
CESI's response to the background paper on the *New Skills Agenda for Europe*

New Skills Agenda for Europe

Within the framework of the consultation being carried out by the European Commission's DG Employment regarding the 'New Skills Agenda for Europe' involving several social partner organisations, the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions, which represents in excess of 40 trade unions in more than 30 countries, wishes to make its opinion known, after having consulted the members of its EDUC trade council and SOC commission.

Preamble

CESI welcomes the fact that the Commission is addressing the issue of fighting unemployment, especially amongst young people, as well as the skills gap. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, CESI warns against adopting an overly utilitarian vision of education. The goal should not only be to train future workers but also future citizens. In this framework, CESI heralds the initiative of the *Paris Declaration*, drafted in the wake of the Paris attacks, which aims for a better education reflecting the shared values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination.

Training should consist first and foremost of furnishing individuals with the capacity to undergo valuable training throughout their lives and the ability to adapt to multiple and constant developments (social, economic). This works on the assumption that basic skills (reading, writing and numeracy) are considered to be an absolute priority. Fundamental knowledge forms the base upon which professional skills and the capacity to keep building on these skills are built.

'Higher and more relevant skills for all'

The Commission talks in terms of **skills**. CESI takes the view that education is part of a larger whole, encompassing **knowledge, behaviour and attitude as well as aptitudes and capacities**. Incidentally, it would seem that the key recruitment criterion remains the social behaviour exhibited by the individual, just ahead of her level of qualification (since this determines the person's capacity to adapt).

CESI supports the willingness to improve the level of training of all citizens. However, the demand inherent in *'for all'* represents an ideal in terms of willingness and capacity to educate which fails to take empirical data into consideration (notably those provided by the OECD) which identify, in almost all of the member states, a group of 15 to 20% of young people whose school performance means that they are unable to pick up any professional skills.

In CESI's view, each member state must hold on to those professional certifications which are accessible to people who will never go further than level V for a variety of reasons, but who deserve respect and the keys to an independent life via dignified and gainful employment. CESI takes the view that the solutions for this target group have more to do with the local level, or indeed the regional level, which is the only level where a social partnership between unions and companies can make strides.

Incidentally, CESI highlights the fact that there is still too little attention being paid to the principle of lifelong learning, whether this be in the member states or at company level. There are still too few workers who are benefitting from continuing education. The budgets allotted to continuing education in companies have often been amongst the first to be slashed, or even disposed of altogether, in the wake of the financial crisis. When continuing education does make an appearance, it is often in the form of online modules. Internet training should be subjected to an objective evaluation, taking into account the working hours it involves and be accompanied by a human follow-up with a trainer, at the least via video conference, in order to protect employees from running the risk of burnout.

On teaching digital skills, these should not amount to an end in themselves or an education exclusively dedicated to the acquisition of these sorts of skills. In this sense, teaching ought to include them as a vehicle, a tool for teaching other knowledge or skills (and view this as an ongoing process). This is all the more true given that dedicated teaching would otherwise very rapidly become obsolete, in light of the fast-paced and permanent changes in the field of technology.

Likewise, when knowledge is being imparted, learning about different media, in particular critical thinking when it comes to analysing sources, are skills which ought systematically to be picked up along the way.

It should be noted that young people have a knack for using social networks – a skill which they can offer companies. By way of example, in an Italian pilot project *'scholarsjob'*, organised by the CONFISALForm, young people undertake a mandatory internship in a company with the goal of enhancing the company's visibility on social networks.

Regarding soft skills, these must not be honed to the detriment of the deepening of genuine transferable skills in the professional milieu. Teaching entrepreneurship makes no sense if the individual does not have a genuine plan to set up a company.

Focusing on how to behave in a self-confident fashion or equipping young people with the aptitude to take risks would be more appropriate at school level.

CESI warns against a systematic intervention on the part of the employers in the content of teaching programmes, as it could turn out to be too utilitarian (See above).

CESI welcomes efforts to support vocational training and improve the latter's image. Eversince it was launched, it has praised the initiative of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and plays an active part in its work. A dedicated internet platform should be devoted to best practice in this field.

However, CESI is against any financing system for vocational training which is purely performance-based. CESI sounds a note of caution warning against abuses of this type of system which would force establishments into informally selecting the best pupils, to the detriment of an inclusive education.

When it comes to guidance for young people, informing young people and their families about the labour market is desirable, though this could collide with their imagination, their dreams and consequently their freedom.

The efforts on the part of the Commission to promote **greater mobility** in Europe should be supported.

- CESI thinks that European mobility programmes which allow pupils, students, apprentices and teachers to spend a period of time in another member state are important.
- CESI's affiliates, particularly those which are active in the sector of vocational training, welcome the budgets allocated to the various mobility programmes. However, they warn the Commission against highly time-consuming application procedures involving too much red tape, which are hard to access by the secretariats of schools and professional establishments which are not able to focus solely on managing these kinds of projects.
- Opportunities to link up classes from different schools in the same country by video conference (a kind of digital twinning) need to be encouraged, notably in professional establishments.
- CESI also reminds the Commission to keep in mind that European citizens, independently of decisions motivated by developments on the labour market, sometimes simply wish to be able to undergo training and go to work near to their homes.
- Within the family unit, in which two working parents is very much a reality, offering more mobility is not without risk to the couple and the family. This should be taken into consideration in the current context in which the employment rate, gender equality and work/life balance are also priorities.
- Mobility can therefore be put forward as a solution, but it certainly is not the answer for everyone.

'A greater visibility and better use of available skills'

The Commission has been trying for a number of years to improve the conditions underlying greater mobility, drawing on the Bologna process and the (technocratic) systems of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). CESI supports efforts which aim for more transparency, a better level of comparability of qualifications and degree certificates, as well as the validation of experience should a person opt for a different study path or job.

Transparency with systems outside of the European Union remains an objective, by encouraging an international qualifications system for one thing and a national evaluation of vocational skills for another.

Basic and continuing education depend heavily on the culture of each country. The strengths inherent in each system must be respected.

This is why strengthening or implementing a state evaluation system/government exam service which would channel the qualifications of all applicants in an objective way, independently of the type of training, would make it possible for all States to lean towards this comparability without calling into question the school system and that of continuing education.

In the final analysis, an employer will still consider an applicant in the future, independently of the EQF/NQF qualifications system, and will test the person to see whether she/he is worth hiring. Making automatic links between university degrees and recruitment is no longer the way things are done.

‘Better understanding of skills requirements and trends on the labour market’

On this issue, CESI restates its warnings against taking an overly utilitarian vision of education. The real priority lies in empowering individuals to pursue the path of lifelong learning.

‘Supporting national reforms’

Strengthening the links between training partners is desirable. Nevertheless, situations are highly complex in each State and intimately linked to the country’s culture, accompanied by a reluctance for Europe to interfere. CESI highlights the benefit of programmes which encourage stays abroad, though it also laments the complexity of the system.

As far as funding instruments, in particular EFSI, are concerned, CESI warns the Commission against the emergence of private financial backers in the education sector as well as the setting up, without critical discussion, of Public Private Partnerships (PPP), about which CESI has voiced a number of reservations.

Generally speaking, CESI would like to see more pressure being brought to bear on the national governments, so that the latter can guarantee the continuity of public financial commitments in the field of education, notably in the light of current challenges.

In spite of the principles established hitherto on the economic governance and budgetary surveillance of the European Union, it should be possible not to prevent, or even to encourage, governments to invest more in the sector of education. Without strong investment in education systems and human resources, all objectives will remain pipe dreams. It is important to reevaluate the role of teachers and take into consideration their staff, status, working conditions and continuing education.

‘Better European tools and services for skills and qualifications, including Europass’

The need to monitor the way funds are used goes without saying. Nonetheless, to date, this can be used to justify an off-putting level of complexity for the players involved. CESI thus wholeheartedly approves of looking for ways to simplify things.

Moreover, CESI takes the view that the plethora of systems and programmes offered is counter-productive and leads to considerable loss: ignorance about the programmes and scattering of funds.

CESI welcomes the wish to reform the Europass. According to CESI, the version of the Europass CV to be submitted to a recruiter is too long. Too often, recruiters only have a very short amount of time to study an application, which needs to provide an at-a-glance impression (one page) of the applicant’s professional background. When it comes to skills which are likely to be set out in the Europass or any other tool, CESI would like to see skills featured having to do with educating people about sustainable development or connected to professional training on sustainable development.

In conclusion CESI:

- warns the Commission against adopting an overly utilitarian vision of education.
- singles out vocational training, for which it would like to see support provided.
- hopes that more pressure can be brought to bear on national governments for public investment in education.
- warns against the emergence of private sector financial backers in the education sector.
- is against the systematic involvement of employers when it comes to determining what content is taught.
- reminds the Commission of the leading role played by teachers and all actors in the teaching milieu when it comes to providing quality education.