

## Study on Long-term cross-country mobility in apprenticeships

### Summary of focus group discussions

Four focus groups with EU social partner representatives were held in June 2020 to discuss the main findings of the study's comparative analysis and obtain further insights on the obstacles and possible ways forward in the promotion of CB LTMA.

Three sector-based focus group – agriculture, construction, tourism – and one cross-sectoral focus group meeting were held.

The key points are summarised for each of the main findings from the comparative analysis. A summary of the discussions on the overarching questions emerging from the research and of the closing remarks is also included.

#### **Finding 1: There is low interest among SMEs in sending apprentices abroad or receiving apprentices from abroad**

There is a broad consensus among sectoral and cross-sectoral EU social partners that the lack of interest among SMEs in CB LTMA is due to several factors including:

- Concerns around the loss of apprentices' productive work, or the fear of losing a qualified worker when they are sent abroad – particularly the case in emigration countries and in situations of severe skill shortages.
- Limited training capacity for SMEs to receive apprentices from abroad
- Incapacity to compensate for the loss of productive work of apprentices during their stay abroad by, for example, in-company rotation of employees.
- Absence of systematic, strategic and structured learning approaches enabling SMEs to provide options for apprenticeship mobility.

The construction, agriculture and tourism sectors are all dominated by micro and small companies, and therefore commonly experience these obstacles to the promotion and development of CB LTMA.

Costs linked to the loss productivity from sending apprentices abroad was recognised as a key obstacle to CB LTMA. From a cross-sectoral perspective, the cost-effectiveness of apprenticeships to companies differs from sector to sector depending on the work and the extent to which it involves the use of complex techniques or technologies – which requires longer training periods. Therefore, the relevance of CB LTMA will also differ from sector to sector. The costs of losing apprentices during mobility are lower in less technology-intense sectors.

Most SMEs do not see the benefits of CB LTMA as it can require significant resources to organise. It remains a challenge to convince them that they will get a return on investment from CB LTMA, that the training is well structured and that there are also longer-term benefits to CB LTMA, especially in terms of attracting tomorrow's workforce. This ties in with the perception that CB LTMA is mostly beneficial to apprentices themselves for their professional development.

Certain sector specific challenges were also mentioned:

#### **Construction:**

- Mobility is generally not a priority given that most SMEs tend to operate locally, and most construction workers do not speak foreign languages.
- Industry-led international initiatives are seeking to improve the attractiveness of the construction sector among young people, women and migrants, which in turn provides scope for promoting CB LTMA.

#### **Agriculture:**

- The agriculture sector sees a decrease in the number of workers and faces a problem of attractiveness among young people
- The number of learners in the agricultural professions is decreasing and this has a natural consequence on the numbers for mobility.

#### **Tourism:**

- SMEs, which are predominant in the sector, have very limited capacity or prospects to engage in CB LTMA unlike multinationals.
- Issues around apprentices' exploitation by employers means that CB LTMA requires a framework with practical rules to avoid such situations; the EU framework for Quality in Apprenticeships would provide a good starting point.
- Many employers are reluctant to cross-border mobility as they associate it with the risk of a 'skills drain', whether it is for workers or apprentices.

#### **Possible ways forward**

From a **cross-sectoral** perspective, certain employers already see the potential of mobility to improve the image of their respective professions among young people and to anticipate how their respective sectors may evolve in the future.

- As a first step, demonstrating how much apprentices can learn from short-term mobility in terms of language and interpersonal skills can improve the image of professions.
- Then, CB LTMA can have a purpose for anticipating the evolution of sectors in situations where companies within the same sector are interested in learning from one another on technical skills.

With its focus on digitalisation skills and the modernisation of professions, the Construction Blueprint Erasmus + project shows how CB LTMA can become part of a new skills strategy for the **construction sector**<sup>1</sup>. The strategy focuses above all on capacity building among construction companies to engage in mobility, e.g. through the provision of foreign language training.

CB LTMA could become a priority in the medium to long term given that the free movement of workers continues to be a top priority in the **agriculture sector**. CB LTMA could also be part of a wider strategy to make the sector more attractive to young people, demonstrating the value of the professions it has to offer.

Erasmus + as a funding instrument could be used to support companies to take on mobile apprentices in the **tourism sector**.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://constructionblueprint.eu/>

**Finding 2: Occupational and training standards between host and sending country are not comparable, raising concerns over the recognition of the skills acquired by apprentices during spells abroad.**

It was acknowledged from a cross-sectoral perspective that the comparability of training standards is limited due to the many country-specific requirements regarding training content and training settings. Another obstacle to CB LTMA comes from the lack of harmonised processes to define learning outcomes or to recognise prior learning as well as a lack of clarity in the implementation of contractual rules and regulations for mobile apprentices.

Furthermore, SMEs do not have the resources to define learning outcomes, and they do not always see the benefit of having detailed learning agreements with well-defined outcomes.

Several sector-specific challenges were also raised:

**Construction:**

- There are different perceptions of what an apprenticeship consists of from one country to another; there first needs to be a common understanding at that level before training standards or qualification profiles can be aligned.
- On-site competences and informal learning need to be better understood and well-structured before standards and qualifications can be harmonised.

**Agriculture:**

- Training standards and qualifications regarding veterinary inspections and livestock transport are aspects that are already harmonised at EU level.
- There are otherwise no comparable training standards across countries, and currently no equivalents between national qualifications.

**Tourism:**

- Skills in the tourism and hospitality sector are highly sensitive to national cultural specificities.
- The European Hospitality Skills Passport's rationale was to help workers document their skills acquired abroad and thus to improve the transparency of skills acquisition in the sector, but the issue of cross-border recognition remains.

**Possible ways forward**

From a **cross-sectoral** perspective, an advantage of CB LTMA relates to the acquisition of technical skills in an informal learning context. These skills should be better recognised and the focus of CB LTMA. While the acquisition of soft or transversal skills should only be a secondary aim of CB LTMA, there is also a need to improve their recognition in the context of mobility more generally.

Work is currently underway on developing common qualification standards in the **construction sector**, and especially on basic skills for painters and decorators to improve the image of the profession. It needs to be seen whether developing a coordinated approach to the recognition of credits within the EQF would be conducive to CB LTMA.

Bearing in mind upcoming changes for professional training in the **agriculture sector**, there would be scope for the EU to set non-legally binding standards for qualifications and competences based on common technologies to favour CB LTMA.

Improving the visibility of the European Hospitality Skills Passport at the national level could improve its use by employers in the **tourism sector**; it would help them select and train apprentices according to the skills they are looking for. While skills and expectations

are very different from one country to another, a common system to improve the transparency of recognition in the tourism sector would be welcome.

### **Finding 3: There is mistrust in the suitability of the learning settings for apprenticeships, which require a structured approach to training**

It was agreed that there is general mistrust regarding the quality of training and working conditions when it comes to sending apprentices abroad. The fact that apprenticeships require a structured approach to learning places legal and contractual obligations on employers, which constitutes further obstacles to CB LTMA. Furthermore, training curricula in the host country are not always matched to the real needs of micro and small companies.

From a cross-sectoral perspective, it appears that employers recognise and value the training function of CB LTMA when apprentices can learn new technical skills which they themselves cannot provide. This goes well beyond interpersonal or language skills which can be acquired in the context of short-term mobilities. In other words, employers value CB LTMA when it has a training purpose that brings valuable technical knowledge and skills to the profession, and not when it is used to substitute workers with apprentices.

Challenges specific to the construction, agriculture and tourism sectors were also raised.

#### **Construction:**

- There is a lack of dialogue between construction employers and training providers whereas such a bottom-up approach to the development and modernisation of qualifications should be favoured.
- Future skills for the sector, such as digital skills, are usually not a key component of currently apprenticeship training curricula in the construction sector.

#### **Agriculture:**

- There is competition among countries to make the sector more attractive to take on apprentices from other countries; students in agriculture tend to favour countries with advanced technologies to undertake a CB LTMA.
- While cross-border exchanges can be useful for learning when the produce harvested is similar, harvesting periods constrain long-term mobility as these are periods when apprentices are needed the most.

#### **Tourism:**

- The subjectivity of skills assessments from one country to another is a key issue in the tourism and hospitality sector which complicates the creation of a common qualification framework.
- There is a degree of informality in micro enterprises in the sector requiring apprentices to multi-task which affects the transparency and comparability of learning experiences, in turn affecting apprentices' professionalism.

### **Possible ways forward**

As far as all sectors are concerned, it was suggested that networks bringing together SMEs – but also training providers and other stakeholders – should be formed to discuss the technical skills apprentices could acquire when training abroad and the benefits this would entail for different professions. SME networks could develop rotation schemes for apprentices to learn specific skills and techniques in different countries, as is already the case among many multinational companies.

Work is being undertaken in the **construction sector** in the context of Erasmus + to improve the skills of in-company trainers imparting knowledge to apprentices. Investing in language skills in this context would boost CB LTMA in the sector.

In the **agriculture sector**, training objectives are quite comparable across countries and can be easily recognised across borders. In this context, there is the possibility at EU level to agree on the scope and objectives of CB LTMA, also to avoid situations where apprentices are used as cheap labour.

Facilitating CB LTMA in the **tourism sector** could be achieved through the development of a common EU instrument for recognising employability skills and other basic skills. In addition, a common EU referencing system for documenting learning outcomes could boost CB LTMA, particularly in certain specialist professions where valuable skills can be acquired from abroad (e.g. chef training).

#### **Finding 4: Social partners at national level play a relatively limited role in promoting and actively supporting CB LTMA**

It is generally recognised across most sectors that social partners' role in promoting and supporting CB LTMA remains rather limited, either at the national or at the European level. This is because CB LTMA is not considered a need, thus a priority, by employers overall.

Instead, VET and apprenticeship governance involving social partners might offer better prospects for the promotion of CB LTMA. There are many national and sectoral specificities which affect the extent to which CB LTMA can be promoted. Likewise, there may already be some approaches to mobility included in the collective agreements of certain sectors. Much of this depends on the extent of social dialogue at the national level, including the bilateral relationships among sectoral social partners and social partners' relationships with national governments.

From a sector-based perspective, there may be specific reasons explaining social partners' lack of engagement in promoting CB LTMA.

##### **Construction:**

- Employers prioritise the mobility of qualified workers due to skills shortages in many EU Member States, which makes it difficult for social partners to make a strong case for the mobility of apprentices.

##### **Agriculture:**

- The political will may be lacking in many European countries even though conditions may already be present to promote CB LTMA given the high level of comparability of competences across some professions within the sector.
- In some European countries, social partners' efforts to insert CB LTMA in collective agreements are constrained by national legislation whereby apprentices are not considered to be part of the regular workforce of a company.

##### **Tourism:**

- Social dialogue on mobility has overall intensified at the national level but remains constrained by employers' lack of interest.
- Yet the skills gaps experienced in the sector at national level does require social partners to play a key role in promoting apprenticeship mobility as a possible remedy.

## Possible ways forward

From a **cross-sectoral perspective**, promoting short-term mobility to begin with could later lead to the promotion of CB LTMA. A way for social partners to do this is to insist on the importance of finding strategies to address future skills needs in a changing world of work. Political support for CB LTMA at EU level needs to be sustained for this to happen.

There are already initiatives in the **construction sector** which constitute a starting point for promoting CB LTMA, chief of which is the French CCA-BTP<sup>2</sup> which links together different training centres and businesses to facilitate mobility in the context of Erasmus +.

For the **agriculture sector**, there are opportunities in several countries to develop CB LTMA collective agreements based on national legislation.

National social partners in the **tourism sector** are interested in mobility overall. There is evidence of this in certain countries where social dialogue has led to the development of apprenticeship mobility initiatives. At European level, further efforts can be made to bring these national social partners together.

## Overarching questions

- **Do you see (sufficient) current or potential value / benefits in CB LTMA that would make it a policy priority in your sector?**
- **What is the scope for fostering sectoral approaches to support CB LTMA – possibly through collaboration between the national and EU levels?**

Overall, it has been recognised by sectoral and cross-sectoral social partners alike that CB LTMA is not a priority.

Raising the profile of CB LTMA remains challenging in a social dialogue setting. Differences in apprenticeship status across different countries continue to be an obstacle to the promotion of CB LTMA as it brings up legal and administrative issues. It has been broadly admitted that work still needs to be done to improve the image of apprenticeships. Furthermore, VET remains less popular than higher education among young people. However, all concur that CB LTMA and mobility more generally can be a strategic way to improve the attractiveness of VET across different sectors and professions. An approach to facilitating CB LTMA would also involve increasing the amount of training time in a company potentially generating mutual added value for employers and for apprentices; the rationale is to maximise returns on investment for companies.

Social partners understand the role they can play in convincing employers that CB LTMA also benefits them. There is scope to make the case for CB LTMA as an opportunity for employers to learn about and integrate new methods or techniques in their profession or business activity. Social partners can build a body of evidence to prove that CB LTMA enables apprentices to bring back something valuable and tangible to their home company upon their return. This would particularly alleviate the concerns of sending companies when apprentices go abroad.

Recent initiatives such as the European Skills Agenda or the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships could give social partners more opportunities for enhancing the long-term and short-term mobility of apprentices. At sectoral level, CB LTMA

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ccca-btp.fr/>

could gain momentum if SMEs network together across different countries to organise a 'marketplace' of skills.

Finally, it was also suggested that this study has the potential to raise awareness about the opportunity of CB LTMA and therefore to make it a policy priority among sectoral and cross-sectoral social partners and the EU and national levels.

Certain prospects specific to the construction, agriculture and tourism sectors were also discussed:

- The **construction sector** is complex and very diverse, mostly composed of micro-companies operating at the local level. This means that CB LTMA initiatives are difficult to develop and implement. Construction employers do not have a need for mobile apprentices and would rather prioritise employing already qualified workers from abroad. As such, the right conditions must be first be created first at the local level for CB LTMA to happen. Short-term mobility across neighbouring countries or regions could be a first step, and this could be facilitated by the creation of clusters of SMEs bringing together VET providers and public sector actors to anticipate skills needs. A related good practice in this regard is the Construction Blueprint Erasmus + project.
- CB LTMA is currently not a priority in the **agriculture sector**, but it has strategic value, within the context of policies for workers' freedom of movement, to improve the image of the agriculture sector to young people, and there is scope for collaboration between the national and EU levels in this regard. CB LTMA would not only enhance the sector's attractiveness to young people but could also serve to compensate for labour shortages in the agriculture sector.
- The concern of a 'skills drain' among employers in the **tourism sector** needs to be overcome to make CB LTMA a priority. Covid-19 may however have created more of an obstacle to the promotion of apprentices' mobility more generally.