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► Comparative discussion on apprenticeships before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significantly increased U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) communication with apprenticeship sponsors, educational entities, and wider stakeholder groups. Apprenticeship programs adapted quickly to the pandemic by using web-based tools to provide online-related instruction and distance learning, which has now greatly expanded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, schools and training centres focused on the conditions at hand, how to open safely with new protocols, and how to comply with pandemic-related mandates. The situation remains fluid in the U.S. regarding ongoing fears of resurgence, new COVID-19 cases, and shifting protocols for education and training institutions in line with the state and local conditions and subsequent regulations.

In the past five years, the U.S. has undertaken a new effort to develop national occupational competency frameworks in conjunction with the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization. The U.S. has developed Competency-Based Occupational Frameworks for Registered Apprenticeships in approximately 30 occupations.

In regard to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the U.S. apprenticeship workforce, we will discuss the current status and trends of apprenticeships in the U.S. and then bring in the context of the massive changes that we have been going through in the past few months with the significant disruptions to the economy that COVID-19 has caused. USDOL has remained fully operational during this time, committed to fulfilling critical workforce needs and addressing the workforce-related impacts of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

An integral part of our job at USDOL's Office of Apprenticeship is to promote Equal Opportunity in Employment and this is particularly needed to increase opportunities for women, minorities, and underserved populations in lucrative skilled apprenticeships, where the average wage at completion in the U.S. is approximately USD 70,000 per year.¹

1 Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Data System (RAPIDS), Fiscal Year 2020 data.

Please note that U.S. apprentices have historically been much older than apprentices in Germany, starting apprenticeships in their mid-20s. While competency-based apprenticeships and hybrid approaches are becoming more popular in the U.S. over the past few years, the traditional time-based apprenticeships in construction are typically four-year programs or longer. Our theoretical instruction component is typically about four hours per week, which is about one-third of the German school-based instruction for apprentices, who are largely teenagers.

Since approximately 2014, the rapid growth in U.S. apprenticeships have increased the availability of cost-effective and high quality learning opportunities to hundreds of thousands of workers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, a tight labor market along with new government initiatives not only increased the number of apprenticeships but also extended the range of apprenticeship training well beyond construction occupations:

- ▶ Since the start of 2017, there have been more than 740,000 new registered apprentices and there are now more than 24,000 Registered Apprenticeship Programs across the nation.
- ▶ As of early 2020, more than 600,000 civilian and military workers were learning an occupation through registered apprenticeships, up from only 410,000 in 2014. Although the percentage of the population engaged in apprenticeship in the U.S. remains well behind Germany, the recent increases have raised hopes for a robust U.S. apprenticeship system. The House passed, with strong bipartisan support, the National Apprenticeship Act of 2021. With Senate approval pending, this would be the first reauthorization of the National Apprenticeship Act of 1937.
- ▶ The gains for the apprenticeship system are particularly notable for non-construction industries. Using data from the RAPIDS system that includes most states, we find non-construction industries have accounted for a rising share of new apprentices, increasing from 26 percent in 1999 to 41 percent in 2019.²
- ▶ During 2020 and 2021, USDOL's Office of Apprenticeship has and continues to make strategic investments to support the expansion of apprenticeships, strengthen the capacity of states and territories, create opportunities for youth to access pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships alike, and diversify apprenticeships in industries.

Apprenticeship trends in the U.S. since the COVID-19 pandemic

USDOL's Office of Apprenticeship has been fully operational and staff have been mostly teleworking since the COVID-19 pandemic started. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in sig-

2 RAPIDS and historical Office of Apprenticeship USDOL database files from federally supported U.S. states, 1999 through 2019.

nificantly increased communication with our apprenticeship sponsors, businesses, industry associations, labor unions, training centers, intermediaries, colleges, and schools. Through virtual methods, there has been much collaboration taking place with our sponsors and partners as we supported the apprenticeship system and determined how best to navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges.

From the U.S. experience:

1. Employers largely held onto their current apprentices, although that trend ranged from difficult to impossible for some industries like hotel and restaurants. The restaurant industry, for example, saw a 25–30 percent drop in number of registered apprentices in the first six months of 2020.³
2. Many apprenticeship programs adapted quickly and figured out how to use web-based tools and provide online-related instruction, to the extent feasible. Schools and training centers spent a significant amount of time evaluating to what degree that they were able to open safely with new protocols and to comply with pandemic-related mandates. To support this trend, the Office of Apprenticeship issued Circular 2021-01 (“Flexibilities Available for the Delivery of On-the-Job Learning and Related Instruction by Registered Apprenticeship Programs”) on 16 December 2020. In adapting to the current public health emergency, this guidance document encouraged registered apprenticeship program sponsors to consider the feasibility of utilizing electronic media as a vehicle for delivering safe, high quality related instruction (as well as the use of such media in connection with the delivery of on-the-job learning and in the assessment and evaluation of apprentice competencies, when and where practicable).
3. Many programs opted for online-related theoretical/technical instruction. Most employers, training centers, and schools adopted online strategies to the extent possible. This entailed more online learning for apprenticeships, increased blended learning with smaller class sizes and new safety protocols for in-person instruction. Those students and apprentices with little or no access to technology or the Internet were the most negatively affected.
4. Government agencies provided leeway and flexibility to businesses and educators collectively to keep apprentices attached to their programs. Many states and localities provided wider access to technology to assist those with limited or no access to technology or the Internet.

3 National Restaurant Association Education Foundation apprenticeship data 2020–2021. Note that as of this writing in 2021, the industry has rebounded and picked up much of those losses in apprenticeships from the initial drop in 2020.

U.S. apprenticeship data (for states managed by the Federal Government) show that the total number of apprentices remained flat-lined from our fiscal year-end numbers of 2019 (30 September 2019) to our mid-fiscal year numbers of 2020 (30 June 2020), which largely means that our active apprentice numbers were very similar to where they were nine months prior. New apprenticeship registrations, however, remained a fraction of what they were in the prior year. Apprenticeship training starts are largely dependent on economic conditions, which changed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We interpret the flat-line total number of apprentices experience during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. with two major assumptions:

1. U.S. employers tried their best to hold onto their apprentices, despite massive unemployment, the likes of which we have barely seen prior to COVID-19.
2. There were fewer U.S. employers willing to onboard new apprentices during these uncertain times, except for apprentices in critical industries.

These assumptions are consistent with our experience from the 2008-2010 economic downturn and how it affected apprenticeships actions in the U.S. Registration data trends during the initial COVID-19 job market disruption indicate that while new registrations slowed down, apprentice cancellations also declined. We interpret this to say that during major economic downturns employers generally try to keep their skilled workers in training, and the apprentices remain because they have fewer options for better jobs. Even during the period 2008-2010, cancellations declined, implying apprenticeship sponsors generally retained their apprentices. In stark contrast, new hires fell dramatically between 2008 and 2010.⁴ The situation remains rather fluid in the U.S., with continuing fears of resurgence, new COVID-19 cases, and shifting our protocols for education and training in line with the state and local conditions. This is best reflected in the many changes that educational institutions face as they prepare and gear up with the necessary protocols for the start of the new school year.

Increased use of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

Distance learning greatly expanded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted above, the Office of Apprenticeship issued Circular 2021-01 in December 2020, which reminded program sponsors that, under § 29.5(b)(4) of the Department's regulations, the use of distance learning for theoretical instruction in apprenticeship was permissible. Specifically, Circular 2021-01 highlighted the language contained in the foregoing regulation that "instruction in technical subjects may be accomplished through media such as classroom, occupational or industry courses, electronic media, or other instruction approved by the Registration Agency." The Department encouraged program sponsors to consider the use of

⁴ RAPIDS Office of Apprenticeship USDOL database files from federally supported U.S. states, 2008 through 2010.

such electronic media as a vehicle for delivering related instruction and on-the-job learning (when and where feasible) in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of our registered apprenticeship sponsors quickly pivoted towards online-related instruction where that was possible. Subsequently, there have been studies published to assist those sponsors and programs better prepare for distance learning, such as CPWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training’s *The Use of Distance Learning in Occupational Health and Safety Training: Assessing Effectiveness and Sustainability in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.⁵ The CPWR study compared safety training delivered in a face-to-face versus synchronous online format, measured the effectiveness of newly developed online COVID-19 trainings, and shared best practices and lessons learned for occupational health and safety training delivered in distance learning format.

USDOL remains adaptable to ever-changing situations with the COVID-19 pandemic. We have increased the use of our website – www.apprenticeship.gov – to provide as much information as possible for our program sponsors, apprentices, and partner organizations throughout the country.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this valuable bilateral discussion and sharing of experiences between Germany and the United States on apprenticeship and the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 PWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training, *The Use of Distance Learning in Occupational Health and Safety Training: Assessing Effectiveness and Sustainability in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, January 2021.