a public institution dedicated to developing skilled professionals across various economic sectors. The school offers two primary branches – electrical and technical/information technology – with a strong focus on vocational learning, where 50% of classes are conducted within companies. Within these branches, the school provides several programmes including IT, Electrotechnics, Transport Vehicles Services, and Construction. It employs innovative teaching methods, including labs and digital simulation equipment. Committed to student success, the school prepares pupils for modern challenges by blending academic excellence with

practical skills and critical thinking. The school's strategic priorities include enhancing quality, modernising and diversifying the supply of professional qualifications, and focusing on international collaboration with partners through projects and initiatives such as InnoVET, Erasmus+, INTERVET, and Skills for Jobs. The school began collaborating with companies in 2018 and has implemented a tracking system to monitor students' outcomes.

During the site visit, participants explored several specialised labs, including the Information Technology lab, where students work on projects related to computer virus protection, and the Multimedia Lab, where students focus on composition and photography. The Multimedia Lab is one of ten dual training programmes enabling students to study and gain practical experience. Other labs that participants visited included the web development lab, the electrical installation lab (which is financed by the government, companies and foreign projects, such as Skills4Jobs), the automation lab, and the software development lab.

6.3 The Technical Economic School of Tirana

The **Technical Economic School of Tirana**, established in 1921, provides high school students and adults with the opportunity to gain both theoretical knowledge and practical skills across various disciplines, including real estate, fashion and design, economics, business and accounting, among others. At present, the institution has 750 high school students enrolled and approximately 50 adult learners. The school maintains close collaboration with employers and businesses to facilitate apprenticeships and part-time employment opportunities for its students. To ensure that the curriculum aligns with industry requirements, the school invites professionals from various sectors to teach students directly within the classroom setting.

During the site visit, participants toured several facilities, including the development unit, which is pivotal for providing career guidance and counselling to students. They also visited the textile and modelling room, where they engaged with a former student who now serves as an instructor at the institution. This provided insight into the apprenticeship system implemented between the school and various companies, highlighting the importance of apprenticeships as a practical learning method for students. Additionally, participants were shown a real estate classroom where students benefit from hybrid learning models. Lastly, participants had the opportunity to discuss the dual educational system in place between the school and employers with a private sector representative and a real estate sector expert.



DAY 2

7.0 Feedback from the site visits

In the initial session of the second day of the conference, participants were welcomed back by **Mr. Christian Wagner**, Team Leader for EU4Youth, who provided an overview of EU4Youth’s efforts in enhancing youth employment by improving entrepreneurial training systems to support apprenticeships in Eastern European countries.

Under Mr. Wagner’s moderation, attendees had the opportunity to share insights from each of the three site visits. The rapporteurs, **Mr. Alberto Seligardi**, Office Manager within the VET Department at the Institute for Training, Employment and Learning Mobility (IFOM), **Ms. Lisette Oosterhuis**, Policy Advisor at the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market of the Netherlands (SBB), and **Tamara Zakarashvili**, Director of the Construction College ‘Construct2’, applauded the significant progress made by host institutions in advancing WBL and dual education in Tirana. They emphasised the students’ eagerness to participate in workplace learning, their satisfaction with the experiences and tangible outcomes, the mutually beneficial relationships between mentors and students, and the staff’s enthusiasm regarding student achievements.



From left to right: **Alberto Seligardi** (IFOM), **Lisette Oosterhuis** (SBB), **Christian Wagner** (EU4Youth), and **Tamara Zakarashvili** (Construct2)

8.0 Thematic focus 1: Apprentice assessment

The first thematic session, introduced and moderated by **Ms. Floriana Folisi**, Human Capital Development Expert at ETF, focused on apprentice assessments. Ms. Folisi highlighted that assessments are a crucial part of the learning process, as they gather comparable evidence to evaluate students’ improvement levels and determine the learning outcomes achieved. While assessments are widely recognised for their importance, they have both advantages and disadvantages; they showcase prior learning and foster professional growth, but may also overlook the acquisition of soft skills, which are more challenging to quantify.

During the session, best practices related to the implementation of apprentice assessments at a national level were presented, including different approaches to structuring assessments in terms of modalities, content, and tools. These practices were shared by three Member States: the Netherlands, Poland, and Finland.

All the event materials for this thematic session, including background papers and PowerPoint presentations, is accessible [here](#).



Floriana Folisi, Human Capital Development Expert at ETF

Speakers:

- **Mr. Horacy Debowski**, Director at the Central Examination Board, Poland
- **Ms. Gonnie van der Eerden**, Policy Advisor for VET at MBO Raad, Netherlands
- **Ms. Karin Geurts**, Policy Advisor for VET at MBO Raad, Netherlands
- **Ms. Paula Kilpeläinen**, Counsellor of Evaluation at the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINEEC), Finland

8.1 Poland's centralised assessment model



Horacy Debowski, Director of the Central Examination Board

Assessments play a crucial role in enhancing the Polish VET system, which is characterised by a centralised assessment model spanning various sectors. Approximately 420 000 students partake in two exam sessions conducted annually. The system employs around 600 staff members and over 20 000 examiners, covering 6 000 VET schools and training centres.

In the Polish apprenticeship system, there are two forms of apprenticeship assessments: for apprenticeships organised by employers within craft chambers, exams are conducted directly by the craft chambers; for those organised by employers outside craft chambers, exams are administered by the Central Examination Board, along with eight regional examination boards. Students must pass a final external exam organised by either body to achieve a VET certificate and diploma. Companies receive approximately EUR 2 500 in state subsidies from the Labour fund, per apprentice who passes the exams.

Centralised and consistent assessments of theoretical and practical parts enable a standardised evaluation across all training programmes by trained examiners.

Despite its advantages in terms of quality, reliability and comparability of exams across the country and between schools, the centralised assessment model in Poland faces some challenges. As students receive both theoretical and practical learning, they must conduct a theoretical test at schools, and also undergo a practical evaluation tailored to each profession. Employers may have different equipment or evaluation methods within each profession, making it methodologically challenging in balancing the VET core curricula and local specificities of businesses. Technological and organisational differences across employers must be taken into account when designing practical exams for all learners across the country in a given profession. However, the effort of quality exams pays off in the longer-term.

The Dutch VET system accommodates 467 000 VET students through both school-based and work-based pathways. While most students enrol in the school-based pathway, which integrates both theoretical and practical components within the educational setting, there is a notable increase in apprenticeship participation. Vocational graduates constitute approximately 40% of the workforce in the Netherlands, underscoring the critical role VET plays in workforce development. Specifically, in the retail sector, around 20 000 students are engaged in VET retail programmes, with an increasing focus on work-based apprenticeships. Each apprentice receives support from both a schoolteacher and a workplace mentor who is trained by the sector's educational authority.



Gonnie van der Eerden and Karin Geurts,
Policy Advisors VET at MBO Raad

With 58 VET institutions and 256 000 accredited training companies, the Dutch system operates under a centralised educational framework policy, while decentralising curricular administration and school management. Schools have the autonomy to organise and conduct learner assessments, including practical exams supervised by workplace mentors. This promotes a skills-based learning environment that effectively combines theoretical knowledge with hands-on workplace training. Students must successfully complete six assessments to qualify for graduation.

The recent introduction of competence-based assessments aims to support lifelong skill development by enabling students to monitor their learning progress over time. Under this model, students undergo a baseline assessment to determine initial competency levels, followed by integrated practical exams throughout their studies where they apply their skills in realistic scenarios, culminating in a final comprehensive exam. By incorporating reflection and evidence-based learning, the Dutch VET system continues to advance student learning in both academic and vocational contexts.

8.3 Finland's outcome-focused apprentice assessments

The Finnish VET model, which includes practical demonstrations of vocational competence and transversal skills as part of WBL assessments, has demonstrated a high level of success. In Finland apprenticeships have been mainly used in further and specialist vocational education and in adult education. In 2023, around 100 000 students participated in an apprenticeship programme. Over 160 qualification programmes are available across ten sectors, including business, services, hospitality, and health, among others.

Since the 2018 VET reform, there has been substantial growth in apprenticeship participation, with 45% of vocational qualifications completed through apprenticeships in 2023. Apprenticeship training has proven effective in facilitating graduates' transition into the workforce, with only 5% of apprenticeship graduates unemployed one year after graduation. WBL in Finland is outcome-focused, requiring students to demonstrate their skills in practical work tests aligned with vocational qualification standards, inclusive of transversal skills that are often integrated into these practical assessments. Competence demonstrations assess students on their mastery of work processes, use of occupational tools, and transversal skills, such as digital literacy. The workplace instructor and teacher are together responsible for assessment of students.



From left to right: **Gonnie van der Eerden** and **Karin Geurts** (MBO Raad), **Paula Kilpeläinen** (FINEEC), **Horacy Debowski** (Central Examination Board in Poland), and **Floriana Folisi** (ETF)

Evaluations of Finland’s WBL indicate that most VET providers actively monitor and develop WBL programmes. They map local workplaces to ensure suitability for WBL placements, with the majority of workplace instructors expressing confidence in their training to guide students effectively. However, challenges persist in identifying adequate workplaces that meet WBL criteria and support comprehensive skills assessment. Feedback from students has been predominantly positive, highlighting the critical role of well-prepared instructors in delivering effective WBL experiences.

9.0 Thematic focus 2: Apprenticeships for adults

The second thematic session on apprenticeships for adults, moderated by **Ms. Lisa Rustico**, Human Capital Development Expert and Country Liaison for North Macedonia at ETF, explored the design and use of apprenticeships for adults, featuring inspiring examples from Austria, Estonia and England. The session highlighted the potential of apprenticeships for adults for upskilling and reskilling the workforce, and that their success depends on a comprehensive policy approach that addresses various enabling factors, including flexibility of training provision and adequate learning arrangements, modular approach to programmes design, e.g. through recognition of prior working experience, and appropriate social policies e.g., availability of childcare.

Once seen as “dead-end” training programmes, creating skilled workers out of youth, apprenticeships are now open pathways at various skill levels and for diverse professions, increasingly aimed at people in adult age. Although some programmes in the EU specifically target adults, others simply do not have an upper age limit, therefore being open to people of all age. Setting specific age cut-offs may aid measurement but does not capture the diverse needs of adult apprentices, who are better defined by factors like employment status and life circumstances.

Apprenticeships for adults must cater to a wide range of backgrounds and life situations, offering adaptability and inclusiveness for those changing career, the unemployed, and those seeking lifelong learning opportunities. They may play a crucial role in addressing labour shortages and supporting labour market integration amid the green and digital transitions. The European Skills Agenda target aims for 60% of adults to participate in lifelong learning by 2030. While this goal is still distant, expanding apprenticeships presents a promising strategy to contribute to its achievement.

All the event materials for this thematic session, including background papers and PowerPoint presentations, is accessible [here](#).

Speakers:

- **Mr. Josef Hochwald**, Deputy Head of Unit, Vocational Training and Professional Skills at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria
- **Ms. Rita Kask**, Advisor at the Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia
- **Ms. Andrea Laczick**, Director of Research, Edge Foundation, and Honorary research fellow – University of Oxford, United Kingdom

9.1 Expanding apprenticeships for adults to address skills gaps and boost economic productivity in Austria

Apprenticeships are increasingly popular among adults (20+ years old) in Austria: the number of apprenticeships for adult seekers more than doubled between 2013 and 2023, while the share of adult apprentices grew from approx. 6% in 2013 to 10% in 2022.

There are several apprenticeship opportunities available to adults:

- ▶ **Classic apprenticeships**, which can be shortened depending on the apprentice's previous qualifications and guarantee an apprentice income;
- ▶ **Extraordinary apprenticeship-leave examination**, which offers relevant training or work experience in the industry, with foundations providing special preparation for these exams;

Among the specific programmes for adults are:

- ▶ The **'Du kannst was'** ('You can do it') programme, which takes into account practical professional skills acquired during working life to design further apprenticeship training, potentially shortening the programme duration leading to a complete apprenticeship;
- ▶ The **'Dual Academy'**, a comprehensive dual vocational training possibility for high school graduates or college dropouts to combine apprenticeship qualification and post-secondary skills. This EQF level 5 programme offers specialised training components focusing on future skills, such as digital applications, project-based apprenticeship training, and job-related internships abroad. The training period is shortened, and whenever possible, the programme is conducted in separate vocational school classes.
- ▶ Higher Vocational Training (European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Levels 5 to 7). The law for higher vocational education (HBB), in force since 1 May 2024, regulates higher vocational training in Austria. This law creates a framework for practically oriented qualifications at higher education levels (above EQF level 5) based on master and qualifying examinations, as well as the engineering qualification redesigned in 2017. The aim is to develop training opportunities based on defined criteria awarded by approved validation and examination bodies that ensure quality.

9.2 Estonia's successful apprenticeship programmes for adults and youth engagement challenges

Apprenticeships were formally introduced in Estonia in 2006 through specific regulations on WBL. These programmes integrate theoretical and practical components, with one-third of the curriculum dedicated to theory and two-thirds to workplace learning.

Adult learners aged 25–64 account for 91% of apprenticeship participants in Estonia, a figure that has grown steadily between 2015 and 2021, with an average participant age of 42 years. These adult learners primarily enrol in initial EQF Level 4 apprenticeships, which typically last around two years and are well-suited to their preferences and schedules. Women notably dominate the graduation rates within apprenticeships for adults. Nearly half of these apprenticeships (47%) are concentrated in the health and well-being sector, followed by sectors such as engineering, production, and construction. This distribution aligns with labour market demand and reflects the flexibility and appeal of these fields to adult learners.

Given the strong receptivity to upskilling and reskilling opportunities via apprenticeships demonstrated by Estonia’s labour force, it would be advantageous to conduct detailed surveys to determine why adults gravitate towards these programmes. Insights drawn from such surveys could inform the design of apprenticeships that are more appealing to younger participants. Despite the success among adult learners in Estonia – facilitated by the absence of age restrictions when the programmes were launched – apprenticeships have not attracted the same level of interest among younger individuals. A significant challenge for policymakers is to identify strategies to attract more young people to apprenticeship pathways.



From left to right: **Lisa Rustico** (ETF), **Rita Kask** (Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia), **Andrea Laczick** (Edge)

9.3 Advancements and challenges in English apprenticeship programmes for adults

While apprenticeships are seen as a crucial tool for enhancing economic productivity in England, when offered to adults, they play a significant role also in addressing skills gaps through upskilling and reskilling. This is particularly relevant given that 9 million working-age adults have low basic skills in literacy or numeracy. In the 2023–2024 academic year, nearly 130 000 apprentices were aged 25 or above, compared to almost 79 000 aged 19–24, and 70 000 under the age of 19.

Apprenticeship has traditionally been open to and used by adults in England. The reforms passed over the past three decades, have introduced elements that further supported adults’ participation.

In 2015, Degree Apprenticeships were introduced initially in digital, automotive engineering, banking, and construction. These programmes, open to young adults and adults, aimed at improving the parity of esteem between VET and higher education, serving as a progression route after upper secondary level education.

In 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) was created, as an independent organisation funded by the government – to work with employers to develop apprenticeship standards, which made apprenticeship programmes more responsive to labour market needs.

In 2017/2018, the levy system was introduced, with the requirement for employers to pay a 0.5% apprenticeship levy, dedicated to apprenticeship training. Employer responses to the apprenticeship levy have varied, with some being more willing to recoup the money paid through the levy by hiring adult apprentices. Many employers advocate for greater flexibility in using the levy for broader training purposes, which could support both growth and skill development across different sectors.

Several challenges are associated with the use of apprenticeship for adults, especially when participants are low-skilled and need to develop foundational skills in programmes that are mainly work-based, and which may have a reduced duration determined by recognition of prior learning. Another challenge is linked to the availability of highly skilled jobs to absorb adults enrolled in higher apprenticeships for upskilling.

10.0 Conclusions and closing of the seminar

Concluding the seminar, **Ms. Manuela Prina**, Head of the Knowledge Hub for Skills and Jobs Unit at ETF, encouraged the audience to reflect on the insights and lessons learned. Participants stressed the importance of promoting quality apprenticeships for all ages and supporting young people across the EU and partner countries through the EAfA network. The participants expressed gratitude towards DG EMPL and ETF for organising the seminar and facilitating the exchange of ideas with representatives from within and outside of the EU.

Ms. Beatrice Biolcati Rinaldi, Policy Assistant at DG EMPL, thanked the participants and ETF on behalf of the European Commission for their successful cooperation in this 9th edition of the EAfA–ETF seminar for partner countries. She underscored the importance of maintaining ongoing conversations and connections and highlighted the European Commission’s strong commitment to integrating the ideas, insights, and feedback shared during the event into EAfA’s future plans and activities.



Manuela Prina, Head of Knowledge Hub for Skills and Jobs Unit at ETF

