



Towards greater education and training for social Europe: ETUC Action Programme on lifelong learning and VET

Adopted at the Executive Committee on 5-6 June 2012

Part One Background Information

1. EU context

Lifelong learning has been a key policy of the European Union since its early days.

Trade unions are also committed to make lifelong learning a reality for all. Not only with respect to labour market needs but also as a fundamental component of an individual's development.

In recent years, also due to the challenges with which Europe is being confronted, education, training, and professional and vocational learning and development have become increasingly important items on the agenda of EU institutions, member states and social partners.

A sustainable and high quality lifelong learning policy is essential for educating and preparing individuals for life, supporting job creation, recovery and mobility. It would also help to foster trust in the construction of a strong and inclusive European Union, with the active involvement of all citizens, and especially social partners, in policy making and implementation.

Europe's current challenges indicate that the direction of the reforms on VET undertaken at EU level (i.e. the Copenhagen process) remains the right one for the years to come. The ETUC Action Programme, adopted in Athens, identifies four drivers of change that will shape Europe's economies and societies and the demands for its VET systems: the economic crisis; developing a low carbon economy; labour market trends towards more skill-intensive jobs; and Europe's future skill supply and demand.

Social partners, and notably trade unions, can play an important role in addressing these challenges, through social dialogue and collective bargaining activities at every level, as well as through direct involvement in the implementation of lifelong learning actions for workers.

Between 2008 and 2010 Europe lost around 5.5 million jobs due to the economic slowdown. The crisis has also constrained economic growth and skill demand which will lag behind skill supply and may lead to over-qualification in the short term;

One in five young people in Europe cannot find a job. The youth unemployment rate (at over 20% and in some countries as high as 50%) is twice as high as for the whole working population. 14% of young people leave school without a diploma;

76 million people of working age (24-64) have either a low level of qualification or no

qualifications at all. This figure represents nearly 30% of the European workforce.

At least 40% of 30-34-year-olds should complete third level education by 2020, nevertheless there is still a lack of flexible pathways between vocational education and training schools and higher education institutions;

Cedefop's latest estimate states that there could be around 83 million vacant posts between 2012 and 2020, with the creation of 8 million new jobs and 75 million jobs becoming vacant due to retirement or people leaving the labour market. Most job opportunities will be in services (including tourism, health care and IT). The trend towards more skill-intensive jobs at all levels will continue and many traditional manual or routine jobs will decline;

Even if the new jobs end up being at the higher or lower end of the job spectrum most job opportunities will still be those requiring medium-level qualifications (including many vocational qualifications) and will continue to employ around half of Europe's workforce;

The polarization of employment has a corresponding effect on the polarization of wages, which are high for highly skilled workers and conversely decrease for the low and unskilled people. At the same time highly qualified workers can also experience underpayment or undervaluation of their performance and in times of economic downturn workers often are obliged to undervalue or hide their qualifications in order to find work more easily;

Despite its many benefits, vocational education and training are not highly regarded, although evidence shows that training not only helps to integrate disadvantaged target groups, but also leads to wider social and economic benefits equal to those achieved by general education;

Many countries in Europe have reformed or looking to introduce apprentice systems with the aim to achieve better interaction between education and employment systems; reducing youth unemployment and strengthening companies by supplying the next generation of skilled workers. Some EU Member States have already developed good systems (i.e. the Nordics, Germany, the Netherlands, etc.), but in the majority of the EU countries reforms have still have to be implemented to enhance the accessibility and quality of existing apprenticeships schemes.

Investment in continuous training by enterprises remains low, especially in SMEs. The crisis has even worsened the performance of enterprises providing continual training and public financing does not help to change companies' reluctance to provide it. This is a worrying trend especially in a context where many member states have severely reduced their investment in education and training;

Only 4.8% of adults (50-64 year olds) participate in learning programmes, although the EU target under the Education and Training strategy is 15% by 2020. From 2014 the EU's working population will start to shrink, making it ever more vital to constantly update and upgrade adults' competences and skills in preparation for a prolonged working life;

Possible teacher shortages are to be expected in the near future. In many European countries, the majority of teachers currently employed are close to retirement and there is a significant fall in the proportion of graduates in the field of education and training mostly as a result of the influence of the economic and financial crisis in the education sector. This has also contributed to the privatization of formal education institutions, to the merger and closure of schools, and to the dismissal of significant number of teachers from all levels of the education

sector. Cuts in the educational budgets risk the quality of education and Europe's recovery from the crisis.

2. The EU Agenda and programmes

The EU has set up an ambitious agenda on lifelong learning. A variety of initiatives and instruments have been developed. They are currently under implementation at various levels and require the full participation of a variety of stakeholders, including trade unions.

The main reference document is *'Europe 2020 – the European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth'* which proposes five headline targets for 2020, two of which are directly linked to education and training and labour market policy:

- i. *75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed;*
- ii. *the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40 % of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree.*

In order to meet these global targets the European Commission has proposed seven flagship initiatives¹, two of which are directly linked to education and training and the labour market, 'An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs' and 'Youth on the Move'.

In parallel the EU has entered a new stage in the 'Copenhagen Process'. The Bruges Communiqué, agreed by Member States and the social partners in December 2010, sets out future priorities for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training with 11 strategic objectives for the period 2011-2020 and 22 short-term deliverables for the first four years (2011-2014)².

Since 2002, the EU has also put in place "common European tools", principles and guidelines to make qualifications more transparent, comparable and transferable, as well as to improve flexibility and quality of training. The current tools in place are: the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)³, the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)⁴, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)⁵, EUROPASS⁶ and European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)⁷.

Furthermore, the EU is in the process of adopting recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and reviewing the Professional Qualifications Directive (2005/36/EC)⁸.

In parallel, EU Member States, in conjunction with another 20 countries, launched the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), previously known as the 'Bologna Process', in March 2010, and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/tools/flagship-initiatives/index_en.htm

² http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf

³ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm

⁵ <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/home.aspx>

⁶ <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu>

⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=852>

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/consultations/2011/professional_qualifications_directive_en.htm

All these tools and principles constitute an integrated framework, the impact of which depends on their consistency and on how they interact.

It should be noted that the EU has adopted a series of different programmes which can be used to support the development of European common tools as well as education and training activities in general. These are: the European Social Fund, which helps the integration of the unemployed and disadvantaged sections of the population into working life, mainly by funding training measures (with a budget of approximately 75 billion Euros for the period 2007 to 2013)⁹. The European Commission is now working to prepare a new generation of EU funding for programmes which will cover the period 2014 – 2020.

Another important programme in this domain is the Lifelong Learning Programme, which funds projects at different levels of education and training - Comenius for schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training, Grundtvig for adult education¹⁰. The new Lifelong Learning programme “Erasmus for all” aims at simplifying and streamlining the old programme into interrelated policy priorities and is currently being discussed at Parliament and Council level and will be finalised by the end of 2012.

Recently, the European Commission adopted an employment package containing measures for an EU job-rich recovery¹¹. Among the different policies addressed, the package recognizes lifelong learning as key to security in employment and puts forward initiatives in order to reach a threefold objective: better monitoring of skills needs, better recognition of skills and qualifications and a better synergy between the worlds of education and work.

Finally, a relevant actor in strengthening European cooperation in vocational education and training is CEDEFOP, whose mandate is to provide information on, and analyses of, vocational education and training systems, policies, research and practice, which are being used increasingly in the preparation of policy-making.

Although the ETUC welcomed the adoption of most of these initiatives, on various occasions we have underlined that better coordination with all the EU tools is needed, to avoid duplication of work as well, and that the social partners should be involved and consulted at all levels if the initiatives are to be successfully implemented.

The ETUC also emphasises the fact that in order to deliver the expected results the EU skills strategy should be linked and coherent with a sustainable and forward looking EU industrial strategy.

3. EU Social Dialogue and education and training: past achievements and the way forward

Article 3 of the Athens Manifesto commits the ETUC to placing more and better jobs at the top of the European agenda and at the heart of EU economic governance, and reflecting this in the European Social Dialogue as well as in the evaluation of the 2020 strategy and Single Market Act. The Strategy and Action Plan from the 12th ETUC Congress underlines, inter alia, the following:

- *‘In the future, even more emphasis and resources will need to be devoted to improving workforce skills in accordance with the needs of our time’;*

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_en.htm

¹¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=7619&langId=en>

- *‘Access to quality education and lifelong training for all is a right that must be recognized and implemented’.*

Prior to the Congress, the ETUC Executive Committee passed a resolution in March 2009 on initial and continuous vocational training for a European employment strategy¹² and a further resolution in December 2010 on more investment in lifelong learning for quality jobs¹³.

The ETUC also signed a Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets with BUSINESSEUROPE, CEEP and UEAPME in March 2010, which emphasized the following¹⁴:

- *Cooperating with education and training systems in order to better match the needs of the individual and those of the labour market, including by tackling the problems of basic skills (literacy and numeracy), promoting vocational education and training and measures to ease the transition between education and the labour market.*
- *Introducing individual competence development plans (in line with the framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications) jointly elaborated by the employer and the worker, taking into account the specific situation of the employer, particularly SMEs, and worker....*
- *Improving transparency and transferability, both for the worker and for the enterprise, in order to facilitate geographical and occupational mobility and to increase the efficiency of labour markets (by promoting the development of means of recognition and validation of competences; by improving the transferability of qualifications to ensure transitions to employment; by promoting more and better apprenticeship and traineeship contracts).*

The Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets is currently being implemented by social partners at relevant levels.

More recently, in their Joint Work programme 2012 – 2014 the EU social partners recognized that the continuous development of competencies and the acquisition of qualifications are a shared interest and responsibility for employers, employees and public authorities. For enterprises, access to and development of a skilled workforce is one of the conditions for innovation and competitiveness. For workers, acquiring, updating and developing relevant knowledge, skills and competences throughout their working lives is the most effective way to find and remain in employment.

In 2002, European social partners adopted a framework of actions on the lifelong development of competencies and qualifications. The EU social partners affirmed jointly that the four priorities within this framework of actions remain valid in the current situation. Nevertheless, the following two issues have emerged since 2002: 1) Skills needed in greening economies; 2) the update and upgrade of the skills of older workers in the context of longer working lives. They will consequently take action on these two issues using the existing matrix of four priorities as a basis.

Furthermore, the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE) was launched in June 2010 by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE). The committee adopted joint actions to influence EU policies and to improve the teaching, working and learning environment by

¹² <http://www.etuc.org/a/6078>

¹³ <http://www.etuc.org/a/8067>

¹⁴ <http://www.etuc.org/a/7076>

identifying and exchanging good practices. ESSDE separate working groups are dealing with issues such as the recruitment and retention of staff in a time of strict budgetary constraints, gender equality, teachers' mobility and improved higher education.

Other EU sectoral social dialogue committees are implementing joint actions to improve training, qualifications and skills within their sectors of responsibility. Examples in this regard include the textile sector (with the establishment of a EU sectoral skill council for the textile, clothing and leather sectors); the road transport sector (with a joint social partners project on training in the commercial road transport sector); tourism (the development of a European qualification and skills passport for the hospitality sector) and the metal sector (joint "ad hoc" working group on skills shortages).

These initiatives complement and at the same time reinforce the experience that social dialogue and collective bargaining play at national, regional and company level with respect to education and training issues. They include (but are not limited to): collective agreements in private and/or public sector including provisions on tools to identify and anticipate competence needs at company level; awareness-raising actions towards companies on the importance of identifying and anticipating competence needs to anticipate industrial change; mutual social partners funds for training programmes for companies and workers; trade union learning representatives that negotiate training programmes, the development of individual learning accounts, etc.. Finally, in most EU countries, social partners participate in tripartite bodies where they give advice on national policies on qualifications, skills, etc. In addition, they take a range of specific actions to better tailor education and training systems to labour market needs.

Part Two: ETUC's Demands and Action Programme

4. ETUC policy and demands on education and training and VET

ETUC has constantly placed lifelong learning, education and training at the heart of its agenda, not only by dealing with these policies directly but also by making the link with other relevant issues that are strongly related to an ambitious and effective lifelong learning agenda (i.e. restructuring, anticipation of change, demographic change, greening of the economy, etc.).

As has been seen, the EU has put in place several instruments for improving education and training at all levels, nevertheless the ETUC believes that the economic and social context in which these tools have been developed has been underestimated. There is a clear risk that EU policies and instruments in the area of LLL and VET will not meet the ambitious aims identified because there has been an insufficient analysis of the context and a lack of adequate resources. In some instances some EU policies also wrongly attribute to LLL the power to generate jobs, while for the ETUC, LLL and VET can contribute to job quality but not necessarily to job creation.

A different governance for macroeconomic policies is needed and the policies should aim to support economic growth. The ETUC therefore welcomed the employment package but at the same time asked for more ambitious resources and initiatives to boost job creation and the quality of jobs, also by enhancing qualifications and skills. ETUC also demands more binding measures for member states to fully meet education and employment objectives set out in the various EU instruments and initiatives. In particular ETUC demands concern incentives, resources and an enhanced partnership, not only at European but at all levels where social partners play a role in defining these policies.

- The ETUC's view is that lifelong learning should concern all education patterns: early childhood, compulsory school education, vocational education and training, higher education, research and innovation, adult learning including professional development and the training of workers/employees. The ETUC has constantly called for the EU and national member states to guarantee a high quality level of education and training, an emancipatory and high-level initial education and fair working conditions for teachers;
- Access to lifelong learning is still a major challenge in most of the EU member states. The ETUC has repeatedly called for lifelong to be/become a reality for all workers (especially with regards to the low-skilled workers or precarious workers) and for all citizens (the young and adults, men and women, without discrimination on grounds of disability, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation);
- There should be a balance between education and training as well as between education and work. We therefore need to encourage further investment in improving the permeability between compulsory and vocational education and training to higher education, and between education and the labour market. There should be a smooth transition from education into work as well as from work into education and back. Labour market training needs take place at a faster pace than those occurring in education and training systems, therefore a stronger link between cross-industry and education trade unions is needed;
- Given the challenges posed by the economic situation, further efforts are needed to combat unemployment and early school leaving, and in reducing the mismatch in skills as well as ensuring that the European workforce gets the best out of the EU tools put in place to become highly qualified;
- All formal, non-formal and informal learning institutions and providers need to receive further financial support to teach lifelong learning and to provide more courses for all free of charge
- Focused education and training strategies should be established and social dialogue should be supported to develop a transition strategy for green and white sectors, as well as for company and sector restructuring, notably due to the economic crisis. Training on the green economy and sustainable development as well on European Structural Funds and their potential to positively impact education, training and employability should be further deployed;
- Anticipation of change and company restructuring can be ensured in a sustainable manner only through adequate levels of education and training;
- High quality training should be seen and promoted as a key instrument for providing concrete possibilities for the unemployed to access the labour market. Furthermore, the combination of collectively-agreed training schemes with reduced working hours (the so-called kurtzarbeit in Germany) should be considered as one of the more/most successful measures implemented by social partners for buffering the effects of the crisis.

The social partners' role in shaping and influencing education and training policies should be respected and promoted at all levels. Collective bargaining should be also promoted. The Action Programme sets out ways in which these broad objectives can be met: measurable and

time-framed targets, follow-up procedures and an evaluation process. It calls for an active involvement of ETUC affiliates at all levels.

5. The ETUC Future Strategy on lifelong learning

In order to meet the above-mentioned challenges the ETUC needs to:

- a) Influence EU institutions in order to create a strong link and political coherence between employment, education and economic policies with a view to supporting growth, inclusion and job creation. More and better resources will be needed to strengthen education and training and structural funds and ESF funding can play an effective role;
- b) Monitor and contribute to the implementation of education and training policies. Trade union organizations must play an essential role in motivating employees with regard to the benefits of lifelong learning. Through collective bargaining or trade union training programmes at all levels, trade union organizations must contribute to increasing the awareness of workers and trade union delegates of the challenges posed by the EU 2020 and ET 2020 agenda;
- c) Work to safeguard, improve and better coordinate European education and training instruments and programmes and develop them further in the next EU funding period (2014-2020);
- d) Influence policy-making and institutions at the European level, notably in the light of EU policy issues and legislative processes at stake in the lifelong learning agenda (e.g. VET, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, mobility, the new lifelong learning programme, Erasmus for All, the modernization of the professional qualification directive, upcoming recommendations on NFIL etc.);
- e) Lobby the EU to adopt recommendations enabling lifelong learning for all and make sure that the new Erasmus for all gives incentives to continuous education for workers as well to the full involvement of social partners;
- f) The economic downturn should not lead to reduced investments in education and training. Public authorities have specific responsibilities for ensuring good quality training despite budgetary constraints. Employers also have their role to play in this regard. They should be doing more and better in terms of investing in the skills of all groups of workers and in providing an adequate number of training hours. Tax incentives can positively support these commitments.
- g) Improve the link between LLL and youth policies. Education and training should offer options for both employment and further study for young people;
- h) Re-evaluate and strengthen, within the context of the European Social Dialogue, the 'Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications' and activate the 'Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets';
- i) Support and coordinate European sectoral trade unions on the development of lifelong learning initiatives within the new context of sectoral social dialogue, sectoral/company level collective bargaining, European sector skills' councils, skills panorama and ESCO;

- j) Step up training on education and training matters and to fully incorporate them in other areas (i.e. restructuring,) in partnership with the ETUI and affiliated unions;
- k) Support national confederations with the introduction, implementation and evaluation of European common instruments, such as EQF, EQUAVET and ECVET, as well as tripartite/bipartite dialogue at national and local level;
- l) Take full advantage of the potential of its Lifelong Learning Working Group to strengthen a European trade union strategy on education and training;
- m) Develop a simple communication strategy for sharing information.

6. ETUC's Actions

There is a need to bridge the gap between the theoretical concept of EU common tools (EQF, ECVET, EQUAVET, etc.) and their application in regards to the reality of national education and training and qualification systems. As a starting point, the ETUC, with the support of the ETUI, will launch a pioneering training programme for trade unionists to make the most of EU tools and principles.

A new ETUC project will be developed between 2012 and 2013. It will focus on the implementation and relevance of the E&T EU agenda (or EU common tools for workers). While EU institutions and the Cedefop have substantially followed the reporting on policies and systems, more empirical evidence is needed from the perspective of the workers, trade unions and social partners on the barriers, challenges and bottlenecks they face. The ETUC will promote a new study to provide recommendations on the practical implementation of learning outcomes in European countries, their relevance for workers, how it is used for example in relation to curricula, assessment, standards, or validation.

Furthermore the ETUC will also promote an exchange of trade unions' views with regard to the dual learning systems and good practices that have been developed by trade unions to enhance quality of apprenticeships. The following qualitative elements for structuring a modern dual vocational training system will be taken into consideration from the outset: VET as a springboard for ongoing and further training, need to adapt to technical and economic changes, as well as processes of corporate organization developments; cooperation between learning institutions; definition of the legal status of trainees; cost-benefit analysis of in-company vocational training; involvement of social partners.

This project could be a first step towards a more general multiannual action, aimed also at mapping the involvement of trade unions in tripartite negotiations, and consultations regarding LLL policies at national and local level, the LLL in collective bargaining activities, and LLL bodies directly managed by trade unions.

The setting up of a network (within the LLL working group) of committed and experienced trade unionists that will work on the ETUC's behalf to defend trade union positions in the numerous EU consultative bodies.

A renovated lifelong learning section of the ETUC website, possibly with a space where ETUC affiliates can share information and experiences on trade unions' actions in the field of education and training will be considered in this regard.

The ETUC will continue to promote the sharing of trade union good practices at national and EU sectoral level through meetings or seminars about specific topics (collective bargaining on

LLL and skills, trade union involvement in training, etc..) that are of interest to member organizations. In particular, a strong emphasis will be placed on social dialogue and collective bargaining practices in this area;

7. ETUC's affiliates challenges

Influence policy-making at the national level, notably in the light of the EU policy issues at stake in the lifelong learning agenda.

Lobby to implement the European tools and the partnership principle in all the Member States and at sectoral and local level as well. Report regularly to the ETUC working groups about challenges and trends (especially for trade unions) in developing these tools, in order to enable the ETUC to lobby effectively at EU level in a way that also reflects workers' views and needs in the implementation of these tools;

Lobby to ensure a full implementation of all European financial instruments at national level, notably the ESF, and push the Member States and the other public authorities to provide their own resources to support education, training and better skills in the labour market.

Participate in peer learning activities and in the exchange of good practices on the implementation of the European tools, create a sense of ownership of the process and stimulate further activities.

Organize activities aimed at promoting EU common tools, including the Copenhagen process. Give adequate support for enhancing mutual recognition and competences.

Include lifelong learning in the collective bargaining agenda. Evidence shows that social partners' agreements have a positive effect on participation, and the number of hours spent, in continuing training.

Our affiliates' good practices in this field have achieved some useful results:

- a) Include into collective bargaining specific mechanisms that encourage the careers of workers upgrading their professional qualifications in order to make effective workers' rights to lifelong learning;
- b) Develop training through collective bargaining, with the aim of encouraging participation in educational processes, particularly in SMEs;
- c) Link the recognition of professional skills to improve wages and working conditions;
- d) Ensure, through collective bargaining, guidance for workers and develop training schedules in accordance with needs of companies and workers, with particular respect to disadvantaged groups;
- e) Secure adequate time requirements for learning phases through collective agreements and /or legislation. Ensure that training officers also have a time budget.

8. Implementation, reporting and evaluation of the Action Programme

In order to successfully meet the objectives that have been identified in the Lifelong learning Action Programme on lifelong learning equality, ETUC member organisations commit

themselves to promoting a sense of ownership, shared responsibilities and actions at all different levels.

As a first step, affiliated organizations will give adequate visibility to this Action Programme. It is therefore recommended that: the Action Programme is translated into national languages, that a copy of the translation is sent to the ETUC so that EU-wide visibility can be given through the ETUC's channels, and then disseminated and discussed with trade union representatives.

The ETUC secretariat will be responsible for leading some specific key activities for meeting the objectives of the Action Programme, having recourse to EU funding if necessary.

An evaluation of progress in achieving the Action Programme will be put forward on the eve of the ETUC Mid-Term Conference in 2013. The lifelong learning working group will have a strategic oversight of the implementation of the key actions identified.

The ETUC and its member organizations will make sufficient resources available so that the key actions of the Programme are accomplished.