



Contribution of EUproVET on the European Commission consultation on the future 'EU 2020' strategy

Introduction

It is Europe's aim to lead, compete and prosper as a knowledge-based, connected, greener and more inclusive economy, rapidly growing and sustainable, and creating high levels of employment and social progress. We fully agree with these ambitions and recognize the importance of education and research. However, we are quite surprised by the exclusive focus on university and academic developments, as we all know the essential role of vocational and adult education (lifelong learning) in the development of the knowledge economy and its importance in fighting inequality and poverty.

EUproVET wants to stress that Vocational education and training (VET) is essential for reaching the EU2020 goals. VET educates both for progression to higher education and access to the labour market. It is crucial to the welfare, social cohesion and prosperity of European societies. Therefore, it needs to be ensured that the VET pathway achieves parity of esteem with other learning pathways and that this is reflected in the equitable and realistic distribution of public funding at European as well as at national level.

As to the Commission working document, we agree that Europe needs new sources of growth to replace the jobs lost in the crisis. In our vision, new patterns are emerging with several entries into and exits from the labour market during a working life, instead of the traditional sequence (education, work, and retirement), offering more opportunities to people. This stresses the importance of an ambitious lifelong learning strategy and requires a framework to organise these transitions and support them, possibly building on some of the measures adopted during the crisis (e.g. short time work combined with training).

Moreover, we believe that the high number of low achievers in basic skills (reading, mathematics and science) needs to be addressed urgently to enhance the employability of young people and to bring them into the world of work after school. Preventing early school leaving reduces future exclusion from the labour market and the threat of future social exclusion. It also appears that the tendency of the more academic orientated student to postpone the choice of a profession to a later age as opposed to the VET student in initial education implies an additional barrier for VET students to the freedom of being able to choose the most suitable educational pathway. This introduces a social division which in the long run is both economically and socially detrimental. For these reasons, investing in second chance education and lifelong learning in VET is of great importance to all EU countries. Also, we underline that collaboration between the EU and its member states and between individual member states is essential to ensuring the future prosperity and cohesion of Europe. Finally we share the opinion about the importance of promoting key, agreed priorities, but among the mentioned three key priorities, we note the omission of implementing strategies for improving social cohesion. In our opinion, this should be added as a fourth priority.

New challenges

EUproVET realizes that the budgetary margin for meeting the new challenges is limited. Nevertheless, we wish to stress what is argued in several studies, that raising the basic skills of all individuals has a larger impact on economic growth than investing in improving the skills of a select group of high-skilled individuals. In many European countries, funding of general and higher education outweighs funding for VET considerably. However, upgrading of the skills of the considerable group of people that have not attained minimum labour market qualifications needs to be done through VET-institutions. More attention to this kind of training will therefore contribute to the objective of social cohesion which is crucial for new policies to work effectively. A disproportionate attention to general and higher education will create a dual labour market which will increase social discrepancies and lower the average economic capabilities of the work force. A one-dimensional policy initiative towards the knowledge and research side of education as opposed to further developing the competencies of the workforce will not be economically beneficial. Knowledge travels easily around the world. The implementation of knowledge however is only feasible in countries with a skilled workforce.

There also needs to be a much greater emphasis on the integration of creativity and innovation into all education and training programmes. In a world where change is literally the only constant and where the life-cycles of products and markets are constantly contracting, education and training programs should be designed and implemented with a view to producing 'graduates' who not only possess the knowledge, skills and competences to be effective employees today, but who also have their capacity for creativity and innovation maximized. Optimal cooperation between education and the labour market is needed for creating a more flexible and mobile work force that anticipates the needs of the business sector. In light of this, education systems should focus their policy more equitably between general- and VET-education. Moreover they should shift policy away from control over the resources and content of education toward a focus on obtaining better outcomes. Concomitantly, VET-institutions should obtain enough institutional autonomy to act according to the needs of both their learners and the communities they serve.

Bringing knowledge and innovation into practice

Innovation is crucial for exploring new markets and creating a more open and flexible labour market. It is important to not only include universities and research institutes, but also focus on the implementation of these innovations on the work floor. Making use of the expertise from the VET sector will be a great support to this priority. Optimal cooperation between the world of education and training, research and innovation, as well as the involvement of trade and industry is essential for success. Barriers between the different sectors should therefore be diminished. Also, the new European 'Knowledge Area' should involve all relevant actors, from the business sector, to education and training and social partners. Moreover there is a shared responsibility, in our view, for employers, trade unions and other industry bodies to recognise their responsibilities as partners with VET institutions in relation to the development of a skilled workforce which is able to cope with current and future challenges.

This goal requires the achievement of greater integration between the workplace and the education/training environment and enhanced co-operation on the design and implementation of VET education and training programmes. This will ensure that such programmes are as relevant as possible to the needs of the workplace whilst, at the same time, catering to the educational needs of individual workers from a citizenship, community and family perspective.

Although we acknowledge the importance of innovation and research, we believe that this should never be at the expense of investing in high quality VET. After all, the results of R&D are very often implemented in production facilities outside Europe, with no or relatively few benefits for the European work force. On the other hand, investment in high quality production capabilities and services, with an eye on a more sustainable, greener and smarter economy, appears to us as most beneficial to the prosperity in Europe, whilst, in the long run, relatively low investments in VET may prove detrimental to the EU economy.

Social inclusion, recognising prior learning and early school leaving

Prosperity and happiness of any society is very much reflected by the level of social cohesion, which in turn significantly depends on the extent to which all members of society benefit from its economic activity. As an important tool to contribute to this ambition, the whole matter of recognising prior learning (RPL) needs to be prioritised to a much greater extent than it is at present. Currently many in need of upgrading their skills are dissuaded from doing so because of the need to 'go back to the beginning of the queue' irrespective of how much they have learned informally – in the workplace, in the community or in the family.

Every nation in Europe needs to be in a position to recognise all prior learning, irrespective of how or where this is acquired, for the purpose of access, transfer, progression and certification. We believe that if the resources currently being devoted to teaching learners what they already know could be devoted towards teaching new skills, knowledge and competences, the labour force would be more skilled than it is at the moment. In our opinion lifelong learning should be the shared responsibility of the social partners, supported by policy on both national and European level, without creating extensive bureaucratic burdens. Concerning the issue of early school leaving we strongly advise a more sophisticated approach, by creating learning environments that provide students at all levels with appropriate challenges as well as opportunities for them to acquire knowledge, skills and competences through both 'learning through doing' and theory. This dual approach is essential to ensuring that students neither underachieve nor leave school early and that, as adults, they are willing to return to education and training as often as necessary to enable them to achieve their full potential in a constantly changing world and to succeed in a competitive global labour-market. It is essential that different learning pathways are considered equally valuable and give opportunities to lifelong learning, whether academic or more vocational and applied.

Concluding remarks

EUproVET recommends that the future development of education and training across Europe should take place within the frameworks already established by the following policy instruments: **EQF, ECVET and EQARF**, thus enhancing the potential for mobility.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the practical usefulness of these instruments will depend very significantly on the extent to which individual European states align their domestic policies to them. Otherwise, there is potential for excessive bureaucracy and consequent inefficiency.

Furthermore, EUproVET believes that the Commission should both encourage and facilitate national governments to promote transnational mobility (not only within the EU but also to and from countries outside the European Union) for students, young workers/apprentices, teaching/training staff in VET institutions and those involved in providing VET in the workplace. The international experience gained in the course of such mobilities will contribute greatly towards enhancing professional practice and strengthening personal adaptability, flexibility, self-reliance and communication skills. It will also contribute significantly towards a full realisation of a single European market. In this matter, the language issue will have to be addressed as well. The EU objective of attaining a mobile and flexible workforce of high quality is greatly hampered by the diversity of languages. In Europe, we greatly differ in this respect to other competing continents. The effects of this on mobility and possible solutions need to be considered in the process of developing a mobility strategy.

Summary of ten (10) EUproVET recommendations to realise the EU2020 strategy

1. To strengthen education and training at all stages of the life cycle, as this is one of the most effective ways of ensuring employability and fighting inequality and poverty.
2. To ensure that the VET pathway achieves parity of esteem with other learning pathways and that this is reflected in the equitable and realistic distribution of public funding at European as well as at national level.
3. To recognize and value the essential role of vocational and adult education (lifelong learning) in the development of the knowledge economy on the one hand and its importance for social inclusion on the other, by raising the basic skills of those who are employed as well as those who are (temporarily) not employed.
4. To add the issue of social inclusion as the 4th key priority for EU2020.
5. To promote cooperation between education/training and the labour market and to acknowledge the shared responsibility of employers, trade unions and other industry as partners with VET institutions in relation to the development of a skilled workforce which is able to cope with current and future challenges.
6. To meet the issue of early school leaving in a more sophisticated approach, by creating learning environments that provide students at all levels with appropriate challenges as well as opportunities for them to acquire knowledge, skills and competences through both 'learning by doing' and theory.
7. To pay attention to the development of innovation, as well as to the implementation of it.
8. To prioritize the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to a much greater extent than exists at present.
9. To use already (partially) developed tools like EQF, ECVET and EQARF, by aligning them to national policies, whilst avoiding excessive bureaucracy.
10. To promote transnational mobility (not only within the EU but also to and from countries outside the EU) for students, young workers/apprentices and staff within VET institutions as well as those involved in VET in the workplace.

Finally the members of EUproVET like to draw the attention to their willingness to participate in any further consultations about the EU2020 strategy.