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Towards a European model of collective skill formation? Analysing the European Alliance for Apprenticeships

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ABSTRACT

While the literature in skill formation systems has paid considerable attention to inter-variation between types of national skill formation systems and intra-variation among individual types as in the case of collective skill formation systems, less is known about the role of the European Union in establishing a European model of skill formation. Building on studies in educational governance and decentralised cooperation, this paper analyses the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) and explores its relationship to national skill formation systems. We analyse the emergence of a European model of collective skill formation and offer case studies of Ireland and France to understand how this European model relates to these two contrasting skill formation systems. Through deductive qualitative content analysis of official documents, we show that (a) the EAfA, in resembling characteristics of national collective skill formation systems, promotes the emergence of a European model of collective skill formation, and (b) that Ireland and France show signs of moving further towards adopting elements of a collectivist training model centred on apprenticeship training although mediated by path-dependencies of a liberal (Ireland) and statist (France) skill formation model.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), launched in 2013, as a move by the European Union towards developing a collectivist approach to fostering vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. Especially since the negative impact of the financial crisis of 2008 on youth employment, apprenticeships have been framed as a key element of the European Youth Guarantee scheme enabling a smooth transition from school to work (European Commission 2013; Council of the European Union 2013). This, in turn, reinforces the nexus of social inclusion and economic development that frequently accompanies VET policy rationales (Rageth and Renold 2019). The EAfA represents a new approach to strengthening VET in Europe and is the European Commission's main multi-actor and multi-level cooperation framework to support and enhance apprenticeship training across member states, not least to combat youth unemployment (European Union 2014). Yet, very little is known about

the institutional characteristics of this policy initiative and how it interacts with national skill formation systems in Europe. Thus, we explore for the first time systematically the characteristics of this European alliance, in which a total of 38 European countries participate (European Commission 2021a).

To describe and unpack the specificities of an emergent European model of skill formation and its relation to the national level, our comparative-institutional analysis builds on literature on the governance of skill formation and on deductive qualitative content analysis of EAfA-related official documents from European, national, and local levels. Our analysis finds that the EAfA is oriented towards the logic of decentralised cooperation. This logic is traditionally characterising the national-level collective skill formation systems in Europe – especially in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012). However, we find that certain adjustments are made to the traditional model of collective skill formation to account for the specific conditions for collective governance at the European level, for instance, regarding the overall embeddedness of the EAfA in the European governance architecture and the steering role of European public governance institutions.

We further analyse the national commitments and local stakeholder pledges to the EAfA to examine how it relates to national skill formation systems with different traditions, namely the statist or liberal models. In the VET policy literature, there is a substantial body of literature that analyses the configurations of the apprenticeship training schemes in collective skill formation systems (Culpepper 2003; Thelen 2004; Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012). However, our understanding about apprenticeship training schemes in statist or liberal models of skill formation is still limited, especially when considering the role of the European Union in promoting a shift towards dual VET systems in recent years (European Union 2014). Thus, we study one liberal skill formation system and one statist skill formation system that in the literature on skill regimes have traditionally been classified as cases of non-collectivist skill formation, namely Ireland and France, respectively (Vossiek 2018; Crouch 1992). We explore whether their national commitments and local stakeholder pledges correspond to or diverge from the model of collective skill formation envisaged in the official documents linked to the EAfA. A key result is that French and Irish documents reflect the collectivist vision of the European-level EAfA, but also national path-dependencies in relation to the respective traditional model of skill formation.

In the next section, we offer a contextualisation of the EAfA. Subsequently, we outline our theoretical framework and methodology. This is followed by the results section, in which we first report on the emergence of the European model of collective skill formation and then on the national-level commitments and pledges. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings.

2. The European Alliance for Apprenticeships and the growing emphasis on apprenticeships in European VET policy

The European Commission has a long-standing interest in matters of VET (see Powell and Trampusch 2012; Ante 2016), not least due to the immediate relevance of VET qualifications for the Common Market and cross-border mobility of workers in Europe. However, the cooperation of European countries and social partners in matters of VET

was taken to a new level with the Copenhagen Process (launched in 2002) and later with the Bruges Communiqué (2010) and the Riga Conclusions (2015) as a strategic vision to develop a modern and attractive European VET agenda to create a European model of skill formation (Powell, Bernhard, and Graf 2012; Trampusch 2009; Ante 2016), accompanied by the institutionalisation of European policy instruments, such as the Open Method of Coordination (Souto-Otero, Fleckenstein, and Dacombe 2008). In this phase of Europeanisation of VET, the focus was on new policy instruments such as the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF) associated with a competence-based modular approach and an orientation towards employability. This rather market-led approach, however, was met with resistance by many social partners within collective skill formation systems, including unions, chambers of commerce, and the craft sector (Cort 2010; Busemeyer 2009).

Recently, the promotion of apprenticeships, as a form of work-based learning, has become one of the main priorities of European VET policy (CEDEFOP 2018). This is most clearly illustrated by the establishment of the EAfA launched in Leipzig in 2013 with a Joint Declaration by the European Commission, the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and the European social partners. The launch of the EAfA as a major policy to push for more apprenticeships in Europe can be understood in the context of the dire need to combat rising youth unemployment in many European countries in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. As countries with collective skill formation systems were perceived as being more successful in maintaining smooth school-to-work transitions and keeping the number of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) low, they served as an inspiration for European VET policy and the EAfA (Eurofound 2014; O'Reilly et al. 2015). The main goals linked to the EAfA have been the improvement of quality and supply of apprenticeships across the European Union as well as the enhancement of the social and economic values of apprenticeships through a concerted effort from key stakeholders from the education and employment sectors (European Commission 2013). The EAfA not only appears as a European policy initiative that expands and consolidates the work of the European Union in matters of VET policy but also emphasises the role of VET – in the form of apprenticeships – to tackle pressing social issues such as youth unemployment. The EAfA thus emerged in a context different to that of prior European VET policy initiatives such as the ECVET or the EQF that have been associated with a strong orientation towards market-making (Cort 2010). Interestingly, German VET stakeholders, in part critical of these older initiatives, played a significant role in the crafting process of the EAfA, with the goal to upload their policy ideas about VET to the European level (Rohde-Liebenau and Graf 2022).

The EAfA, to achieve its goals, underlines as one of its main principles the establishment of effective partnerships between educational actors, training institutions, and companies; the involvement of social partners, including intermediary partners (chambers of commerce, industry and crafts, professional organisations, and sectoral organisations); the promotion of qualifications and learning processes of high quality; and the integration of apprenticeship schemes into national/regional education and training systems with a clear regulatory framework (European Commission 2016).

To accomplish systemic change, the Joint Declaration was endorsed at the supranational level by the European Commission, the European social partners, and the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. After the Joint Declaration was published in July 2013, the Council of the European Union issued a Council Declaration in October of the same year with several key messages that will be analysed in a later section of this paper (European Commission 2013). Member States were invited to submit a national commitment under the frame of the aims of the initiative, and individual stakeholders and organisations that could arrange or provide apprenticeships were invited to voluntarily submit pledges. Today, the EAfA counts 1 regional commitment (Baltic countries), 38 national commitments, and 383 stakeholders' pledges.¹

The supranational political commitment to the initiative was later reinforced in the meeting of the Directors General for VET in Riga in 2015, where the EAfA played a central role as a flagship initiative to fight unemployment and to promote work-based learning across Europe (CEDEFOP 2015). In the following year, apprenticeships appeared in the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* (European Commission 2016) as a way to promote work-based learning as 'a proven springboard to good jobs and to developing labour market-relevant skills, including transversal and soft skills' (European Commission 2016, 13). In 2018, the Council of the European Union issued a recommendation in which 14 criteria were identified as a recommendation to member states and stakeholders to develop effective and high-quality apprenticeships (European Council 2018). In 2020, the European Commission launched a new cycle of the EAfA embedded in the Youth Employment Support Package to tackle several of the EU's major horizontal policy issues such as social inclusion, gender, health, and safety, and the internationalisation of VET. Furthermore, this renewed EAfA includes a strong focus on 'digital' and 'green' apprenticeships (European Commission 2021b).

We next present our analytical framework.

3. Analytical framework: exploring the European model of skill formation

3.1. Varieties of skill formation regimes

The literature on the governance of skill formation has identified four main types of skill formation regimes in advanced industrial democracies. Work by scholars such as Greinert (1988, 2005), Crouch (1992), Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012), and Vossiek (2018) has contributed significantly to our understanding of the differences between *statist*, *collective*, *liberal*, and *segmentalist* skill formation systems. Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) have argued that these different systems can be distinguished by the degree of public commitment to VET (high or low), on the one hand, and firm involvement in initial VET (high or low), on the other hand (see Table 1). Thus, in *collective* skill formation systems (e.g. Germany), both public commitment and firm involvement are high. Collective systems are characterised by apprenticeship training organised in the school and the firm and by being governed through social partnerships. *Liberal* skill formation systems represent a stark contrast to the collective type, as they are defined by both low public commitment and firm involvement. A common example for skill formation in such a liberal regime is firm-based on-the-job training. In *statist* skill formation, public commitment is high but firm involvement is low, as is the case in state-controlled full-time vocational schools. The reverse holds

Table 1. Four skills regimes in advanced industrial democracies – the classical typology.

Public commitment to VET	High	<i>Statist</i> skill formation [Statist model] (SWE, F)	<i>Collective</i> skill formation [Corporatist model] (GER, CH, AUT, DK, NL)
	Low	<i>Liberal</i> skill formation [Short-term adaptability model] (US, CAN, UK, IRE, AUS, NZL)	<i>Segmentalist</i> skill formation [Big-company model] (JAP)
		Low	High
		Firm involvement in initial VET	

Source: Vossiek (2018, 42); own depiction by Vossiek (2018) who followed Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012, 12) and adopted the alternative labels in the squared brackets from Crouch (1992).²

for *segmentalist* skill formation, which is characterised by low public commitment but high firm involvement. The most prominent example for this latter type of skill formation is in-house training within large firms' internal labour markets in countries such as Japan. However, as none of the skill formation systems in Europe is considered a typical example of a segmentalist model, we do not further discuss this type in our paper.

Referring to Streeck and Schmitter's (1985) seminal distinction between major institutional orders and respective logics of contemporary Western societies, one can add that in the (1) *statist* order, the dominant logic of interaction is *hierarchical control*, in the (2) *liberal* order, it is *dispersed market competition*, and in the (3) *collective* order, it is the associational logic linked to *decentralised cooperation* (on the associational logic in VET, see Graf, Strebler, and Emmenegger 2021). In fact, Streeck and Schmitter (1985) do not use the term decentralised cooperation in this context but speak of an associational logic based on organisational concertation. However, in our analysis we use the term *decentralised cooperation*, which was coined later by Culpepper (2003) and is linked to the associational logic. That is, a strongly decentralised system of cooperation requires organisational concertation, for example, through associations helping to coordinate the various relevant individual actors within such a system.

In the following, we offer a more detailed account of the core concept of decentralised cooperation.

3.2. Collective skill formation and decentralised cooperation

The seminal definition of collectively organised skill formation has been proposed by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012, 4): 'The main characteristic of the vocational training systems of these countries is that they are collectively organised, because firms, intermediary associations, and the state cooperate in the process of skill formation in initial vocational training.' In collective skill formation, the type of cooperation between these actors has been identified as decentralised cooperation (Culpepper 2003). Traditionally, such a cooperation is closely related to strategic cooperation in coordinated market economies (Amable 2003). Reviewing the comparative political economy literature on governance, corporatism, and coordination (e.g. Thelen 2004), institutional labour and societal economics (e.g. Marsden 1999) as well as the educational science literature (e.g. Buschfeld and Euler 1994), Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch (2019) propose a conceptual framework for the analysis of decentralised cooperation in collective skill formation. In the following, we build on this framework and argue that, in principle, it can be applied not only to the analysis of decentralised cooperation within the national frame but also to explore whether

or to what extent the EAfA, as a core element of the European model of skill formation, entails elements of collective skill formation. At the same time, we contend that it will be necessary to adjust and extend the framework to do justice to the specific conditions for decentralised cooperation at the European level – for instance, regarding the key actor groups involved at this supranational level.

To conceptualise decentralised cooperation, Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch (2019) distinguish between the following analytical dimensions: ‘core task areas of cooperation’, ‘actors in cooperation’, ‘levels in cooperation’, ‘types of cooperation’, and ‘conflicts in cooperation’. The first two of these dimensions – ‘core task areas of cooperation’ and ‘actors in cooperation’ – are the most fundamental ones when it comes to characterising collective skill formation. First, it is critical to note that any collective skill formation system is expected to enable decentralised cooperation between the relevant stakeholders within six task areas: (1) *strategic system development* including policy reforms, (2) *content definition* (e.g. vocational profiles and curricula), (3) *organisation of the training provision* in terms of implementation and administration, (4) *matching of demand and supply* on the apprenticeship market, (5) *financing* of the training provision, and (6) *monitoring, examination, and certification* (Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch 2019). These task areas of cooperation therefore serve as the starting point and organising structure for the analysis of decentralised cooperation (Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch 2019). Second, collective skill formation inherently builds on the cooperation of both public and private actors. Here, the most important actor groups regarding cooperation in collective skill formation are the following (Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch 2019): individual firms; employers’ organisations; educational organisations; employees’ organisations (e.g. trade unions and works councils); regional public governance institutions; and federal public governance institutions (national level). Thus, if a skill formation system offers apprenticeships based on decentralised cooperation between such public and private actors involving each of the six task areas, it is reasonable to identify it as a collective skill formation system. In comparison, the three other dimensions are more specific, diving deeper into specific characteristics of decentralised cooperation. For instance, ‘levels in cooperation’ helps exploring whether collective skill formation is organised more along sectoral or occupational lines; ‘type of cooperation’ is indicative of the intensity of cooperation within collective skill formation, and ‘conflicts in cooperation’ is sensitive to the different areas of contention related to collective governance. Given that these latter dimensions are typically used to specify the kind of collective skill formation observed rather than whether we are observing such a system in the first place, we focus our analysis on the more fundamental dimensions of ‘core task areas of cooperation’ and ‘core actors in cooperation’.

In view of our goal to discern the contemporary European model of skill formation, we add a seventh actor group, namely European public governance institutions. This extension allows us to consider the role of actors such as the European Commission that play a critical steering role in the emergent European model of collective skill formation. Furthermore, at the European level, employers’ and employees’ organisations may be represented through their European-level interest organisations – which is something we also consider in our empirical analysis.

We next present our main argument, operationalisation, methods, and data.

3.3. Research design: main argument, operationalisation, methods, and data

National models of collective skill formation, like the German one, have typically served or been promoted as a role model for apprenticeship training at the European level (Lange and Alexiadou 2010; Powell, Bernhard, and Graf 2012). In line with this, we expect that the EAfA represents a collectivist model – but with adjustments related to the transposition of this model to the European level. Regarding the uptake of European VET policies at the national level, it is known that it can be strongly shaped by path dependencies at the national level and specific policy interests of stakeholders in the domestic arena (Trampusch 2009; Bernhard 2017; Graf 2015). For instance, Bieber (2010) shows that stakeholders in collective skill formation have drawn very selectively on the Copenhagen process for VET due to such path dependencies. Against this backdrop, we expect that the national commitments and local stakeholder pledges from traditionally non-collective skill formation systems reflect a mix of ‘top down’ elements prescribed by a European model, as defined by the European declaration(s) and, ‘bottom up’ elements that derive from the national or local traditions in the governance of skill formation systems and related interests of domestic actors. Thus, for instance, it is possible that the European-level documents prescribe a more purely collective skill formation model than the national or local-level documents that relate to the EAfA. In other words, our expectation is that the Irish and French policy documents reflect hybridity in the sense that they combine European elements with those of the respective national institutional tradition of skill formation.

However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to carve out in detail causal mechanisms in terms of the relation between the European and national levels. Instead, our goal is to discern the European model of skill formation as envisaged in the EAfA and to show how it is taken up in the respective national commitments and the stakeholder pledges and the extent to which developments at the national level resemble the corresponding European model of skill formation. In other words, our analysis is more apt to capturing the model for apprenticeship training outlined in the official declarations and documents at the European and national levels than accounting in detail for the actual implementation at the national level. Yet, our approach still allows us to provide a comprehensive picture of the EAfA given that its main purpose is precisely to provide a model that provides orientation and incentives to relevant stakeholders and to compare this model to developments at the national level, which is where the actual authority for educational policy-making is located given the principle of subsidiarity in the EU.

In operational terms, we consider it to be a strong indicator for a collective skill formation model if all aforementioned core task areas of cooperation, which together constitute the governance frame for collective skill formation, are explicitly described in the analysed documents and if they outline the necessity of cooperation between the relevant actor groups. Regarding the actor groups, the official assignment of important governance tasks to non-state actors is another key indicator for a collective skills model. This refers in particular to employers’ organisations, individual firms, and employees’ organisations (e.g. trade unions and work councils). In contrast, for instance, if only public governance institutions are identified as key actors, this would speak against the presence of a collective skill formation model but instead point towards a more statist one.

In terms of methods, we conduct a deductive qualitative content analysis of the official documents that are linked to the emergent European model of collective skill formation. This involves the analysis not only of the relevant European-level declarations but also of the respective national commitments and local stakeholder pledges. Together, these documents provide a comprehensive perspective on this emergent model represented by the EAfA. Because this is an interdependent policy initiative, analysing it without looking at the member states level would risk ignoring a major, if not the most important, aspect of the initiative. Thus, next to analysing the key documents related to the EAfA at the European level, we study how the alliance is mirrored in the relevant policy documents and recent institutional developments in Ireland and France to capture the multi-level character of the EAfA.

These two countries are of particular interest as they have traditionally been perceived as classical examples for liberal and statist skill formation, respectively (Table 1), which represent the two major other types of skill formation in Europe next to collective skill formation. Thus, we explore the Irish and French national commitments and local stakeholder pledges to see how the EAfA relates to these two classic examples of countries that traditionally have not been considered as collective skill formation systems in the skills regime literature. At the same time, we acknowledge that both countries have seen efforts to enhance apprenticeships prior and independently of the EAfA as well (e.g. Vossiek 2018; Bernhard 2017). Yet, in relative terms, we still consider the two countries as relevant examples for these respective ideal types (Table 1). For the liberal skill formation system, we had initially considered to analyse the United Kingdom, but eventually decided against it due to Brexit as a confounding factor when it comes to the relationship between European and British educational policies. This led us to choosing Ireland as the other major case in Europe traditionally considered as a representative of liberal skill formation (Vossiek 2018). In turn, the French case is typically considered as the most prominent case of a statist skill formation system (Greinert 1988, 2005). Our selection is also motivated by the embeddedness of the skill formation system in the respective national model of capitalism, with Ireland traditionally being considered a key case of a liberal market economy and France as the poster child of a statist market economy (Amable 2003). We abstain from including a collective skill formation system as another national case as this would require a different research design, given that the collective model served, to a significant extent, as a role model for the EAfA (Section 2).

In our analysis, the Council Declaration of the ‘European Alliance for Apprenticeships’ (EU1) (European Commission 2013) served as the main document to explore the emergence of the European model of (collective) skill formation. Other second-order European documents were also analysed such as the ‘*The renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships*’ (EU2) (European Commission 2021b), the only EAfA assessment report to date (EU3) (European Commission 2017), and the latest survey conducted on the stakeholder pledges (EU4) (European Commission 2021, 2021c). While the EAfA declaration (EU1) appears as the main document for analysis since it contains the foundational principles of the policy initiative, the other documents – EU2, EU3, EU4 – are added as secondary ones since they provide further evidence to strengthen the analysis. For the national cases, the official Irish (IRE1) and French (FR1) national commitments to the EAfA were the most important documents analysed, as well

as the total number of stakeholder pledges for each country, respectively, $n = 7$ for Ireland and $n = 25$ for France. Both types of documents appear as relevant since they are directly connected to the EAfA. National commitments are governments' proposals to increase the attractiveness, quality, and the supply of apprenticeships at the system level, while stakeholder pledges are submissions by organisations such as state agencies (local and regional authorities), professional networks, education and training providers, or companies that 'pledge' to strengthen the supply, quality, and mobility of apprentices. Data was retrieved from the EAfA official website. To support the analysis of the Irish system given the rather limited amount of information embedded in the national commitment, two policy documents served as a secondary source of analysis – the *Action Plan to Expand the Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016–2020* (IRE2) (DFHERIS 2020a), and the *Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025* (IRE3) (DFHERIS 2020b). The former is explicitly referenced in the Irish national commitment as the policy document that informs the overall reform of the system, while the latter is the follow-up recently adopted. For the French case, we also looked at secondary documents to enlarge the empirical base relevant for our analysis. This is the case of a report on the finances of the apprenticeship system (FR2) (France compétences 2021a) and on the national qualification system (FR3) (France compétences 2021b), both published by the national agency that governs the French apprenticeship system.

To examine these documents, we applied deductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000). The overarching categories for this analysis were derived from the theory of decentralised cooperation (Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch 2019), referring to the task areas of cooperation (six categories) and the types of actor groups in cooperation (ten categories) that in combination identify collective skill formation (Section 2.3). These categories enabled us to detect the extent to which the relevant documents describe a model of collective skill formation. In a multi-month coding process, 306 items were coded for all the sixteen categories via MAXQDA. Specifically, 42 items were coded for the EAfA, 55 items for Ireland, and 209 for France. To guarantee inter-coder reliability, samples were analysed by the two authors of the paper. For the examination of relevant change processes in our country cases beyond the deductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000), we added a historical institutionalist research strategy often used in the political economy of skill formation literature (e.g. Thelen 2004) in making use of document analysis in a slightly less structured way but based on a systematic review and evaluation of the documents (Bowen 2009).

4. Results: the European collective model and its hybrid uptake

In this section, we present the results of the content analysis of the relevant European, Irish, and French documents. Based on the key task areas for cooperation in collective skill formation, we first show how the EAfA is an indicator of the emergence of a European model of collective skill formation. Secondly, we discuss the Irish and French cases in the context of the European model of collective skill formation.

4.1. *The emergence of a European model of collective skill formation?*

Stemming from the categorisation of the key task areas for cooperation in skill formation systems applied to the EAfA, we show the emergence of a European model of collective skill formation. We find that the relevant European declaration and related documents explicitly speak to each of the six key task areas that define a collective skill formation system.

Regarding *system development*, the content analysis shows that the EAfA invites member states to develop proper regulatory frameworks, in which responsibilities, rights, and obligations of each party involved are formulated and enforceable by law. The systems are envisioned to cover multiple sectors and occupations, including new and innovation sectors with high employment potential, while considering forecasts of future skills needs. Such national regulatory frameworks should be built in continuous exchange of best practices and experiences on apprenticeship schemes at the Union level through a ‘multilateral surveillance process’, where the European Semester, the Mutual Learning Programme, and the Open Method of Coordination, via the Copenhagen Process and the strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020) play a significant role in the monitoring of the European model of collective skill formation (EU1). While most of member states had some sort of apprenticeship training in place, it is reported that between 2015 and 2017 around 55 per cent of the EU-28+ introduced or reformed their previous apprenticeship systems (CEDEFOP 2018). While the reforms implemented are not necessarily due directly to the EAfA, the policy initiative works as a push factor for some countries and is considered as a relevant response to tackle youth unemployment (EU3), facilitated also by an increasing interest in apprenticeship training by policy makers in contexts outside of traditional collective skill formation systems more generally (Li and Pilz 2021).

The dimension of *content definition* is visible in the stimulus to create national partnerships with social partners and other relevant stakeholders such as intermediary bodies, education and training providers, youth and student organisations, local, regional, and national authorities in the curricular design and implementation of the apprenticeship schemes with the aim to improve skill matches (EU1). Recently, this also includes a focus on digital and green skills (EU2, EU4). In addition, the EAfA aims to diversify apprenticeships, to contribute to the updating of existing or the creation of new training programmes, and to strengthen the partnerships between teachers and employers in content aspects (EU3).

The main features in the *organisation of training provision* are concerned with the promotion of the apprenticeship schemes through mechanisms of awareness-raising not only targeted towards youth and their families but also to education and training providers, employers, and public employment services. In this process, social partners are called to provide career guidance, prepare quality training and other forms of support to enhance the quality of the schemes and to provide broad educational and professional opportunities (EU1). The promotion of organisational structures to support apprenticeship schemes, adoption of early vocational guidance tools, carrying out of public events, and fostering transnational mobility projects are among the most common activities referred to (EU3).

In the category of *matching of demand and supply*, we observe a strong orientation towards the supply side to tackle youth unemployment. The EAfA aims at combating this through apprenticeship schemes by stressing the need for comprehensive and complementary action at national and European Union levels, where apprentices should receive social protection, career guidance, training, and adequate incentives to participate. The same rationale of incentives is applied to suppliers. Thus, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) should receive incentives to provide an adequate supply of training spots, covering multiple sectors and occupations, with particular attention to ‘new and innovation sectors’, where high employment potential is seen as a way of identifying future skills needs. Therefore, SME play a significant role as suppliers of apprenticeships (EU1). Regarding the supply of apprenticeships more generally, an European Commission monitoring study surveying actors that have pledged to contribute to the EAfA estimates that the EAfA has created at least 735,000 apprenticeship places between January 2019 and December 2020 alone (EU4).

The category of *financing* encourages a strategic use of European Union funds (through the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Erasmus+ Programme) in a concerted fashion, while stressing the importance of financial and non-financial incentives to all parties involved (supply and demand) as well as the commitment of public authorities and employers by providing adequate remuneration and social protection (EU1). Besides the important, yet insufficient, role of European funding, about half of member states to the EAfA reported to have provided financial incentives to employers (EU3).

At last, questions related to *monitoring, examination, and certification* are illustrated by the necessity of recognising qualifications and competences developed under the apprenticeship schemes and integrating them within the formal education and training system. This is conceived to grant access to higher education and lifelong learning. Moreover, qualifications and competences should be defined against the standards of learning outcomes and quality assurance in line with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET as a way of facilitating cross-border mobility (EU1). On this matter, measures to introduce or enhance mentoring and guidance at the workplace, accreditation of companies, and improved assessment and certification of learning outcomes were reported (EU3).

In sum, relevant recommendations pertaining to all previously identified collective governance tasks and features were detected. That is, relevant codes associated with collective skill formation were found in each of the governance task areas: we find that the EAfA shows a strong orientation towards collective governance in the six task areas that characterise collective skill formation regimes. At the same time, we also observe that the EAfA is adapted to the broader European governance architecture, such as the strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020) (*system development*), the European Structural and Investment Funds (*financing*), and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (*monitoring, examination, and certification*) (EU1).

We next provide our results for the analysis of the central actor groups in the European declaration (Table 2). First, it can be noted that all traditional actor groups considered to be core in collective skill formation are brought up. In addition, we find that local public governance institutions (n = 3) and youth representatives (n = 1) are

Table 2. Analysis of actor groups.

Actor group	Frequency
Employers' organisations	10
Individual firms	5
Employees' organisations	2
Educational organisations	3
European public governance institutions	9
Federal public governance institutions	5
Regional public governance institutions	3
Local public governance institutions*	3
Youth representatives*	2
Combined actor groups	1

*Actors not included in the initial theoretical framework by Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch (2019).

mentioned. Furthermore, the level of individual firms ($n = 2$) plays a role. This points towards a strategy of European policymakers to try to reach out directly to subnational stakeholders, related to the trend towards polyarchic multi-level governance in the European Union in the past two decades (Sabel and Zeitlin 2012) that aims to connect local stakeholders directly to policy processes at the European level. Furthermore, European public governance institutions ($n = 9$) play a significant role for the governance of the European model of skill formation. However, the most frequently mentioned actor group is employers' organisations ($n = 10$) (EU1).

Overall, the prevalence of these actor groups speaks for a collective character of the emergent European model, which assigns a core role to such private actors. In contrast, employees' organisations are mentioned only twice and where they are mentioned, this is merely done indirectly by reference to the role given to social partners generally. This suggests that the European model of collective skill formation is a *liberal* rather than a *social* one. The distinction between liberal and social collective skill formation has been used to distinguish between the Swiss and German cases, respectively (Emmenegger, Graf, and Strebel 2019). In the former case, employers dominate in the VET governance system while in the latter, unions play a more influential role. Thus, while we observe that the EAfA is a multi-actor constellation of public and private actor groups that resembles a collective skill formation system, it is a rather liberal version of such a collective system, as unions play a rather limited role. That is, the employers' camp is dominating. In addition, in the emergent European model, European public governance institutions are critical actors, not least as they help to steer and coordinated the overall policy processes linked to the EAfA.

In the next two sections, we present our case studies for Ireland and France. Each section begins with a short historical contextualisation of the respective VET system. Subsequently, we focus on presenting the results of our content analysis of the national commitments to the EAfA as well as the related local stakeholder pledges. This presentation is again structured by the key task areas in decentralised cooperation.

4.2. The Irish case and the important role of employers

The Irish skill formation system has traditionally been classified as a liberal model that offers little institutional support for apprenticeships (Vossiek 2018, 11, 42). Yet, since the 1980s there have been incremental changes that render the trajectory of the system more

complex. The creation of a Training Employment Authority in 1987 as a tripartite body governed by social partnership arrangements between trade unions and employers, as well as the introduction of the Standards-based Apprenticeships in 1993, as a statutory instrument to regulate the workplace learning, has shown a public commitment to the VET system as well as a growing involvement by firms. Such changes were signs of a gradual move towards a collective skill formation system (Ryan 2000; Vossiek 2018). This move recognised successes in matching supply and demand expressed through apprenticeship training until the global financial crisis of 2008 hit Ireland and compromised the continuation of the collective elements in the skill formation system. It is against this backdrop that the EAfA can be understood. After a review conducted in 2013 by the Minister for Education and Skills to determine whether the apprenticeship system should be ‘retained, adapted or replaced by an alternative model of vocational education and training’ (Department of Education and Skills 2013, 5), a major reform took shape to reform the Irish apprenticeship system. We contextualise this major reform alongside the role of the EAfA in shaping the direction of the Irish Apprenticeship system. For this, we next present our findings for the six core task areas in skill formation in the Irish case based on our document analysis.

At the *system development* level, two main bodies were created under the Further Education and Training Act 2013. In October 2013, the Training and Employment Authority was replaced by the Further Education and Skills Service (SOLAS) under the umbrella of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and constituted as a body to manage further education and training programmes in close relationship with Regional Skills Managers and National Education and Training Boards (IRE1). In the following year, the enterprise-led Apprenticeship Council was created as a way to expand the apprenticeship system into new sectors of the economy. It is constituted by representatives of businesses, trade unions, further and higher education bodies, and the Department of Education and Skills. As part of the larger reform, a strategic plan was set up as a way to increase the number of apprenticeships and apprentices as well as to conduct curricular and qualification changes (IRE2), followed by the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025 (IRE3).

Regarding *content definition*, the Irish apprenticeship reform is concerned with providing real and substantive career pathways for first-time learners and for people looking to reskill, while providing a base for income and a solid formulation for career progression (IRE2). The core features of apprenticeship in Ireland are that (a) apprenticeships may only be offered in a designated area of economic activity; (b) they must be employed under a formal written contract, be paid wages, and covered under social insurance arrangements; (c) employers must approve and register their apprenticeships with SOLAS; (d) they must have a minimum duration of 2 years and at least 50% of the learning must take place on-the-job; (e) an Apprenticeship Code of Practice sets rights and obligations of both employers and apprentices; and (f) all new apprenticeship programmes must be developed by industry-led consortia (IRE3).

With the new reform, one of the main innovations in the *organisation of the training provision* of the Irish apprenticeship system is the introduction of the consortia-led apprenticeships in 2016, in parallel to the traditional craft apprenticeships. While craft apprenticeships are developed through SOLAS as a coordinator that places advisory

structures with industry stakeholders, consortia-led apprenticeships are proposed by representatives of employers, employees, education and training providers, and public bodies to the Apprenticeship Council. The former has a duration of 4 years, wages are set centrally through industrial relations mechanisms and the state funds 'off-the-job' phases. The latter can range from 2 to 4 years, the employer determines wages, and each consortium is responsible to decide how education is delivered with no involvement of SOLAS (IRE2, IRE3).

Concerning *matching of demand and supply*, the Irish apprenticeship system recognised a significant expansion since 2013, which then only comprised 6000 apprentices. In 2015, the number of apprentices rose to 8,317, while in 2019 more than doubled with roughly 18,000 apprentices, majorly placed in craft apprenticeships. Created in 2016, consortia-led apprenticeships account for 55 new programmes, with 23 further programmes in development. The number of employers engaged with the apprenticeship systems has increased from 3,558 in 2015 to over 6,000 in 2020 (IRE3: 5). Such an increase in the supply and demand can also be attributed to the *Generation Apprenticeship*, a national campaign launched in 2017 to influence employers, parents, teachers, and potential apprentices to raise awareness to the apprenticeship system. Looking at the stakeholders' pledges from Ireland submitted to the EAfA, we find the composition of education and training providers ($n = 2$), unions ($n = 2$), non-profit /youth organisations ($n = 1$) and business – including both large ($n = 1$) and small ($n = 1$) companies. Looking at the partners associated to these pledges, government and governing bodies are the most represented ($n = 18$), followed by companies ($n = 15$), unions ($n = 10$), education and training providers ($n = 8$), representative bodies ($n = 6$), financial and philanthropic ($n = 1$), and international organisations ($n = 1$). The pledges by the local stakeholders thus point to the involvement and decentralised cooperation of multiple public and private actors related to the matching of demand and supply.

Regarding *funding*, the Irish apprenticeship system adopts a cost sharing concept between the state, employers, and apprentices. The National Training Fund delivers public funding for apprenticeships, with EUR 142 million allocated to the system in 2019 and EUR 169 million in 2020 (IRE3). Thus, craft apprenticeship wages, which are defined centrally, are paid by the employer while the government sponsors off-the-job training. In consortia-led apprenticeship, employers determine the wage rate in line with the sector and fund the off-the-job training period of the apprentices.

With respect to *monitoring, examination, and certification*, the Irish apprenticeship system is regulated by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Thus, crafts apprenticeships are at the NQF Level 6 and are quality assured by the national agency, namely Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). For its turn, the consortia-led apprenticeships can range from NFQ Level 5 to Level 9, which is decided by each consortium and the quality is assured by the QQI as well as by a range of providers and bodies involved in the consortium (IRE2, IRE3).

Overall, our analysis indicates that the reforms of Irish VET in the wake of the EAfA – as reflected in the national commitment and local stakeholder pledges – signify a substantial effort to integrate public and private actors into a decentralised governance system. In this context, industry and employers are framed as the most pivotal actor group within collective governance.

4.3. The French case and the important role of the state

In contrast to the Irish case, the institutionalisation of the French apprenticeship system is overall framed within the statist skill formation model, in which the state shows a high commitment to initial VET (Greiner 1988, 2005). Firm involvement is rather low in comparison to traditional systems of collective skill formation. Despite having long traditions dating back to the 18th century, the creation of the *Centres de formation d'apprentis* (CFA) in 1966 as training centres, and the decentralisation introduced in the French system through the regionalisation law in 1983 (loi Defferre) have contributed to make the French apprenticeship system less centralised. Notwithstanding the continuous efforts to improve the system and to bridge the gap between centralised state, regional governance structures and social partners in the last three decades, the gradual decentralisation of the French apprenticeship system is still mainly governed by either central or regional state structures (Lamanthe and Verdier 1999; Casella 2005; Bernhard 2017).

In the *system development* dimension, the French apprenticeship system recognised several incremental changes. Thus, the *Loi n. 2014-288 du 5 mars 2014*, reaffirmed the role of the *Régions* by increasing their funding, providing security in professional trajectories through the improvement of apprentices' social rights, enhancing the support led by the CFAs, and simplifying companies' administrative procedures. Furthermore, the *Loi n. 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016* conferred the right to any public institution to sign apprenticeship contracts, as in the private sector, and it expanded the list of private establishments that can receive apprenticeship tax. Finally, the *Loi n. 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018* introduced a major reform to adapt the system to the companies' needs, by simplifying mechanisms for training providers, apprentices, and companies and by facilitating the choice for training offers. Moreover, it created a new public national institution, *France compétences*, to improve the efficiency of professional training and apprenticeship training (FR1, FR3).

On matters of *content definition*, the French apprenticeship system developed apprentice training support and training activities for VET teachers (FR1). Related to *organisation of the training provision*, changes were made to easily combine periods of apprenticeship with periods of school training (developing an integrated training offer and encouraging access to mixed courses), to support companies and their recruitment efforts, and to strengthen the resources of apprentice training centers. Moreover, the apprentice status was introduced, while the state, the social partners, the *Régions*, and the consular chambers made a collective commitment to support the development of apprenticeships (e.g. through the analysis of needs and coordinated calls for project procedures) (FR1).

To better *match supply and demand*, measures were taken to increase the number of qualifications at Levels 4 and 5, since they experienced a slowdown, to adapt the training offers in accordance with the sectors of the future, and to increase the number of apprentices in the public sector (specifically, 60,000 apprentices at the first levels of qualification in local public education establishments and 10,000 apprentices in the state civil service). In 2018, the number of apprentices were 452,652, in comparison to 2014, when the number was a bit more than 400,000 (FR3). Moreover, to bridge the gap between supply and demand, steps were taken to create a national apprenticeship website

which lists all apprenticeship offers (FR1). Regarding the analysis of the composition of stakeholders' pledges, we find that education and training providers ($n = 8$) are the most represented bodies, followed by professional bodies and networks ($n = 5$), chambers of commerce ($n = 4$), unions ($n = 4$), business-large companies ($n = 3$), non-profit/youth organisation ($n = 1$), and research institutes/think tanks ($n = 1$). Looking in particular at the overall number of partners affiliated to the stakeholder's pledges, the most mentioned type of actors is education and training providers ($n = 48$), followed by governing bodies, including regional ones ($n = 16$), companies ($n = 14$), European partners ($n = 7$), business and companies' networks ($n = 7$), unions ($n = 6$), civil society associations ($n = 5$), companies HR departments ($n = 2$), chambers ($n = 1$), private associations ($n = 1$), and international organisation ($n = 1$). The high number and types of actors that have committed pledges to the EAfA regarding the governance task of demand and supply is indicative of a system of decentralised cooperation. However, in the French case, public stakeholders are more actively involved in the process, confirming the importance of the state in the governance of the French skill formation system.

Regarding measures related to *funding*, since 2014 EUR 200 million were granted in the form of emergency measures to complement the apprenticeship tax (i.e. funds derived from the training levy paid by companies) and to support the recruitment of apprentices in small and medium companies (less than 50 or 250 employees), while EUR 14 million were targeted to support the access to apprenticeships, for instance, in matters of accommodation and mobility. Furthermore, the method of calculating the apprenticeship tax and its collection system was simplified (FR1; FR2).

Finally, related to *monitoring, examination, and certification*, the new category of apprenticeship masters was registered in the national directory of professional certifications and steps were taken to improve the validation of certification of apprenticeships under the National Commission for Professional Certifications (FR1).

In sum, the analysis of the French national commitment to the EAfA and related stakeholder pledges suggests the emergence of a state-led collective skill formation system. That is, the emergent system builds on decentralised cooperation by multiple public and private stakeholders. However, the state – also as an employer and training provider – takes the lead in steering a collectively governed apprenticeship training system.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Looking at the EAfA, our paper has analysed recent developments around the European model of skill formation with a specific focus on apprenticeship schemes. Based on the established typology of skill formation systems, the concept of decentralised cooperation, and deductive qualitative content analysis of the relevant official documents related to the EAfA at multiple levels, we find that the model of skill formation envisaged for Europe resembles a collectivist one. However, certain adjustments are made to this collectivist model relative to traditional national systems of collective skill formation. This relates in particular to the steering role of European public governance institutions and the overall embeddedness of the EAfA in the European governance architecture, including consultation practices linked to the Open Method of Coordination. Furthermore, we found that the EAfA represents a rather liberal version of collective skill formation, given the

stronger role granted to employers' relative to employees' organisations. This is critical as a limited influence of unions in the governance of apprenticeships bears the risk that employers push mainly for firm-specific skills or exploit apprenticeships as cheap labour – unless this is compensated through strong state capacity (Thelen 2004). More generally, considering that policy makers both within national-level collective skill formation – especially in strongly federal states like Germany or Switzerland (Gonon 2010) – and within the European governance architecture face the challenge to develop workable modes of decentralised cooperation, further comparisons of polyarchic governance structures at the national and European levels may yield significant opportunities for policy learning.

Future research could also explore in detail the causal relationship between European and national governance levels. Our results for the Irish and French national commitments and stakeholder pledges to the EAfA indeed point towards a move towards a collective model of skill formation. That is, the national commitments, as well as related local stakeholder pledges, largely follow the core model described in the EAfA, strengthening a collectivist training model centred on apprenticeship training. This tendency towards the promotion of a more collective model is visible in all six task areas of cooperation but also considering the involvement of the typical public and private actors in decentralised cooperation. However, as we expected, due to path-dependencies, the national documents also show signs of hybridity because of the combination of newer collective elements with those of the more traditional national skill formation model. That is, we found elements of the respective traditional model of skill formation in the national commitments to the EAfA. More specifically, in the Irish case the commitment to the collectivist model is conditioned by the liberal model of skill formation. This relates to the dominant role granted to employers and industry in the Irish commitments as well as, relative to the French case, a more market-oriented approach to VET. In the French case, the traditional statist skill formation model features in the French commitments and pledges to the EAfA, for instance, regarding the prominent role for public agencies both in steering the apprenticeship training system and as training providers.

Further research is needed to extend the analysis to other related European policy initiatives to explore the extent to which this European model of collective skill formation can also be found in the overall portfolio of the EU's VET policies. Similarly, it would be possible to compare the EAfA in greater detail with prior European VET policies, some which have been associated with liberalisation tendencies (Cort 2010). While we find that the EAfA stands for a liberal version of collective skill formation, it nevertheless is promoting both economic *and* social goals, not least due to its emergence in the context of efforts to battle youth unemployment in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. It would also be fruitful to analyse other European participating countries to see whether these countries' relationship to the European alliance shows similarly hybrid patterns as the Irish and French cases – and whether this hybrid uptake in the long run leads to sustainable governance arrangements. In addition, it would be insightful to study how the EAfA and the involvement of countries and local stakeholders evolve over time, also considering changing policy priorities of the European Commission. Ongoing challenges

to match demand and supply in European youth labour markets will likely lead to further political support for the EAfA (Hubaut 2020) – not least in view of the Covid-19 pandemic implying yet another major shock to European labour markets.

Notes

1. Database of national commitments to the EAfA: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1149&langId=en> (last accessed 25 April 2022).
2. Abbreviations (Vossiek 2018): AUS = Australia; AUT = Austria; CAN = Canada; DK = Denmark; F = France; GER = Germany; IRE = Ireland; JAP = Japan; NL = Netherlands; NZL = New Zealand; SWE = Sweden; UK = United Kingdom; US = United States.

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