

Executive Summary – ibw Study

Mobility Abroad in Apprenticeship Training

Framework conditions, funding instruments, and stakeholder perspectives

Apprenticeship training is an integral part of the vocational education system in Austria. Aside from the primary objective of achieving vocational competence and agency, under the Austrian Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz – BAG) apprentices have the option to undertake a practical traineeship abroad. Although the number of apprentices taking up international mobility opportunities is rising, it still represents only a fraction of the overall apprentice cohort (around 3 per cent per year group). This is significantly lower than the proportion in full-time school-based vocational education and training (at VET schools or colleges – Berufsbildende Mittlere und Höhere Schule, BMHS). The ibw study presented here looks into the reasons behind this.

To understand this, it is important to bear in mind that mobility abroad is **voluntary** for all stakeholders (particularly apprentices and training companies, and vocational schools too where applicable¹) and based on their consent. Placements abroad also take place **during the apprenticeship** (including retention period) and **for a limited duration** (a maximum of six months per academic year).

In Austria, there is a range of **support initiatives** with informative, advisory, supportive, and specific (co-)organisational remits. The IFA (International Young Workers Exchange) association is the only nationwide initiative. All of the others have a regional focus. There are also **financial support schemes** available: The training company receives the gross compensation for apprentices for periods in which the apprentice is undertaking a language course and/or a work-related traineeship abroad and is therefore not actively working at the company. The actual costs of language courses are funded (with no limit), while fixed allowances and daily rates are granted to help cover travel and accommodation costs. Apprentices receive a bonus in the form of a EUR 15 daily allowance for the duration of their stay abroad. This means that **the main – though not all – expenses and investments involved in apprentices spending time abroad can be covered**. As far as the training companies are concerned, the fact that apprentices do not make a productive contribution to the production process while they are away is an investment component they still have to shoulder. Meanwhile, apprentices have to make their own investment by paying any additional amount required for their actual travel and accommodation expenses, as the total sum of the apprenticeship bonus and the funding they receive for travel and accommodation costs is rarely enough to cover these.

The **expectations on both sides (apprentices and training companies/trainers) regarding the benefits of spending time abroad** are therefore not the only crucial factor in deciding whether training opportunities abroad are something worth considering and ultimately pursuing. The **information available about these funding opportunities** (and any **benefits available through the support initiatives**) has a bearing on this too. These aspects therefore form the main focus of the study's empirical research, which is based on an online survey of trainers. In addition, the study sheds light on the perspective and situation of vocational schools (based on qualitative interviews with administrators of

¹ If the period an apprentice spends abroad falls during (or overlaps with) vocational school time.

these institutions).

The study highlights the fact that there are, on the one hand, **certain structural constraints on the participation of apprentices in practical traineeships abroad**. This is due to...

...the specific way in which apprenticeship training in Austria is organised (especially with regard to the young age of the apprentices and the effects relating to this, which often hinder participation², and the intense schedule of the training programme³).

...the stakeholders involved, whose interests and level of willingness must align as a “necessary” requirement for participation, at least as far as training companies and apprentices are concerned.⁴

...a support/counselling landscape and a financial support scheme which, although the former exists and is available in principle and the latter is essentially adequate, both involve a certain degree of complexity and lack of transparency⁵.

Nevertheless, there is potential for increasing participation levels, because...

...there is a **widespread lack of information**, both amongst trainers/training companies and amongst apprentices themselves. In many cases they do not realise, or are only vaguely aware, that it is possible to do a traineeship abroad as part of an apprenticeship. Many stakeholders (also) have no (in-depth) knowledge of the support, advice, and funding options available.

the **“main benefits” of mobility abroad (namely the apprentice’s personal development, independence, and motivation)** are underestimated by both training companies/trainers and apprentices themselves (and presumably their parents or guardians too).

These two factors form the basis for possible **courses of action** which the study authors believe could be used to boost apprentice uptake of traineeships abroad in the medium term (e.g. pushing the participation level towards the EU benchmark of 6 per cent). This would require the development of an **overall national strategy**, which would involve all relevant stakeholders⁶ both in terms of formulating objectives and fundamental strategic approaches, and in terms of implementing measures/activities in their respective spheres of action or responsibility. A **concerted public image** and a joint campaign⁷

² For example, apprehensions and reservations (including on the part of many parents or guardians) about the apprentices staying abroad “on their own”, probably for the first time for many of them. Young people also often have other interests within their peer group.

³ All training content needs to be taught on an occupation-specific basis within the apprenticeship period. The time available for training at work is also reduced by holidays, sick leave, time off to attend vocational school, and – in the final year – preparations for the final apprenticeship exam (Lehrabschlussprüfung – LAP).

⁴ The temporary loss of an apprentice from the production workforce while they are abroad is a potential inhibiting factor for many training companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.

⁵ It is not immediately clear to training companies and apprentices who they can contact for advice, support, or funding. This is particularly challenging for training companies and apprentices looking into opportunities for mobility abroad for the first time. There are numerous support initiatives available (although IFA is the only one with nationwide scope), but it is often unclear who is responsible for what and the support offered by these initiatives varies. The funding instruments (and where they stand in relation to the national funding budget and Erasmus+ funding components) and the eligibility criteria for support are also difficult to grasp at first glance.

⁶ Meaning the government departments and their “downstream” institutions (the Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research, the Agency for Education and Internationalisation), social partners and interest groups and their institutions (particularly the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, including apprenticeship offices, the Federation of Austrian Industries, the Chamber of Labour, the Austrian Trade Union Federation), and the relevant support initiatives (IFA, xchange, Let’s Walz, etc.).

⁷ The following aspects are crucial to an overall national strategy:

The involvement of all relevant stakeholders, in terms of both content and responsibilities (who does what and who is charge of/responsible for what).

The creation of a joint “centralised” public image, e.g. in the form of an officially presented **central communication platform/website/“point of contact”**.

Coordination of the activities launched, organised, and implemented by the various stakeholders, in terms of both content and scheduling.

would need to be devised on the back of this. The aims of this would be as follows:

- To disseminate **essential information about the support and funding options available**,
- To **raise awareness of the advantages and benefits of practical traineeships abroad on a target group-specific basis** (training companies/trainers⁸, apprentices, parents/guardians, vocational schools). **The “main” benefits of traineeships abroad should be highlighted in particular, i.e. the apprentice’s personal development** (independence/self-reliance, self-confidence, motivation), along with the positive effects on in-company training and for vocational schools. Emphasis should also be placed on improving foreign language skills (especially in relation to communication) and on the opportunity to gain insights into different professional settings in practice (production processes/organisational structures, etc.).
- To actively **address/encourage discussion on any apprehensions/reservations**, again on a target group-specific basis (e.g. a traineeship abroad being the first time an apprentice goes abroad “on their own”, uncertainty on the part of training companies on whether their business will be able to reap benefits from this too).

It is essential to use attractive media formats for all these implementation activities and to include testimonials. Equally importantly, the measures must follow an **outreach-based approach** (i.e. proactively approaching the relevant target groups) rather than a reactive one (i.e. waiting to see what happens first, responding to demand). The study outlines a series of specific possible activities as examples.

Our investigation also sets out **some further measures**, such as (sectoral, regional, or cross-border) mobility alliances, opportunities to raise awareness of engagement in mobility abroad and the quality of the programmes on offer (award for training companies, national prizes, documenting traineeships abroad in apprenticeship certificates), promoting mobility placements during the retention period and amongst training staff themselves (in-company trainers and/or vocational school teachers), to name but a few.

Finally, there are two more aspects that should not go unmentioned: the unsatisfactory data situation when it comes to the **monitoring** of mobility placements abroad, and the **empirical research** on mobility abroad in apprenticeships. This study is the first of its kind in Austria. Further research should follow.

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⁸ Since companies organise their training differently depending on their size, this should be taken into account when deciding how to approach them. Most training companies in Austria are SMEs, so any general information/PR strategy needs to take the specific challenges they face into consideration.