



Position Paper

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The Future of VET

Education, and in particular vocational education and training (VET), is crucial for the competitiveness and social cohesion of Europe. Against the backdrop of significant changes triggered by digitalisation, automation, artificial intelligence, internationalization and rapidly evolving customer expectations, the demands on the working population are evolving faster than ever. Developing and ensuring skills and competences is going to be a central political issue, at national as well as at European level.

The most recent edition of the annual EUROCHAMBRES Economic Survey revealed a lack of skilled workers as the second greatest challenge for businesses across Europe. The next edition will be published next month and initial indications suggest that a lack of skilled workers may, for the first time, be top of the list of challenges. At the European Parliament of Enterprises in the Brussels hemicycle on 10 October 2018, 84% of the entrepreneurs from all over Europe replied 'yes' when asked if it is harder today to find staff with the right skills than 5 years ago. The same question was asked at two previous editions of the EPE and the percentage of 'yes' votes has increased each time. This prompted EUROCHAMBRES President, Christoph Leitl, to warn EU leaders at the Tripartite Social Summit on 16 October that the EU is sleepwalking into a skills crisis.

It also underlines a worrying trend, as the skills mismatch issue has been a recurring problem for several years, in times of both high and low unemployment. As a result, companies are often not in a position to accept orders and suffer revenue losses, which has a negative overall effect on the capacity, efficiency and competitiveness of the European economy.

Ensuring skilled labour and addressing the skills mismatch begins with reliable educational objectives in general education. In addition to literacy and numeracy, basic digital skills are acquiring increasing importance. Flexible and adaptable school education, VET and higher education systems have to contribute to a better skills-mix among the working population. A heavy political focus on higher education to the detriment of VET does not correspond with the needs of companies in terms of personnel and competences. VET at middle and higher level is and will remain a key pillar.

European cooperation on VET must define common objectives and find innovative solutions to similar challenges encountered at national level. EUROCHAMBRES appreciates and supports a continuation of this collaboration. Therefore, it is important to create a new strategic framework as successor to the “Education and Training 2020” framework. In addition to such cooperation, instruments developed at EU level can themselves contribute to the achievement of these objectives.

Priorities for future EU-cooperation in the field of education policy and VET policy in particular should be:

- Securing of an adequate skills mix with high-quality systems of VET and higher education, which are strategically coordinated and offer pathways for learners;
- Safe-guarding high-quality VET at secondary level, especially by strengthening systems of work-based learning and apprenticeship training;
- Consolidation and development of VET at the post-secondary and tertiary levels outside academic structures (“Higher VET”);
- The development of general education and VET in a perspective of life-long learning and the unfolding of the potential of several target groups;
- Focus on excellence in VET and higher education;
- Pursuing a significant increase in the work-based learning component of VET.

Students, pupils and apprentices should continue to be encouraged to capitalize on the opportunities of mobility actions through direct measures at EU-level. The Erasmus+-Programme is thus of high importance, especially because it enables thousands of young people to experience the EU so that they can establish a positive impression of the European project. The rise in Eurosceptic tendencies in numerous member states emphasises the need for the programme to fulfil this role effectively through increased funding and enhanced efficiency. EUROCHAMBRES therefore fully supports the doubling of funding to €30 billion for the next period from 2021 to 2027, as proposed by the EU Commission¹. At the same time, the effectiveness of this funding must not be limited by complex programme management and work-intensive administrative requirements for applicants.

Furthermore, SMEs and their apprentices should in particular benefit from Erasmus+. To ensure a large scale impact of Erasmus+, extensive public relations and awareness raising activities need to take place - ideally already before 2020 - but at least in the years to follow. It is necessary to directly address each target group, to use all the different communication channels in particular on a regional level and to point out the opportunities under Erasmus+.

Ensuring transparency and comparability of educational degrees is a genuine European goal. Given the huge differences between the different national education systems, this goal needs to remain a top priority of EU education policy and should be addressed through joint instruments.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a particularly promising tool in this respect. Nevertheless, 10 years after the adoption of the first EU-recommendation, important implementation steps are still missing. The EQF has triggered significant reforms in many member states. In particular, the fundamental equivalence of academic and professional education opens up a new perspective on qualifications focusing on learning outcomes rather than the type of

¹ See EUROCHAMBRES’ August 2018 reaction to the Commission’s 2021-27 Erasmus programme proposal: <http://bit.ly/2oeS3cV>

institutions awarding them and consequently signalling the value of VET qualifications in respect to their relevance on the labour market. However, the initial objective of improved transparency and comparability of degrees has to date not been achieved. The pan-European comparison of educational degrees on the basis of their learning outcomes functions only on a rudimentary level.

At this point, companies and individuals only partly benefit from the EQF's added value. The extent to which ESCO, a tool developed by the European Commission for the description of competences, will be a meaningful complement to the EQF for professions and qualifications from the companies point of view remains to be seen. A broad testing and evaluation of ESCO is still pending and should in any case be carried out and fully concluded before connecting this instrument with other existing tools such as, for example, Europass.

Generally, the new strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of VET after 2020 should be used to evaluate existing cooperation and in particular European tools (e.g. EQAVAT, ECVET, Europass) as a whole. The detected impacts of the various tools and policies should then be used as a starting point for their consolidation.

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