

Ideas for the European Year of Skills

More and more effective investment in skills, strengthening co-operation among all relevant actors and matching individual aspirations with labour market demands are all very commendable objectives, but not very new and so general, that nobody will argue against it. In that respect, only objective 4 is a point that will raise discussion within and among member states.

Nevertheless, it is a very positive signal that the EU Commission is focusing strongly on the skills issue. Attracting people from third countries (objective 4) can contribute to a solution for the skills shortages, although there is a danger that many countries are focusing on the same third countries, resulting in a skills-drain in those countries. It is regrettable, that the European Commission is not putting more emphasis on recognizing qualifications between EU countries and regions. More policy attention and a dedicated pilot initiative allowing border regions to work together on barriers towards qualification recognition, both in vocational- and higher professional education is therefor strongly advised by us. If successful, it could be a feature of the Interreg program. The covid-19 crisis showed bottlenecks in these border regions regarding labour mobility due to issues related to recognition. Recognition of skills and qualifications as part of the European Education Area could provide a major boost to a more balanced European labour market. The national borders within the European Union are still a strong barrier (sometimes formal, often also as a mindset) to come to a European labour market and the Commission should do everything to take these barriers away, whilst taking negative side-effects like a skills-drain into account.

Next to this major objective, the European Commission should consider other initiatives to raise the status of VET and to come to a parity of esteem with academic studies.

- The European City of Science, or European Capital of Innovation is a great initiative to put science and innovation in the picture. A similar competition is lacking for skills. It would be advisable to also make a competition for the European Capital of Skills. The European and World Skills Competitions could be linked to the initiative. We should be happy to discuss such a initiative with the European Commission, we are also suggesting a kind of Tour d' Europe, to show the value and good practices of Skills in VET in the member states.
- Skills across education levels should be valued in a similar way as academic knowledge. We still see too little appreciation of vocational skills in society. A great first step would be to open the EU institutions for VET students to do their internships. This means the European Parliament, EU Commission, Council, agencies and other institutions should also create opportunities for traineeships for vocational students at the EU institutions. There are plenty of VET studies that would be suitable. Also national ministries themselves could work on this.
- Many of the skills shortages at the moment are in typical VET sectors, such as the care sector, technical sectors, transportation sectors. A Cedefop opinion survey showed that in many EU countries 40-50% of the population think VET does not lead to highly valued jobs in society. The EU and its member states should work on creating a better image for VET jobs. This starts with promoting VET as an excellent study choice at primary and high school.
- Furthermore, VET students should get equal rights and opportunities as university students. This means same opportunities to join a study/student association, going abroad for study and practice etc.
- Investing in further professionalization of teachers and company tutors
- Linking skills to the big transition issues like climate, sustainability and digitalization
- Striving for a joint approach with International networks inside and outside of Europe.

Other solutions to help to reduce the skills mismatch:

1. The need for development of “new” skills is going very fast and the labour market has huge difficulties to identify the required skills. **The regional skills ecosystems**, which includes various regional stakeholders (VET providers, chambers, associations of employers, universities, research centres) merged into **Pact for skills, COVEs or similar**, have great potential to act agile and responsive and to become responsible for **skills** (including regional skills building blocks) **identification**.
2. New generations (e.g. Z-gen) neither have enough insights into the job profiles (especially digital and green jobs connected) and skills needed, nor can they identify with them. **Finding appropriate ways to introduce the young people the jobs/skills we need tomorrow would help a great deal to be able to develop/gain the needed skills and reduce skills mismatch.**
3. The need of young generations (digital natives) for skills they want to gain differs in comparison to the need for skills of older generations (very often connected to traditional job profiles). It would be great to make this generation gap smaller and to work on exchanging views in order to bring to the surface the **new framework for transition (emerging fields) skills versus traditional skills (including craftsmen)**. In this regard discussing and exchanging views on the **meaningful and not meaningful skills/jobs for tomorrow** (considering also the increasing shortage of working force and aging population) is advisable.
4. Since our future is much about **sustainability**, we could **make an EU map with hot spots**, that people could visit over the year **travelling by train**. The hot spots would represent COVEs, other VET providers and their regional stakeholders, where various activities would be presented and would promote the selected topics.
5. In Skills year 2023, the COVE initiative, as the driving force for VET transformation and regional innovation (connecting with applied research), should be included.