How can we close the skills gap? Quality apprenticeships and the future of work

Interview with Martin Henry, Research, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator of Education International in Brussels and Kathryn Rowan, Executive Director of the GAN, the Global Apprenticeship Network based in Geneva

Introduction by host:

Welcome to the ILO Employment podcast series, Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The Future of Work. I’m your host Tom Netter…and today we’re going to talk about the pursuit of quality apprenticeships and their impact on the future of work.

For anyone looking for work, or workers, it’s probably obvious that the world of work is facing transformational change. And these changes are creating skills gaps, mismatches and shortages that are resulting in unfilled jobs and lost productivity.

Some people have the right skills today but won’t tomorrow. Others don’t have skills they need now to qualify for many jobs and need to find ways to get them.

So, what is to be done?
In search of answers, the ILO's memberships—governments, employers, and workers—have adopted a sweeping new international labour standard focused on updating its approach to skills and quality apprenticeships.

The new “Recommendation on Quality Apprenticeships” is designed to support, and I quote, "opportunities for people of all ages to skill, reskill and upskill continuously" and adapt to rapidly changing labour markets.

It defines apprenticeships, specifies aspirational standards for quality apprenticeships, and importantly spells out rights and protections for apprentices. It also highlights that quality apprenticeships are a means of acquiring competencies in line with market needs and learners' aspirations.

This is something that we can all agree on, and with this new standard, we have. But how will it work in practice?

Joining us today to share their expertise on this subject are Martin Henry, Research, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator of Education International in Brussels and Kathryn Rowan, Executive Director of the GAN, the Global Apprenticeship Network based in Geneva.

Kathryn, Martin, welcome to the program. Let's start by defining what we're calling apprenticeships. How do they differ from other forms of work-based learning? So, let's start with Martin.

**Martin:** Thanks very much, Tom. Well, quality apprenticeships culminate in an officially recognized qualification delivered by qualified professionals. There are structured learning opportunities that involve on-the-job and off-the-job training. They're supported by a rights-based approach that gives apprentices regulatory protections that ensure the educational quality as well as the fact that they're governed by an apprenticeship agreement. And all of this, of course, was achieved in the negotiation and the passing of the recommendation at the ILO. And there are also clauses in there that include the right to freedom of association, holiday pay, access to paid maternity, paternity, and parental leave, and the usual conditions that were associated with work. Apprentices in quality apprenticeships receive adequate remuneration or other financial compensation for the work they do, and other forms of work-based learning are less structured and often do not lead to an officially recognized qualification. So that gives you a bit of a framing, Tom, and I'm sure we'll be digging into that as the podcast continues.
Tom: Thanks, Martin. Kathryn, over to you now.

Kathryn: Thanks very much, Tom and Martin. It's great to be with you here today as well. Listen, quality apprenticeships, without a doubt, go far beyond traditional work-based learning. And there's a real emphasis on a comprehensive approach to on-the-job training. And this means respecting the ILO recommendations that have been agreed to by the employers and governments and employee representatives. Quality apprenticeships really provide a very clear pathway for individuals to acquire not only very job-specific and job-related skills that can result in officially recognized certification, as Martin mentioned, but also broader competencies crucial for long-term career success. And without a doubt, when we talk about a rights-based approach, we're talking about regulatory protections like freedom of association and standard working conditions. All of this really sets the quality apprenticeship and the recommendation apart from other less structured forms of work-based learning.

Tom: Thanks, Kathryn. Now continuing, what are the most important new elements of this standard that differentiate it from earlier standards on skills and apprenticeships, including the emphasis on acquiring competencies? And does this amount to a basis for a new vision on skills development and apprenticeships? Can you give us your perspective, Kathryn?

Kathryn: Yeah, absolutely, Tom. No, the emphasis on acquiring competencies in the new standard signifies what I would say a major paradigm shift in the skills development and apprenticeships. And this new standard recognizes that skills are really dynamic and they should never be static. And so, this means that competencies will continue to be adaptable in the rapidly changing landscape of work. And from an employer perspective, it's really important because this new vision of skills development and apprenticeship will be much more closely aligned with the evolving needs of industry. And I also believe that the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion is a major step forward and something that our members fully support.

Tom: Great. Kathryn, thanks. Now, Martin, give us your views.

Martin: Yeah, I do agree with Kathryn that the inclusion aspect was very important to us as well. And certainly the development of competencies and productive capabilities that were foreshadowed in the ILO report on the future of work are really important to produce an environment in which students who are not destined for a university path are able to find a way that they can develop the skills that they need to be productive members of society, and to be able to work within a context that gives them options
and choices and also develops more than the utilitarian, but also the whole of the student.

Crucially, the education will be delivered by qualified professionals who will ensure that the opportunities to learn for life are developed during the apprenticeship. The apprenticeships are also protected from discrimination and exploitation and equity and diversity are encouraged, as we've already discussed, with the aim to ensure that everyone, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or migrant status can participate in apprenticeships. And I think the holistic way in which we work towards developing the recommendation gives us an opportunity for a better set of options across the educational field.

**Tom:** So, Martin, I wanted to ask you also, is demand for quality apprenticeships growing and have the impact of challenges like climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence on the workplace altered the strategic playing field? And are these trends universal?

**Martin:** Well, that's the million-dollar question. The future of work has never been more mysterious than it is at the moment. And I do think that AI and the introduction of new forms of technology have further complicated the playing field that people are going into. What we do know is that lifelong learning and the guarantee to be able to access lifelong learning have never been more important. In a world where change is the only constant, it's important now more than ever that people have universal access to the opportunities apprenticeships provide. That's including but not limited to emerging sectors such as the green economy or growing sectors such as the care economy where skills demand is expected to increase. I would add that the whole gender orientation of apprenticeships is one that we do expect to shift quite in a major way over the next 10 to 50 years.

I mean, if we look at the fact that we've now got female electricians developing their ability to work in a sector that has been traditionally male, and we have the reverse issue in early childhood where we have a very female workforce that we need to produce some gendered responses to because there are men who should be able to work in that sector too. And every apprentice should be able to follow their dream. And I think it's really important to us that apprentices are able to choose and select the areas in which they're going to develop with solid qualifications behind them and the ability to develop and move throughout their lives.

**Tom:** Okay, Martin, thanks. Let's have Kathryn's views on this.
Kathryn: Yeah, thanks very much and great points, Martin. Back to the question of demand, Tom. Demand, and frankly, the need for quality apprenticeships is growing globally. Factors, like you mentioned, climate change and COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of AI. These have altered the strategic playing field and really influenced the types of skills that are required and needed. And these trends are universal. With countries recognizing the need for adaptable, resilient, and forward-looking apprenticeship programs. What we know and what we've heard from our GAN networks across the world is that there's a noticeable surge in demand for quality apprenticeships. We've seen this in many jurisdictions, the US, Australia, New Zealand as examples.

In New Zealand, for example, there was a 59% increase in apprenticeships since 2019. And this really speaks to the important role that governments and legislative efforts that really they need to play, whether it's wage subsidies or landmark bills like clean energy bill and the public infrastructure bill, semiconductor workforce, all of these have really triggered explosive growth in the demand for apprenticeship. But having said that, once governments start to cut back subsidies or change the legislative environment, there's a risk that numbers could drop. So, when it comes to our members, for example, our corporate members, we have really great examples. We have companies that are emphasizing digitalization in their apprenticeship programs through content delivered electronically and communication via online tools. And so, this new world that we live in is changing the way that apprenticeships are being delivered and making them much more accessible to individuals around the world.

Tom: Okay. Well, so we know that young people are seeking more apprenticeships, but what about women workers in general? And also, can you briefly describe the skills challenges facing women? And also, I'd like to ask whether older workers are really looking for apprenticeships or work-based learning, and if so, why? Let's start with Kathryn.

Kathryn: Yeah, Tom, for sure. Quality apprenticeships have to be, they must be inclusive, and they must address issues such as gender bias. And addressing these challenges and the challenges that are facing female employees really requires targeted efforts to break down gender stereotypes. And Martin alluded to that earlier in the piece. And we really need to create an environment that encourages diverse participation. It's not easy, there's no question, but it can be done, but there's still a lot of work to do. We are definitely seeing progress across the board with female participation in apprenticeships. I mean, the numbers are still, I would say low. I mean, it's not fifty-fifty, but depending on the apprenticeship in question, there's still a lot of gender stereotyping as Martin alluded to with women in childcare roles.
So, we also see issues around access and things like personal protection equipment and childcare, suitable washrooms and change room facilities and bullying and harassment.

So, there's a lot of work to be done and a lot of education and standard setting. And I would say in terms of older workers, to your question, we're seeing engagement in apprenticeship really due to a couple of things. One is extended careers and evolving skill demand. So, in Australia for instance, we see an uptick in the average age of apprentices, and this is indicating a trend towards career changers versus folks coming right out of school and emphasizing the importance of transferable skills. The same is true in our New Zealand network, for example, where the majority of apprentices are career changers and not school-leavers.

**Tom:** That's very interesting, Kathryn. Martin, can you weigh in on this?

**Martin:** Yeah. The new ILO instrument on quality apprenticeships offers opportunities to challenge historical gendered stereotypes we've already referred to about the types of jobs that women and men can do. Ultimately, the instrument will be an important vehicle to address gendered occupational segregation. The fact that men are concentrated in jobs, occupations, and sectors that pay more while women are concentrated in jobs, occupations, and sectors that remain undervalued. We've talked about the care sector, but there are other examples across the landscape. And we've also talked about the importance of getting girls into areas like electrician, electrical engineering. I do think that the shift in demographic is also a significant megatrend, and we are seeing people go through that process of reinventing their job, their employment, their opportunities at various times throughout their lives. And as we see an aging population become more of the norm, there are ways in which we've got to give access to learning and to qualified solid learning, which provides for solid jobs in order to make sure that all of our economies are able to function properly.

I would say that there is an example from international equal pay day on the 18th of September, the US government announced with the aim of disrupting occupational segregation and combating pay inequality and compensation discrimination. In 2023, the US Department of Labor is funding up to 14 grants totalling up to 5 million to attract and support women in accessing registered apprenticeship programs in high growth, high wage industries where they're underrepresented such as construction, manufacturing and cyber security. We think these sorts of initiatives and incentives provided by government are critical. We do need to think about which boys and which girls as well. How are we providing access to all sections of society to the opportunities that are available? So that goes for migrants, it goes for people with backgrounds that
mean they're generally not allowed into the labour market in the normal fashion. And we have to focus on ensuring that opportunities exist for those groups.

Gender, class, and intersectionality play a part. Fluidity of opportunity can't be concentrated in places that were already advantaged. And I know that there were a lot of questions around how we might ensure that this approach to quality apprenticeships works right around the world because we don't want to see that we've got one set of standards and abilities to access apprenticeships in one part of the world, and we've got another set of opportunities and abilities to access these apprenticeships in another. We want to see an even playing field where everybody is given an opportunity that counts. The aging population I've already referred to, it presents new challenges, but I don't want to construct aging and an aging population as just a problem because they also present us with an opportunity. And I think we can enable a way of having fluid access to apprenticeships that gives everyone the ability to learn.

Tom: Thanks. We've touched already on the issue of protecting apprentices and there's a long list of protections in the standard. Practically speaking, how can countries give effect to these revisions and what can individual workers and employers do? Let's go again with Martin first.

Martin: Well, these are some of the most important protections offered to workers and all are consistent with the centenary declaration and other ILO instruments. Apprenticeships and apprentices are often vulnerable, and I think we forget this at our peril. They can be open to exploitation and abuse by nature of their status and their knowledge of the trade, and the fact that when you're just starting off, then you don't have the experience and the knowledge and the ability to navigate the terrain that you do later on in the profession. And that goes for any profession, whether you're an electrician or a teacher. But looking at apprenticeships, the ability for them to join a union and to bargain collectively gives them the protections that they need. Countries must ensure these rights are offered by regulation and the creation of a monitoring and responsible body who will ensure that the protections are offered.

And I think that was a very important clause in the recommendation as we did provide for ensuring that countries and governments don't just put these regulations out there and say we need to have a good solid apprenticeship system, but a monitoring and ensuring that the qualifications offered are up to the standards that we all require. Trade unions have an important role to play in ensuring that those protections are provided for within the regulatory framework, and that all actors involved in apprenticeships, including individual employers and intermediaries, do provide for those protections. And that in case of violations of their rights, apprentices can be
supported in accessing effective complaints and dispute resolution mechanisms. Employers will then play their part in ensuring the protections are offered and workers will ensure that they come with the ability to learn and to respond and to develop.

**Tom:** Thanks, Martin. So, Kathryn, what is your perspective on this?

**Kathryn:** Yeah, no, Tom. I think protecting apprentices is paramount, and the recommendation really calls on ILO members to uphold fundamental principles and rights at work. And this really reflects a commitment to fairness. But practically speaking, it's pretty basic. I mean, Martin alluded to this, countries can give effect to these provisions by implementing, but also enforcing robust legal frameworks and ensuring decent working conditions as well as promoting social security measures. And during difficult times, governments need to really go above and beyond. COVID-19, for example, when lockdowns were implemented, many governments contributed to the protection of apprentices by offering financial support, and companies also did the same. And employers have an important role to play as well in implementing these protections, and they can contribute to the development of a stronger and better supported workforce.

But first and foremost, they need to meet the regulatory requirements and they can also choose to go above and beyond. And many do. For example, one of our members, L'Oreal, for instance, it offers remuneration and training aids and leaves of absences as well as representation and negotiations, respective training objectives for apprentices to thereby enrich their experience. And this is just some of the examples that we're seeing out there that really are reinforcing a strong commitment to apprenticeship.

**Tom:** Thanks, Kathryn. Now finally, recognizing that social justice encompasses many different areas. Are you seeing evidence suggesting that skills development and promoting quality apprenticeships can have an impact on the quest for social justice? Kathryn first.

**Kathryn:** I think there is compelling evidence suggesting that skills development and quality apprenticeships contribute significantly to the quest for social justice. By providing equal opportunities, promoting inclusivity, addressing systemic inequalities, quality apprenticeships are really a very powerful tool for creating a more just and equitable society. And apprenticeships can also provide tangible pathways for those who have been marginalized in the past, or who traditionally have been excluded from the labour market. And thereby this can promote democracy, citizenship, and a greater sense of community. So, there is, in my mind, no question that the ILO's longstanding
efforts, and it's been a work in progress for many years in conjunction with employers, employee representatives, and governments culminating in Recommendation 208 will really contribute significantly to enhancing right protection and opportunities for a brighter future for society.

Tom: Thanks, Kathryn. Now Martin.

Martin: Thanks Tom. And I do want to take us back to one of the original apprentices, and that is Sancho Panza who was tilting at windmills without the right advice or the right support from Old Don Quixote. He would get himself in a few pickles one way or the other. I think the quest for social justice must not be left as tilting at windmills, but we've got to offer tangible and real pathways for those traditionally excluded from the labour market back into the social fold. I think that this recommendation offers the possibility and the ability to do that. The benefits for democracy, for citizenship, and for community could not be clearer. And we need a community that wraps round each other and enables us to learn together and to learn as social members of our societies, to work out how we can become better in our jobs, better in our learning, better in our abilities.

I think the ILO has been working on this tirelessly for over a hundred years, and it's as the oldest tripartite relationship in the world, one that allows social dialogue and the ability of employers and workers to work with governments to make this happen, that we're able to present these rights, protections, and opportunities for a brighter future. And I do agree with Kathryn that we are on a road to a better way, ensuring that we're able to give opportunities to all workers to be able to approach work in the right way from the first steps. Next, we'd like a similar agreement for trainees and interns because the job is never done, Tom.

Tom: Thanks. Well, I want to thank both of you for a great interview. It was very, very interesting and we'll hopefully talk soon about other issues.

A key takeaway here is that the need for a new, up to date approach to apprenticeships and skills is a given.

What's significant is that it's something that we all seem to agree on.
That kind of positive dialogue is the power behind this new standard, and let’s hope that it’ll be the driver that promotes work-based training that’ll address the challenges posed in the future of work.

I’m Tom Netter, and you’ve been listening to the ILO EMPLOYMENT podcast series, “Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work”. For more on this, go to www.ilo.org/employment. Meanwhile, thank you for your time.