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On the Inclusive Performance of Apprenticeship Within the French VET System and the Current Reform of Its Governance and Related Institutional Setting

Dif, M'Hamed

BETA-Céreq Alsace, University of Strasbourg, France, dif@unistra.fr

Abstract

Apprenticeship constitutes institutionally the second main component of the French initial vocational education and training (IVET). It is a dual system based on an alternation between on-the-job training within a company and off-the-job training within an apprenticeship training centre. Although apprenticeship is observed to be the most performing IVET instruments in terms of its contribution to vocational inclusion and effective access to the labour market, its future further development remains hindered by some structural and functioning weaknesses (Brunet, 2018; Marchal, 2019a, 2019b; Pesonel, 2018). In this connection, the implementation of a major related reform integrating within the VET reform Act of the 5th September 2018, was launched at the beginning of 2019. This paper is an analytical investigation into the functioning and performance of apprenticeship including the recently undertaken institutional and governance reform within the perspectives of its future development. The adopted investigation method is primarily based on scientific desk research and available data, documentation and performance evaluation studies and reports published by the ministries of education and labour, completed by a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives of involved stakeholders. One of the main outcomes of this research investigation confirms that apprenticeship is the most inclusive IVET component within the labour market as, on average, 72% of apprentices find jobs (56% on permanent employment contracts) within a seven-month-period following the completion of their apprenticeship in 2017, compared to only 51% of the school-based IVET graduates. This performance is expected to improve in the future following the implementation of the recently undertaken apprenticeship reform.

Keywords

apprenticeship reform, governance, inclusion, transition to work, vocational qualifications, work-based training

1 Introduction

The French educational system includes several VET schemes designed for effective vocational inclusion and transition to the labour market, especially young people with low or without initial vocational qualifications. Among these schemes, apprenticeship constitutes one of the most observed inclusive instrument. Although apprenticeship finds its early roots in the medieval

guilds practice, it was formally established as a dual work-based system, by the Astier Act of the 25th July 1919 and developed since then to become an important component of the French initial vocational education (IVET) system through Guichard's Act in 1971 (Gues, 2009; Sanchez & Zamora, 2007). It is a written work contract between the apprentice and an employer allowing the apprentice to undertake in-company training under the responsibility of an apprenticeship tutor /master in an apprenticeship training centre (CFA- *Centre de Formation d'Apprentis*) for up to three years. Its basic aim is to allow young people to have access to all levels of vocational qualifications referenced within the NQF Directory of vocational qualifications (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*) (Abriac, Rathelot, & Sanchez, 2009; Brunet, 2018; Marchal, 2019a, 2019b; Pesonel, 2018). In spite of its high inclusive performance compared to the school-based IVET, and due to some structural and functioning weakness and rigidities which are still hindering its future further developments, the implementation of a major related reform integrating within the VET reform Act n° 2018-771 of the 5th September 2018 on the freedom to choose one's professional future, was launched at the beginning of 2019.

This paper is an analytical research investigation into the functioning and inclusive performance of apprenticeship within the French IVET system including the presentation of the recently undertaken institutional and governance reform within the perspectives of its future further development. The conducted investigation is primarily based on desk research and available statistical data, documentation and related performance evaluation studies and reports published by the ministries of education and employment, which are then completed by conducting a set of semi-directive interviews with the representatives of involved stakeholders. The analysis of the outcomes of the research investigation is presented through the following two basic section: a)- functioning and inclusive performance of apprenticeship, b)- recent institutional and governance reform of apprenticeship.

2 Functioning and inclusive performance of apprenticeship

2.1 Objectives, functioning organisation and methods

The major aim of apprenticeship is to facilitate transition from school to work of young people aged from 16 to 30 years old by allowing them to have access to formal professional qualifications through an alternation between on-the-job workplace raining and in-house training centre. The duration of the related employment contract signed between the apprentice and the employer is usually equivalent to the duration of the targeted qualification (Dif, 2013; MT, 2019).

Until the launch of the implementation of the overall restructuring reform of apprenticeship at beginning of this year 2019, a large number of stakeholders were involved in its provision, governance and funding. They are usually grouped in two main categories: alternating training providers and other involved stakeholders. The first category includes two types of directly involved stakeholders: enterprises and all other public, semi-public and private in-house training providers. The enterprises which take in charge on-the-job training (including off-the-job courses in cases where they possess their own in-house training centres) pay the trainee's salary as a percentage of the minimum guaranteed wage (SMIC) whose level is variable according to the trainee's age and level of undertaken training. The usual in-house training providers include apprentices' training centres (CFA- *Centres de Formation d'Apprentis*) and all other public, semi-public and private in-house training providers. As for the the second category, it concerns all other stakeholders involved in the qualification design processes and in the implementation and follow up of apprenticeship contracts and their funding arrangements, including quality assurance, inclusive coaching and guidance provision services. It is a networking of partnerships and cooperation between the following main involved

stakeholders: the State, social partners, chambers, regional networks. The State is involved via its ministries and inter-ministerial institutions such as “the national commission for vocational qualifications (CNCP)” and “the national council for lifelong vocational learning (CNFPTLV)”. Social partners play an important consultative and decision making role in the qualification formation processes, such as the design/updating of qualifications and their referential standards, including continuing vocational training mandatory funding collection and management via parity based collecting organisations (OPCA- Organismes Paritaires collecteurs agréés). The chambers take in charge the validation of the apprenticeship contracts (connected with their sectors of activity) and other issues concerning the follow-up of apprenticeship in cooperation with the employers, the CFA and the regions. The regional networks include different institutions and their networks with shared responsibilities for apprenticeship. Regional authorities are responsible primarily for vocational inclusion (of young people and job-seekers) including apprenticeship management and funding in co-operation with local job-centres and missions. The other networks are more connected with the apprenticeship funding before its recent reform and they include namely *the organisations collecting apprenticeship tax* (OCTA- Organismes collecteurs de la Taxe d'Apprentissage) *from the enterprise (representing 0.68% of the enterprises' gross wage bill) and the regional funds for apprenticeship and CVT* (FRAFP- Fonds Régional de l'Apprentissage et de la Formation Professionnelle; Cedefop, 2016; Dif, 2013).

As a dual system, apprenticeship is organised through an alternation between on-the-job-workplace training and off-the-job in-house training. On-the-job training within a company represents from 60% to 75% of the overall training time and off-the-job training within an apprenticeship training centre represents 25% to 40% of the whole training programme. About two thirds of the undertaken in-house training time is devoted to general, technical and vocational subjects, whereas the remaining third is dedicated to professional and practical training as a usual complement to workplace training.

In contrast with the practice in the school-based training system, the apprentice training centres (CFA) are committed to respect the following basic principles connected with the concept of “alternating pedagogy” specific to apprenticeship training provision: (a)- focussing on work-based training where teachers and trainers use workplace experience in the development of their teaching and training programmes and methods; (b)- distributing learning and training activities between on and off the job training according to specifically adapted schedules; (c)- guaranteeing a complementary role of the in-house training provision to on-the-job training by completing observed insufficiencies in workplace training programme within the enterprise; (d)- securing the management and continuing communication between the training centre, the company and the trainee via well-established coordination, control and follow-up intermediary tutors and instruments. In this connection, in-house training centres and their teaching and training staff have a large pedagogical autonomy and flexibility in defining and using adapted teaching approaches and supporting instruments, tools and equipment. The training provision is founded on the use of the inductive and active learner-centred teaching method. It goes from concrete and specific to general as its practice is based on the use of specific experiments, case studies or experimental exercises in training provision by building up progressively on the learner’s individual experiences, knowledge, capacities, expectations and constraints. Within this process, the alternating training providers use two assessment methods: continuous assessment during the study/training courses called CCF (contrôle en cours de formations) introduced at the beginning of the 1990s, and the traditional punctual assessment (CP-Contrôle ponctuel; Billet, Cahuzac & Perrin, 2002; Dif, 2013).

As it is the case within the whole educational system, apprenticeship is basically subject to the same overarching quality assurance evaluation mechanisms, namely the following: a)- the evaluation and the accreditation/certification of providers and trainers; b)- the evaluation of the

educational and training system and its teaching methods by various inspection and evaluation organisations; c)- quality assurance through the process of learning outcomes certification (assessment, validation, recognition and certification awarding) implemented within the framework of a mixed approach of regulation and autonomy combining both prescriptive and cooperative characters; d)- the existence of referential framework of standards combining occupational and qualification standards for all awarded vocational qualifications which are also validated and referenced within the NQF directory of vocational qualifications (RNCP; CEDEFOP, 2009; Dif, 2013; Lombardi, 2010).

2.2 Inclusive performance

The inclusive performance of apprenticeship is analysed in terms of effectively achieved accessibility to both: apprenticeship programmes and to employment after graduation.

Accessibility to apprenticeship

412,266 apprentices were following their apprenticeship at all levels of the French five-level-NQF during the school year 2016/2017 (429,900 apprentices by the end of 2017 representing 1.6% of the occupied work force), dominantly (at 63%) within the upper secondary apprenticeship training centres (CFA), where 38.8 % at the NQF Level 5 (EQF level 3) and 24.2% at NQF level 4 (EQF level 4). Within higher education, 18.5 % of the apprentices targeted NQF-level-3 (EQF level 5) qualifications which included the “high technician certificate (BTS)” and the “university diploma in technology (DUT)”, followed by the professional Masters and Bachelors” with 12% and 6.5% respectively. 294,800 new apprenticeship contracts were signed between the apprentices and both private and public employers. Out of the 280,388 newly signed contract in 2017 within the private sector, 81.8% were taken in charge by small and medium enterprises with less than 250 employees, leaving only 18.2% to larger ones. 58.6% of these new apprenticeship contracts were signed within the service sector companies. The remaining 41.4% of the apprenticeship contracts were taken in charge by the enterprises of the production sectors, namely the the industry (21.8%), the construction (16%) and the agriculture (3.6%) (Demongeot & Lombard, 2018; INSEE, 2019; DEPP, 2018a, 2018b; Pesonel, 2018). About two thirds (68.9%) of the new apprentices in 2017 were initially holders of vocational qualifications (where 27.1% at EQF level 4, 21.3% at EQF level 3 and 20.5% at EQF level 5 and over; Pesonel, 2018). The weight of newly participating apprentices with the lowest initial NQF level (EQF level 3) or without any qualification went down from 94.8% in 1992 to 52.4% in 2017. This decrease touched more specifically those without any initial formal qualifications as the share of their participation in the new apprenticeship contracts decreased from 60.5% in 1992 to 31.1% in 2017 (DARES, 2018). Moreover, most of the new beneficiaries of apprenticeship contracts in 2017 (85.9%) came from the initial educational tracks, where 58.6% from initial school-based system and 27.3% from apprenticeship. As for those who were unemployed job-seekers represented only 5.2% of the beneficiaries in 2017 (Pesonel, 2018).

Accessibility to employment

As a dual system functioning through an alternation between on-the-job and in-house work-based training, apprenticeship offers a better access to employment than the school-based component of the VET system. 72% of all the apprentices who completed their apprenticeship up to EQF level 5 in 2017 had an effective access to employment (56% on permanent employment contracts) within the following seven months as compared to only 51% (35% on open-ended work contracts) for those completing their school-based VET programmes at the same EQF levels. About half of the apprenticeship graduates at all NQF levels in 2017 are kept by the enterprises within which they completed their on-the-job training. The access rate is even higher for the holders than for the non-holders of vocational qualifications. In apprenticeship,

76% of graduates holding vocational qualifications up to EQF level 5 have access to a job within the first seven months following their graduation (57% of them on permanent employment contracts), compared to only 59% of graduates non-holders of vocational qualifications (52% on open-ended work contracts). By contrast, this access rate is far lower for the holders of the same vocational qualifications up to the EQF level 5 within the school-based system as only 53% of them (35% on open-ended contract) have access to a job seven months after the graduation. Moreover, the access rate to employment is generally observed to be increasing with the increased level of obtained vocational qualifications through apprenticeship as it goes up from 67% for EQF level 3 up to 82% for EQF level 6 and 7. However, some of the well established intermediary vocational qualifications obtained via apprenticeship remain characterised by allowing their holders to have even a higher access rate, such as the EQF level 5 BTS (High Technician Certificate) and the EQF level 4 PB (professional certificate) at access rates of 83% and 84% respectively within seven months after the graduation in 2017 (Marchal, 2019a, 2019b).

3 Recent institutional and governance reform of apprenticeship

3.1 Need for apprenticeship reform

In spite of its observed overall positive performance mainly as an effective facilitator of professional inclusion and transition to the labour market of both young and adults, apprenticeship still suffers from some weaknesses basically connected with the following:

- First, the risk of breaching the apprenticeship contracts before their due time remains non-negligible issue as the overall observed rate of defection before the end of the contractual period was 29% for the apprentices enrolled during the school year 2015/2016. The defection usually takes place during the first year where about a third of apprentices abandon apprenticeship within the trial period for three main reasons: a)-dominantly for personal reasons (such as dissatisfaction with the training programme contents, work/working environment, changes in the learning/career project, health or other personal reasons); b)-changes in the employer's economic situations where some contracts are ended prematurely; c)-unsatisfactory trial period from the employer's point of view. This observed defection rate is decreasing with the apprentices' increased age and level of targeted vocational qualifications (Arrighi & Mora, 2010; Cart & Toutin-Trelcat, 2010; Pesonel, 2018;).
- Second, the persistence of a traditionally held poor perception of work-based vocational training in comparison with the school-based general education (Pigeaud, 2014).
- Third, there are some observed functioning inefficiencies due basically to the existence of a large and complex networking of (directly and indirectly) involved institutions and stakeholders in their governance and funding arrangements (Cahuc & Ferracci, 2014; Dif, 2013).
- In connection with the perspectives for reforms and future developments, it is important to underline some basic related actions to be undertaken for further improvement (Dif, 2013; Pigeaud, 2014; Proglia, 2009) namely:
- Reinforcing the observed positive inclusive performance of apprenticeship through the development of a more adapted information and guidance provision, aiming primarily at the following: (a)-changing the traditionally held poor perception of apprenticeship in comparison with general education, (b)-promoting the image and standing of apprenticeship as a learning pathway of excellence.
- Simplifying apprenticeship related governance and funding systems and reinforcing cooperation and partnerships between directly involved stakeholders, especially on regional levels.

3.2 Apprenticeship recent reform

In order to deal with some of the above underlined structural and functioning weaknesses hindering further future development of apprenticeship, the implementation of a set of related major reform measures undertaken within the framework of the “VET Reform Act n° 2018-771 of the 5th September 2018 concerning the freedom to choose one's professional future”, was effectively launched at the beginning of 2019. As an overall restructuring reform of apprenticeship institutional setting and mode of governance and funding, its contents can be presented through the following overarching points, namely: liberalising apprenticeship market and transferring its regional governance to the professional activity branches, creating "France competences" agency as a unique national governance institution and promoting the attractiveness and accessibility to apprenticeship.

Liberalisation of apprenticeship market:

Previously in the hands of regions, apprenticeship governance is transferred to the professional activity branches which will be involved in the design of qualifications, including their related activity and certification referential standards. They will also be involved in setting the costs of apprenticeship contracts. This new mode of governance and funding, will be accompanied by the liberalisation of apprenticeship provision market, via allowing all training organisations (including companies) to create their own apprenticeship centres (CFA) after obtaining prior formal quality assurance certification.

Creation of “France competences” national agency:

The number of involved governance institutions is reduced through the creation of a unique quadripartite national body representing the State, the Regions and the social partners called “France competences” under the responsibility of the Ministry of VET. It replaces and absorbs the activities and roles of the previous national governance institutions such as “the National Commission for Vocational Qualification (*CNCP- Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*), “the National Council for Employment, Training and Vocational Guidance (*CNEFOP- Conseil National de l'Emploi, de la formation et de l'Orientation Professionnelles*) and the Parity Fund for Securing Career Pathways (*FPSP- Fonds Paritaire de Sécurisation des Parcours*) *Professionnels*). Among its missions will be the regulation and control of prices and the quality of training, as well as the management of the NQF Directory for vocational qualifications (*RNCP- Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*). It also plays an important financial role by ensuring via its newly created operators the reallocation of the funds collected from employers by “the Union for Recovering Social Security Contributions and family Allowances (*URSSAF-Unions de Recouvrement des cotisations de Sécurité Sociale et d'Allocations Familiales*)” or the Agricultural Social Mutuality (*MSA- Mutualité Sociale Agricole*). In this connection, apprenticeship centres (CFA) are financed on the basis of the real number of individual apprenticeship contracts. The regions can, in addition to the possibility of subsidising the investments of apprenticeship centres, complete this funding via their financial contribution to current costs of apprenticeship contracts in accordance with their regional criteria for spatial and regional development. This regional complementary funding can be obtained via agreements by objectives and means concluded with the competences' operators. Finally, the “France competences” agency allows for the development of an expertise networking and contributing to the public debate on the efficiency of policies connected with training and access to employment. Moreover, the accredited vocational training funds collectors and managers run by social partners called OPCA (*Organismes Paritaires Collecteurs Agréés*) have also to be restructured to become the competences' operators for “France

competences” agency (*OPCO -Opérateurs de compétences*) by taking in charge the management of skill formation and support to small and medium companies.

3.3 Promoting the attractiveness of apprenticeship

Promoting the attractiveness of apprenticeship for both apprentices and employers is considered at the heart of the undertaken reform. The measures enhancing the apprenticeship attractiveness for apprentices, include namely: 1)- promoting the image of apprenticeship as a pathway to excellence through guidance and information provision about the effective access rate to employment following each apprenticeship programme completion; 2)- extending the maximum access age limit to apprenticeship from 26 to 30 years old to allow more young people to take advantage of this opportunity, and creating a pre-apprenticeship preparatory programme for candidates without/with low initial qualification in order to reduce the observed risk of apprentices' defection; 3)- encouraging apprentices' mobility by allowing each one of them to benefit from a financial support of €500 for obtaining a driving licence; 4)- improving the apprentices' purchasing power through the usual annual increases of the referential minimum guaranteed wage (SMIC) in addition to increasing the net salaries of all apprentices aged from 16 to 20 years old by € 30 per month and those aged 26 years old and over to the minimum guaranteed wage level at least; 5)- loosening the rules of mobility abroad and strengthening European openness of apprenticeship by doubling the number of apprentices benefiting from the Erasmus + programme by raising it to 15,000 a year compared to less than 7,000 today. As for the measures enhancing the attractiveness of apprenticeship for employers, they include basically:

1. involving the enterprises in pedagogy and qualification design so that they can match better the companies needed skills and competences;
2. loosening the hiring schedule of apprentices by allowing accessibility to apprenticeship contracts through the whole year without the usual constraint of hiring season imposed by the apprenticeship centres (CFA);
3. simplifying hiring support instruments for employers by unifying them into a unique instrument focussed on small / medium companies and baccalaureate / pre-baccalaureate levels;
4. more flexibility in apprenticeship contract signed with a company, as it will no longer be mandatory to go through labour courts to break a contract after 45 days (as, for instance, the employer may terminate the contract for a serious professional malpractice);
5. encouraging the creation of a quality certification of “apprenticeship masters” where the necessary competence / qualification requirements are established via an agreement between the professional branches;
6. simplifying apprenticeship funding mechanism to a unique alternating contribution (instead of two before the reform) whose amount will be set by the social partners.

4 Conclusion

Within the whole French initial vocational education and training (IVET) system, apprenticeship is observed to have the highest performance in terms of effective access of its beneficiaries to work-based learning and employment as in 2017: a)- about one third of the new beneficiaries of apprenticeship contracts were without any initial formal vocational qualifications; b)- over two thirds on average of the apprentices completing their apprenticeship, have a direct access to the labour market, dominantly via open-ended employment contracts; c)- About four out of five on average of holders of vocational qualifications through apprenticeship find jobs within a period of seven month after the completion of their apprenticeship.

This observed inclusive performance of apprenticeship is expected to improve further in the future following the effective implementation starting from January 2019 of the recently undertaken reform introduced via the Act of the 5th September 2018 on the freedom to choose one's professional future. As an overall restructuring reform of apprenticeship institutional setting and mode of governance and funding, it is focussed basically on: a)-liberalising the apprenticeship market by allowing the training organisations including companies to create their own quality certified apprenticeship centres and the transfer of governance from regions to the professional branches which will be involved in the design of vocational qualifications and in setting apprenticeship contracts costs; b)-reducing the number of national governance institutions to the unique “France competences” body to take in charge the management the NQF directory of vocational qualifications and the reallocation of the alternating training funding collected by the URSSAF (the union for recovering social security contributions and family allowances); c)-promoting the image and the attractiveness of apprenticeship for both apprentices and employers.

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Bibliographical note

M'Hamed Dif (Dr.) is a senior associate researcher within BETA- Céreq Alsace at the University of Strasbourg (France), working in the following research areas: Lifelong learning and qualification systems, inclusion and VET-labour market relationships, competence assessment and validation of experiential learning, work identities and HRD, innovation and learning organisations and regions. He is also a “VETNET” board member and a reviewer to the ECER (EERA) and IJRVET.