

Higher Education Apprenticeships: An opportunity for the modernisation of the current higher education system

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Europe’s economic and employment landscape is in perpetual change and it is becoming increasingly clear that economic growth and competitiveness cannot be based exclusively on low-skilled sectors, as it is the case in Spain with the building and tourism sectors. It has become clear that today there is a pressing need for a shift towards innovation and emerging technologies to boost employment and wealth. The problem is that there are not enough employees and young graduates technically prepared for the great challenge of the changes in the world of work that lie ahead.

Innovation and the use of new technologies, added to the crisis caused by the unexpected pandemic, force us to look at the business environment and ask ourselves what the real and future needs are in each sector. And it also forces us to approach universities to update and reorder their training offer. It is not so much a radical change of course (universities must continue to research and provide academic training in basic knowledge and skills that will enable them to acquire a multi-purpose training) but rather an adaptation so that part of the training on offer takes students along a more professionalising route that opens the doors to the labour market, preparing them and leaving them better equipped to face the current challenges and needs of industry. Let us not forget that the most optimistic analyses of the work of the future expect that by 2025 new professions will account for 13.5% of all employees (World Economic Forum, 2020).

The current high unemployment among young Europeans under 25 (which Spain unfortunately leads with 38%, according to Eurostat data from April 2021) and the shortage of technical and higher level qualifications demanded by companies make dual education undoubtedly the most appropriate way to help students obtain a recognised professional qualification while acquiring transversal and practical skills needed in today's labour market that are not always learned in the classroom.

The European Commission is calling on member states to refine training provision to meet the needs and match students with skills that will give them more opportunities in the labour market. On 24 November 2020, the Council recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience was adopted. In the Commission’s communication, “*A New Industrial Model for Europe*”, the Commission encourages its member states to develop and implement a new model of education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social equity

¹ See chapter 2, pp 164-167 <https://www.fundacioncyd.org/publicaciones-cyd/informe-cyd-2020/>

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and resilience, to adapt to current needs, to make the parameters of traditional education more flexible and to bring higher education and industry closer together in order to strengthen dialogue and cooperation.

In this context, dual training, understood as training in alternation that combines teaching periods in an educational or training centre with other periods of work experience in a workplace (CEDEFOP, 2014), is emerging in Europe as a training modality that allows not only to address the challenges of the future of work, but also to provide the student-apprentice with greater possibilities of labour insertion, through a contractual relationship with the company where he/she carries out his/her learning periods (CEDEFOP, 2016).

Since its first regulation in 2012, Spain has been strongly committed to dual vocational training (in the 2019-20 academic year there were 32,919 students enrolled in these training itineraries, an increase of 165% in the last five years). Furthermore, the Draft Bill of the Organic Law for the Organisation and Integration of Vocational Training, which will be approved soon, envisages that all vocational training will be dual, although with different intensities in general dual vocational training and advanced dual vocational training.

Unlike in the case of vocational training, the development of dual university education in Spain is relatively recent, mainly because there are no state regulations governing this type of education. So far, the only autonomous community that has a protocol for obtaining recognition of dual training for official Bachelor's and Master's degrees is the Basque Country, through its Unibasq agency. There are also some previous experiences in other public universities in Catalonia and Andalusia, such as the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Rovira y Virgili University, the University of Lleida, the International University of Andalusia and the University of Seville, to which must be added some of the universities' own degrees, which have also implemented dual pathways in their educational offer⁴.

Recent regulatory developments in Spain

This situation of regulatory uncertainty seems to be fortunately going to end in a few months, because the Ministry of Universities has decided to include dual training in the Draft Royal Decree establishing the organisation of university education and the procedure for quality assurance, whose latest draft dated 15 May 2021 completed the public hearing process on 7 June. Thus, article 22 (dual mention in official university education) regulates for the first time in Spain the possibility that official Bachelor's and Master's degrees may include the dual mention, *“which involves a common training project that is developed complementarily in the university centre and a collaborating entity, which may be a company, a social or trade union organisation, an institution or an administration, under the supervision and training leadership of the university centre, and whose objective is the appropriate training of students to improve their comprehensive training and improve their employability”*.

⁴ The Universidad de Lleida, the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, the Universidad del País Vasco, the Universidad de Mondragón, or the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, are examples. They have launched “dual pre-degrees” as own degrees.

Section 2 of this article establishes the percentage of credits to be developed in the collaborating entity (between 20 and 40% for bachelor's degrees and between 25 and 50% for master's degrees), the need for the activity to be regulated by means of an employment contract, which will have as its fundamental purpose *“the development of the student's training”* and a duration equivalent to the academic credits required to obtain the dual mention. The fact that the Ministry has opted to regulate this type of programmes by means of an employment contract is a very important step, because there has been pressure from some universities to allow the relationship between the student and the entity to be articulated by means of agreements, as is currently the case with external academic internships for official degrees.

Dual vocational training uses the contract for training and apprenticeship (Jansen and Troncoso, 2018) or the collaboration agreement that includes the misnamed “scholarships” depending on the autonomous Spanish region. However, universities that had been offering dual degrees encountered serious problems in linking the relationship through an employment contract, because the contract for training and apprenticeship establishes an age limit of 25 years and requires no previous university education, which could be used in the case of degrees, but not in the case of master's degrees.

Fortunately, an important regulatory step has been taken in this direction (which has gone rather unnoticed in the media) with the recent approval of the Dual University Training Contract, which makes it clear that an employment relationship based on apprenticeship is being sought. Thus, the law indicates that this new contractual modality *“will have as its objective the professional qualification of university students through a system of alternating paid work activity in a company with training activity received within the framework of their university training, in order to favour a greater relationship between this and the training and learning of the worker”*.

Although the regulatory development of this new contract is still pending, where aspects such as the remuneration of apprentices, their holiday regime, training in occupational risk prevention, possible bonuses in Social Security contributions for companies, etc., will have to be specified, the law establishes that the contract must be formalised within the *“framework of educational cooperation agreements”*, that the salary will be fixed in proportion to the effective working time in accordance with the provisions of the collective agreement, without it ever being less than the minimum interprofessional wage, and that Social Security protection will cover all protectable contingencies and benefits, including unemployment, in addition to the coverage of the Wage Guarantee Fund

The draft Royal Decree⁵, contemplates this obligation to sign a framework agreement between the university and the collaborating entity, which, in a similar way to the current internship agreements, must establish the obligations of the parties, the tutoring and supervision mechanisms and the assessment systems. It is important to note that it is expressly stated that the student must have two tutors who *“must jointly supervise the development of the training project”*, but always *“under the leadership of the university tutor”*. Undoubtedly, the involvement and coordinated action of the two mentors is a central element of the dual training system.

⁵ Article 22(3).

The ApprEnt project⁶: main contributions

Taking into account the likely expansion of dual university training in the coming years, it seems relevant to recover the work done in the framework of the EU-funded ApprEnt project, which tried to build bridges between the world of higher education and the world of work, fostering collaboration between companies, Higher Education and Higher Vocational Training institutions, and other relevant stakeholders, such as public bodies or student representatives, with the ultimate aim of promoting work-based learning and especially dual training programmes.

Thus, through the analysis of 33 cases of dual higher education in 9 European countries and a series of focus discussion groups organised in the different countries with the participation of universities, business organisations, chambers of commerce and other stakeholders, a series of relevant aspects for the different actors involved were identified. For reasons of space and usefulness for the implementation of dual higher education in Spain, we will only present the advantages for companies of their active participation in dual programmes, given that the advantages for the universities themselves and for the students are better known and have been pointed out by other authors (ACUP, 2015):

- Participation in dual programmes builds trust between the higher education and business worlds through the opportunity to collaborate, learn from each other and influence the design of programmes that are more relevant to today's employment needs.
- Generally, it helps to alleviate the problem of mismatches between the competences and skills acquired in the education system and those required in the world of work.
- The contributions of apprentices in work environments often bring new perspectives that improve productivity. Their innovative ideas are particularly important for micro-enterprises.
- The synergies that are created through collaboration with universities in dual programmes enhance the transfer of theoretical and cross-cutting knowledge, as well as research tools and consultancy services to better address the problems they face.
- On the other hand, university-industry collaboration allows access to university resources and spaces for events, equipment, etc.
- Recruitment processes are smoother and more efficient, because once the training programme is completed, if a former apprentice is hired, training costs and the period of adaptation to the company are reduced. Companies participating in dual training programmes tend to have a better trained workforce in the long run, which results in increased competitiveness.
- Participation in dual programmes often leads to a better knowledge of the surrounding companies, of the sector itself and of society in general. In the case of smaller companies, clusters of companies are sometimes organised for apprenticeship training.

⁶ Refining HE Apprenticeships with enterprises in Europe <https://apprent.eucen.eu>

- Dual programmes often encourage employees themselves to participate in lifelong learning programmes.
- It fulfils its corporate social responsibility mission by also making the organisation more attractive to society and to young professionals, gaining prestige and recognition. It often serves as an inspiration for other companies to offer opportunities to young people.

Analyses revealed the importance of the size of the company in dual higher education programmes. A large multinational company logically has a structure that allows it to absorb a larger number of students at a time and thus benefit from its work. But in Spain, where SMEs with and without employees account for 64% of employment and 83.4% of the total number of companies in the country, we cannot fail to consider the role that small companies can play in dual higher education. As we have mentioned, young apprentices, even if they are in the process of training, generally bring with them knowledge and a fresh look that can be of great value. On the other hand, the initial staffing effort for supervising dual higher education students, which is greater for small companies, can be alleviated by initiatives that are already being implemented in dual VET, such as the joint tutor or the tutor coordinator, which facilitate the rotation of apprentices in different companies so that they can acquire broader knowledge of their sector.

Diagram 1 on the next page summarises the main benefits identified in the ApprEnt project for all parties involved in Dual Training in Higher Education (DTHE) programmes.

Challenges for the future

Learning programmes in Higher Education are the bridge between knowledge generated at university and in business. Closer collaboration and coordination between these two worlds would undoubtedly improve outcomes in terms of employability and matching skills and knowledge to current labour market needs, but there are many challenges that we identified within the ApprEnt Project that need to be addressed in order to implement FDES programmes.

Especially, such programmes require more financial and personnel resources, as well as greater attention and preparation on the part of universities and companies. As mentioned above, specific regulations and strategic sectoral policies need to be developed, which should be subject to monitoring and evaluation procedures. Furthermore, the curricula of these programmes need to be flexible in the form that the alternation takes and in the definition of their training pathways.

It is essential to develop trust between all parties involved and make specific programme management tools available to them, without losing sight of the creation of rules to facilitate student mobility (Sancha Gonzalo, 2020) as well as the recognition of training between companies and higher education institutions.

The training of academic and partner mentors is a crucial aspect that should not be neglected. It is important to provide "compensation" (in the form of time or credits) and to ensure that the role and competences of mentors are fully recognised. Mentoring of students and the role of programme coordination should also be strengthened.

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