

BM71 - GDANSK

Statement on the New Skills Agenda for Europe

In order to deal with common employment struggles in Europe and the unequal access to skills, in June 2016 the European Commission launched the New Skills Agenda for Europe, a cross-sectoral communication with a list of actions to be implemented on European and national levels.

A number of these actions are addressing the role of higher education in providing lifelong skills. In this context, ESU emphasizes that employability is a broad concept which includes subject-specific, methodological, social and individual competences which enable graduates to successfully take up and pursue employment, and empower their lifelong-learning. Equitable access to all education levels and needs-based learning plays a vital role in developing lifelong skills for employability and active citizenship. This statement provides further recommendations and student views on the implementation of different action lines, as well as on the delivery of the Agenda.

Implementing the Skills Agenda

Vocational education as an equal choice

Vocational education (VET) has the strongest link with the world of work from all the upper and post-secondary education levels. Considering the fast changes in the labour market, VET should include a broad spectrum of transversal skills like problem solving, critical thinking, and communication skills that are essential to employability and lifelong learning of graduates.

No VET programme should be a dead-end to a chosen education path of a learner, but should ensure life-long learning and further possible progression to higher education levels, as well ensure flexibility to change education paths and offer interdisciplinary opportunities. This requires clear referencing in qualification levels, as well as transparent and fair recognition procedures in higher education institutions. Higher education institutions should treat students with a VET background equally during the selection process. Also, information for potential applicants should clearly state the eligibility of students with VET background.

The European Commission's call to make VET a first choice should not position VET as a priority over higher education, but rather be a call to raise quality and accessibility of the VET programmes. Member states should recognise different natures of education levels, including different levels of interaction with employers in each of them. Learners should be provided with quality career and educational guidance during earlier education to be able to make an informed choice about their further education and employability path. Educational guidance should be delivered on an equal basis; no differentiation based on social stratification should occur.

The European Students' Union (ESU) is being used to refer to "ESIB - The National Unions of Students in Europe" Belgian asbl BE0890.019.936, due to the fact that both legal entities are going through a merging process. Likewise the visual identity of ESU is being used instead of the one from ESIB.

From Skills Guarantee to Upskilling Pathways

In the transition from Skills Guarantee to the proposed recommendation on Upskilling Pathways, the member states should set the educational goal guaranteeing everyone the right to education at EQF4 level, in order to ensure everyone has the possibility to continue on to higher education if they so wish.

Digital skills

In the national digital skills context, ESU calls for the full involvement of student unions, as meaningful Higher Education stakeholders when establishing national digital skills coalitions. ESU would like to remind the Commission and the member states that one of the first steps to tackle the lack of digital skills through education is making information and communication technology tools accessible and free of charge, and providing the training needed for teachers and students. Developing digital literacies recognises the transformative nature these tools can have in the teaching and learning environment. In some education settings, teachers and academic staff limit the usage of digital tools due to the lack of their own competencies. This can disadvantage learners by slowing down the pace of progression on their course, and so teachers and academic staff need relevant digital training available to them so as to best support students' use of digital tools. It is necessary that member states support and bridge the gap between the education institutions applying advanced digitalisation, and those still lacking tools and resources. Education institutions should explore, develop and implement digitisation policies, with respect to the mission of the institution and needs of its students. Meanwhile, education institutions should keep in mind that digitalisation should serve as a supplementary tool to further enhance the learning process and not as a means to justify cuts to public funding for education.

Revision of the EQF

The revision of the *Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning* is a valuable opportunity to take stock of the accomplished work and of achieved goals, as well as pinpoint the problematic areas of implementation and determine how to best move forwards with the European Qualifications Framework.

The revised Recommendation and supporting documents should be wary of overstating the accomplishments so far achieved in this area of work, as realistic evaluation of the previous recommendation and its impact is necessary. Although the EQF as a tool has gained prominence and has caused a lot of positive changes, a significant number of the recommendations from the original *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning* are still to be fulfilled.

Furthermore, it is very worrying that in the current proposal of the revised Council Recommendation, students are not mentioned as one of the key stakeholders. The focus on students' needs to be emphasized, and students included as a stakeholder at all levels of implementation, since they are the primary and by far the largest group affected by all changes in education.

The current proposal of the revised Recommendation also emphasizes employers as a stakeholder group for which EQF is to be used.

It should be made clear that, on the contrary, EQF and National qualifications frameworks (NQF) are educational tools serving not only the employers, or simply tools for increasing employment, but are intended to be useful for all stakeholders connected to education.

In addition, EQF and NQFs should foster an environment conducive to the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Therefore, it is important to emphasize their role in this area which is currently not visible.

The planned integration of a credit system could be problematic as well, and therefore needs to be critically evaluated in terms of feasibility, and consequences toward credit systems previously established in the European Higher Education Area.

Tertiary graduate tracking

ESU believes that higher education should not be structured around employment

levels. Therefore, ESU does not believe that resources should be prioritized on graduate tracking. However, if establishing graduate tracking mechanisms, ESU calls on the member states to incorporate various social dimension indicators that would allow the monitoring of the progression in the labour market and the transition to the labour market of students with a diversity of backgrounds. Collection of such data would enable higher education institutions to spot shortages in student support mechanisms, and improve support for teaching and learning for marginalised groups that later will affect the access to the labour market. Nevertheless, attention needs to be paid to implementing mechanisms that would prevent higher education institutions from misusing the data collected in order to deny access to certain groups of students, whose path to completion might be longer or more difficult. The interpretation of collected data should never interfere with the planning and deliverance of HE, or result in policies that lead to actions advocating the closing of study programmes, or reducing public funding to study programmes because they are considered less relevant for the labour market or are not addressing short term needs of the economies.

Only looking at the statistics on employment are not sufficient enough when assessing the quality of employment. Tertiary graduate tracking must be implemented in such a way that the higher education institutions can use the data gathered to better the provided education and support services.

Work Based Learning as a valued education pathway

Work based learning (WBL) is an education pathway that develops experiences and professional skills by allowing learners to put theory into practice. These programmes offer students an opportunity to learn in a relevant workplace. This pathway should be seen as equal and complementary of more academic routes. Internships and apprenticeships, as the most popular form of WBL, are the result of cooperation between relevant employers, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or training providers. All forms of WBL must have adequate guidance included by the workplace provider and be held in close cooperation with the HEI. Learners' needs should always be of the highest importance to the process of finding and progressing in a relevant programme. Work-based learners should have a clear legal status as a student, a worker, or both, so they have full access to the relevant benefits and support. WBL shall never be used as a means to replace existing paid jobs or minimizing employment cost. Work-based learners should always be recognized fairly with formal accreditation that can be universally recognized, and with pay for their work when appropriate. Therefore, social security and a legal contract according to labor standards

must be included by WBL providers. These learners should also have access to representation, and spaces to voice their needs which can influence the quality of their education. The cooperation between HEIs and business must always be voluntarily and transparent. The independence of research, teaching, academic values and learning outcomes must not be compromised.

Learners Mobility

Whilst the Commission acknowledges that student mobility in HE has a long standing tradition, and millions of students have taken part in the ERASMUS+ programme, critical assessment of its accessibility and further implementation of accessibility measures are crucial for ensuring equal access to the skills that a mobility experience provides. The EU budget, as well as the budget of the member states allocated to learning mobility needs to be increased, in order to facilitate and support mobility opportunities for all. It is furthermore necessary to develop measures and incentives to increase mobility opportunities and eliminate obstacles for students from marginalised groups. An additional way of broadening access to mobility would be to re-establish the short term mobility schemes, like intensive courses, that were left out of the new Erasmus+ program to ensure low threshold access to under-represented groups.

The Commission should cease the masters' loan guarantee facility that was launched in 2015 as it does not increase the accessibility of mobility. It has not proven fit for purpose to increase the accessibility of mobility, and only three banks from two countries have signed the contract with the European Investment Fund, indicating that the system is not working.

Modernisation of HE in relation to skills

It is encouraging that the role of teachers is recognized as key for the advancement and modernisation of higher education, but more specific measures should be mentioned, and funds allocated for these goals. Sufficient funding of higher education is needed in order to meet the conditions resulting in increase of access and diversity of student body in higher education. Teaching competencies need to be at the heart of modernization efforts, to make teaching highly recognized and valued (for example, in academic promotion criteria). The aim is to give every teaching staff member the opportunity to improve their teaching competences by providing them with support for professional development at the start of their teaching career, and continuous support during their career. The goal should be that every member of the teaching staff participates regularly in professional development opportunities.

Although emphasizing flexible curricula, interdisciplinarity, and collaborative efforts is commendable, emphasis also needs to be put on student-centred learning and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. In addition, ESU encourages the promotion of alternative ways of learning, thus involving HEIs in delivering new sets of skills by engaging students into real-life problem-solving situations in their communities.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and RPL

ESU calls on the Member States to fully implement the recognition procedures as is required by the 2012 *Council Recommendation on Validation of Nonformal and Informal Learning*. Students should be able to have previous learning recognised- whether formal, non-formal or informal; even if they do not hold a formally certified qualification providing access to a certain education programme. In that case, flexible assessment procedures should be provided by the HEIs.

Furthermore, the EU and its member states should commit to eliminating obstacles for refugees and asylum seekers to access formal education, regardless of the existence of their documentation

of previous learning as foreseen in the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The profiling of skills within the framework of the proposed Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals should not be done by establishing a separate tool; but rather, through discovering how it can be connected with recognition of qualifications and skills, which would provide further access to employment and formal education.

Delivering the Agenda

ESU believes that cooperation between decision makers and stakeholders will play a crucial role in delivering the New Skills Agenda for Europe.

Strong cross-sectoral cooperation within the EU bodies and Member States

Since the skills portfolio has been moved from the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) to the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the European Commission's approach to skills and cooperation between the education and employment sector has been lacking an overall coordination framework, in which both education and employability would work hand in hand. ESU underlines the necessity for a stronger focus on education policies and instruments, such as student centred learning and modernisation of teaching in the overarching approach to skills and upskilling, responding to the needs of the learner.

The implementation of the New Skills Agenda should involve cross-sectoral working between DG EAC and DG EMPL on European level, and the corresponding ministries of the Member States on national level. Employment policies should not override the independence of education systems and the value of multiple purposes of education and lifelong learning.

Therefore, ESU calls for a stronger voice and impact for the decision makers in the education sector and education stakeholders on both European and national level in delivering the New Skills Agenda.

Stakeholders' involvement

ESU calls on full involvement of national union of students in developing National Skills strategies and implementing the actions laid out in the Skills Agenda. Moreover, when reviewing the current governance structures, for example the experts' groups working on different action lines of the Skills Agenda, the European Commission should recognise the importance of stakeholders' formal involvement within those structures.