

Mobility abroad in apprenticeship training

Framework conditions, funding instruments and actor perspectives

Executive Summary of the ibw-study

Translation from German to English

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The apprenticeship is a central component of the vocational education system in Austria. In addition to the primary objective of acquiring professional capacity, the Vocational Training Act enables apprentices to do an internship abroad. Despite increasing participation, only a fraction of apprentices (around 3% of a school year) still participates in foreign mobility stays. This is significantly lower than in full-time vocational education (BMHS). The reasons for this context are investigated in this ibw study.

It is fundamental to the understanding that mobility abroad is based on the **voluntary nature** (and consent) of all actors involved (especially apprentices and apprenticeship companies, possibly also the vocational school¹), takes place **during the apprenticeship period** (including retention period) and is **limited in its duration** (maximum of six months per apprenticeship year).

There are several **funding initiatives** in Austria for informing, consulting, supporting, and concretely organizing task portfolios. The IFA Association (International Qualified Employee Exchange) is the only nationally active initiative, all others have a regional focus. Additionally, **financial support** is available: the company providing the apprenticeship receives the gross apprentice allowance for the period during which the apprentice completes a language course and/or a job-related internship abroad and is therefore not present at the company. The actual costs of the language course are subsidized (without a cap). For accommodation and travel expenses, flat rates and daily rates are applied. The apprentice receives a premium in the form of the daily rate of 15,- EUR for the duration of the stay abroad. Thus, **significant, but not all, expenditure/investment components for a stay abroad can be covered**. From the perspective of the company training the apprentice, the investment component of an internship abroad is the loss of the apprentice's productive performance in the production process during the absence. From an apprentice's point of view, there is also an investment component in the form of a deductible since, in most cases, the sum of the internship grant and subsidized living and travel expenses do not cover the actual expenses for living and travel.

In this respect, not only **the expectations for the benefit of the stay** for both parties (apprentices and apprenticeship company/trainers) are decisive for whether mobility abroad is of interest and will be ultimately realized. **The level of information about these funding opportunities** (and the possible **support provided by the funding initiatives**) also significantly influences this. These are thus the central aspects that were investigated empirically in the study using an online survey of trainers. In addition, the perspective and situation of vocational schools were examined (based on qualitative interviews with vocational school directors).

¹ If the mobility abroad (also) coincides with the period of vocational schooling.

The study shows that, on the one hand, **apprenticeship participation in internships abroad is subject to certain structural limitations**. This is due to...

... the concrete structure of apprenticeship training in Austria (especially the young age of apprentices and the associated effects, which often hinder participation²; and a tightly timed training programme.³

... the constellation of actors, which requires a "necessary" convergence of interests and willingness, at least on the part of the companies providing apprenticeships and apprentices.⁴

... an existing support/consulting landscape and an, at the core, adequate financial support regime. However, both are also characterized by a certain complexity and lack of transparency.⁵

Nevertheless, there is potential for an increase in participation as...

... there is a **widespread lack of information**, both on the part of the trainers/enterprises and on the part of the apprentices themselves. These deficits often relate to a lack of or merely rudimentary basic knowledge about the possibility of doing an internship abroad as part of an apprenticeship. Many stakeholders (also) lack the (detailed) knowledge of the availability of support/advice and financial support options.

... the "**primary benefit**" of international mobility (**keyword personal development of the apprentice, independence and motivation**) is underestimated both among companies/trainers and also among apprentices themselves (and probably their parents as well).

The study's authors also identify the two basic starting points for **options for action**, which should be set to increase the participation of apprentices in internships abroad in the medium term (e. g., towards the EU benchmark of 6%). This would require the **development of an overall national strategy** involving all relevant actors⁶, on the one hand, in formulating the objectives and the main lines of action, and on the other hand, as actors and implementers of measures/activities in their

² Like the fears, reservations (also on the part of many legal guardians) about the "alone" stay abroad for many for the first time. And young people often have different peer group interests.

³ All training contents must be imparted according to the job description within the apprenticeship framework. In addition, in-company training periods are shortened by holidays, sick leave, stay at the vocational school and, in the final year of the apprenticeship, by the preparation time for the LAP (Apprenticeship Examination).

⁴ On the part of many, especially small and medium-sized apprenticeship companies, the absence of the apprentice as a worker in the production process during their stay abroad is perceived as hindering.

⁵ It is not apparent to apprenticeship companies and apprentices at first glance to whom they can turn for advice, support, or funding. This is particularly difficult to understand for companies and apprentices interested in mobility abroad for the first time. There are numerous funding initiatives (only IFA operates on a national level), responsibilities are often unclear, and the initiatives offer different support. In addition, the financial support instruments (and their relationship between the national funding scheme and the Erasmus+ funding component) and the funding criteria are difficult to see at first glance.

⁶ This refers to the ministries and their "downstream" institutions (BMDW, BMBWF, OeAD), the social partners and stakeholders and their institutions (especially WKO including apprenticeships, IV, AK, ÖGB), as well as the supporting funding initiatives (IFA, xchange, Let's Walz! etc.).

respective areas of competence/impact. Building on this, a **concrete external presence** and a joint campaign⁷ should be developed. The objectives of these would be:

- the dissemination of **basic information on support and funding opportunities**; and
- **raising awareness of the advantages and benefits of internships abroad**, and this in a **target group-specific manner** (company providing apprenticeships/trainers⁸, apprentices, parents, vocational schools). **Emphasis should be placed on the "primary" benefit** of internships abroad, so **the apprentice's personal development** (independence, self-confidence, motivation), with corresponding positive effects also for the company training and the vocational schools. Emphasis should also be placed on the increase in foreign language competence [especially in the field of communication] and the opportunity to gain insight into other professional "realities" (production processes/company organization, etc.).
- the active **addressing/thematizing of possible fears/reservations**, again target-group-specific (e.g., an internship abroad as the apprentice's first stay abroad on their own, uncertainty on the part of the companies providing the training as to whether benefits are "realized" for the company as well).

It is essential that attractive media formats and testimonials are used in all these implementation activities. Another measure is to follow a more **"seeking" approach** (i.e. actively approaching the respective target groups) rather than a reactive approach (i.e. waiting, demand-driven). The study outlines, as an example, several possible concrete activities.

Our study also outlines a **number of other measures**, such as (sectoral, regional or cross-border) mobility alliances, ways of improving the visibility of commitment and quality in international mobility (recognition for companies providing apprenticeships, state prizes, documentation of the stay abroad in the final certificate), encouraging mobility during the retention period and among the training staff themselves (the in-company training staff and/or vocational school teachers), to name a few.

Finally, two aspects should not be overlooked: Firstly, the unsatisfactory data situation regarding the **monitoring of mobility abroad**; secondly, **the empirical research situation** regarding mobility abroad in teaching. This study is the first of its kind for Austria. Further ones should follow.

⁷ Fundamental to an overall national strategy is that...

...all relevant actors are involved, both in terms of content and responsibilities (who does what and is responsible for what).

...a common "central" external appearance is designed, e.g. in the form of an officially designated **main communication platform/website/"place to go"**.

...the activities set up, organized, and carried out by the respective actors are coordinated both in terms of content and timing.

⁸ As companies organize training differently according to their size, this should also be considered when addressing them. Since most companies providing apprenticeships in Austria are SMEs, any general information/PR strategy must consider their specific challenges.