

OPINIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

(2021/C 106/02)

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Reference documents:	Communication on a 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

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Main messages

1. advocates for the recognition of and respect for the crucial role local and regional authorities (LRAs), and Member States, play in the EU's main policies, and also in the realm of skills, as owners of the relevant infrastructure, as beneficiaries of EU Funds and of national and regional support, and also as the main gateways to local and regional communities. At the same time, regrets the lack of recognition of this role in the current European Commission Communications;
2. underlines the need to inform employees in energy-intensive sectors about the challenges and opportunities caused by the digital and green transitions and accompany them accordingly;
3. welcomes with interest the launch of the European Pact promoting joint action to maximise the impact of investment in upgrading existing skills (upskilling) and training in new skills (reskilling). Local and regional authorities must be part of this Pact, working together and making a clear commitment to training for everyone of working age throughout the European Union;
4. suggests that regional territorial strategies and Green-Deal-related pacts should refer to the skills policy and investments that the region needs. There is also a need for a better understanding of regional skills-related needs and opportunities, analysed for each sector concerned, emphasising low carbon technologies and sustainability, but in particular car manufacturing, construction, building services, the design and creative industries, pharmaceuticals, ITC and the food sector;
5. highlights that, in most Member States, LRAs play a major role in funding education and developing skills-related policies. The Commission should take steps to build direct links with LRAs interested in fast-tracking of EU funds in the form of pilot projects, the formulation of local and regional strategies and action plans, and increased financing for new initiatives, so that actions can be carried out, even if there are no partnership agreements in the medium term;

6. notes that, during the current pandemic, most education systems have responded quickly and flexibly to new challenges, and some Member States have rapidly accelerated the digitalisation of education. While there are real success stories in the regions, the Committee of the Regions suggests focusing on:

- a. equal access to the new forms of education and training for all, with a special focus on the most vulnerable children and adolescents,
- b. removing obstacles in the area of the language, including the language rights of ethnic minorities and the language rights of deaf people, as well as people with hard of hearing using sign language,
- c. ensuring that the new initiatives and forms of education have had a positive impact on access to education and training for all, reducing the digital divide and accessibility deficit, so that all people have full access to collaborative tools, regardless of where they are,
- d. promoting digital connectivity, particularly in areas with low population density, including technology and educational materials and tools that facilitates access to digital education;

7. points out that the European Commission's Guidance to Member States Recovery and Resilience Plans of 17 September 2020, under NextGenerationEU, includes 'Reskill and upskill' as one of its flagship initiatives together with the adaptation of education systems to support digital skills and vocational education and training at all ages, which entails a new financial perspective for the Member States, and thus for regional and local authorities;

Policy recommendations

8. notes that LRAs are facing new challenges, in particular with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many new initiatives emerge also every day, as a reply to these challenges. The digitalisation of education and local business are the most prominent examples. The Commission should analyse whether it can set up a European platform with a selection of best practices, which would be accessible to LRAs and which would support the development of adaptation and resilience strategies and action plans, inspiring new local and regional initiatives. Any such initiative would be welcomed and supported by the Committee of the Regions and its members;

9. highlights that vocational and technological education both need practice and are mostly connected to places and educational facilities, much more so than digital, language and other soft skills. We should start identifying best practices in some regions that can inspire new initiatives in other regions;

10. asks the Commission to revise the approach set out in the communication and take into account the major role LRAs play in supporting and developing skills-related infrastructure in most Member States, because local and regional authorities hold key responsibilities for education and training policy and play an important role in youth and employment policies;

11. underscores that times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt education and training systems and are often followed by a period of high unemployment rates and economic uncertainty. At the same time, in addition to changes in the labour market from the green and digital transitions, low-qualified adults need urgent support to enter or remain in the labour market⁽¹⁾. In this regard, the proposed initiatives for skills and vocational education and training (VET) are very much needed in order to ensure the implementation of the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning;

(1) According to Cedefop, in 2016, 23 % of people aged 25-64 in the EU had a low level of education attainment, at or below lower secondary education (ISCED 2). ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/statistics-and-indicators/statistics-and-graphs/33-how-many-adults-have-low-level-education#:~:text=%202016%2C%2023.0%25%20of%20people,followed%20by%20Portugal%20\(53.1%25\)](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/statistics-and-indicators/statistics-and-graphs/33-how-many-adults-have-low-level-education#:~:text=%202016%2C%2023.0%25%20of%20people,followed%20by%20Portugal%20(53.1%25)))

12. looks forward to the upcoming endorsement of the ‘Osnabrück Declaration’ by the EU education ministers with a view to modernising European VET and deepening cross-border cooperation within a European Education Area ⁽²⁾, and as a means to strengthen the voluntary nature of the recommendation. Underlines to this effect that local and regional authorities must be fully involved in the design and implementation of national strategies regarding adult learning policies;

13. underlines, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, the need to improve digital training solutions and distance learning including for VET and to improve tracking of VET graduates when appropriate, without creating unnecessary administrative burdens. Further points to the need to boost VET’s attractiveness and to ensure coherence and synergies between the VET sector and the general education system. Moreover, the CoR calls for a review of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships in order to ensure high quality, diversified and tailor-made apprenticeships: further underlines the importance of equal access and the right to training for all employees;

14. notes that the situation varies widely across the EU, and that this is one of the main challenges when designing and implementing new standards and practices for education and training. These regional disparities are created by the skills gap and mismatch in the EU and are likely to be widened if local and regional policies are not well designed and not financed accordingly. Therefore, the Committee of the Regions reiterates its demand for a more regional focus when assessing progress on the implementation of the new Skills Agenda and VET policy;

15. holds the opinion that any policy intervention must be in keeping with the regional context, and that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach does not work. In local and regional-level policy, solutions must be adapted accordingly;

16. points out that the issue of socially excluded or vulnerable people’s access to high-quality education and training needs to be addressed, to ensure that there are no barriers to equal access in any of the Member States;

17. is in favour of speeding up the implementation of a European Education Area to guarantee high-quality education for all. The EU should encourage, support and supplement cooperation and exchanges between education systems and different curricula based on citizens’ needs, in line with the division of competences, the subsidiarity principle, and the prohibition on harmonisation in this field;

18. stresses that there is a risk that the green transition and the pandemic will have a more detrimental effect on minorities, women, children, adolescents, youth and people from disadvantaged communities, especially in remote, sparsely populated or mountainous regions where the population faces greater barriers and difficulties in accessing quality training and education. These issues should be tackled in a way that is evidence-based and that addresses the specific needs of these groups in all regions; to this end, we propose including people with disabilities as one of the groups particularly badly affected by the problems described;

19. given the important role of the new STEM skills (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), these shall be accessible in all regions, at all levels of education, respecting gender balance, while in promoting the twin transitions, the relevance of these disciplines to the future labour market, and the opportunities they have for future employees, should be disseminated to students in ISCED 2 and 3, when they choose their career path. The aim is to guide their future training and education towards these sectors, bearing in mind language rights and the accessibility of these new skills for all generations and groups;

20. points out that public universities should be prioritised in order to boost local and regional initiatives, and that public and private investment should be found to promote new skills-related opportunities, while local and regional research in this field should focus on the uptake of new skills in all European regions;

21. would stress that European cooperation on skills and vocational training should have a local and regional focus, aimed at LRAs and at stabilising access to schools and training providers. Such platforms should not focus purely on Member States and those already involved;

(2) <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en/news/article/eu-education-ministers-karliczek-osnabrueck/2384182>

22. warmly welcomes the fact that the Action 7 of the Skills Agenda introduces the promotion of entrepreneurial opportunities yielded by the social economy, such as helping local communities, striking local green deals and activating vulnerable groups. In this regard, we recommend closer involvement of local and regional authorities in drafting the Social Economy Action Plan announced by the European Commission for 2021;
23. holds the opinion that EU's Erasmus+ education scheme plays an important role in the acquisition of intercultural and multilingual skills. Due to the pandemic, there is a risk that many students, pupils and apprentices will be unable to take up this opportunity. Consequently, quick solutions adapted to the new circumstances must be found, so that the goals of the Erasmus+ can continue to be met, while supporting those students, pupils and apprentices who have in the past been less likely to make use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus+, in the interests of social inclusion;
24. maintains that the pandemic, the Green Deal and digitalisation are the main drivers of change in the European economy. Changes are welcome when it comes to targeted outcomes for the environment and for the future of European economic development. Employees need to have access to new skills for the new era of green and digital growth, to build resilience, in line with the emerging and growing sectors, so that any skills mismatch can be tackled. Employees must be supported with targeted, tailored guidance in the workplace and people looking for new job opportunities are most open to learning new skills; at the same time, businesses should be supported in providing training guidance to their staff;
25. underlines that there is a need for a critical mass in terms of funding and support for recovery, resilience-building and new skills related to education and training in all regions, including the training of teachers and trainers, in all areas and at all levels of education; with this in mind, insists that the budget of those EU programmes directly investing in education and skills, especially Erasmus+ and ESF+, should not be cut;
26. highlights that in the rapidly digitalising worlds of education and training, teachers, trainers, students and pupils need new ICT-based and operational skills but at the same time behavioural skills pertaining to information, digital and media literacies⁽³⁾. Regions and cities need to design evidence based on local and regional policies, reflecting if teachers and trainers have the requisite skills and have adapted to the new situation, and if there are bottlenecks and mismatches, these require tailored, coordinated solutions in teacher training curricula and continuous teachers' skills improvement;
27. supports the idea that, in the future Horizon Europe, we need to see the results of evidence-based, applied research on identifying new skills, on teaching methods in the online digitised form, on offering the basic set of skills to all, including language minorities, ethnic groups and marginalised groups, and also on the multi-level governance of skills-related policy areas, with the active participation of LRAs;
28. believes that local and regional partnerships, formed by LRAs, expert groups, representatives of employers, education and training providers can lead to a better understanding of how regionally embedded skills acquisition works in the most effective and rapid way. Such partnerships can serve as the motor of local and regional change in this respect, by building knowledge, understanding and trust, and also by involving all the different actors concerned.

Brussels, 5 February 2021.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
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⁽³⁾ JRC Technical Notes: 'Mapping Digital Competence: Towards a Conceptual Understanding', by Kirsti Ala-Mutka (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340375234_Mapping_Digital_Competence_Towards_a_Conceptual_Understanding).