

# Position Paper

## UEAPME<sup>1</sup> strategic reflections on Future of Vocational Education and Training post 2020

### Summary

- Vocational education and training has to be valued as a **specific asset for economic growth, competitiveness and employment**.
- VET has to be responsive for relevant and sustainable skills. The future of VET and future of work are two sides of the same coin.
- VET, especially, work-based learning and apprenticeship, is one of the most relevant pathways to ensure employability, adaptability and personal development.
- National VET systems need stability and flexibility for ensuring quality and relevance of skills.
- A good VET system governance with social partners' involvement remains essential.
- Higher qualification strategies must dedicate a stronger focus on higher VET, VET excellence and parity of esteem.
- European support is necessary for mobility, innovative and digital skills and further cooperation in VET.

### Introduction

#### **Vocational education and training has to be valued as a specific asset for economic growth, competitiveness and employment.**

It is necessary to make Europe fit for the future. Investing in people is one of our main strengths for making Europe competitive, promoting innovation and economic growth, ensuring cohesion and resilience.

Investing in people should first and foremost mean investing in education and training that support skills development, empowerment, learning to learn, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurial spirit and capacity to innovate.

The crisis and its economic, social and labour market consequences with high unemployment, in particular youth unemployment, in several European countries, as well as the more recent skills shortage with the recovery and labour market developments, are shifting the political focus towards the systems of education and training and their ability to deliver and secure relevant supply of skilled labour.

<sup>1</sup> UEAPME subscribes to the European Commission's Register of Interest Representatives and to the related code of conduct as requested by the European Transparency Initiative. Our ID number is [55820581197-35](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/procurements/notice/55820581197-35).

## 1 - Key challenges having an impact on Vocational Education and Training

Structural changes encompassing globalisation, ageing workforce, greening, digitisation, rapid technical change, new technologies, new processes and new business models, have generated new needs of companies, especially Crafts and SMEs, for skills and learning outcomes, innovation and for remaining competitive in a more and more globalised market.

This has a direct impact on an increased need for initial, continuous and higher vocational education and training in order to equip young people and adult learners with the right skills mix requested on the labour market.

Current VET systems are more and more diverse and pluralistic. They are also faced with a greater heterogeneity of learners in initial, continuous and higher VET due to, among others, an ageing workforce, the impact of migration, the introduction of new learning methods and supports such as digital learning and more individualised approaches.

Higher needs for continuous work-based training and requests for better and higher skills including more transversal competences put a renewed focus on the role and significance of VET for employability, adaptability, personal development, citizenship and social inclusion.

## 2 - Responsive VET for relevant and sustainable skills

### The future of VET and future of work are two sides of the same coin

VET content and methods cannot be disconnected from short and longer-term skills needs. Responsive VET systems have to mirror global and local skills forecasts as much as it is possible to precisely identify and anticipate them.

Adaptation of VET content and methods towards more work-based learning should evolve more rapidly to cope with the new pace of change of the general environment integrating industry and a service-based approach with a trend towards more blurred sectors and tasks due to digitisation.

### Labour market intelligence and skills forecasts

To support the transformation to a digital society, it is crucial that changes in skills demand are reflected in education and training systems. To this end, there is a clear need for improved skills intelligence, including for skills needs and skills forecasting with the objective of informing policy makers.

To ensure accuracy of data and of interpretation, it is highly necessary to perform checks at national, regional and local levels with a good governance system involving social partners. Crafts and SMEs rely to a great extent on the support of business organisations and professional chambers to anticipate labour market evolutions and to adapt curricula and training offers accordingly. Both, qualitative methods are helpful in identifying trends and evolving skills needs at company level and in different industries, and quantitative approaches are especially important in tracking VET graduates and their pathways on the labour market.

## 3 - VET to ensure employability, adaptability and personal development

VET can only function and deliver against its objective of securing competitiveness and employability if people entering VET possess adequate basic skills. It is detrimental to its good functioning, if VET is expected to compensate the shortcomings of basic general education systems. The acquisition of solid basic skills is essential as it is the foundation for any further learning to access to work and remaining in work and to play a full role in society.

Countries with VET systems, in which businesses are directly involved in the learning process, have shown more stable and sound employment and especially youth employment rates. These countries have better outcomes in terms of labour productivity, international competitiveness and economic growth. Even in highly specialised, technology- and knowledge-intensive sectors with high qualification requirements, skilled workers and managers, who have acquired qualifications by completing the vocational pathway, constitute the productive backbone of many small businesses.

VET has to become more an integrated part of education and training systems, with a better balance between theoretical and practical – including worked-based – learning and between transversal and technical skills. It requires more recognition of learning outcomes related to competences, and more focus on diversity of skills declined in technical, soft skills as well as creativity and innovation.

At the same time, VET needs to be more technical to keep pace with the advancement in knowledge and technologies common to the user communities.

Teachers and trainers role has to evolve as supporters of pedagogical practices such as planning individual learning paths, supporting learning processes in different learning environments, with a special emphasis to workplaces and digital learning environments, and the assessment of learning outcomes.

## 4 - VET systems organisation

### **National VET systems need stability and flexibility for ensuring quality and relevance of skills**

More open and flexible VET is a necessity to be more responsive to rapid changes and to new needs for updating or upgrading knowledge of adults. This should also include a better balance between technical, general and soft skills.

Furthermore flexible and permeable qualification pathways are more than ever necessary for innovation and for a better response to new approaches in initial, continuous and higher VET.

### **A good VET system governance remains essential**

The governance structures in the VET sector should be based on institutional cooperation between economic organisations in particular those representing Crafts and SMEs, chambers, social partners as well as public authorities and also, in particular, by economic self-administration, to ensure that VET is geared towards the specific requirements of the labour market and businesses, both conceptually and in their practical implementation.

### **Financing of VET**

VET systems are, for a large part, the result of shared contributions from sectors and industry, but also from employers and individuals, in particular in a more frequent lifelong learning perspective.

Public investments in Education and Training policies need to be more efficient and result oriented in basic skills since it is the responsibility of public authorities and education systems to equip young people with the necessary basic skills and key competences for further learning and for life.

European funding through the Support Services for Structural Reforms (SRSS) programme, Erasmus and ESF+ could make a decisive contribution to modernise national VET systems and adapt them to the new labour market challenges.

## 5 - Significance of higher VET and need for more VET excellence in Europe

Promoting higher VET, supporting excellence in VET, and bringing work-based learning elements in all forms of general education should become a key priority in the coming years, with the objective of reaching higher and more relevant skills. Technical and hands-on skills are already and will remain in high demand by businesses, the basis for which are sound basic and social skills.

Attractive qualification pathways and career concepts including VET at higher levels are the right answer to the growing demand for higher qualified workers. These pathways enable graduates to acquire further qualifications leading to the highest standards. Building on secondary vocational education and training, higher VET (covering qualifications on EQF-levels 5 to 8) fulfils a key function, ensuring that the learners deepen and widen their first qualification and are prepared for an entrepreneurial career and managerial tasks as well as for key positions in their respective specialist field in businesses.

Traditional public and educational policy discourse on “high-level qualifications” focuses mainly on tertiary academic education (i.e. Bachelor, Master and PhD study programmes). This is an approach which holds significant risks. There is no doubt that knowledge- and innovation-driven economies need a sufficient number of academically qualified higher education (HE) graduates. No less significant for the business work and production processes are vocationally highly skilled workers.

Higher qualification strategies pursued by educational policy-makers therefore need to value tertiary academic and tertiary vocational education and training equally. The one-sided focus on tertiary academic education, as pursued by many countries over the last decades, is a wrong course for young people and businesses.

The high rates of higher education graduates currently co-exist with still too high youth unemployment, while businesses are complaining about shortage of skilled labour, holding back economic growth in an increasing number of member states.

The challenge for the tertiary academic sector is mainly in terms of quality, with the goal of boosting excellence in the academic sphere and research rather than generating a further general increase of the HE graduation rate. At the same time it is necessary to make higher VET more attractive, visible and comparable: Compared to tertiary academic education with its homogeneous structures and qualifications (Bachelor-Master-PhD), the higher VET sector is relatively heterogeneous.

Fostering VET excellence, making higher VET more known and understood and thus enhancing its attractiveness is a major change and necessity. This also includes improving communication about higher vocational career paths and qualification ladders. A first important step can be taken with the national implementation of the European Qualifications Framework. Here it is important that the qualifications and learning outcomes acquired in higher VET are allocated appropriately and in line with their structure and levels to the national qualifications frameworks (NQF). In addition, permeability between tertiary academic and higher VET needs to be enhanced.

## **6 - Commitment to parity of esteem and acceptance of heterogeneity in the fields of governance and quality assurance**

National qualifications frameworks must be used to exemplify parity of esteem between higher VET and tertiary academic education. At the same time, parity of esteem of different types of qualifications must not be mixed-up neither with homogeneity nor harmonisation.

Higher VET qualifies graduates to autonomously and responsibly fulfil specialist and managerial functions in businesses. The focus here is on imparting professional competence at the highest level in specific fields of work. The points of reference of tertiary academic education are the academic disciplines. These different points of reference have a direct impact on the governance systems and this is reflected in substantially different approaches towards quality assurance.

Tertiary academic education can be much more self-referential in its governance and quality assurance than would be possible and useful for higher VET. The commitment to the quality of tertiary VET is geared towards specific occupational fields. Therefore the leading role by representatives of the different professions in regulatory work, examinations and courses is correspondingly important for assuring quality. Tertiary academic education and higher VET pursue a different logic, but both have the objective of generating the highest possible excellence with regard to different contexts. The different approaches need to be respected instead of uniformity with regard to governance and quality assurance from the parity of esteem of tertiary academic education and higher VET.

## 7 – Need for comprehensive vocational education and training

Strengthening VET for the future, in particular through work-based learning, dual VET systems and other types of apprenticeship training in Europe or introducing it, is taking place for the first time in many countries with the help of the “European Alliance for Apprenticeships” and of the “European Framework for Quality and effective Apprenticeships”.

At the same time, a firmly established work-based learning VET system needs to go beyond singular cooperation measures between businesses and schools and must not be limited to a training guarantee. For dual VET to become a regular part of national education systems, a number of steps need to be taken at the national level, such as the existence of reactive and business-oriented governance systems and the development of vocational qualifications that build on each other.

The objective, which was already agreed on in the Bruges Communiqué and reaffirmed in the Riga conclusions, of developing or strengthening vocational qualifications at EQF level 5 and above is particularly welcome. This objective, however, must now be incorporated more than in the past into the interpretation of the benchmark of the EU 2020 strategy and the subsequent strategy, according to which a Higher Education graduation rate of 40% in all age groups should be achieved across the EU by 2020 and after.

## 8 - UEAPME members expectations from EU level

Based on several years of intense cooperation and contribution to the various European tools, developing higher vocational education and training should become a fully-fledged European objective.

### Reinforced promotion of mobility in VET

The support to transnational mobility of VET learners, VET graduates and VET teachers and trainers should remain a key priority at EU level for acquiring broader and more transversal skills and competences, language competences and other key competences more and more required on the labour market.

UEAPME particularly welcomes the future Erasmus programme 2021-2027 to strongly support transnational mobility in VET. However, when redesigning the programme, the specific needs of small businesses must be stronger taken into account. This means simple applications procedures and less bureaucracy. In addition, the programme must be extended to learners in continuous and higher VET.

Equally relevant is to communicate more around VET excellence. The partnerships of excellence and funding of centres of vocational excellence as long as all partners can demonstrate a high quality level is a promising initiative<sup>2</sup>.

### Support to digital skills acquisition

The acceleration of change in the economy with digitisation, such as the use of platforms for businesses, robotics, automation, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, have revealed an increasing and urgent need for digital skills. Since digitisation remains one of the major challenges for Crafts and SMEs in Europe, UEAPME sees the need to further promote exchange of good practices and mutual learning on digital innovations, the acquisition of digital skills and the use of digital tools for learning and teaching.

Businesses should be supported in using the manifold possibilities of digitisation, both in the framework of their work and business processes as well as in the qualification of their apprentices, staff and trainers. Here the EU has a key role to play.

<sup>2</sup> [https://ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/180918\\_UEAPME\\_position\\_on\\_Erasmus\\_programme\\_2021\\_2027.pdf](https://ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/180918_UEAPME_position_on_Erasmus_programme_2021_2027.pdf)

## Enhanced cooperation at European level

Achieving higher transparency and comparability of educational degrees is already a genuine European goal and should remain a top priority, given the noticeable differences between national education systems. UEAPME considers it necessary to focus on consolidation of existing instruments notably EQF, ECVET, EQAVET, Europass after their thorough evaluations. Future work on instruments should be based on thorough analyses of the needs of end-users and as much as possible tested in pilot projects before giving them a legal status.

Innovative learning tools made possible through digitisation should benefit from further exchange of good practices, policy learning and possible European co-financing.

Last but not least, international sectoral qualifications will play a growing role in the future as global challenges need global answers. Policy exchange on how to deal with these qualifications in national VET systems and national qualification frameworks will be highly welcome.

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