



Brussels, Belgium

29/01/2020

CONSULTATION ON THE UPDATE OF THE SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE CONTRIBUTION OF CEEP & EFEE

CEEP and EFEE welcome the European Commission's initiative to update the EU Skills Agenda which was adopted in June 2016. In recent years, many important steps have already been taken to improve the skills of European citizens. Nevertheless, there is still a significant amount of work that remains to be done, in particular with regards to the implementation and follow-up of these actions.

As social partners representing employers and organisations providing services of general interest and education employers in particular, CEEP and EFEE invite the European Commission to consider the following points in order to further improve the EU Skills Agenda.

1. The emerging trends that will have a significant impact on the labour market, including digitalisation, demographic change and green economy, will not only require European citizens to adopt new skills but also new attitudes and lifestyles. We therefore deem it important that the Skills Agenda stresses the necessity of changing the culture of work into a culture of learning on all fronts. Simultaneously, we ask the European Commission to shift the focus of the conversation away from negative aspects towards positive elements of skills. Empowering workers to upskill and re-skill as part of their lifelong learning, strengthening collective leadership and modernising vocational education and training (VET) are all positive working points... We propose that the European Commission alters the key objective of "addressing skills mismatches" to "fostering skills intelligence in line with the labour market needs" to create a more positive atmosphere that invites increased responsiveness through a common goal setting.
2. Low-skilled people represent a high percentage of the EU working age population and more strategic, sustainable and coherent approaches are needed to support them into accessing and progressing through upskilling pathways. It is essential to invest in human capital, skills and lifelong learning to help people address the employment and social challenges ahead. Addressing the low-skills challenge requires a long-term systemic approach and needs to be accompanied by appropriate and sustainable funding resources and mechanisms. Adequate levels of both private

and public investment should clearly be stressed, as only a combined effort would allow addressing the existing major funding gaps in this area.

3. We deem it important that the Commission takes an integrated and comprehensive approach to the update of the Skills Agenda since it covers various challenges and opportunities that are interlinked. We therefore strongly support more efficient cooperation not only at all levels (regional, sectoral, national and European) but also between different initiatives and key documents. Regarding the former, we believe that in order to develop holistic instruments that create effective results, the Commission needs to structurally involve all the relevant stakeholders in their discussions so the industry, the social partners and the education providers are all included as input contributors and not solely as observers. In particular with regards to the proposed Council Recommendation on VET, we urge the Commission to stimulate this trust building and foster an inclusive environment that takes on a more integrated approach. Concerning the latter, we encourage the Commission to build bridges between policy areas by connecting the Skills Agenda to other European initiatives that involve skills and training, such as the Green Deal, the Digital Agenda, the Industrial Policy and most importantly the European Semester. These links will reduce the massive fragmentation of initiatives by different stakeholders which is detrimental to an effective outcome.
4. Mismatches between qualifications and job requirements remain a long-standing challenge in several Member States. Skill shortages are impeding growth because of the entailing high productivity cost in many economies across the EU. At the same time, it is important to identify the nature of the skills needed, ranging from job specific skills to digital skills and a broader set of transversal skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, capacity to learn and relearn etc. It is equally important to recognise that such skills are best learnt on the job, thereby requiring close cooperation between education and training, employers, and social partners.
5. We deem it of paramount importance that the Skills Agenda has a specific focus on inclusion, not only with regards to up-skilling and re-skilling but with regards to all levels of education. Individual learning accounts (ILA) are one instrument among others only applied in a few Member States. An ILA scheme is but one piece of a more complex institutional setting. Before considering such an instrument from the EU level the Commission should look at a range of factors related to “institutional obstacles”: i.e., depending on the institutional context: the availability of suitable training supply and adequate information are key elements for taking up further training. In this context career counselling and public service guidance is essential in complementing ILA instruments. However, it may turn out to be very costly: an efficient information and guidance system (including the certification of training providers) requires an adequate institutional infrastructure (local agencies, skilled case-managers, etc.). To create as efficient a tool as possible, we urge the Commission to consult all the relevant stakeholders so that the burden of this new initiative can be fairly attributed to all parties concerned.

6. We strongly welcome that vocational education and training (VET) receives such a prominent place in the Update of the Skills Agenda as it is a key driver of skills intelligence. Nevertheless, we recognize that in order for VET to become a first choice, it is important to raise the image and visibility of VET in other policy areas as well. Integrating VET in the EU agendas on regional development, innovation and industry, including EFSI, ERDF and Horizon Europe, will strengthen outcomes, increase budgets for VET initiatives and improve the quality and image of VET. Having this in mind, it is crucial that the richness of VET is showcased in all these policy areas. We, therefore, invite the European Commission to display VET's important role as contributor to the human capital agenda as it fosters democratic citizenship and EU values as well as adds to innovation and excellence. The first step in achieving this was taken with the JRC report on VET and Smart specialisation and the Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence in Europe. We laud the Commission's initiative to provide information, facilitate exchanges, bring networks together and engage all stakeholders so that new ideas can be generated. As a follow-up, the new Europass portal should be linked to EU initiatives that address relevant networks such as My Europe while VET mobility can be linked to other transnational programmes such as Interreg. Finally, we emphasize that the recognition of VET qualifications and learning periods in the development of the European Education Area should be a priority for the European Commission with regards to increasing the status of VET.