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ETUCE

European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

Long-term vision on education is a key for economic growth

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An ETUCE position on “A New Skills Agenda for Europe”

Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 11 October, 2016

Following the publication of a new policy package of the of European Commission under its Communication to the European Union institutions entitled [A New Skills Agenda for Europe- Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness](#), the ETUCE hereby would like to express the opinion of the education trade unions on the initiative. ETUCE represents 132 education trade unions in 45 countries whose view is that the professionals of the education sector are going to be strongly influenced during the implementation of the proposed actions of the initiative.

The purpose of our position is to urge the European Union institutions, especially the Education Council, which will adopt its Council Conclusions on its meeting on 21-22 November 2016, and the European Parliament, which is preparing its resolutions on this initiative, to consider the opinion of the education trade unions.

In our [previous position](#) sent to the European Commission, ETUCE underlined the importance of teachers and ensuring social dialogue with the education trade unions regarding improving skills provision.

Thus, **we strongly welcome** that the European Commission’s Communication puts emphasis on the role of teachers, underlining that:

- Increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession would stimulate talented young people and graduates to pursue their career;
- Quality and responsiveness of education and training and teaching standards should be equally high in Europe;
- More emphasis should be put on the recruitment and retention of teachers, their working conditions and professional development.

At the same time, we would like to underline some elements of the initiative which we strongly believe should be improved during the implementation process.

1. Long-term vision on education

We fully understand that the intention of DG Employment with the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* was to **find solutions to high unemployment**, mostly among young people, by focusing on skills provision. However, we believe that improving skills provision can only be one small step to fight high unemployment but what is most imperative is to achieve a more appropriate **environment for economic growth and sustainable quality jobs**.

We see, however, that the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* adds to the increasing trend of **short-term vision on the aim of education** which blames the education sector for skills mismatch and for not fulfilling the imminent needs of the labour market. We remind the EU institutions that preparing graduates for non-predictable jobs requires an impossible task from education if the focus remains limited to the short-term target of teaching students “for the labour market”.

We underline that **education is a fundamental human right** conceived to give the opportunity to all children, young persons and adults, regardless their socio-economic cultural background to enhance their chances for a good life, decent employment and participation in the democratic life of a country, and have a key role in fostering mutual understanding and respect for others. Therefore, by focusing narrowly on the short-sighted target of education **will undermine the future of the students.**

Additionally, CEDEFOP: [Matching skills and jobs in Europe](#) (2015) report proved that companies need to provide jobs with appropriate salary and working conditions via fair recruitment in order to find the right candidate for the job and avoid “skills mismatch”. The statement of Communication that two thirds of the graduates do not enter the labour market because they lack skills, indicates that the focus lies on the immediate needs of companies rather than on **strengthening the responsibility of education in society**. ETUCE member organisations do not agree with this principle.

Therefore, the initiative’s foreseen proposals on **graduate tracking** should also investigate the companies’ offers for graduates. Indeed, graduate tracking is important to receive information about the students, but it should **not be used to evaluate individual institutions** with a view to determine performance-based funding to the university. Graduate tracking should not narrow the labour market perspectives for graduates. It is essential to have a **broad view on education** so that professionals can be tracked among wider professional opportunities, e.g. when a historian is employed as project officer of a company. It is high time that companies understand the learning outcomes of graduates and that graduates **from arts** can perfectly well contribute with their soft skills and competences to the work of any sectoral company. Furthermore, in their own interest of maintaining a skilled and competent workforce, companies should have a long-term vision of graduates and invest in their continuous upskilling.

Graduate tracking should also help universities to set up a system for tracking graduates with a view to inform them about quality employment offers suitable for their high qualification level.

We welcome that the European Commission proposes to deal in future with the highly important issue of **brain drain**. We believe that this is more related to the imbalances of the job market between countries than to skills provision. The mobility of students, graduates and researchers must be ensured and their forced movement due to the national economic environment should be avoided.

We would like to remind that the Commission's new initiative should also have proposed solutions on how to remove obstacles that are in the way of **quality teaching** with a view to further improve the work of teachers and trainers in Europe and for better skills' development. ETUCE member organisations have identified several **national challenges that teachers and trainers** in all education sectors face day by day. These challenges obviously derived from the fact that teacher education was affected by the economic and financial crisis¹.

2. The role of social dialogue with education trade unions

We welcome that the role of **social partners** is highlighted in working with the European Commission and governments at national level on the suggested objectives of the *Skills Agenda*. However, we strongly believe that such an important initiative as the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* should have been better communicated and consulted with relevant actors to ensure their engagement in its implementation, such as the governments and the social partners at national and regional levels, among them especially the social partners in the education sector.

We disagree with the fact that **social dialogue** as the framework for the involvement of the social partners in the design and execution of implementation plans and actions is not mentioned in the policy package. While effective social dialogue remains the key for the development of successful education reforms, unfortunately, several education trade unions reported that they have not been consulted on key education reforms linked to the implementation of the ET2020 goals. We suggest that the Education Council and the European Parliament pay more attention to the importance of social dialogue.

The governments should **enhance social dialogue** with the unions of professionals working in the education sector to improve not only the provision of skills but education and training is general. Therefore, we urge the European Union institutions, especially the European Parliament and the Education Council to **put special emphasis on effective social dialogue** in national actions regarding the implementation of the *New Skills Agenda for Europe*.

3. Importance of investment in education

ETUCE shares the belief of the European Commission that education is one of the main drivers for **Europe's economic and social and civic development**, and to tackle growing inequalities across Europe. It is recognised that inequalities are detrimental to growth, and that the only way to tackle their intergenerational transmission is to invest in equitable,

¹ ETUCE ACTION AND CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK ON THE ECONOMIC CRISIS 2012 Analysis of the mini survey: http://etuce.homestead.com/crisis/crisis_survey/minisurvey_-_etuce_action_and_campaign_framework_on_the_economic_crisis_final_29.3.12.pdf.

ETUCE Analysis of a mini-survey on the impact of the economic crisis on teacher education in the European Union, 2012

http://etuce.homestead.com/Crisis/Crisis_survey/Results_of_ETUCE_Minisurvey_on_Crisis_effecting_teacher_education_.pdf.

ETUCE SURVEY: The continued impact of the crisis on teachers in Europe, 2013

http://etuce.homestead.com/Policies/6.e.EN_Survey_Analysis_CONTINUED_IMPACT_OF_THE_CRISIS_ON_TEACHERS_IN_EUROPE_2_-Layouted.pdf.

public, high-quality education for all. It is urgent that public investment in education be excluded from the calculation of deficit and debt levels within the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact to reach the goals of intergenerational fairness and economic growth.

ETUCE acknowledges that the initiative emphasises investment in public education and training including lifelong learning, in particular in adult learning. However, **public investment** should be sustainable and predictable, and the use of market/financial products, for example through the European Fund for Strategic Investment (***Investment Plan for Europe***), should be avoided in public education and training. After several years of continuously demanding EU Member states to reduce public debt to accomplish fiscal consolidation, it is a fact that the education sector as a whole in Europe is currently under strain due to **unprecedented cuts** in public funding. The EU member states at risk of breaching the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact are pressured to provide incentives for private investments (e.g. public-private partnerships), for performance-based funding, and for enhancing business-education partnerships in all sectors of education, resulting in **increasing privatisation of** potentially profitable education services, thus jeopardising free access to quality education for all².

Education authorities and education institutions should emphasise that private market opportunities are not compatible with quality public education. They should critically assess the benefits and drawbacks of public-private partnerships and ensure that the education system does not fall prey to lobbying interests in an extremely competitive new segment for the private market. Public-private partnerships did not raise management standards and proved to be even more costly for public finances in the longer term. Therefore, even from an economic perspective, **education must be publicly funded and regulated**.

ETUCE asks the EU institutions to encourage governments in relation to the new initiative to take all necessary measures to ensure sufficient revenue for the investment in education with a view to guarantee the provision of **high quality public education for all**, including investment in teachers' training and adult learning. This includes by diverting incentives, subsidies and other forms of corporate welfare to public services, such as education, by fighting tax evasion, avoidance and tax fraud, as well as by increasing transparency and cooperation between various national tax administrations.

Governments and public authorities, in cooperation with social partners should take a holistic view on investment in education, and oversee the design and impact of the education budget with a view to guarantee that resources meet the most marginalised and those coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, often of migrant origin. Equity and equality must be the hallmark of education quality. ETUCE recalls that the **investment capacity of today's public education will also determine the quality of jobs now and in the future**, qualification of workers, social well-being and democratic participation in society of citizens. Thus it potentially has a significant impact on the economic growth in Europe and on the vital reduction of social inequalities.

We note that positive long-term effects of **good quality early childhood education** is indeed significant for people's future ability and motivation to learn. However, several member

² See [ETUCE Position on Investment Plan for Europe, December 2014](#)

states suffer from increasing privatisation and the introduction or increase of fees for children to attend early childhood education. Actions following the European Commission's initiative should pay special attention to this problem.

Additionally, we are concerned that the lack of **dedicated EU funds for the implementation** of the proposals of the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* will be an important obstacle for actions that national actors, such as governments, social partners, schools are encouraged to carry out.

4. Business-education partnership

In our previous position we underlined that **partnership** between the vocational education and training sector (VET) and companies is an important element from the perspective of **apprenticeship and work-based learning**. Concerning VET, ETUCE has been one of the pledging organisations to support the [European Alliance for Apprenticeship](#), because we support improving the quality of apprenticeship in Europe and involvement of VET teachers and VET school-based trainers into company-based teachers' training.

Companies should support the improvement of students' skills and respect the schools' curricula without overruling it via the apprenticeship. Companies have an important role in providing apprenticeship places and in cooperating with schools and universities in preparing professionals under the condition that **ministries and national social partners keep the full responsibility for the curricula and ownership of the VET schools**.

However, we do not accept the suggestion of the European Commission on boosting "*business-education partnerships, involving all sectors and levels of education and training*". ETUCE and its member organisations request the European Union's institutions to be cautious on this idea as **companies' involvement in every sector of education** will have an impact, among others, on the societal aim of education, sustainable financing, and the autonomy of higher education institutions. Thus, we demand to respect the **autonomy of the education sector** from the constantly changing business sector.

More influence of businesses in education would affect the autonomy of schools and teachers and have a negative impact on **sufficient, predictable and sustainable investment** in the sector. The involvement of businesses in education should not lead in any way to **privatisation and/or commercialisation of education services**.

Consequently, we ask the European Union's institutions to continue advocating for sustainable public support for public education.

5. Supporting equal access to education

We welcome the suggestion of the policy package to focus more on the recognition of refugees' skills. However, we urge the EU institutions to propose more imminent solutions for **equal access to migrants and refugees to the education and labour market**.

We ask the European Union's institutions to establish **more effective sustainable and quality educational support** for young and adult migrants and refugees via the improved

focus on training and recruitment of teachers in all education sectors. To achieve this, **financial investment** is necessary, among others, to recruit teachers, to involve retired teachers in teaching migrants and refugees, and to recognise the qualifications of migrant and refugee teachers.

The European Union's institutions should also provide solutions and support actions to decrease the **high number of NEETs, early school leavers, socio-economically disadvantaged young and adult learners**, including those who are excluded on grounds such as ethnic origin, gender, nationality, age, religious belief, disability, sexual orientation, and how to help schools and teachers with achieving this goal.

6. Revision of the European Qualifications Framework

We do not agree with using the **European Qualifications Framework** as a political tool. The involvement of education trade unions in the design of National Qualification Frameworks is still to be improved in order to achieve that the EQF remains a voluntary tool for better comparison and transparency of the education systems. As the subsidiarity principle of the EU applies to education, ETUCE underlines that further developments of EQF should not go beyond this principle. We urge the European Union's institutions to **avoid harmonising** contents related to the use of EQF and to potentially creating *Common Training Frameworks (related to Directive 2005/36/EC)* but rather define general competences and required skills with the involvement of the social partners.

The Commission's proposal for the revision of the European Qualifications Framework foresees **registering all national quality assurance agencies** under the EU umbrella. ETUCE member organisations are concerned about this requirement and strongly urge the European Commission to avoid controlling national quality assurance systems and to impose requirements on national education systems.

Education trade unions can provide a highly valuable contribution in the foreseen revision of the **Key Competences Framework** proposed in the policy package. However, we regret that the European Commission sees the review of the Key Competences Framework, which is the basis of the **European Qualifications Framework**, from the perspective of strengthening the business and entrepreneurial mindset of people. ETUCE, therefore, urges the European Commission to involve the education trade unions in the revision of the **Key Competences Framework** and to **therein especially emphasise arts and creativity**, which education trade unions report to be diminishing in national curricula.

Furthermore, ETUCE member organizations reported that teaching staff in different education sectors have not received **training on teaching learning outcomes** and how to integrate them in curricula. We urge the EU institutions to **invest and support professional development of teachers** of all education sectors.

At present, the policy package includes many discrepancies on the revision of the European Qualifications Framework, for example the change of the principles of learning outcomes and the change of the wording **"competences" to "attitude and responsibility"** while *Key "Competences" Framework* is to continue to exist. We underline that competences are not

equal to responsibility, as the first can be taught while the latter can be obtained following experience in the workplace.

7. Governance

While the intention of DG Employment with the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* was to focus on the provision of skills from an employability perspective, we strongly believe that the initiative should be part of the ET2020 Strategy, the process run by DG Education and Culture, and it should be better related to the implementation of the Paris Declaration.

Furthermore, we understand that the foreseen Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, announced as part of the *New Skills Agenda for Europe*, will be launched in December 2016 and organised by DG CONNECT. While we believe that more emphasis should be put on improving digital skills and competences of students and teachers, we are concerned about the lack of comprehensive skills approach and governance of the EU's skills strategy for which different Directorate-Generals of the European Commission are in charge. Additionally, other DGs are also involved in the work on proposals of the *New Skills Agenda for Europe*.

Therefore, we ask the Education Council and the European Parliament to urge the European Commission to:

1. Follow a comprehensive governance on skills focusing on coordinated actions under the lead of DG EAC and supported by DG EMPL;
2. Support with appropriate EU funding the implementation mechanism of the proposals within the *New Skills Agenda for Europe* that, are agreed with social partners, including the social partners in the education sector;
3. Contribute to improving the provision of skills by supporting national actions in the framework of effective national/regional social dialogue.

On these views and further actions related to the initiative we ask the European Commission and other EU institutions for further discussion with ETUCE and its member organisations.