OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European
Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**
[COM(2020) 274 final]

**Proposal for a Council recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for
sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**
[COM(2020) 275 final - 2020/0137 NLE]

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1.   **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1   The EESC recalls that a skilled and qualified workforce is one of the main assets of the European social and economic model and that support for training for young people and adults must be used as a lever to boost **long-term and sustainable economic growth**, since it helps **increasing innovation, productivity and competitiveness** and supports workers in just transition and career and wage progression.

1.2   The EESC welcomes the fact that the Skills Agenda and the proposed recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) were developed under the umbrella of the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** and that the motto of the Skills Agenda is the first principle of the EPSR.

1.3   The Committee believes that the projects of **Centres of Vocational Excellence** and funding countries' participation in **EuroSkills competitions** as one of the instruments will generate improvements in the whole VET system, raising the quality, attractiveness and inclusiveness of VET for all. This should be achieved with the **relevant social partners and civil society organisations**, including families, parents, and students.

1.4   The EESC recalls that **key competences and STEAM[1] skills** need to be included in the provision of "**right skills**" to respond to the immediate needs of young people and adults to live successfully in society and to the needs of the labour market in the digital and green transition.

1.5   The EESC underlines **the focus on social and citizenship competences**, which are crucial for the individual as a democratic citizen. Citizenship education should be accessible to everyone, in particular to disadvantaged groups[2]. The EESC encourages Member States (MS) to implement the *Council Recommendation on promoting common values*[3] and also to strengthen learning about **European values and identity in the VET and adult learning sectors**.

1.6   The Committee welcomes the proposal for a **Pact for Skills on re- and upskilling workers** and calls for achievable targets and agreed **joint quality principles** to be designed, with the involvement of the relevant **social partners**, civil society organisations and other important stakeholders, in order to provide **effective solutions for all**.

1.7   The EESC calls for greater emphasis to be placed on **guidance and counselling policies** in relation to the green and digital transition of the labour market by expanding the support mechanisms offered by different information providers, e.g. trade unions' training ambassadors schemes, human resources (HR) support for companies, and civil society work to **motivate adults and workers to upskill and reskill.** The EESC recalls that supporting people with training in just digital and green transitions will start with the **validation of non-formal and**

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[1]   Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics.

[2]   EIGE.

[3]   Council Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching.

informal learning (NFIL) and with ensuring **the recognition and certification of training courses** to allow these to form part of full qualifications.

1.8   The EESC refers to its opinion on "Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour"[4] and notes that the Recovery Plan, the Next Generation EU and other **EU funds** (e.g. ESF+, Just Transition Funds) need to be used in an efficient and consistent way to effectively support education and training policies.

1.9   The Committee calls for EU-level research to be carried out on the idea of a **European initiative for Individual Learning Accounts (ILA)** as an umbrella initiative or specific support for Member States' needs. The EESC calls on the Commission to initiate social dialogue on the ILA and on developing **European Core Profiles in VET** to take into account the needs of the sectors, national requirements from VET professions in line with collective agreements, changing professional and occupational profiles, and companies' needs, and to consult with the relevant civil society organisations.

1.10   The EESC urges that **the indicators and benchmarks be reconsidered and updated** once more when data on the **impact of the COVID-19 crisis** becomes available. Data and information on VET, skills and labour market needs must be improved in relation to the EU goals on education and training and the new indicators should enforce implementation of **the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and **the European Semester**. In order to achieve the proposed indicators by 2025, the frequency of monitoring would require **a yearly update on a range of data to better follow up improvements in the VET sector** and on up-skilling and re-skilling provision.

1.11   The EESC requests that all VET learners are guaranteed the right and access to high **quality and inclusive VET and apprenticeships**, showing due regard for the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA)[5]. In addition to the indicator of participation in work-based learning (WBL) set out in the proposed Recommendation on VET, an indicator of company-based learning could be defined and **collaborative apprenticeship** between companies could be encouraged.

1.12   The EESC refers to its opinion on "Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all"[6] and calls on the Commission to develop an EU-level green skills and competences strategy in line with the European Green Deal and set up indicators on a **competence framework on green skills needs**, with the involvement of **governments, the social partners and civil society organisations**.

1.13   The Committee calls for policies to be developed to **improve the attractiveness of the profession of VET teachers and trainers** by offering strategic updates of their initial and

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[4]   OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, pp. 8-17.

[5]   Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0502%2801%29

[6]   SOC/636 opinion (ongoing), title in the process of being changed.

continuous professional development to be prepared for the green and digital transitions of VET, by improving their status, health and safety and working conditions, and by involving them in curriculum development on the digital and green transition for VET schools and educational institutions as part of a process of genuine social dialogue.

1.14 The EESC would like the **Digital Education Action Plan**[7] to propose **practical support for schools' communities** to improve digital skills and investment in digital tools and internet access and provide support so that **digital skills, both soft (for social and personal life), and hard (technology- and job-related) reach everyone**. We call on the Commission to provide relevant data on access to digital tools and internet access in schools in relation to the SELFIE tool[8]. It is important to upskill and reskill workers in the necessary digital skills.

1.15 The EESC recommends conducting an **EU-level study to map out existing micro-credentials** of different providers to find out the actual needs of European companies, employers, workers and job-seekers as regards micro-credentials and their **impacts on qualifications** and collective agreements.

1.16 The EESC recommends that the **Europass platform** be improved, with trustworthy information for job-seekers, learners, employers, and policy-makers, and that the information should also be accessible to people with disabilities and be provided in different languages, including the major languages of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

1.17 The Committee calls for national skills actions to put the emphasis on **supporting female students, female workers and the female unemployed**, with tailor-made training, also focusing on effective support to families that have faced severe difficulties in the COVID-19 crisis.

1.18 The EESC encourages the Commission to draw up actions ensuring that **every single refugee and asylum-seeker be given the opportunity to validate their skills and competences** and be offered apprenticeships and re- and upskilling, to be integrated into the labour market, in line with **the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**.

1.19 The EESC proposes that ideas behind the higher education- and research-related initiatives of the Skills Agenda and further policy actions should be further discussed with governments, relevant social partners and civil society organisations. **Business-higher education** partnerships should be equally beneficial for both parties and should not result in cuts to public higher education budgets.

1.20 The EESC calls for **sustainable national public investment in higher education and research** as a part of the European Semester and for this to be supported with EU funds to make higher education and research fully inclusive and accessible to students and future researchers and to guarantee a supportive working environment for academics and researchers. The EESC

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[7]   Commission page on a new Digital Education Action Plan.

[8]   SELFIE tool.

requests that proposals on **researchers' skills and competence** development should be further discussed with the intended beneficiaries of the initiatives.

1.21 The EESC calls on Member States to implement the Paris Communiqué (2018) and the upcoming Rome Communiqué (2020) and to ensure **that academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, the participation of students and staff in higher education governance**, and public responsibility are respected as the basis of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EESC calls on MS to respect the fundamental values of the Bologna Process, implement the principles on the social dimension and on quality learning and teaching, and asks the Bologna Follow-Up Group to ensure further implementation of the commonly agreed Bologna goals. The EESC also highlights the importance of implementing the UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel of 1997[9].

2. **Background**

2.1 The Communication on a *European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience* 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**[10].

2.2 The new proposal is rooted in the communication *A new skills agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness* (2016)[11]. The updated Skills Agenda (2020) proposes **12 initiatives and four quantitative objectives to be reached by 2025**. The *proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience* proposes **additional targets** for VET learners. The present opinion focuses on both initiatives.

3. **General comments**

3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the European economy into a deep recession and an increasing unemployment rate. While Eurostat estimates that the recent increase in unemployment has been small compared to the decline in economic activity, the **unemployment rate** in the EU-27 is expected to rise from 6.7% in 2019 to 9% in 2020[12]. On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the **digital transition in education, work and everyday life**. The Commission's policy package has therefore come at the **right moment** to generate discussions on **effective policies on education and training**.

3.2 The EESC welcomes the fact that the Skills Agenda and the proposed recommendation on VET were developed under the umbrella of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** (EPSR) to contribute towards its first principle on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning (LLL). Indeed, all Europeans should have the right to access **quality and**

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9   Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel.

10   European Skills Agenda – Background note on the skills objectives (2020).

11   COM(2016) 381.

12   Eurostat Press release "Euro area unemployment at 7.8%", July 2020.

inclusive training and LLL within a just transition and in relation to **demographic changes**. We highlight the need to address **educational poverty**, which has deepened as a result of unequal access to education and training during the COVID-19 crisis.

3.3 We believe that key competences and soft skills are as important as the "right skills" needed on the labour market. These **key competences** include **social and citizenship competences,** which are crucial for the individual as a democratic citizen, especially when increased **social and economic inequalities** can lead to radicalism, populism and higher rates of crime. The Skills Agenda should give more attention to the development of the key competences during mandatory education cycles/curricula, as well as for young people and adults' learning. The focus of the Skills Agenda on **STEM**[13] **studies and entrepreneurial competences** is very welcome, alongside an understanding of the broad competences needs for the society and the labour market and provided that there is also a focus on social and transversal skills. STEAM[14] skills need to be further improved, as the arts, humanities, social studies, and professional sectors make a significant contribution to the GDP of a country.

3.4 We point out that the EESC in its opinion on the **European Education Area (EEA)** (2018) [15] welcomed the fact that the EEA initiative proposed more inclusiveness in future education systems and underlined that learning about the EU, democratic values, tolerance and citizenship should be considered a right for all, within a holistic education concept, with a special focus on **disadvantaged groups of people**[16] and as part of the implementation of the **EPSR**. It is essential that Member States are encouraged to implement the *Council Recommendation on promoting common values*[17]. Following the EESC opinion on "Education about the European Union"[18] we point out that VET and adult learning should also focus on strengthening **common European values and EU identity**.

4. **Specific comments**

4.1 The EESC welcomes the proposal for a **Pact for Skills on re- and upskilling workers**. It is essential to design the Pact with the involvement of the relevant **social partners**, **civil society organisations and other important stakeholders** according to the focus groups, in order to define targets for the addressees of such a Pact and ensure that these targets are met. The Pact should provide **effective solutions to young people and adults**, the unemployed, low-qualified, and workers, with special attention on access for socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people to quality and inclusive VET, adult learning and re- and upskilling training provided by a wide range of providers, such as public employment services, companies and VET institutions.

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13   Science, technology, engineering, mathematics.

14   Science, technology, ARTS, engineering, mathematics.

15   OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 136.

16   EIGE.

17   Council Recommendation (2018/C 195/01).

18   OJ C 228, 5.7.2019, p. 68.

4.2 One of the quality criteria of these training provisions should link to **validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL)** before any training. The training should be recognised and certified, clearly identifying the level of qualification or the unit/part of the qualification the certificate is a part of. This requirement would strengthen the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults[19] and Council Recommendation on the validation of NFIL[20].

4.3 In line with a previous EESC opinion on "Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour"[21], we request that the Recovery Plan, the Next Generation EU and other **EU funds** (e.g. ESF+, Just Transition Funds) be used in an efficient and consistent way, in order to ensure that businesses and social enterprises survive the crisis, that they can offer and maintain quality jobs, and that workers and the unemployed get effective support as regards acquiring quality skills. The ESF+ as a complementary fund helps to implement the education and training reforms identified in the European Semester process and it should support the objectives of sustainable Europe's industrial strategy and SME policy on skills development.

4.4 The EESC notes that, in its proposal, the Commission recognises the different approaches in the Member States that empower people to build skills throughout life, talking about "accounts" rather than "account" in the singular. Nevertheless, the idea of a **European initiative on an Individual Learning Accounts (ILA)**, as an umbrella initiative or specific support for Member States needs to be further investigated with proper research, to make sure that it can really provide an effective solution for supporting up- and reskilling and be based on the validation of NFIL in order to provide individual learning options. Further policy actions should be therefore decided with the relevant social partners, including the sectoral ones.

4.5 The Pact for Skills could focus on **industry sectors** in which support for upskilling and reskilling and the motivation of workers, following practical guidance and counselling, to attend training that contributes to their professional and career development and the company interest are important. In relation to the **Blueprint**[22] **initiative** and the idea of developing a **European Core Profile in VET**, it is worth noting that the potential synergies of the sectoral skills profiles of certain professions need to be further discussed with the relevant sectoral social partners. Comprehensive approaches, including competitiveness, companies' research and innovation strategies and industrial secrets need to be taken into account.

4.6 All VET students ought to have the right to high **quality and inclusive VET and apprenticeships** respecting the 2018 Council Recommendation on European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeships[23]. Indicators for VET graduates' employability rate

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[19] JO C 484 du 24.12.2016, p. 1–6.

[20] Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

[21] OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, pp. 8-17.

[22] Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills.

[23] Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships.https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0502%2801%29

should take into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on industries and fair and quality job requirements of the graduates. Collaborative apprenticeships between companies could be further encouraged. The projects on **Centres of Vocational Excellence** could have a greater focus on social inclusion and equal access to high quality and attractive training. It is important to consider the role of VET providers within the national context and their interaction with social partners concerning adapting curricula to skills needs. Similarly, the suggestion regarding the funding participation of countries in EuroSkills competitions can raise the attractiveness of VET. However, the exceptional preparation of selected VET students will serve as an example to governments to improve the quality of VET schools in general with effective measures.

4.7   The EESC recalls the Riga Conclusions on VET strategy for 2015-2020, which agrees that work-based learning (WBL) covers practical learning in schools and companies[24]. As access to some form of work-based learning should be the norm for all VET students, the indicators of WBL participation is definitely not ambitious and can difficultly apply to improve apprenticeship provisions.

4.8   Strengthening **skills intelligence**, building on the recent work by Cedefop[25], is essential also to define and monitor the achievements of Member States in relation to the indicators on adult learning and VET. **Forecasting/anticipating skills needs** in relation to social and labour market changes is important to ensure better governance of skills strategies within effective social dialogue and consultation with relevant civil society organisations and stakeholders, including companies. It would be welcomed if the indicators proposed by the Skills Agenda and the proposed Recommendation on VET were reconsidered and updated following research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education, training and the labour market.

4.9   More generally, data and information on VET, skills and the labour market need to be improved in relation to the EU goals on education and training and the new indicators proposed to enforce implementation of the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**, in particular SDG 4 (education), SDG 5 (equality), SDG 8 (decent work), and SDG 13 (climate change), and the **European Semester**. In order to achieve the proposed indicators by 2025, the frequency of the monitoring by Eurostat and agencies such as Cedefop and Eurofound would require a yearly update. Additional indicators could better support companies and workers in defining their investment, provision, and skills needs, focusing on the "percentage of enterprises **providing training** by type of training", and "enterprises' expenditure on training courses as a percentage of the total labour cost". These data are already collected by Eurostat every five years, but such a time period does not support the **social partners' active involvement in skills anticipation/forecasting and the setting up of required training**, an issue that the Skills Agenda proposes should be strengthened. Paid educational leave as part of negotiated collective agreements can be a tool to be included in indicators, together with measuring the provision of information and guidance to workers.

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[24]   See the definition of WBL in footnote 6 of the 2015 Riga Conclusions.

[25]   Cedefop web page on Skills intelligence.

4.10 The EESC opinion on "Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all"[26] points out that **environmental responsibility is an obligation for everyone**. **Pro-active upskilling and reskilling** to facilitate the just transition to a green economy should be available for all, particularly for workers in declining sectors. Monitoring the training provision on soft (for everyday life and society) and hard (technical-professional) **green skills and competences** is necessary, following a clear indicator, relevant for everyone in Europe and not only adults. Such an indicator and the EU strategy on green skills and competences should be based on a thorough **EU-level study and assessment of national green skills and competence strategies**. The setting up of indicators and of a **competence framework on green skills needs** to be based on an Open Method of Cooperation. **Teachers and trainers in VET** should receive quality continuous professional development also within companies[27] and need to be involved in curriculum development on the digital and green transition.

4.11 We underline that **schools have a great social role** and teaching methods should be supported with digitalisation as a tool and not as an aim. Effective support for schools, students, teachers, parents and families for improving digital skills and investment in equipment is essential and should be addressed within the European Semester and in the **Digital Education Action Plan**. As industries and the economy are continuously digitalised, it is important to upskill and reskill workers in necessary digital skills by using social dialogue. We call on the Commission to provide relevant data on access to digital tools and the internet in schools in relation to the SELFIE tool[28].

4.12 It is necessary to find, in consultation with social partners, a common European definition and understanding on **micro-credentials**. The EESC recommends conducting an EU-level study to map out existing micro-credentials used by companies in different sectors, training providers and education institutions (VET and higher education) and find out the needs and interest of European companies, employers, workers and job-seekers as regards obtaining and requesting micro-credentials. Micro-credentials could be considered to be one but not the only solution and outcome of recognition procedures and upskilling or reskilling. They should clearly define how the certificate links to a full qualification. Defining standards and further policy action at EU level on micro-credentials needs to be discussed with the social partners, particularly ensuring quality and transparency while considering such an EU-level study and a thorough impact assessment including its impacts on qualifications and collective agreements.

4.13 In relation to the launch of the new **Europass platform**, trust within certifications and qualifications could be solved with digital credentials, whilst respecting recognition and validation procedures. Information should also be accessible to people with disabilities and be provided in different languages, including the major languages of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. The idea of digital badges to be used for fast-track recognition should be explored in more detail.

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[26] SOC/636 opinion (ongoing), title in the process of being changed.

[27] Cedefop, "Guiding principles for professional development of trainers in VET", 2014 and ETUCE Policy Paper on VET in Europe, 2012.

[28] SELFIE tool.

4.14   The EESC welcomes the Commission's suggestions on supporting strategic national skills actions with a focus on **inclusiveness and gender equality** in VET. The COVID-19 crisis has particularly **hit women with families** according to recent UN[29], Council of Europe, and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)[30] reports. Women have been facing "increased levels of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence" and "attention needs to be paid also to the possible longer-term effects of the pandemic on the balance between professional and personal life and on women's economic independence, since it may force many of them to make difficult choices and to move to unpaid work"[31]. Therefore, the EESC suggests that national skills actions should put an emphasis on supporting female students, female workers and the female unemployed with tailor-made training. These actions should also focus on effective support to families that have faced severe difficulties in the COVID-19 crisis.

4.15   The EESC recalls that **refugees need to be treated equally irrespective of their skills level**, and every single refugee and asylum-seeker should be provided with the possibility to validate their skills and competences and receive apprenticeships and re- and upskilling to be integrated into the labour market in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The **Pact on Migration and Asylum** should acknowledge that refugees have skills and different qualification levels that may be of added value to receiving countries and their local labour market and businesses' needs.

4.16   It is important to seek more connections between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area to improve the **quality and inclusiveness of higher education and research** for all students regardless of their age or socio-economic background. Enhancing the quality and recognition of studies between universities needs to be an important focus of the European Universities initiative. While higher education is a national competence, the Commission's proposals for the European Degree, a European University Statute and a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System seems to be a move towards the synchronisation of higher education studies. Thus, the EESC requests that the ideas behind these initiatives and further policy actions be further discussed with governments, relevant social partners and civil society organisations.

4.17   The EESC points out that the COVID-19 crisis has had a very negative impact on universities' admissions, attendance, social role and investment. Sustainable national public investment in higher education and research needs to be ensured and EU funds should be improved to make education and research fully inclusive and accessible to students and future researchers and to guarantee a supportive working environment to academics and researchers.

4.18   Business and higher education partnerships should be beneficial for both parties without external pressure and be balanced to ensure company research and innovation work in its own right and public higher education and research objectives in its own right. The ministers' commitments in the 48 Bologna Process countries need to be taken into consideration in relation

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[29]   UN Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, 2020.

[30]   See EIGE relevant web page.

[31]   https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/women-s-rights-and-covid-19

to the proposals of the Skills Agenda: "**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." The EESC also points to the UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel of 1997[32].

4.19 According to Article 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"[33]. The proposals for setting up a European Competence Framework for **Researchers**, Taxonomy of Skills for Researchers, and developing curricula for researchers on open science and science management are ambitious ideas but question the academic freedom of higher education institutions in preparing future academics and researchers to enhance freedom of knowledge and research.

Brussels, 29 October 2020

Christa SCHWENG
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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[32] UN Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel, 1997. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[33] Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.