



# Position Paper

August 2016

## A New Skills Agenda for Europe - COM(2016) 381

### In summary, EUROCHAMBRES:

- Welcomes the priority attached to VET in the New Skills Agenda for Europe as a crucial element in addressing the skills gap
- Nonetheless regrets that, as a whole, the communication represents no significant advancement on similar initiatives over the last decade
- Endorses the proposal to enhance entrepreneurship education as a key competence
- Supports the launch of the 1<sup>st</sup> European VET week in December 2016 as a positive initiative to increase the visibility and promote the attractiveness of VET
- Shares the importance attached to identifying refugees' skills earlier, which should be part of a coherent, comprehensive strategy for the economic integration of migrants
- Welcomes the launch of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition
- Questions the effectiveness of the proposed skills guarantee
- Argues that the proposed revision of the European Qualification Framework will prove burdensome and undermine its primary purposes
- Is disappointed at the omission of a quantifiable target for work-based learning in VET
- Laments the absence of a robust, pan-European approach to skills forecasting
- Calls in parallel for EUROCHAMBRES' involvement in the governance of CEDEFOP

### Introduction

EUROCHAMBRES – The Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry represents over 20 million enterprises in Europe – 98% of which are SMEs – through members in 43 countries and a European network of 1700 regional and local Chambers.

Chambers are key players in imparting and raising skills. They play a pivotal role in the development and delivery of Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy. 80% of all Chambers of Commerce and Industry are involved in education and training and 48% of all Chambers deliver initial or continuous vocational education and training. Every year, nearly 1.8 million people receive training qualifications via the Chamber network and 600.000 apprenticeships are managed directly by Chambers, mainly in Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg and Spain.

In this context, EUROCHAMBRES welcomes the aims of the New Skills Agenda for Europe that the European Commission published on 10 June 2016. However, we regret that, collectively, the communication represents no significant progression on similar initiatives over the last decade.

Specific comments on the proposals for meeting these aims that are contained in – or, indeed, missing from – the communication can be found on the following pages.

## Entrepreneurship and innovation correctly prioritized

While there is general support for entrepreneurship education in most EU member states and it has been defined as a key competence in national curricula, this is in many cases not converted into deliverable strategies during either full-time education or lifelong learning. EUROCHAMBRES thus endorses the proposal to review the Key Competences framework, with a special focus on promoting entrepreneurial mindsets. Employers are increasingly more in demand of a higher level of soft skills for all workers. Companies are continuously improving services and products based on the active involvement of employees. Education and training systems have to pay more attention to developing necessary key competences and make a revision of curricula at all levels accordingly.

An entrepreneurial mindset can be successfully developed through education and training and Chambers are ready and willing to contribute through their experience to the development of content and methods of assessment for entrepreneurship and innovation skills.

## European VET Skills week a positive initiative

EUROCHAMBRES supports the effort to make VET, and in particular higher VET, more visible and to enhance its attractiveness. In this context, EUROCHAMBRES welcomes the proposal set in the New Skills Agenda to organize the 1<sup>st</sup> European VET Skills week from 5 to 9 December 2016. EUROCHAMBRES and the Chamber network will participate actively in this initiative at EU and member state level to promote VET and the role played by Chambers as both training providers and employer representatives, therefore “users” of education.

## Early identification and upgrading of migrants’ skills welcomed

EUROCHAMBRES warmly welcomes the priority given in the New Skills Agenda to improve skills levels and qualifications among migrants, as well as to the use of their existing skills and qualifications in order to support their effective integration into the labour market. In this context, EUROCHAMBRES stresses the importance to develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the economic integration of migrants in the countries of destination in the EU, in the countries of transit in the EU and its neighbourhood, and in the countries of origin. Indeed, EUROCHAMBRES has developed and submitted to policy makers such a strategy, entitled ERIAS (European Refugee Integration Action Scheme)<sup>1</sup> and we believe this merits active pursuit by the European Commission. The New Skills Agenda rightly sets out schemes for skills identification and these should be reinforced with effective measures to upgrade skills through training programmes and for matching migrants with relevant opportunities.

## Launch of Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition to facilitate cooperation

EUROCHAMBRES recognizes the fast changing conditions in the labour market due to innovation and ongoing digital progress. This is a positive trend for the economy due to higher value added productivity. Nevertheless, educational institutions and employees need to remain up to speed in order to respond to the latest needs of the labour market. This can only be achieved through cross-stakeholder cooperation that identifies solutions and creates the right framework according to national, regional and local needs. The launch of the new Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition can facilitate such cooperation. Chambers are well positioned to contribute to strong and relevant national digital skills strategies, to identify the digital skills required by the labour market as they develop, and to help ensure successful implementation of initiatives through targeted promotion within their membership base.

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<sup>1</sup> Available via [www.eurochambres.eu](http://www.eurochambres.eu) - please type ERIAS in the search box

## **Proposed “skills guarantee” not the right tool**

EUROCHAMBRES agrees that the high-number of low-skilled adults in Europe is worrying. Without the solid foundations of a good school education, individuals are already at a disadvantage in meeting future work and social challenges. However, EUROCHAMBRES does not believe that the skills guarantee proposed by the European Commission is the appropriate tool to meet this challenge. The use of the word guarantee is in itself misleading and creates false expectations.

From the experience of Chambers highly involved in VET, the EQF level 4 target mentioned in the New Skills Agenda is too ambitious. EQF level 2 - 3 is more realistic and should instead be the target. Moreover, an identification of target groups to which this instrument applies is necessary, otherwise financing will be impossible (65 million Europeans are low skilled!). The main focus should be to assess and improve literacy and numeracy skills to enable them to pursue a VET pathway and to acquire a good qualification for the labour market.

Whereas the financing of the skills guarantee remains unclear, EUROCHAMBRES emphasizes that the responsibility and financing of the acquisition of basic skills for all citizens has to be assumed by the national governments and their education systems, not by the employers.

## **Flaws in proposed revisions to European Qualification Framework**

In some countries, Chambers are directly involved in the validation of formal, informal and non-formal competencies and are therefore experts in the field of qualifications.

Against this background, EUROCHAMBRES agrees on the need to improve the understanding and comparability of different qualifications, both general and vocational.

In general, EUROCHAMBRES believes that the European Qualification Framework (EQF) is a valuable EU initiative that has real impact on member state level. In this respect, EUROCHAMBRES welcomes the focus of the proposed revision on strengthening the transparency and consistency of the EQF. Any attempt to upgrade the EQF to a tool for recognition of qualifications would be unrealistic and prove too burdensome and is thus considered counter-productive by EUROCHAMBRES.

Exchange between member states on the methodology of referencing at EU level should also be further promoted. Concerning governance, EUROCHAMBRES believe that any form of “super-platform” for all of the different instruments would be detrimental to transparency and would prove unsatisfactory, if not unworkable. It would be more effective to appoint an expert group with a mandate to explore better synergies between the EQF and other European tools on skills and qualifications at European, sectoral and national level.

On International Sectoral Qualifications (ISQ), EUROCHAMBRES regrets that the proposal still includes no reference to standards and procedures at European level for the referencing of such qualifications in the national NQFs, in order to avoid inconsistencies, as these would severely damage the credibility of the EQF.

## Quantifiable target for apprenticeship in VET omitted

Whereas the New Skills Agenda sets VET as a first choice, EUROCHAMBRES regrets that it does not define – or even promote the idea of defining - a target on the percentage of VET students who benefit from work-based experience. Some statistics suggest that less than 27% of EU VET students are enrolled in programmes that combine school and company-based learning. EUROCHAMBRES, has been pushing since autumn 2014 for an EU flagship initiative to increase the percentage of VET programmes with apprenticeship elements to 50% by 2020. It is disappointing that this new communication did not feature such an objective, especially given the well-documented advantages of work-based learning in VET.

## EU skills forecasting survey missing

EUROCHAMBRES regrets that the communication doesn't foresee a pan-European approach to skills forecasting. Greater efforts are required to provide information on future skills needs. Broken down to regional level, this information should be regularly gathered across the EU in a homogeneous or interoperable format in order to facilitate workforce mobility and address skills mismatches.

In order to be accurate and useable, an EU skills forecasting survey should build on different groups of data (anticipated business vacancies, data on business activity and the economic situation, vacancy monitored by public employment services and data on graduates from all types of education and training institutes).

Based on existing experience in this field<sup>2</sup> and its capacity to gather and harness feedback from the business community, particularly SMEs, the Chamber network would be ready to contribute to such an initiative in collaboration with the European Commission and other relevant bodies, such as the Committee of the Regions.

*EUROCHAMBRES will follow closely the discussions on the New Skills Agenda in the Council and the European Parliament during the Slovak and Maltese Presidencies.*

*In parallel, we will also monitor and contribute to the inter-institutional discussions on the **revisions of the regulation establishing a European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)** and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. Given the key role that Chambers play in the development and delivery of Vocational Education and Training policy – it is appropriate that EUROCHAMBRES plays a formal role in the governance of this important agency, which is currently restricted to member state representatives and organisations involved in the tripartite cross-sectoral EU social dialogue. Also officially a European social partner, **EUROCHAMBRES therefore strongly recommends an amendment to ensure its systematic inclusion in the governance process in the context of the revision of the CEDEFOP regulation.***

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<sup>2</sup> Chambers in several EU member states, such as Germany, Italy and Slovenia, directly run or are actively involved in national or regional skills forecasting schemes. EUROCHAMBRES has already organized presentations of such approaches to Commission officials on several occasions and is ready to so again.