

## “New Skills Agenda”: Improving training opportunities for workers in Europe (ETUC position)

Adopted at the Meeting of the executive committee on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016

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The European Commission is preparing “A New Skills Agenda for Europe”. The main priorities of this initiative, to be launched in May 2016, are ensuring higher and more relevant skills for all; promoting better visibility and use of available skills; and reaching a better understanding of skills needs and trends in the labour market.

The Commission consulted the ETUC and its affiliated organisations in December 2015 and in January 2016 during specific hearings of the social partners. The ETUC Secretariat has built the following position with the active participation of the members of the ETUC’s Education and Training Committee, and after several consultations with national affiliates and European-level sectoral federations.

### A sound environment for skills development

The recent European Commission policies have identified Vocational Education and Training (VET) as the main lever to foster employability of workers. The ETUC believes that VET indeed contributes to employability, but only if workers are provided with high quality training provisions and if sustainable economic growth can provide quality jobs for workers and quality apprenticeship/traineeship positions. If the Commission’s initiative is going in this direction, then it is a good direction. VET is unfortunately not the miraculous solution for fighting unemployment and precarious jobs. **Thus, the ETUC demand for a European investment strategy is still key to creating a sound environment for employability and skills development.**

**More attention should be put on** high quality education at all levels and on **qualifications** (which are described as knowledge, skills and competences) and not exclusively on skills. Work-related aspects of qualifications, that formally recognize skills, are particularly important **in the wage-setting process** as important formal elements used by social partners in collective bargaining.

On work-based learning for young people the Commission should further develop the European Alliance for Apprenticeship (EAfA) which was initiated by the social partners, and approved by the national governments via the Council. The future ETUC Quality Framework on Apprenticeships that will be finalised in April 2016 could serve the overall European strategy on apprenticeship and “put flesh on the bones” of the European Alliance for Apprenticeship.

### a) The key role of trade unions as social partners

The role of **social partners and social dialogue** at all levels of decision making on qualifications and training schemes should be recognized and fostered by the EU institutions. At company level, workers’ representatives must be involved in the forward planning of both employment and skills, with the latter having to become a regular and shared feature of companies’ policies for anticipation of change. There are good practices in this field, for example: co-decision in Germany, negotiation of company training plans in France, the involvement of “trade union learning reps” (ULRs) in the UK, etc. In general, training culture in companies should be established as skills development and training provision should be part of the whole company strategy.

At European level, *Sector Skills Councils* are best placed to identify skills needs and should be thus better supported with clear and sustainable objectives defined by the Commission and the sectoral social partners. Defining and anticipating *sectoral skills or professional profiles* at European level should be discussed with sectoral social partners

and governments within the preferred framework of the social partners. **Sector Skills Alliance** as a project may also contribute to formulating European-level core curricula in a sector, but only with the involvement of the social partners. **Professional curricula** and skills in sectors should be defined with equal involvement of social partners and government. Therefore, the Commission's proposal whereby only the employers should design curricula and have partnership with training providers is not suitable.

Research activity is needed to support sectoral social partners' work in addressing **the conditions of rapid social, economic, and technological change**.

#### **b) Strengthen the social dimension of VET**

When launching a new initiative on skills, **poverty and discrimination** should also be tackled. The Commission in its initiative should not only deal with improving skills provision of the unemployed and low-skilled, but also of part-time workers, temporary workers, as well as atypical workers and freelancers, who should be helped to access training with contributory schemes, without placing the whole costs on their shoulders. It is imperative to pay special attention to equal access to training and equal career prospects for women, the disabled and socio-economically disadvantaged people. The Commission should also pay special attention to those not in education employment or training (NEETs).

The integration of **migrants and refugees** into the labour market should be a target of the initiative. Immediate legislative and financial support is needed for the integration of migrants into the labour market, in particular for measuring and auditing skills and competences of migrants, refugees and economic migrants. In this latter regard, it is crucial to establish on national level efficient, foreseeable and equivalent frameworks for formal validation of skills and qualifications. To ensure adequate coordination as well as trust within and between member states, relevant national agencies and Public Employment Services have to play a key role.

#### **c) The ETUC demands guaranteed access to training for all**

On one hand, 70 million low-skilled people need upskilling, and on the other hand skilled workers have continuous pressure on skills updating and on continuous training. Everybody should be supported to gain high quality and sustainable provision of basic skills, key competences and professional skills equally.

For the ETUC, the right for training must be reaffirmed as a European right. However, the sole existence of a right is not self-sufficient. Workers should have the right to and support for validation and recognition of learning in the workplace and in the labour market. In addition, concrete measures must be set up and implemented to guarantee an effective use of this right for training and employers' financial contribution to workers' training. In line with this, the ETUC demands:

**A Professional Skills Guarantee to ensure effective access to training for low-skilled workers and unemployed people, in order to ensure their employability and their capacity to adapt to the labour market.** This guarantee should be set as a European principle and implemented by the member states and social partners at national level. The definition of professional skills, the certifications/qualifications linked to them, and the training provisions to access these basic professional skills should be defined at national level by the social partners in the framework of social dialogue, and by governments. This complementarity between European and national level must ensure that all adults reach minimum requirements for employability and further training according to national regulations. One of the possible examples of this Professional Skills Guarantee is the *"cross-sectoral certificate on basic professional skills"* initiated by the French social partners.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> French cross-sectoral certification on basic professional skills "Cléa": <http://certificat-clea.info/>

Furthermore, sectors should define professional skills to ensure sector-specific professional needs.

As part of the Professional Skills Guarantee Initiative, the European Commission should provide a platform for the exchange of experiences and further encourage member states to reduce numbers of low-skilled people in Europe (using also the European Semester).

**A Paid Educational Leave** to allow workers to upgrade their skills according to the new needs in their sector, and ensure them access to training not related to job-specific needs as an opportunity to launch a new phase in their career. As individual workers and employers cannot be expected to bear all costs, governments and/or social partners must agree to provide transition schemes and lifelong learning in general, preferably in collective agreements, if not by law. The ILO 140 Paid Educational Leave Convention (1974) already defines this measure but many countries have not yet ratified it. The Skills Agenda should put special emphasis on this right. Transition schemes, retraining and access to VET, upper secondary and higher education must be offered to all, regardless of previous level of education. Higher education should be accessible to all on conditions at least equal to those of young students. It is also critical for the overall quality of the workforce and thus for the non-cost competitiveness of the European economy.

**Measures to guarantee access to training** for all kinds of workers. This must be underpinned by **the individual right to training, preferably guaranteed by collective agreements<sup>2</sup>**, if not by law. As far as possible, collective agreements and legislation must ensure training provisions of workers in part-time jobs, precarious contracts, but also independent workers, freelancers and the self-employed, regardless of previous levels of education.

A key element to encourage workers to use their training rights is to provide them **access to career guidance and professional development**, which is not currently the case for many workers. Professional guidance schemes are essential to empower workers in their choices in terms of training, adaptation, and transitions.

#### **d) The need to boost investment in training**

The EU has an average of 27.5% of adults who participate in job-related employer-sponsored activities. According to Cedefop, big businesses more frequently provide training than small and medium-sized enterprises.<sup>3</sup> Providing the right skills for the European workforce requires high levels of investment by companies in life-long learning. Sustainable **EU-level and national investment** policies on training should also be fostered, focusing on countries where the participation of adults in education and training schemes is low, contributing at the same time to social convergence. The Commission should deal with how to best use the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) and other EU investment tools and funds for training provision.

It appears that EFSI is not tailored for social investment, like training and skills development. The EU Commission must rethink its investing tools to cover social investment needs and make a better use of the existing funds such as the European Structural and Investment Funds.

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<sup>2</sup> See example from [industriAll: European Trade Union Federation's resolution on anticipation of change and management of restructuring](#).

<sup>3</sup> CEDEFOP: Job-related adult learning and continuing vocational training in Europe, November 2015 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5548>

The ESF should better support efforts to increase the participation of employees and companies in continuous VET.

#### **e) Facilitate the mobility of VET learners**

The ET2020 European objective of “At least 20 % of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-34 year-olds with an initial VET qualification should have had a period of study or training abroad” is far from being met. The ETUC is still convinced that this objective is relevant and that social partners should be involved and lend their effort to achieving this goal.

Funding under the **Erasmus+ Programme is not sufficient for boosting VET mobility** and barriers have to be tackled to improve mobility in VET. More resources should be available **at EU level for** VET learners of all ages. The role of the social partners in ensuring quality of mobility in VET and on the effective use of the Erasmus+ and other programmes funds on VET should be secured.

Another challenge in mobility is the lack of understanding and **trust in foreign qualifications** by the employers and the slow implementation of the Directive on Recognition of Professional Qualifications in regulated professions in the EU. Relevant solutions have been presented by different European Sectoral Social Partner Committees who have developed (e.g. hairdressing sector) or are still developing (e.g. construction, automotive, textile sectors) their **qualification frameworks / occupational profiles / core curricula or core skills** in their sectors at European level, but they are faced with resistance on implementing these agreements at national level.

The Commission considers mobility only through the prism of employability. Getting the unemployed and precarious workers into quality jobs and apprenticeship positions is, of course, fundamental, for several reasons. However, limiting mobility to a single aspect, in the wake of recent developments in Europe, is not appropriate. The ETUC strongly believes that mobility contributes just as much to EU citizenship, social cohesion and facilitating cultural understanding as much as democratic values. In times of increased populism, radicalism, and xenophobia, it is more important than ever that workers in Europe meet across national and cultural borders. Doing so as students undergoing education and training needs to be emphasised by the European Commission in the New Skills Agenda.”

ETUC urges the Commission to adopt a coherent and consistent approach to its policy initiatives in this field, in particular where they involve the development of skills. There is a lack of coordination between simultaneous initiatives which are still intertwined. DG Connect, for instance, is working on e-skills, DG EMPL on the new skills agenda, DG HOME is in the process of publishing a legal migration package which might address the issue of migrant workers’ skills while DG GROW is closely following industry-related initiatives on skills and DG EAC is responsible for education policies. The ETUC therefore urges the Commission to adopt a more coherent and consistent approach.

We ask the European Commission to use caution concerning the planned revision of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in line with the use and development of different European tools and instruments on qualifications and skills. EQF in some countries is still in the process of implementation and national policies on qualification of public and private learning need to be in line with national budget and social dialogue