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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNCIL

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

of 19 December 2016

on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults

(2016/C 484/01)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) In today's society everyone needs to have a wide set of skills, knowledge and competences, including a sufficient level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence, in order to achieve his or her full potential, play an active part in society and undertake his or her social and civic responsibilities. Such skills, knowledge and competences are also crucial for accessing, and progressing in, the labour market and for engaging in further education and training.
- (2) Increasingly, job openings require both a higher level and a broader range of skills. In the future there will be fewer jobs of an elementary nature. Even jobs which traditionally required low-level qualifications or no qualifications at all are becoming more demanding. A large majority of jobs will require some level of digital competence, and an increasing number of elementary jobs require some core or generic skills (such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork and emotional intelligence).
- (3) In 2015, there were 64 million people, more than a quarter of the Union population aged 25-64, who had left initial education and training with at most a lower secondary education qualification. While there are no means to measure the basic skill levels of those people, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills ('PIAAC'), which tested levels of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments, indicates that similar proportions of adults aged 16 to 65 performed at the lowest level of proficiency in 20 Member States.
- (4) Furthermore, 2013 data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) highlight the significant proportion of 15-year-olds who underachieve in reading (17,8%), maths (22,1%) and science (16,6%). Those results remain above the Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) benchmark of 15%.
- (5) PIAAC indicates that adults with higher proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments tend to have more success in the labour market. At the same time, 20 to 25% of European adults aged 16 to 65 with low levels of proficiency in those skills are less likely to take part in learning or to participate fully in the digitally driven economy and society. They face a higher risk of unemployment, a higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion, higher health risks and a lower life expectancy, while their children face higher risks of educational underachievement.

- (6) Low-qualified people with fundamental weaknesses in basic skills may constitute a high proportion of the unemployed (in particular long-term unemployed) and other vulnerable groups, for instance older workers, economically inactive people and third-country nationals. Such weaknesses make it more difficult for them to enter or return to the labour market.
- (7) Member State policies to reduce early leaving from education and training in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 ⁽¹⁾ and the Council conclusions of 23 November 2015 on policies to reduce early school-leaving, based on prevention, intervention and compensation measures, are having a positive effect. In 2015, the Union average rate of early school-leaving among those aged 18 to 24 was around one percentage point below the Europe 2020 headline target of 10 %, but with wide variations across Member States. Even if the headline target were to be achieved, the remaining 10 % of people would enter adulthood facing serious problems with regard to access to sustainable employment. Moreover, there are still large numbers of people aged 25 and above who left school early, many of them third-country nationals and other people with a migrant or disadvantaged background.
- (8) Participation in lifelong learning by low-qualified adults remains four times lower than that by those with tertiary qualifications. Access to lifelong learning opportunities remains uneven across socioeconomic groups, and some groups of the working-age population, in particular third-country nationals, have less access. Encouraging wide and inclusive participation is therefore key to the success of upskilling measures. Efforts to reach out to individuals who need special motivation, support and lifelong guidance, especially those furthest away from the labour market or education and training, are essential.
- (9) The Upskilling Pathways would target adults with a low level of skills, knowledge and competences who are not eligible for support under the Youth Guarantee ⁽²⁾, and would provide them with flexible opportunities to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital competence and to progress towards higher European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels relevant for the labour market and for active participation in society. This could be achieved by delivering education and training in appropriate learning settings in which qualified teachers and trainers apply adult-specific teaching methods and exploit the potential of digital learning.
- (10) Taking into account national legislation, circumstances and available resources, Member States may focus upskilling pathways on their identified priority target groups. They could be delivered in line with the implementing arrangements put in place by the Member States and on the basis of the individual's commitment and interest in taking part.
- (11) Raising the skills and competences of adults significantly contributes to achieving the strategic objectives of Europe 2020, as reflected in the policy cycle of the European Semester.
- (12) The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognises the right to education and to access to vocational and continuing training for everyone.
- (13) The 2015 United Nations sustainable development goals call for action to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030.
- (14) Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning ⁽³⁾ provides a reference framework that supports Member States in ensuring that, by the end of initial education and training, young people have developed the key competences that equip them for adult life, further learning and working life. That framework also supports Member States in ensuring that adults are able to develop and update their key competences throughout their lives.
- (15) The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens provides a common European reference for what it means to be digitally savvy in today's society, and defines competences and levels of competence in five key areas.
- (16) 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 ⁽⁴⁾ created a common qualifications reference framework of eight levels, expressed in terms of learning outcomes which can be achieved through various routes of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 191, 1.7.2011, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee (OJ C 120, 26.4.2013, p. 1).

⁽³⁾ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.

- (17) The Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) prioritised in the area of adult learning, *inter alia*, the provision of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and of sufficient second-chance opportunities leading to a recognised EQF qualification for those without EQF level 4. That Joint Report also includes medium-term deliverables for vocational education and training ('VET'), including enhancing access to qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable VET systems, in particular by offering efficient and integrated guidance services and making available validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- (18) The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽¹⁾ invites Member States by 2018 to set up national arrangements for the validation (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) of non-formal and informal learning. This includes possibilities for unemployed people or those at risk of unemployment to undergo a 'skills audit' aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences.
- (19) The Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee recommends that young people under 25 years of age receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. It invites Member States to offer early school-leavers and low-skilled young people pathways to re-enter education and training or second-chance education programmes which provide learning environments which respond to their specific needs and enable them to obtain the qualification they have missed.
- (20) The Council Recommendation of 15 February 2016 on the Integration of the Long Term Unemployed into the Labour Market ⁽²⁾ recommends that long-term unemployed persons are offered in-depth individual assessments and guidance and a job-integration agreement comprising an individual offer and the identification of a single point of contact at the very latest when they reach 18 months of unemployment.
- (21) Commission Recommendation 2008/867/EC of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market ⁽³⁾ invites Member States to expand and improve investment in human capital through inclusive education and training policies, including effective lifelong strategies, and to adapt education and training systems in response to new competence requirements and the need for digital skills.
- (22) The Council conclusions of 5 and 6 June 2014 on the integration of third-country nationals legally residing in the Union reaffirmed the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU adopted in 2004, one of which is that efforts in education are critical to preparing immigrants, and particularly their descendants, to be more successful and more active participants in society.
- (23) The Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies ⁽⁴⁾ invites the Member States to make use of four guiding principles for supporting the lifelong career transitions of citizens: encourage the lifelong acquisition of career management skills; facilitate access by all citizens to guidance services; develop the quality assurance of guidance provision; and encourage coordination and cooperation among various national, regional and local stakeholders.
- (24) Despite these efforts, low-qualified adults' access to and participation in education and training opportunities remains a challenge. Active labour market policies aim to bring unemployed people into a job as fast as possible but do not always provide flexible personalised opportunities for upskilling. Few public policies address the need for upskilling those who are already in employment, leaving them at risk of skills obsolescence and job loss, while people furthest from the labour market have the greatest upskilling needs but are hardest to reach.
- (25) The Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States invited the Commission to present the proposal for a new skills agenda for Europe addressing, *inter alia*, ways of boosting skills development and knowledge acquisition and acknowledging that completing upper secondary level or equivalent tends to be considered the minimum requirement for ensuring a successful transition from education to the labour market and for gaining access to further learning.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 67, 20.2.2016, p. 1.

⁽³⁾ OJ L 307, 18.11.2008, p. 11.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 4.

- (26) The knowledge base needed by policymakers and practitioners is growing but incomplete. Union bodies, in particular Eurostat, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), could develop further relevant research, expertise and analysis. Results of the work carried out under European cooperation in the fields of employment, education and training could contribute further to developing the knowledge base and mutual learning.
- (27) Employer organisations, employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, trade, commerce and crafts, national entities involved in planning, organising or promoting education and training and in migrant integration policies, employment services, education and training providers, intermediary and sectoral organisations, civil society organisations, local and regional economic actors, libraries, community services and adult learners themselves are among the key stakeholders in the concerted effort needed to reach, engage, guide, and support individuals as they progress on their upskilling pathways.
- (28) The diversity of the target group and the fragmentation and complexity of the policy measures in this area often result in a lack of systematic approaches to upskilling the workforce and a lack of awareness of the socio-economic benefits of doing so. Therefore, coherent policy efforts based on effective coordination and partnerships across policy fields would be welcome.
- (29) Since education and training systems and labour market situations differ substantially between Member States and regions, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to employability. In this context, progress towards a specific level of qualification is a means to enhance one's employability and active participation in society, rather than an end in itself,

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES,

in accordance with national legislation, circumstances and available resources, and in close cooperation with social partners and education and training providers:

1. Offer adults with a low level of skills, knowledge and competences, for example those who have left initial education or training without completing upper secondary education or equivalent, and who are not eligible for support under the Youth Guarantee, access to upskilling pathways which provide them with the opportunity, according to their individual needs, to:
 - (a) acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence; and/or
 - (b) acquire a wider set of skills, knowledge and competences, relevant for the labour market and active participation in society, building on Recommendation 2006/962/EC on key competences for lifelong learning, by making progress towards a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4 depending on national circumstances.
2. Taking into account national circumstances, available resources and existing national strategies, identify priority target groups for the delivery of upskilling pathways at national level. In doing so, take also into account the gender, diversity and various sub-groups in the targeted population.
3. Where appropriate, base the design of the upskilling pathways on three steps: skills assessment; provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer; and validation and recognition of skills acquired. Those steps could be facilitated by guidance and support measures as provided for in paragraphs 12 to 14 and by making best use of the potential of digital technologies, if appropriate.

Skills assessment

4. Offer adults within the priority target groups defined in accordance with paragraph 2 the opportunity to undergo an assessment, e.g. a skills audit, to identify existing skills and upskilling needs.
5. Apply, where appropriate, to low-qualified adults the validation arrangements set up in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning to identify, document, assess and/or certify existing skills.

A tailored and flexible learning offer

6. Provide an offer of education and training, in accordance with paragraph 1, meeting the needs identified by the skills assessment. For migrants from third countries, include, as appropriate, opportunities for language learning and preparation for training.

7. If in line with national systems and circumstances, allow for the increased use of units of learning outcomes which can be documented, assessed and validated in order to record the progress of learners at different stages.
8. Consider, as far as possible, local, regional and national labour market needs when establishing an offer in accordance with paragraph 1, and deliver it in close cooperation with relevant stakeholders, in particular social partners and local, regional and national economic actors.

Validation and recognition

9. Build on existing validation arrangements put in place in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning to assess and certify the knowledge, skills and competences acquired, including learning at work, and encourage their certification towards a qualification, in accordance with national qualifications frameworks and systems.
10. In accordance with national legislation, circumstances and available resources, base the delivery of upskilling pathways on the principles outlined in paragraphs 11 to 18.

Coordination and partnership

11. Ensure effective coordination to implement this Recommendation, and support, where appropriate, the engagement of relevant public and private actors in education and training, employment, social, cultural and other relevant policy areas, as well as the promotion of partnerships among them, including cross-border and regional cooperation.

Outreach, guidance and support measures

12. Implement motivation and outreach measures that include raising awareness on the benefits of upskilling, making available information on existing guidance, support measures, upskilling opportunities and responsible bodies, and providing incentives to those least motivated to take advantage of these.
13. Provide guidance and/or mentoring services to support learners' progression through all steps of the upskilling process.
14. Consider designing and implementing support measures that address in an equitable way obstacles to participation in upskilling pathways. These could be, *inter alia*, direct support to learners or indirect support to employers for upskilling their employees.
15. Support the initial training and continuous professional development of staff engaged in the delivery of upskilling pathways, in particular teaching professionals.

Follow-up and evaluation

16. Where possible, within one year of the adoption of this Recommendation and at the latest by mid-2018, and by building on relevant existing national arrangements and existing financial frameworks, outline appropriate measures for the implementation of this Recommendation at national level.
17. Evaluate within the existing national frameworks all measures referred to in paragraph 16 and their impact on the progress of the target group towards the acquisition of literacy, numeracy and digital competences and/or towards a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4 depending on national circumstances.
18. Use the results of the evaluation to inform, as appropriate, the design and delivery of upskilling pathways at national level and inform further evidence-based policies and reforms.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT THE COMMISSION:

19. With the support of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training, follow up on the implementation of this Recommendation, especially through exchanges such as mutual learning, in conjunction with relevant European coordination bodies and processes dealing with employment and education and training policies.
20. Promote the use of existing relevant competence frameworks, such as the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, and assessment tools.
21. Facilitate mutual learning among Member States and make key resources and information available on the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE).

22. Support and carry out in cooperation with Union bodies and international organisations such as the OECD or UNESCO relevant research and analysis on adult learning and skills assessments (e.g. PIAAC).
23. Where appropriate, without prejudice to the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework and in line with priorities defined for the period 2014-2020, support the use of current and future European funding programmes in the area of skills development, in particular European structural and investment funds and Erasmus+, for the implementation of this Recommendation, in accordance with their legal basis.
24. Take stock by 31 December 2018, in the framework of existing reporting procedures, of the implementation measures outlined by Member States.
25. Assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, the actions taken in response to this Recommendation and, within five years from the date of its adoption, report to the Council on progress made towards raising the levels of literacy, numeracy and digital competence amongst low-qualified adults, experience gained and implications for the future.

Done at Brussels, 19 December 2016.

For the Council

The President

L. SÓLYMOS
