

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — A New Skills Agenda for Europe

(2017/C 185/05)

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Reference documents: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — A New Skills Agenda for Europe — Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness

COM(2016) 381 final

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

COM(2016) 382 final

Proposal for a 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

COM(2016) 383 final

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMENDMENTS

Amendment 1

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

Recital 11

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Taking into account national circumstances and available resources, Member States should focus the implementation of the Skills Guarantee on priority target groups (e.g. unemployed people, disadvantaged groups, certain age groups etc.).	Taking into account national, regional and local circumstances and available resources, and bearing in mind that investment in human capital could be treated as a social investment , Member States should focus the implementation of the Skills Guarantee on priority target groups (e.g. unemployed people, disadvantaged groups, certain age groups etc.), ensuring Member States' competencies are respected .

Reason

Initiatives taken in the framework of the New Skills Agenda could be regarded as a social investment, giving greater flexibility when it comes to public spending and the use of EU funding to improve skills. Measures to implement the Skills Guarantee must take account of the different circumstances of regional and local labour markets.

Amendment 2

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

Recital 12

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
The Skills Guarantee should be delivered in line with the implementing arrangements put in place by the Member States and based on the individual's commitment and interest in taking part in the upskilling pathway.	The Skills Guarantee should be delivered in line with the implementing arrangements put in place by the Member States and based on the individual's commitment and interest in taking part in the upskilling pathway. <i>The offer of taking part in the Skills Guarantee should detail explicit objectives which the low-qualified adult must meet.</i>

Reason

The individual's commitment to upskilling must be based on meeting concrete objectives.

Amendment 3

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

Point 2

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Base the design of the Skills Guarantee on three steps: skills assessment, provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer and validation and recognition of skills acquired through the upskilling pathway.	Base the design of the Skills Guarantee on three steps: skills assessment, provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer <i>detailing the explicit objectives which the low-qualified adult must meet</i> , and validation and recognition of skills acquired through the upskilling pathway.

Reason

The individual's commitment to upskilling must be based on meeting concrete objectives.

Amendment 4

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

Point 12

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Taking into account national circumstances and available resources, identify priority target groups for the delivery of the Skills Guarantee at national level. In doing so, take also into account the gender, the diversity and various sub-groups in the targeted population.	Taking into account national, <i>regional and local</i> circumstances and available resources, <i>and bearing in mind that investment in human capital could be treated as a social investment</i> , identify priority target groups for the delivery of the Skills Guarantee at national level. In doing so, take also into account the gender, the diversity and various sub-groups in the targeted population.

Reason

Initiatives taken in the framework of the New Skills Agenda could be regarded as a social investment, giving greater flexibility when it comes to public spending and the use of EU funding to improve skills. Measures to implement the Skills Guarantee must take account of the different circumstances of regional and local labour markets.

Amendment 5

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee

Point 21

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT THE COMMISSION: Promote the use of competence frameworks for literacy, numeracy and digital skills and assessment tools.	HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT THE COMMISSION: <i>In the same way as for digital and entrepreneurial skills, develop equivalent competence frameworks for other key competences and</i> promote the use of competence frameworks for literacy, numeracy and digital skills and assessment tools; <i>account should be taken of the fact that the starting points vary a great deal between Member States.</i>

Reason

The Commission's reference frameworks for digital and entrepreneurial skills are important factors in ensuring these have a greater impact. Equivalent frameworks should be developed for other key competences, together with material to support implementation, assessment and evaluation. There are already multiple successful initiatives in the Member States which adopt a comprehensive approach. Any Europe-wide initiative to promote digital skills downstream of national strategies must not run counter to the national initiatives.

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. notes that a New Skills Agenda is critically important for Europe's continuing development. Economic, social and cultural investments have a long-term effect and are of prime importance. The New Skills Agenda is therefore to be welcomed and every effort should be made to ensure it is implemented swiftly and effectively. These are issues that are highly relevant to local and regional interests in Europe;
2. underlines that the labour market is becoming more and more fluid. People need to be versatile and flexible to be able to withstand unexpected changes and to take advantage of new opportunities. In addition to occupation-specific skills employers are increasingly looking for 'transversal' or 'soft' skills. This is in line with the requirement of modern life and society, making skilled, well-rounded people not only better performers in the labour market, but also better informed individuals, more engaged citizens, and smarter consumers;
3. points to the need for upskilling measures to give people living in Europe who lack basic skills the means to be actively part of the world of work and enable them to support themselves. This is important both from the perspective of the individual and for society as a whole. Signs of social unrest have been apparent in Europe recently, indicating quite clearly that social inclusion is an indispensable objective for basic education and training measures as a means of combating exclusion. Active citizenship entails accepting democratic values and being aware of what it means to take active responsibility for upholding those values, and this must include everybody. It is therefore important for integration purposes that migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, also benefit from a suitable form of skills guarantee;
4. would stress, however, that it is important for basic skills to be imparted first and foremost at the earliest stages of schooling and, in any event, during the compulsory schooling phase;

5. regards the New Skills Agenda as an important programme to tackle the skills gap in Europe covering the whole spectrum of skills needs, from basic to complex skills, and from transversal to sector-specific. While it is important to develop a broad set of skills from an early age, the skills agenda is also relevant for various categories of adult: people who need to improve their skills to enter the labour market or keep doing their job, those who need an opportunity to develop skills for employment in another field, people who want to be mobile across borders, and others who need a foundation for further studies and training. Also considers it important to ensure coherence and complementarity between and within education and training in general — and particularly vocational education — and work-based training in the delivery of upskilling measures;

Basic competences — skills guarantee

6. supports the Commission's proposal for a Skills Guarantee aimed at improving employment opportunities and full participation in society for low-qualified adults in Europe. The offer of taking part in the Skills Guarantee should specify clear goals as regards the level of skills and qualifications to be acquired and set out the conditions that low-qualified adults must meet. It should take into consideration the level and nature of skills required by the labour market, and, where possible, make use of people's existing vocational competences. These matters have considerable implications for local and regional levels of government, given that they have responsibility for education, training and employment;

7. considers that there should be a clear link between efforts to identify skills and consequent educational measures in the form of personalised learning plans. A well thought-out personalised learning plan should be designed to contain specific information about the approach, objective and goals of study for each individual;

8. also believes that life-long high-quality and effective information and career guidance services are needed for the implementation of personalised learning plans. These services will provide the person concerned with information regarding the learning opportunities that are tailored to their needs and will help them acquire the necessary skills for entering employment. They might also include guidance, study visits or 'hands-on' activities, advice on study financing and information about training opportunities, as well as information about access to various types of training and relevant contacts;

9. stresses that the point of education and training should be to allow an individual to acquire the skills needed by an adult to secure or maintain their position in a work or social environment. It is important that participants also have the option to combine study at different levels in an education system and in different study environments suited to their individual needs, so that they can rapidly acquire the skills needed in the employment market and the society, especially when it comes to integration of asylum seekers and refugees. This could mean for instance basic language skills combined with study at primary, secondary and post-secondary level. Work-study programmes should also be facilitated;

10. points out that members of target groups should be given opportunities to attend different forms of training that are accessible to them in terms of time and venue, depending for example on geographical or social factors, as well as the option of combining studies with other activities and taking into account people's different ways of learning. It is important to take advantage of new learning approaches, subject to good guidance, through various forms of IT-based learning, e.g. distance learning (in real time) and blended learning or other forms of open education. It is likely that technology will develop very quickly during the next few years, posing challenges in terms of educational activity keeping pace with developments;

11. emphasises that such a system should also include outreach activities for disadvantaged groups in need of upskilling where individuals do not seek training on their own initiative. Such efforts could usefully consist of a combination of measures at national or local/regional level. For example, local or regional authorities could be responsible for identifying target groups and incentivising those groups through outreach activities, after which people qualifying for training would have access to nationally determined forms of support, e.g. special study grants, tax breaks or study leave. Civil society players, such as youth organisations, can play an important role in such outreach efforts;

12. agrees with the observation in the communication that employers are not seeking occupation-specific skills as much as they used to, but are more interested in transferable skills, such as the ability to work in a team, creative thinking and problem-solving, as well as the ability to work across different fields. These new fundamentals should be taken into account when designing and implementing education measures. However, believes it necessary to develop specific training content aimed at the new economic sectors such as the green and blue economies;

13. would like to see cooperation developed on the basis of partnerships between national, regional and local authorities, companies, employees and employee associations, as well as civil society players, with the aim of taking more account of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning. Recognition of skills acquired outside the formal education system can significantly improve awareness of what new skills and qualifications are needed;

14. believes that, while the content and organisation of education and training systems are Member State competence, the Skills Guarantee should be designed with reference to national, regional and local conditions and available resources, while also considering that investment in human capital should be seen as social investment. The possibility of EU co-financing — through existing or future funding programmes — is very important for the implementation of a skills guarantee in the Member States;

Key competences and higher, more complex skills to make citizens better equipped

15. welcomes the Commission's intention to continue its efforts to achieve a consensus about key competences, so that these are: (1) clearly laid out in national guidance documents, (2) reflected in teaching, and (3) evaluated at the various levels of policy-making within the education system. The significance of key competences, whose aim is also to empower people to meet rapidly changing labour market demands, must be discussed in different arenas at EU, national, regional and local level. Therefore, this should preferably involve close dialogue between representatives of community organisations, the labour market, education, research and civil society;

16. thinks it is appropriate for local and regional authorities — for example, in their role as education and training providers — as well as teacher-training bodies to be involved in these efforts as soon as work has begun on developing the activities envisaged, so as to ensure that the skills are deployed as soon as conceivably possible. The reference frameworks for digital and entrepreneurial skills developed by the Commission are a very useful step in this direction, and it might therefore be a good idea to develop equivalent frameworks for other key competences, such as the competence of financial literacy, together with supporting material for implementation, assessment and evaluation;

Vocational training

17. believes it would make sense for the Commission to continue organising themed weeks and cooperating with the World Skills Organisation. This would in turn stimulate and support national, regional and local efforts to promote vocational training through information days and skills competitions, including 'hands-on' activities;

18. welcomes EU action to address skill shortages which are often particularly problematic for smaller, rural local and regional authorities. Awaits in this respect the implementation of the new proposal for a Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills to see if this new scheme can contribute to cross-sectoral cooperation for regional and local government. Such cross-sectoral cooperation platform could be of benefit for local economies, workforce and public services;

19. endorses the Commission's idea of urging the Member States to design their education systems so as to allow transition from general training programmes to targeted programmes geared to different occupational skills;

20. supports the idea of calling on the Member States to guarantee that recently arrived migrants who have been able to find work quickly thanks to targeted measures have opportunities to access continuing training so as to avoid them later being excluded from the labour market;

21. supports the Commission's intention to promote a wider range of higher vocational training with the aim of ensuring that the level of vocational training is further improved. A well-developed partnership between training providers, researchers, businesses, and local and regional authorities should be the mainstay of such training approaches;

22. notes that the Commission must also continue efforts to ensure that vocational training still supports lifelong learning and provides the opportunity for further learning to continue at a higher level of qualification;

Investment in digital skills

23. backs the Commission's proposal to urge the Member States to draw up comprehensive national strategies for digital skills;

24. points out that high-quality and innovative teaching methods and forms of learning with digital content require:

- *open learning environments*, with new conditions and forms of learning, knowledge-building and teaching for a digital world, supported by teachers and administrators who are thoroughly familiar with these concepts,
- *open educational resources*, i.e. access to knowledge, teaching materials and other types of support for online learning,
- *promotion of networks* for both educational staff and students, e.g. networks between different educational establishments and between countries;

25. sees digitalisation as an opportunity to address many educational challenges, for example:

- providing scope for more personalised and inclusive teaching,
- as a tool enabling new migrants to practise their language skills, find their way in society and cover subjects with support in both their mother tongue and the language of their new country of residence,
- for distance learning, e.g. for reaching the most remote areas, or where teachers are unavailable for certain languages,
- documenting students' progress, facilitating the assessment work of teachers and reducing red tape;

26. underscores that for investment in digital skills to be effective, strong pedagogical leadership is needed from teachers at different educational levels. Investment in digital skills in school can help to create more attractive jobs in which teachers become more willing and able to develop their skills;

27. points out that a distinction must be made between basic digital skills, which everybody has to acquire, and more specific digital competences that are linked to specific subject and skills areas;

Better comparability of qualifications

28. expects the review of the European Qualifications Framework to ensure that national qualifications frameworks are updated where appropriate and that reporting follows a standardised format. Repeats, however, that the Member States are those responsible for formulating principles to ensure quality within national qualifications frameworks;

29. underlines the importance of maintaining quality assurance coordination between the Member States and agrees with the European Commission that a step-by-step approach is needed for cooperation between the EU and third countries over the comparability of qualifications;

30. notes that the majority of occupations and occupational spheres are undergoing considerable change, with new occupations emerging and others becoming obsolete. It is therefore important for skills descriptions and skills profiles for the future to be able to reflect a labour market that is in a state of rapid flux and renewal. Particular importance should be attached to key competences in this context;

Skills and qualifications of migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees

31. notes that, as stated by the European Parliament in 2016 ⁽¹⁾, it is of the utmost importance to support the inclusion and integration of refugees, asylum seekers and people in equivalent circumstances. Thus it is also important to provide support as promptly as possible to the Member States in ensuring access to skills identification, language introduction, upskilling efforts and other measures to promote integration at work and in society. It should also be possible for people with training/qualifications acquired in their country of origin to have those skills assessed without delay;

Modernisation of teaching and learning

32. welcomes the Commission's promise to pay particular attention in the skills agenda to innovation in the sphere of education and expects that this will also facilitate the acquisition of key competences, which is a vital component of education and training systems in Europe;

33. believes that the Commission should promote further development of student-centred learning **based on the aspects of digital learning** mentioned in the CoR opinion on the Commission Communication on *Opening up Education* (2014) ⁽²⁾;

34. points out that the delivery of the New Skills Agenda will depend on the upskilling of all teachers, in particular those involved in adult education and community learning. Support for teaching staff should be properly considered in Member States' implementation plans and steps could be taken to raise awareness about the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE);

35. shares the Commission's view about the need for the Member States to reinforce education and continuing training of teachers and others involved in implementing the skills guarantee;

Modernisation of higher education

36. appreciates the Commission's intention to work together with various relevant parties in their efforts to modernise higher education, with specific reference to issues of skills assessment. Such work should take into consideration the national education frameworks of the Member States as well as local and regional strengths and challenges, including divergent local and regional labour market needs. Insists in this context on the need to draw lessons from previous successes and failures of similar exercises so as to ensure the necessary commitment to reach a consensus in taking forward the modernisation of higher education;

37. would underline, in respect of the initiative announced by the Commission on graduate tracking to improve information on how graduates progress in the labour market, that no additional red tape should be created for national and regional authorities and higher education establishments, nor should this create an additional burden for students; moreover it would point out the need to comply with data protection provisions. For this reason, the idea of using tax and social security information for these plans is questionable;

Review of the Europass framework

38. welcomes the Commission's intention to revise the current Europass framework. To ensure accurate and real-time information about skills demand and supply, the revised Europass framework must draw on current local and regional experience. Therefore, local and regional authorities can usefully contribute to skills intelligence and the work of the proposed online service platform.

Brussels, 7 December 2016.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
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⁽¹⁾ Refugees: Social inclusion and integration into the labour market. European Parliament (2016)0297.

⁽²⁾ COM(2013) 654 final