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“Skills development must respect holistic education”

ETUCE position on the European Skills Agenda

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 12 October, 2020

The European Commission published a new package of policy initiatives on 1 July, 2020 which includes the following documents:

- [Communication on a "European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience"](#)
- a [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\)](#)
- a [Communication](#) and [proposal for a Council Recommendation](#) on Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation

The below position is a response to the European Commission's initiatives demanding, among many other issues, to ensure the holistic nature of education, effective teacher support with fair working conditions and quality professional training in the green and digital transitions of education, and the respect of academic freedom in the higher education and research sectors.

According to the European Commission, the Communication on *European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (Skills Agenda)* sets out policy priorities and actions aimed at training more people, more often, and in the skills needed for a job, notably to master the green and digital transitions. The Skills Agenda proposes 12 initiatives, such as: A Pact for Skills; Strengthening skills intelligence; EU support for strategic national upskilling action; Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience; Rolling out the European Universities Initiative and upskilling scientists; Skills to support the twin transitions; Increasing STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills; Skills for life; Initiative on individual learning accounts; A European approach to micro-credentials; New Europass platform; Improving the enabling framework to unlock Member States' and private investments in skills.

Within the policy package the Skills Agenda introduces the following indicators to be reached by 2025: (1) Participation of adults aged 25-64 in learning during the last 12 months (50%); (2) Participation of low-qualified adults 25-64 in learning during the last 12 months (30%); Share of unemployed adults aged 25-64 with a recent learning experience (20%); Share of adults aged 16-74 having at least basic digital skills (70%). The proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET proposed additional targets such as: (1) the share of employed

graduates should be at least 82%; (2) 60% of recent graduates from VET benefit from exposure to work-based learning during their VET; (3) 8% of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad.

The following ETUCE position is a response to the policy package on behalf of 131 education trade unions in Europe.

1. ETUCE welcomes that the new initiatives were developed under the umbrella of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and that the motto of the European Skills Agenda initiative is the first principle of the pillar: *“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”* The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on teachers and education systems across Europe and it is essential now more than ever to ensure the right for all students to access high quality and inclusive education which help students to prepare for social life and jobs. After three years of the endorsement of the Social Pillar it is high time to require reports from the EU member states on the implementation of national action plans on making the Social Pillar real in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nation (UN).
2. **Education is a human right and a public good.** The policy package tries to find arguments for an enhanced focus on the **“right skills”** needed by the labour market to reduce the unemployment rate. We remind that education, including VET, should not aim only at the always changing labour market. Instead, the European Commission should put more emphasis on the second part of the Social Pillar on preparing the students for participating fully in the society and the importance of a holistic education. Recent social and political developments have shown that the increased focus on labour market demands has led to a widespread lack of other skills needed to become democratic and proactive citizens. Education about **social and democratic values and citizenship including freedom, tolerance, intercultural dialogue, equality and the fight against discrimination and radicalisation** need to be put into the focus especially in the social and economic crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon Europe.
3. Therefore, we ask the European Commission to encourage the member states to make further steps to implement the updated **Key Competence Framework (2018)**¹ valuing equally each of the 8 competence groups within. Also, member states should continue taking steps to implement the [Paris declaration of 2015 of education ministers](#) which was adopted following the terror attacks in Europe and which need to be taken into consideration in each education sector, in particular where practical and professional skills tend to overtake holistic skills and competence development, for example in VET.

¹ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604%2801%29>

4. The Skills Agenda's focus on STEM skills should be extended to **STEAM skills** (science, technology, engineering, *arts* and maths) in each education sector, in particular in VET, given equal value to arts as to other skills. **Shortage of teachers** in STEAM education need to be tackled by making the profession more attractive.
5. While the policy package focuses on skills development within the **green and digital transformation of education** and the labour market, we regret that it does not put enough emphasis on supporting teachers. We highlighted in our [ETUCE Statement on tackling the COVID-19 crisis](#) (April 2020) and the [Joint ETUCE-OBESSU-EPA Statement on COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (May 2020) how teachers have been playing an essential role in ensuring that education continued during the school lock downs in the COVID- 19 crisis. They did this under extraordinary circumstances, thanks to their tremendous adaptation effort, and often to the detriment of their own health, safety, and well-being. **Active support to teachers and trainers** should be an important message of the policy package to ensure that teachers in VET and higher education are also well prepared and upskilled to the digital and green transformation of schools and institutions and they are well trained on key competences related to their subject area and transversally. **Effective social dialogue** with the education trade unions and the reinforcement of collective bargaining are essential prerequisites to guarantee adequate salaries, pensions and good working conditions match the increased demands for quality learning and for an **attractive and rewarding teaching profession**. We remind that investing in the teaching profession means investment in quality education and in the well-being of all citizens.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled the gaps in equity and the growing inequalities in access and provision of quality education and training, resulting from long-term underinvestment in education. Unequal access to digital devices and broadband were particular challenges when schools had to close but were endeavouring to ensure continuity of learning. These have an impact to a great extent on each education sectors from early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education and VET up until higher education and research. As Europe is experiencing record drops in its Gross Domestic Product and it is moving towards a new deep recession, ETUCE calls on the European Commission to firmly take action to reach the goals of the policy package on the need to **rebuild public education investment**. A repetition of the failed austerity measures that followed the last economic crisis must be avoided by all means as well as any form of public and private finance mix that opens the way to lobbying and/or for-profit interests in EU education systems. Education systems as a whole, and in particular the VET and higher education sectors, should remain **publicly funded and governed** for the benefits of those working in the sectors, students, and society. Free public education systems are also crucial to support women workers with children, lone parents and disabled children that privatisation of education activities often exclude.
7. Developing **green skills and competences** needs to be linked to social and environmental responsibility and to creating a green school culture. This would change the traditional way of how schools and institutions are run and enforce **democratic school management and collaborative leaderships** between school leaders, teachers,

students and parents. We remind that integration of environmental and climate considerations in the education system should be achieved via effective social dialogue with teachers, academics, researchers, and other education personnel. Thus, it is important to involve the education social partners in realising the initiative of the Skills Agenda on *“Helping to integrate environmental and climate considerations into school, higher education, vocational education and training, as well as professional training”*, on *“Developing a European competence framework on education for climate change, environmental issues, clean energy transition and sustainable development, which will spell out the different levels of green competence”*, and on *“Agreeing with Member States a set of indicators to allow monitoring and statistical analysis of developments in green skills”*. Education trade unions need to be involved in the **design and implementation of reforms on the green transition of schools** and on defining **necessary skills and competences for teachers and trainers** to be acquired within initial and continuous professional development in relation to the green transition. VET teachers and trainers would need provision of adequate professional support and up-to-date **teaching materials, tools and practices**.

8. Suggestion for a Digital Education Action Plan should consider that the current changes introduced in the digital era affect the education sector to a large extent. As the recent COVID-19 crisis clearly showcases, **digital education**, and the use of new technologies in the educational context remain **unequally accessible** to teachers, other education personnel and students alike. They are however increasingly prevalent in our society, and the implications are multi-fold: at a time when citizens need to be able to master a certain level of digital skills to actively take part in the world of work and to actively engage in their communities, they must be educated in the use of new technologies, its benefits and its dangers. This entails that teachers and other education personnel are **adequately trained** to use new technologies, in order to successfully integrate them into the curricula. At the same time, the use of technologies in the workplace creates modifications of working conditions and education personnel must be protected from adverse effects. Education trade unions should have an active role in **defining digital strategies for education** within effective social dialogue.
9. The policy package focuses on the modernisation of VET and apprenticeship and on digital and green transformations within this sector. Concerning the idea of setting up a **“European Core Profile in VET”**, we remind the European Commission that VET is a national competence. The national governance and educational management supported by social dialogue with the relevant industry and education social partners should be respected. Social partners including the education trade unions should have an active role in **updating VET curricula of different professions** and in defining or updating teaching and training materials both for VET learners as well as the VET teachers and trainers. Social partners, including the education sector ones, need to be involved in **research and data collection on present and future skills needs** and skills development (“skills intelligence”) in order to define future VET objectives.
10. The Skills agenda presents very ambitious plans on VET and apprenticeship saying that: *“Implementing VET and apprenticeships reforms, which may include investments in curricula reforms for increased labour market relevance, mainstreaming of green and*

digital skills, flexibility and modularisation, expansion of higher VET programmes, setting up quality assurance and graduate tracking systems, training of teachers and trainers in VET, supporting mobility of VET learners, teachers and trainers and setting up Centres of Vocational Excellence linked to smart specialisation strategies and/or regional innovation and growth strategies.” However, it is important to underline that the VET education institutions suffered the most in the COVID-19 crisis while VET is the least attractive education sector for students and parents. As VET is still considered a second chance education in many countries, we are concerned that the biggest number of **student drop-outs** happened during the pandemic from VET schools and apprenticeships because practical learning could not, or only with difficulty, continue remotely. Moreover, remote learning also put the full responsibility of learning on the individual, while at the same time only little or none of the usual motivation deriving from the exchange with classmates was provided. This is why it is vital to improve the quality and attractiveness of **VET and apprenticeships to be fully inclusive and accessible** for students of any skills levels and to the socio-economically disadvantaged, to migrants and refugees, minorities, the Roma, and the disabled. VET reforms and curricula developments should focus on **quality and inclusiveness**. The announced **Pact on Migration and Asylum** should not only support high-skilled migrants and refugees but provide equal treatment to all, and ensure quality education for migrant and refugee children.

11. The impact of the pandemic has been especially hard on female employees, particularly the teachers – a profession carried out mostly by female workers in Europe – as they experienced the double burden of having to combine at the same time caring and household responsibilities with working from home. In the digital and green transition of education systems **female teachers** require individual assistance schemes to access skills development programmes which respect their work-life balance. The Skills Agenda should also take into account gender equality in accessing skills and skills needs of different age groups. It is also important to make further steps towards achieving **gender equality** attracting female students to STEM subjects and in pursuing certain VET studies which lead to traditionally male or female dominated professions, as gender segregation is much stronger in vocational than in any other education sectors in [almost all EU countries](#).
12. Projects of VET schools supported by the Erasmus + programme to create “**Centres of Vocational Excellence**” should focus on these abovementioned objectives of linking quality and inclusiveness. The Skills Agenda, however, links the purposes of the Centres of Vocational Excellence projects too narrowly to digitalisation and innovation only, also as regards the **upskilling of teachers**. In addition, supporting countries to participate in **Euroskills** competitions should enhance the quality and inclusiveness of VET studies for everyone and not focus only on the few chosen learners and their teachers / trainers who participate in the skills competitions. Skills competitions should be more inclusive and they should contribute to increase the level of quality of the **initial and continuous professional training of VET teachers and to ensure attractive salaries and working conditions** for them. We underline that all VET trainers should have an appropriate pedagogical qualification.

13. Concerning flexibility and modularisation, we remind that cutting up full qualifications to units and introducing micro-credentials in formal VET and higher education needs to be dealt with caution. **Respecting full qualifications** and **holistic education** in each education sector is fundamental. We have already expressed our concerns that defining curricula based on the **employability rate of graduates** endangers the holistic approach of education². Modularising education and replacing qualifications/diplomas with **micro-credentials**³ does not guarantee good preparation of the student for life and the labour market. Instead they often provide students with low quality education and leaving certificates, which do not match the professional qualifications described in collective agreements and cannot therefore be adequately rewarded and eventually push the students into low paid jobs and further social and economic exclusion. The European Commission's focus on micro-credentials and tracking of VET and higher education graduates' employability should respect academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of universities.
14. High political focus in the recent years on **apprenticeships** had an impact on VET teachers from whom many are responsible for maintaining contact with company-based trainers, for organising company placements for their students, and for participating in students' assessment in companies. It is necessary to ensure that continuous professional development of VET teachers can take place in companies to update their knowledge⁴. In the [Communication](#) and the [proposal for a Council Recommendation](#) on Youth Employment Support, the European Commission proposes to renew and give a fresh impetus to the **European Alliance for Apprenticeship**. One of the actions proposed concerns mobilising local and regional authorities to motivate local businesses to open apprenticeship places. This will be indeed helpful for VET teachers who struggle with obtaining company based training for their students. However, increasing apprenticeship placements within companies following the pandemic comes with the risk that **apprentices can be seen as cheap labour** replacing workers. To avoid this the European Commission should encourage collaborative apprenticeships among companies and enhance **quality assurance** of apprenticeships with the involvement of industry and education trade unions. Furthermore, governments should fully implement the [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#) (2018) to ensure fair pay and working conditions to the apprentices, and to support VET teachers and trainers: *"Teachers, trainers and mentors, especially in micro-, small and medium-sized companies, should be supported to update their skills, knowledge and competences in order to train apprentices according to the latest teaching and training methods and labour market needs."* Therefore, we welcome the European Commission's suggestion to enhance **social dialogue** in improving apprenticeship systems. Concerning further

² Joint ETUC - ETUCE Position on a European-level graduate tracking system of VET learners and tertiary education students (July 2020) <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/resources/statements/3905-joint-etuc-etuce-position-on-a-european-level-graduate-tracking-system-of-vet-learners-and-tertiary-education-students-july-2020>

³ Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position on Micro-credentials in VET and tertiary education (July 2020) <https://www.csee-etuce.org/en/resources/statements/3908-joint-etuc-etuce-position-on-micro-credentials-in-vet-and-tertiary-education-june-2020>

⁴ [ETUCE Policy Paper on Vocational Education and Training in Europe, 2012](#)

motivating European sectoral social dialogue committees to focus on apprenticeship, we remind that ETUCE was the first European level trade union organisation which signed a pledge to the European Alliance for Apprenticeship in 2013, the **European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education** agreed on a joint pledge in 2015, and since then the education social partners have been working on apprenticeship issues in line with their [agreed work programme](#).

15. We welcome that the Skills Agenda acknowledges the important role of higher education for the society and students saying that: *“Higher education is an essential vehicle to provide students with the skills they need in the future. Universities generate the advanced knowledge and skills that help society innovate to address its big challenges. They are empowering people with high-level skills that allow them to boost their professional, social and personal development.”* However, we experience that in recent years, the reduction of core **public funding in higher education and research** has had a major impact on increasing the number of part-time and short-term contracts of higher education and research staff, multiplying inequalities and deteriorating working conditions. Budget cuts happened many times in line with policies requiring universities to fulfil labour market needs, shorten the curricula, introduce lifelong learning, and seek the necessary funding from companies. According to a European Commission report⁵, several countries recently adopted reforms which extend the possibilities for performance-related pay of academics, making this kind of remuneration possible in virtually all European higher education systems. The same report says that there are high disparities regarding the contractual arrangements of academic staff across Europe. For example, in countries like France, Malta and Turkey, 80% or more academics have a permanent contract, while only 30 % or fewer academics have permanent contracts in Germany, Estonia, Austria, Finland and Serbia. Academics across Europe face **decreasing job security**, due to budget constraints, reduced employment opportunities, and an increasing proportion of staff in externally funded positions. We regret that the Skills Agenda does not provide solution on how to better ensure appropriate working environments and contractual situations for academics.

16. In addition, the core principles of higher education and research, **academic freedom** and professional autonomy are not respected in many countries. Many academics have subjected themselves to self-censorship at work for fear of negative repercussions, such as loss of benefits and career prospects⁶. Precarity affects high education and research staff all across Europe. Education ministers of the EU should urgently solve this problem through effective and meaningful social dialogue and regular consultations with the education trade unions. This is essential in order to find more synergies between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) which the Skills Agenda announced.

⁵ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017): Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff – 2017. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁶ Scholars at Risk (2019): *Free to Think 2019*, Scholars at Risk: New York, pp. 25-30

17. We remind that the COVID-19 crisis had a huge and negative impact on admission, attendance, social role and investment of universities. Quality and inclusive higher education need to be ensured for all students regardless of their age, nationality or social-economic background. We are strongly against marketising higher education and research. We remind that **sustainable public investment in higher education and research** needs to be ensured via the European Semester to make education and research fully inclusive and accessible and to guarantee a **supportive working environment for academics and researchers**. We regret that instead of solving problems that universities and research institutions face, the Skills Agenda suggests to member states to enhance more **business influence in higher education**, reduce the aim of higher education to narrowly serve labour market needs, diminish institutional autonomy and academic freedom by harmonising degrees, and by regulating researchers' professional competences. We remind about the agreed goals of the Paris Communiqué: *“Academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education form the backbone of the EHEA. Having seen these fundamental values challenged in recent years in some of our countries, we strongly commit to promoting and protecting them in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation.”* We strongly believe that these commitments cannot be fulfilled in relation to the Skills Agenda's suggestion which commercialises higher education studies saying that: *“Bring academia and industry together by testing a new Talents-On-Demand knowledge exchange to meet companies' research and innovation needs, complementing university-business collaboration.”*
18. The European Commission announced the **“European Universities”** initiative in order to motivate universities to establish networks among others to create joint degrees and enhance mobility of learners in 2018. We have commented⁷ that these networks should be created while ensuring **inclusiveness and diversity** of the networks concerning the involved institutions and the students. The university alliance projects should **respect national and institutional competence in higher education** and not be mandated to *“set standards for the transformation of higher education institutions”* as proposed by the Skills Agenda. The projects should support recognition of studies and setting up joint programmes and respect national competence on higher education, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. We do not agree that the European Commission plans to push the university alliances to *“deepen the cooperation with economic actors”* as **public-private partnerships and marketisation** are dangerous towards protecting free knowledge creation of the universities.
19. The European Commission's plan to set up a **European Degree, a European University Statute and a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System** is a clear move towards synchronisation of higher education studies. As higher education is a national competence, we demand that these ideas be discussed with the respective ministries of education and education trade unions and national and institutional competence on

⁷ [Teachers have an essential role in “Building a stronger Europe”](#) - ETUCE Reaction Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 8-9 October, 2018

higher education are respected. It is important that the development of education and skills/competence is primarily considered between the education systems. The European Commission should carry out a fully-fledged research and impact assessment on these proposals. We indeed wonder what the quality criteria should be and how they would be established in order to set up a **European Degree and “European University Statute” of universities individually or jointly**. We request that academic freedom and supportive working conditions to academics be a **quality criteria** and involve education trade unions in defining these criteria and evaluating the applicant institutions. We remind that **quality assurance and accreditation procedures** should be also respected as national competence and the European Commission should refrain from harmonising quality assurance at European level.

20. We recall the European Commission’s Communication on “A renewed EU agenda for higher education” (COM/2017/0247) which underlined that research need to be a platform of “international circulation of ideas” and encouraged researchers to perform teaching tasks. We underline that national and institutional level competence frameworks and research training programmes should be more accessible to researchers to provide them **flexible pathways in academic and non-academic careers**. In order to support their career development, initial and continuous training need to be seen from a holistic perspective. PhD students and early career researchers should be equipped to receive trainings on how to prepare for a research work within the university and in the broader labour market if they wish so. While the European Commission addresses the need for competence, skills, and training of researchers towards open science, it should also consider how to foster comprehensive researcher’s career development in line with ensuring better contractual status and working conditions for them.
21. We are concerned that the proposals of the European Commission on setting up a **European Competence Framework for Researchers, Taxonomy of Skills for Researchers, and developing curricula for researchers** on open science and science management and their possible impact on research staff. The European level competence framework could be too restrictive and may undermine existing national and institutional frameworks and agreements, including on academic freedom and researchers’ career development. While guidance to researchers’ skills and competence development is indeed necessary, competition among research institutions increases the need of researchers to develop further skills. We believe that the Commission’s attempt may result in harmonising the skills needs of researchers at a minimum level and in classifying the skills requirements at a low level. Firstly, we request that the European Commission respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom, including the UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel of 1997⁸ and Art. 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, “*The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected.*”⁹ Secondly, the work of researchers should be seen

⁸ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12012P/TXT>

through a more holistic perspective rather than simply a narrow skills agenda. Thirdly, standards and professional requirements for researchers are subject to national legislation and assessments of researchers' work need to be in line with collective agreements. At institutional and national level this should part of ongoing debates and initiatives to improve doctoral training and researchers' careers in a lifelong perspective.

22. Trade unions of researchers are committed to open science but they worry that researchers who work for companies need to respect business secrecy while researchers committed to **open science** need to communicate their research outcomes, which is a conflict of interest when researchers move between public and private sectors. We also request that the European Commission consider the discrepancy in the financial possibilities of big companies and SMEs in research and development as well as different employment opportunities that companies can offer to researchers. We would like to raise the problem that opening career pathways to researchers in the private sector must align with ensuring their fair recruitment, decent working conditions and salary, and permanent contractual status, which today is missing in many private and public research institutions.
23. Finally, we underline that recruitment and retention of researchers and skills development of researchers within public and private sectors fall under the expertise of education trade unions and further European Commission work in relation to the researchers should be consulted with their trade unions.