

## **Apprenticeships for promoting youth school-to-work transition: does it enhance inclusion or the reproduction of inequalities?**

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In recent decades, the increasing speed of technological innovation, globalization and population ageing, climate change and ecological transition, together with all the other global phenomena known as the mega-trends, are stimulating a broad transformation of the economy and the world of work. In a globally interconnected world, shocks propagate worldwide at an increasing speed as well, as demonstrated by the pandemic first and then the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Young people (and women) are the population group most affected by the global transformations of recent decades and the most recent crises, in particular with respect to their condition in the labour market: not by chance they have been defined as the "losers" of globalization.

The study whose results we are going to present wanted to investigate the effects produced by the global transformations on the school to work transition, focusing on apprenticeship as it is a widely recognised tool - in Italy and in many other countries – for promoting youth labour insertion. The research aimed at responding to the following two objectives: to analyse the effects produced by the transformations underway on some European apprenticeship systems and evaluate if they maintain their effectiveness for the inclusion of young people, especially with respect to the most vulnerable groups. The study was conducted through a systematic literature review, looking into the most prominent publications, reports and documents contained in scientific databases and related to the issues of vocational education and training and youth employment as well as youth school-to-work transition. Moreover, a number of interviews carried out with experts identified among the relevant actors and stakeholders operating in the dual systems of the European countries examined were valorised in the national reports.

In the «apprenticeship countries» - i.e. Austria, Germany, Switzerland – as well as in France, the push for change induced by the global mega-trends prompted a progressive revisions of the dual system which have redefined its features and configuration, succeeding in maintaining a high quality and attractiveness for businesses and households. In a variety of approaches linked to the specificities of the national contexts, the apprenticeship systems of the selected European countries are progressively repositioning towards tertiary level education and training, intercepting young people with a stronger cultural background, but leaving behind the most vulnerable ones. The transformations which occurred in the last decades seem to have reduced the apprenticeship capacity to foster youth labour inclusion, with a higher risk of reproducing social inequalities. These inequalities operate between territories,

economic sectors and businesses, but also in relation to the individual characteristics of young people - i.e. gender, migration background, education, family background).

The analysis considered Italy as well, which for some years has been engaged in the construction of a dual system based on the "formative" apprenticeship, with the aim of tackling early school leaving and promoting employability and employment of young people. The NRRP contributes to this goal by funding a project whose aim is the relaunch of apprenticeship as a tool to counter youth unemployment and reduce the number of NEETs.

Italy has chosen to follow the traditional dual system model, centred on young people aged 15-19 who need to acquire a first vocational qualification, without considering the most recent evolutionary trends in the European dual systems which are repositioning towards the tertiary sectors. However, the measures adopted so far have failed to give a national character to the "formative" apprenticeship, which remains the prerogative of the large northern regions, whose economies also show the best results.

The lack of a long-established collaboration between institutions, social partners and businesses to share the educational responsibility towards young people, which often is rooted in the weaknesses of these actors, especially in territories where the industry is weaker, is the first obstacle to the construction of an Italian dual system. Further critical issues derive from the decision to set up the Italian dual system by leveraging the Initial Vocational Education and Training (IeFP) sector, which consists of a very heterogeneous offer, often not independent from schools, and suffers from the historical weaknesses of many regional VET systems, undermined by the limited availability of financial resources as well as by a feeble demand expressed by the local production system.

A future scenario we need to reflect on is that the intervention financed by the NRRP ends up widening territorial differences, increasing the gap in opportunities between young people who reside in some areas of the country, the already richer ones which benefit also of better connections between school and work, while those living in the weakest continue to fall behind.