



*Brussels, 02.05.2017  
C(2017) 2404 final*

*Dear President,*

*The Commission would like to thank the Bundesrat for its Opinion on the Communication 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}.*

*The New Skills Agenda for Europe focuses on increasing skills levels to boost employability and competitiveness, supporting fair, inclusive and sustainable growth. The Agenda supports upward social convergence and the sustainability of the European Social Model, contributing to the Commission's first political priority, "A New Boost for Jobs, Growth and Investment". It aims at addressing three pressing challenges that Europe faces: inadequate skills compared to the requirements of our society and economy, the insufficient transparency of skills and qualifications and the difficulty to anticipate and forecast the skills needs of the labour market.*

*In adopting the New Skills Agenda for Europe the Commission is delivering on the promise in its 2016 Work Programme to promote skills development and the transparency of qualifications, supporting vocational training and higher education and reaping the full potential of digital jobs.*

*With this initiative, the Commission outlined its vision on the strategic importance of skills for sustaining jobs, growth and competitiveness.*

*The Commission put forward ten key actions which will contribute to make progress in three priority areas:*

- 1. Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;*
- 2. Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and*
- 3. Advancing skills intelligence, documentation and informed career choices.*

*Ms Malu DREYER  
President of the Bundesrat  
Leipziger Straße 3 - 4  
D – 10117 BERLIN*

*The Commission has taken due note of the views expressed by the Bundesrat in its Opinion. In response to the more technical comments in the Opinion the Commission would like to refer to the attached annex.*

*The Commission would also like to refer to the replies already provided in relation to the Bundesrat's Opinions on the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning {COM(2016) 383 final} [C(2017) 22], and on the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee {COM(2016) 382 final} [C(2017) 384].*

*The Commission hopes that the clarifications provided in this reply address the concerns raised by the Bundesrat and looks forward to continuing the political dialogue in the future.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Frans Timmermans  
First Vice-President*

*Marianne Thyssen  
Member of the Commission*

## ANNEX

*The Commission has carefully considered the issues raised by the Bundesrat in its Opinion and would like to offer the following observations grouped by topic.*

### *I. General*

*The Commission welcomes the Bundesrat's view that the issues outlined in its Communication on A New Skills Agenda for Europe, are also on the agenda at national level.*

*The Commission fully acknowledges that the responsibility in the field of education and vocational training resides with the Member States (Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and confirms that no binding measures arise from the Communication. Legislative proposals are being or will be discussed in accordance with the appropriate procedures, fully respecting the competences and responsibilities of the European Parliament and of the Council, where Germany is taking an active role.*

*The Commission takes note of the Bundesrat's critical view on the fact that the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion is the leading service for the New Skills Agenda for Europe. As the Bundesrat will be aware, in the current Commission the development of skills policies is part of the responsibilities of the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility. The New Skills Agenda for Europe, is a collegial initiative by the Commission and has benefitted from a wide cooperation across all Commission services, including the Directorate-General for Education and Culture and Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content & Technology, which are also responsible for some of the Agenda's key actions.*

*The Commission takes note of the Bundesrat's view on the need for a more gender-sensitive approach and reassures the Bundesrat of the importance that the Commission attaches to the gender dimension, also in the implementation of the Agenda by the Member States.*

*The Commission agrees that the role of education is broader than preparing people for the labour market and support growth and competitiveness. The New Skills Agenda for Europe does not contradict this principle and is coherent with other relevant processes at European level, such as the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), which cover the different aspects of education.*

### *II. Establishment of a Skills Guarantee*

*As regards the Skills Guarantee, the Commission would like to refer to its detailed reply to the Bundesrat's Opinion on the proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee {COM(2016) 382 final} [C(2017) 384].*

*The Commission would like to recall here the purpose of this proposed Recommendation is to draw attention to the untenable situation in which 64 million low-skilled adults find themselves at a disadvantage regarding access to upskilling. The initiative further seeks to encourage that the many examples of excellent adult education and training measures which are undertaken in Member States can be exchanged and learned from, and proposes steps and enablers which can be used to upscale Member States' activities to cater for a larger*

*number of low-skilled and low-qualified adults. The proposed Recommendation clearly states that Member States themselves should use the recommendation "in accordance with national circumstances" and to identify the group or groups they wish to target.*

*The proposal was adopted as Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults, 19 December 2016 (2016/C 484/01).*

### *III. Key competences and higher, more complex skills*

*The Commission believes that education and training should equip everyone with key competences which enable personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment. The proposed EU level initiative aims to provide further support to Member States in their approaches to competences development in a lifelong learning perspective while fully respecting the sole responsibility of the Member States for curriculum development and key competences assessment.*

### *IV. Implementation of the Riga conclusions and apprenticeships*

*Regarding the implementation of the Riga conclusions, the Commission welcomes the positive view of the Bundesrat on the focus of the New Skills Agenda for Europe on promoting apprenticeships and work-based learning and agrees that the German dual system provides an inspiring best practice.*

*The holistic approach to training and professions is a key feature of the German system and the Commission supports EU-wide open and flexible pathways. A variety of approaches can better respond to diverse needs taking into account different national contexts and learners' personal circumstances. For this purpose, the Commission will further develop European tools and frameworks, which will be made available for voluntary use by Member States according to their national circumstances.*

*Such developments will be taken into consideration when preparing the actions included in the Commission Work Programme for 2017, notably regarding the proposal for a Quality Framework for Apprenticeships and that on increased mobility of apprentices. Regarding apprenticeships, as mentioned in the New Skills Agenda for Europe the Commission will help social partners take forward the results of their joint projects, for example exploring the cost-effectiveness of apprenticeships. In 2017 the Commission also plans to carry out a comprehensive consultation with Member States and relevant stakeholders in the Education and Training, as well as Employment fields as part of the legislative preparations. The Commission would like to assure the Bundesrat that any proposal to change the role of the Advisory Committee on vocational training would be thoroughly discussed with the Member States.*

*The Commission is aware of the difficulties related to long-term mobility of apprentices. The Commission is exploring the barriers and advantages of long-term mobility and identifying the nature of these difficulties with a pilot project supported by the European Parliament. As foreseen in the Commission Work programme 2017, and the December 2016 Communication "Investing in Europe's Youth", the Commission intends to propose a new dedicated activity labelled "ErasmusPRO" within the existing Erasmus+ programme, to support long-duration mobility opportunities for vocational educational and training learners and recent graduates,*

*namely through work-placements in companies abroad. Germany is among the countries that already make the most use of long-duration vocational mobility in the Erasmus+ programme.*

#### *V. Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition*

*The Commission takes note that the Bundesrat concurs with the Commission's view on the essential role of national coalitions and partnerships to solve the digital skills gap. As outlined in the Opinion, national, regional and local actors are best placed to address the training challenges arising from digitisation. Any action at European level, including joint action by Member States, needs to take full account and learn from work ongoing at national level.*

*As regards the use of EU funds, it is important that they and the projects they support can be used in the best possible way to support the development of digital skills. Concerning the timing of having national strategies and targets in place, this is an ambition rather than a fixed objective. The Commission services have discussed possible indicators with Member State experts. Member States are free to use these or other indicators to measure progress at national level. As regards Germany, the Commission has noted that several new and complementary initiatives at the interface of digital and education have been presented recently, which are fully in line with the objectives of the New Skills Agenda for Europe in the domain of digital skills.*

#### *VI. Revision of the European Qualifications Framework*

*On this question, the Commission would like to refer to its detailed reply to the Bundesrat's opinion on the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning {COM(2016) 383 final} [C(2017) 22].*

*In that regard, the Commission recalls that the proposal for a revision of the European Qualifications Framework builds on the achievements of the 2008 Recommendation and ensures continuity in the processes launched by Member States to reference their qualifications frameworks and levels to the European Qualifications Framework. The proposal seeks to deepen the comparability process, and to make the European Qualifications Framework more effective in facilitating understanding of qualifications by employers, workers and learners.*

#### *VII. Early identification of skills and qualifications of migrant workers and migrants*

*The Skills Profile Tool for third-country nationals announced by the Commission is indeed intended as a tool to be used on a voluntary basis by Member States to identify the skills and qualifications acquired by third-country nationals and their work experiences. Its main added value consists in providing a common format to present skills in all EU official languages and some other languages of incoming individuals, together with first guidance about training or upskilling needs. The tool is not intended as a recognition tool but rather as a first step to assist national authorities to profile the skills of third-country nationals and direct them to the most appropriate national body for further assessment of skills, training or employment.*

### *VIII. Revision of the Europass framework*

*The current Europass framework is mainly a documentation tool, offering templates for CVs and other documents to present the skills and experience individuals have acquired. Current templates are, however, not flexible enough to meet evolving needs and developments in information searching, job seeking and technology. Therefore, a revision of the framework is necessary to move away from a mere document approach to a more comprehensive offer of tools and services on skills and qualifications. Bringing together information and tools currently available through different platforms into one comprehensive platform will help simplify the offer, avoid duplication and ultimately ensure more efficiency and user-friendliness. The use of the tools and services offered by the new framework will be voluntary as it is now.*

### *IX. Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills*

*As stated in the New Skills Agenda for Europe, the Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills will help mobilise and coordinate key players to improve skills intelligence and tackle skills shortages in economic sectors, and to encourage private investment and promote more strategic use of relevant EU and national funding programmes. Sectoral skills partnerships at EU level will be supported through existing EU funding.*

*The Commission wishes to reassure the Bundesrat that this initiative will not encroach on Member States' competences and that any relevant link with the European Qualifications Framework will be thoroughly considered and addressed through the appropriate procedures.*

### *X. Initiative on Graduate Tracking and assessment frameworks*

*Across the EU, but particularly in countries with high rates of graduate unemployment, there is evidence of a mismatch between the supply of graduates and demand in the real economy. The proposed EU level initiative aims to increase the availability of information on the outcomes of graduates from Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training by supporting additional cooperation and mutual learning between organisations at national level involved in graduate tracking exercises and through a pilot phase of a new European graduate study. Participation in the proposed activities will be entirely voluntary and the pilot phase of the European tracking study will examine how such an exercise could be designed to avoid interference with national data collections and minimise the burden on organisations and respondents. In all activities proposed as part of the initiative, due attention will be paid to data protection.*

*The proposal to include the development of assessment frameworks to analyse the learning outcomes achieved in different higher education disciplines stems from a recently launched project to test the feasibility of such an initiative. The project, led by the University of Groningen, has taken full account of the lessons learnt from the OECD's AHELO project (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes). Moreover, the project is taking an entirely different approach, based on the bottom-up development of assessment frameworks for five disciplines by a core partnership involving 75 universities across Europe.*

## *XI. Implementation of the Agenda*

*The Commission wishes to reassure the Bundesrat that EU financial principles and procedures will be respected in the implementation of the New Skills Agenda for Europe.*

*The Commission takes due note of the Bundesrat's views on attention to education and training in the European Semester for economic policy coordination.*

*The Commission also notes the concerns expressed by the Bundesrat in relation to the expert groups dealing with skills and qualifications at EU level and on the coordination between the EU supported national centres for Europass, Euroguidance and European Qualifications Framework. On the latter, the Commission wishes to underline that the issues raised are based on the Commission proposal for a Decision revising the Europass Framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications {COM(2016) 625 final} which is currently in the legislative process involving both the European Parliament and the Council.*