



EAfa

# Support to SMEs in offering apprenticeships



Launched in 2013, the [European Alliance for Apprenticeships \(EAfa\)](#) is a multi-stakeholder platform aiming to strengthen the quality, supply and image of apprenticeships, as well as the mobility of apprentices in Europe and beyond. EAfa aims to do so through national commitments by public authorities and voluntary pledges from stakeholders, and by providing practical information and increasing knowledge exchange on apprenticeships.

## Introduction

This factsheet provides a comprehensive overview of the different types of support available for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) offering apprenticeships across EU Member States. By offering apprenticeships, SMEs can play a crucial role in addressing existing skills gaps and labour shortages within the European Union; however, they may face challenges in providing these opportunities. This factsheet discusses the importance of non-financial support to address some of these challenges and provides an overview of the roles different stakeholders can play in supporting SMEs. It also emphasises the significance of training alliances and partnerships, as well as the role of dedicated financial support in mitigating the costs associated with hiring and training new apprentices. By presenting inspiring examples, this factsheet aims to encourage the further development and innovation of apprenticeship programmes within SMEs, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of vocational education and training (VET) systems across the EU.

## Why SMEs need support to offer apprenticeships

SMEs constitute 99% of all businesses in the EU and<sup>1,2</sup> in EU Member States with strong apprenticeship-based VET systems, SMEs provide the majority of apprenticeship places. For instance, in **France** almost **80% of all apprenticeship places are offered by SMEs**, while in **Germany** the figure is **70%**, and in **Austria 60%**.<sup>3</sup>

Apprenticeships benefit both apprentices and companies:

Apprentices	Businesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuable work experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly skilled and tailored workforce to business needs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced future employment prospects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A reliable source of qualified workers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of technical and soft skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced recruitment costs</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved employee retention rates<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>

Despite the evident gains, **SMEs face many challenges** in successfully offering apprenticeships, such as the administrative burden associated with recruitment and the necessity of training qualified workers to mentor and supervise apprentices. While some of these challenges can be overcome through **financial assistance** and financial incentives such as vouchers, grants, and tax exemptions, others require **non-financial support measures**.

Over time, the need to provide support to SMEs has been acknowledged by several institutions such as the European Council and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships ([EFQEA](#)) underscores the importance of supporting SMEs in providing apprenticeships. The Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, published by the ILO in 2023,<sup>5</sup> recognises the need to provide incentives and support services in order to foster quality apprenticeships, in particular to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

1 Commission Recommendation 2003/361 defines SMEs as companies whose staff numbers and economic weight fall below certain limits. A medium-sized company has fewer than 250 employees, a turnover of up to €50 million or a balance sheet total of up to €43 million; a small company has fewer than 50 employees and a turnover or balance sheet total of up to €10 million; a micro-company has fewer than 10 employees and a turnover or balance sheet total of up to €2 million. European Commission (na) [Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises](#)

2 Di Bella, L., Katsinis, A., Lagüera-González, J., Odenthal, L., Hell, M., Lozar, B. (2023) Annual Report on European SMEs 2022/2023, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

3 ILO (2022) [Towards lifelong learning and skills for the future of work: Global lessons from innovative apprenticeships](#)

4 European Commission (na) [10 Good Reasons for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises \(SMEs\) to invest in apprenticeships](#)

5 ILO, [R208 - Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023 \(No. 208\)](#)

## Non-financial support

### Training alliances and partnerships

SMEs approaching apprenticeships often face challenges related to scale, variable demand, perceived lack of utility, geographical remoteness, or skills mismatches.<sup>6</sup> **Training alliances are publicly co-funded initiatives composed of private company networks.** As such, they enable the pooling of resources, sharing of information, exchange of knowledge, development of ideas, and mutual learning,<sup>7</sup> providing a valuable and cost-effective method to tackle challenges linked to the scale and size of companies.

The types of support provided by these alliances may include establishing inter-company training centres, fostering cooperation with educational and training institutions, and forming partnerships between larger and smaller companies.<sup>8</sup>

One example of partnerships are the [Centres of Vocational Excellence](#) (CoVE) funded by Erasmus+. Thanks to their extensive partner networks aimed at developing regional or local skills ecosystems, **CoVEs can stimulate local business development** and innovation. They work closely with SMEs across various topics and initiatives, including apprenticeships. Such public and private collaborations play a crucial role in establishing skills provisions that are **responsive to industry needs**.

#### WIN4SMES CoVE (Erasmus+ project)

##### *Support area: Public-private collaboration between the education and training world*

The Erasmus+ funded [Regional and International Education Partnerships for Workplace Innovation in SMEs \(WIN4SMES\)](#) project will establish and permanently operate seven CoVEs. Each of the CoVEs will work intensively with SMEs and stakeholders and realise strong regional and international cooperation. With 20 partners from nine countries and 70 associated organisations, including educational institutions and enterprises, the project will run from 2024 to 2028.

WIN4SMES aims to enhance workplace innovation in SMEs by fostering a skilled workforce, entrepreneurship, and knowledge transfer by developing, testing, evaluating, and implementing tools and educational programmes across three educational levels: initial vocational training (including work-based learning and apprenticeships); further education; and higher education (EQF levels 3–6).

All training programmes (including degree courses) are geared to the specific needs of SMEs and designed according to the dual vocational training system. Vocational training will be differentiated through specific training courses for, on the one hand, young people with learning difficulties and for young people with strong learning abilities on the other.

**Training alliances** between companies can support SMEs by creating a framework for **sharing tutors** within a specific sector. Collaborating with joint tutors can enable SMEs to offer apprenticeships by **alleviating potential capacity or resource constraints** that might otherwise hinder their participation in apprenticeship programmes.<sup>9</sup>

#### Providing support to SMEs through joint tutors in Spain

##### *Support area: Cooperative training and apprenticeships provision*

The largest SME organisation in Spain, 'Micro, petita i mitjana empresa de Catalunya' (PIMEC), represents the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises and the self-employed of Catalonia.

Piloted in the electrical installation sector in 2022–2023, [joint tutors](#) are support professionals who assist SMEs throughout the entire process of recruiting and managing apprentices. They help companies with administrative requirements, selection, reception, remuneration, and monitoring of students during their apprenticeships. In addition to facilitating the work of the companies, joint tutors also [attract students to apprenticeships](#) and act as a point of contact during their apprenticeships and their integration into the labour market, complementing the VET schools' tutors.

6 OECD/ILO (2017) [Engaging Employers in Apprenticeship Opportunities](#)

7 Cedefop (2015) [Making apprenticeships work for small and medium enterprises](#)

8 For more examples of apprenticeship coalitions, see: [EFA Webinar - Apprenticeship coalitions: experiences & advantages](#)

9 ILO (2022) [Towards lifelong learning and skills for the future of work: Global lessons from innovative apprenticeships](#); ILO (2023) [Unlocking apprenticeships potential in small and medium enterprises](#)

Finally, **larger companies** can play a crucial role in helping SMEs offer apprenticeships through **partnerships and collaborations**. Larger companies can help SMEs navigate administrative and regulatory challenges associated with apprenticeship schemes or offer support in areas like digital tools and technologies for training. Additionally, these partnerships can facilitate knowledge transfer, helping SMEs implement best practices in apprenticeship management and development.

## Siemens Professional Education – VET support for SMEs

### *Support area: Cooperative training and apprenticeships provision*

Siemens is a technology company specialising in industry, infrastructure, transport, and healthcare. The company works closely with its external partner companies and in particular SMEs to attract, recruit and train qualified apprentices for the modern workforce.

Once recruited, apprentices spend about half of their apprenticeships at the partner company working alongside their future colleagues, and the remaining time at Siemens and in vocational schools. Currently, Siemens trains over 750 apprentices from its external partner companies ensuring the apprenticeships' alignment with professional standards and requirements.

Siemens' partners include companies offering technical services for complex systems across Germany, such as, for instance, lift and escalator maintenance, washing machine repair, regional energy supply, and local public transportation managed by communal corporations. Thanks to this collaboration, these partner companies gain direct access to highly skilled workers, and Siemens deepens its cooperation with them, contributing to strengthening the quality of its overall service chain.

## Training the trainer

**In-company teachers**, trainers, and mentors, particularly within micro, small, and medium enterprises, may need **specialised training** in teaching methodologies and could benefit significantly from ready-made resources such as training materials, guidelines, toolkits, and checklists for apprentice training.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond providing these pedagogical support materials, SME in-company trainers may also find value in flexible solutions and expedited competence development provisions.<sup>11</sup> Since apprentice training often complements their regular duties, online or other flexible training methods could be more efficient in terms of time and cost. These methods can also encourage the development of a more agile and systematic approach to their training practices.

Implementing **'train the trainer'** strategies can **enhance the training capacity of SMEs**, ensure consistency in the training provided, and lead to a better overall training experience for apprentices. This improvement in training quality may ultimately help in retaining apprentices as employees following the completion of their programme.

## 'One More Job' Initiative of Ireland

### *Support area: Building capacities in SMEs for offering apprenticeships and training in-company trainers*

'One More Job' is a national initiative in Ireland designed to assist micro and small businesses in employing one or more apprentices. It fosters apprenticeships in Ireland in line with the national Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025. Piloted in 2023 in 2–3 regions, it was later expanded nationwide following its initial success.

The initiative is coordinated by the National Apprenticeship Office, in collaboration with Enterprise Ireland and regional apprenticeship partners. In addition to financial grants, other support measures were introduced to support SME employers new to training apprentices such as onboarding assistance, access to training for in-company mentors, free online mentoring services, and guidance services from the One More Job team during the first year of training.

The National Apprenticeship Office provides a one-stop shop webpage that advertises the benefits of being an in-company trainer and includes indicative role profiles of in-company trainers. The webpage also lists available in-company training positions through the Education and Training Boards across the country.

The second annual report of the National Apprenticeship Office indicates that, by the end of 2023, almost 900 new SMEs had been engaged through this initiative, leading to more than a thousand new apprentices employed.

10 ESF (2022) Engaging employers in work-based learning and apprenticeships: A recommendations paper, ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform, Community of Practice on Employment, Education, and Skills

11 European Commission (2015) High-performance apprenticeships & work-based learning – 20 guiding principles

Support to in-company trainers has become even more important in recent times to **navigate the green and digital transition**. Indeed, to support the development of apprentices' skills required by the twin transition, it is crucial that companies and in-company trainers possess these skills and stay informed about the latest trends and challenges in their sector.

## SME Academy in Portugal

### *Support area: Supporting the development of in-company trainers*

The Portuguese Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (IAPMEI) promotes competitiveness and business growth in SMEs through a range of services, including business assistance, business financing, and support for qualifications and certifications.

The [SME Academy](#) of IAPMEI is a training provider for SMEs that offers various types of training, information, and awareness-raising actions aimed at developing trainers' skills. Covering all fields of industry, the available tools, webinars, workshops, training, and upskilling programmes focus on high-demand areas such as innovation, digital transition, and sustainability.

## Lithuania's 'Greening Apprenticeships' initiative

### *Support area: Strengthening the green and digital skills of in-company trainers*

Lithuania's Greening Apprenticeships support scheme aims to help learners acquire practical skills in companies and sectoral practical training centres while enhancing the skills of vocational trainers and in-company trainers.

Activities under the 'Greening Apprenticeships' scheme will focus on developing digital and technical competences. In addition to initiatives aimed at improving students' digital and practical skills, the scheme has set a target that by 2026, 1 000 VET teachers and in-company trainers will undergo competence development activities in these areas. The scheme will help companies and VET providers receive funding for apprenticeship placements, with a goal of qualifying 3 866 apprentices, up to 70% of whom will be in SMEs.

**Online training** courses offer in-company trainers a **flexible, targeted, and expedited path** to achieving necessary certifications or keeping their knowledge and skills up to date. The ability to access materials online at their convenience facilitates the professional development of adult learners, who often find it challenging to incorporate learning opportunities into their schedules.

### **Looking for further information on support measures available for in-company trainers in SMEs?**

A dedicated EAfA Module offers detailed information about various ways to support in-company trainers. The module includes an overview of the main challenges and opportunities, the regulatory framework, key success factors, the role of collaboration and networks, and practical examples of financial and non-financial measures available to support in-company trainers in SMEs. You can access the module [here](#).

## Apprenticeship promotion and recruitment

Raising awareness about the importance and benefits of apprenticeships and recruiting individuals to these programmes entails various activities. This topic has been discussed within a specific [EAfA factsheet](#), which includes approaches and examples of best practices for reaching out to disadvantaged communities and highlights several factors influencing the success of such initiatives, such as high-quality labour market data, the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, and the effective use of digital technologies.

**SMEs face significant challenges** in attracting and recruiting skilled workers and apprentices. Compared to large companies, SMEs have **limited financial and human resources**, less experience in marketing and recruiting, and lower visibility among job seekers or potential apprentices. This puts SMEs at a disadvantage in competing for top young talent.<sup>12</sup> To mitigate these challenges, support for SMEs may include [targeted matching services](#), portals and networks for sharing apprenticeship vacancies, and national apprenticeship competitions for companies.

### Germany's apprenticeships matching services

#### *Support area: Matching services*

[Passgenaue Besetzung](#) ('Perfect Match') is an initiative by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, established in 2007 and updated in 2015. This programme assists SMEs in locating suitable trainees and job candidates through a network of over 150 advisors who reach out to SMEs and support them in filling their vacant apprenticeship positions. The advisors assess the companies' need for trainees, develop requirement profiles, search for potential candidates, and assist with the recruitment process.

The programme offers innovative matching services such as 'apprentice-speed-dating' events and vocational training fairs. It also supports young individuals through job interviews and employs various outreach and consultation channels (e.g. social media, virtual meetings, or face-to-face interactions).

A recent project extension from 2024–2027 includes additional funding of EUR 9.7 million, co-financed by the private sector and the Ministry (OECD 2024). An impact evaluation covering 2015 to 2017 indicated significant programme uptake with about 40 000 SMEs supported, surpassing initial operational targets. As per the evaluation (see OECD 2024), the programme successfully filled about 50% of training positions with candidates who would not have been considered by SMEs in the absence of this initiative.

In addition, **skills competitions**, such as [Worldskills](#) and [Euroskills](#), along with the supporting national skills competitions, are well-regarded methods for showcasing excellence in skills and promoting apprenticeships to young people. Similarly, **competitions for companies** that train and work with apprentices can offer businesses similar visibility as innovative training environments. For example, in Austria, the 'Fit for Future' competition is a national event for teaching companies, featuring state-sponsored awards in various categories, including one specifically for SMEs.

### 'Fit for Future' apprenticeship competition for companies in Austria

#### *Support area: National apprenticeship competition for companies*

In Austria, the state-sponsored prize '[Best teaching companies: Fit for Future](#)' aims to honour teaching companies for their quality, innovative approaches to, and sustainability of apprenticeship training. Awarded every two years, these prizes are considered important driving forces nationally and provide an opportunity to showcase best practices in apprenticeship training across the country. In 2024, the award categories included 'Training initiatives in teaching companies with up to 50 apprentices,' which provides an opportunity for SMEs to showcase innovative approaches.

For instance, in 2019, [Zauner GmbH](#), a landscape gardening company from Upper Austria, won the prize in the category 'Training initiatives in teaching companies with up to 49 employees.' Established over 20 years ago, this family-run company was recognised for its long-standing commitment to working with young talent. At Zauner, apprentices have a separate '[apprentice garden](#)' which they create in teams each year. The apprentices independently plan, design, and build a project where they can showcase their specialist knowledge.

Zauner also employs diverse training methods that support apprentices' independent and self-directed learning, including completing a short internship abroad as part of their training. Due to the company's dedication to apprenticeship training, its personnel almost exclusively come from their in-house apprenticeship programmes. Additionally, the company organises interactive '[Info Days](#)' for the apprentices' gardens, during which the gardens are opened to the wider public and apprentices present their completed projects.

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2024) [A perfect match – supporting SMEs in filling their vacant apprenticeship positions](#)

## Financial support

Financial support for apprenticeships in the EU comes from various sources, including regional, national, and European-level funds. This financial assistance serves as a crucial stimulus for SMEs by offering:

- direct financial aids (e.g. wage subsidies);
- tax relief;
- relevant labour market legislation (e.g. wages, social security, employment protection).

In addition to national-level financial support measures, more localised or regional approaches can provide further tailored support for SMEs to offer apprenticeships.

For instance, in **Belgium** (Flanders), a specific **tax incentive scheme** is regionally available to certified SMEs that provide apprenticeships to young adults aged 18–25 and minors under 18.<sup>13</sup> Introduced in 2008, this scheme aims to assist SMEs in paying apprenticeship wages and covering related social insurance costs.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in **France**, dedicated **employment incentives for SMEs** have been in place since 2016. These incentives include grants to encourage the hiring of young people or the unemployed as apprentices and signing a professionalisation contract with them for a duration of six months or more.<sup>15</sup>

Due to their limited size and resources, SMEs often encounter challenges in training qualified workers to supervise apprentices.<sup>16</sup> Among the range of financial support services, **targeted grants** can offer a cost-effective means for SMEs to **engage in training** or upskilling in-company trainers.

### Apprenticeship Training Grant in Austria

#### *Support area: Grants to train in-company trainers*

The Vienna Employment Promotion Fund, *Wiener Arbeitnehmer\*innen Förderungsfonds* (WAFF), is Vienna's labour market organisation that offers people information, advice, and financial support for professional development. In addition to supporting individuals, WAFF also offers companies various support services through different grants.

Apprenticeship Trainer Grant is a funding initiative aimed at SMEs with no more than 50 employees and a site in Vienna. To incentivise SMEs to offer apprenticeships, this grant covers the cost of training their employees as in-company trainers. Specifically, the grant covers 75% of the trainer's course costs, with a maximum limit of EUR 500 per trainer and up to a maximum of EUR 100 per trainer for examination fees.

### European Social Fund (ESF) co-funding for inter-company apprenticeship training in Germany

#### *Support area: National and ESF co-funding for development*

The Vocational Training Centre of the Chamber of Crafts and Trades (HWK) of Lübeck receives co-funding from the German federal and state governments as well as ESF+ in Schleswig-Holstein. It provides training in automotive mechatronics (e-Mobility), carpentry, sanitary, heating and air conditioning technology, and electronics (smart homes and energy storage systems).

The inter-company apprenticeship known as Überbetriebliche Lehrlingsunterweisung (ÜLU) is a key part of vocational training. This programme complements the practical training offered by companies and the theoretical training provided in vocational schools with additional shorter modules that are otherwise not feasible due to technical and material requirements. SMEs can especially benefit from sending their apprentices to ÜLU because their smaller scale and often specialised nature may limit their ability to independently offer such training or acquire the often-expensive technical materials needed for the training.

The ÜLU ensures that VET curricula are updated to align with the innovation needs of companies, particularly in the context of the twin transition. The co-funding supports apprentice training and engages SMEs in inter-company apprenticeship programmes.

In 2025, with the support of ESF+ co-funding, this VET centre will introduce two new programmes focusing on renewable energy systems and energy storage systems. These programmes are designed to develop, test, and raise awareness among apprentices about sustainability, and they are certified by the HWK.

#### Looking for further information on financial support measures available for offering apprenticeships in the EU?

An EAfA factsheet provides detailed information on various support measures available for apprenticeships in the EU. The factsheet offers an overview of the main costs associated with apprenticeships and introduces the financial support available for companies and individuals, illustrated through a range of good practice examples across the EU. Additionally, the factsheet outlines EU funding available for the development of apprenticeships in the EU. You can access the factsheet [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> Cedefop (2020) [Financing apprenticeships in the EU](#); European Commission (2021) [Putting into practice the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#)

<sup>14</sup> Cedefop (2020) [Financing apprenticeships in the EU](#)

<sup>15</sup> Cedefop (na) [Employment incentives for SMEs in France](#)

<sup>16</sup> Cedefop (2015) [Making apprenticeships work for small and medium enterprises](#)

## Key sources for further reading

- Cedefop (2015) [Making apprenticeships work for small and medium enterprises](#)
- Cedefop (2015) [Who trains in small and medium-sized enterprises: characteristics, needs and ways of support](#)
- Cedefop (2020) [Financing apprenticeships in the EU](#)
- Cedefop (2024) [Beyond subsidising training costs. Policies to increase training provision in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises](#)
- Cedefop (n.d.) [Database on financing apprenticeships in the EU](#) (reference year: 2016–2017)
- Di Bella, L., Katsinis, A., Lagüera-González, J., Odenthal, L., Hell, M., Lozar, B (2023) [Annual Report on European SMEs 2022/2023](#)
- ESF (2022) [Engaging employers in work-based learning and apprenticeships: A recommendations paper](#), ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform, Community of Practice on Employment, Education, and Skills
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2022) [10 good reasons for small and medium-sized enterprises \(SMEs\) to invest in apprenticeships](#)
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2023) [Cooperation and partnerships on apprenticeships and work-based learning](#)
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2024) [Awareness raising and guidance for apprenticeships](#)
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2024) [Financial support to apprenticeships in the EU](#)
- European Alliance for Apprenticeships (n.d.) [Module 4: Supporting in-company trainers in SMEs](#)
- European Commission (2015) [High-performance apprenticeships & work-based learning – 20 guiding principles](#)
- European Commission (2021) [Putting into practice the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#)
- European Commission (na) [Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises](#)
- ILO (2022) [Towards lifelong learning and skills for the future of work: Global lessons from innovative apprenticeships](#)
- ILO (2023) [Unlocking apprenticeships in small and medium enterprises](#)
- OECD (2017) [Incentives for apprenticeship](#)
- OECD (2024) [A perfect match – supporting SMEs in filling their vacant apprenticeship positions](#)
- OECD/ILO (2017) [Engaging Employers in Apprenticeship Opportunities](#)
- PIMEC (2023) [Discover a range of projects, programmes, and measures](#)
- SMEUnited (2022) [Youth and skilled workforce. Best practices from SMEUnited members](#)

