

New Skills Agenda for Europe: State of implementation

KEY FINDINGS

- In June 2016, the European Commission published the New Skills Agenda for Europe which is a **package of measures to face concrete skills problems** identified in Europe and to revise a number of existing European tools (e.g. Europass, European Qualifications Framework).
- **All ten key actions planned will be launched by the end of the year** and most were more or less in line with the original schedule. **Two Council Recommendations** (Upskilling pathways, revision of the European Qualifications Framework) have been adopted in the meantime demonstrating general support together with partially substantial reservations by the Member States.
- In September 2017, the European Parliament will adopt a **resolution on the New Skills Agenda**. Further, in July 2017 the plenary has adopted its **mandate** for the upcoming negotiations with the Council and the Commission on the **revision of the Europass framework** on the basis of the joint report by the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Committee on Culture and Education.

In June 2016, the European Commission launched the New Skills Agenda for Europe which was one of the priorities of the Commission's work program 2016. The Agenda is a **package of measures** to bring improvements in three areas: **1. Basic competences, 2. Visibility and comparability of competences, 3. Labour market and skills intelligence** to facilitate effective career decisions in the fields of education, training and (un-)employment. Overall, it aims at promoting the employability of the individual, social cohesion and the global competitiveness of Europe through the development of human capital, especially as cheap labor is not a competitive advantage for the EU.

The overall agenda shows a strong **employment orientation** including initiatives in the area of education such as Vocational Education and Training (VET), tertiary and adult education. Like previous Skills Agendas (Agenda Skills for New Jobs 2008, Agenda for New Skills and Jobs 2010), it was developed under the aegis of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion which had integrated some educational files following a reorganisation of the Commission in autumn 2014. Several education-oriented units belonging to the Directorates-General for Education and Culture (Vocational Training, Adult Education, Skills) had been assigned to the Directorate-General for Employment. All planned ten actions will be launched by the end of the year and this more or less in line with the original schedule.

1. **Commission proposal for the revision of the Europass framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications** (Decision of the European Parliament and the Council, October 2016, planned for 3rd quarter 2016)

The proposal for a new Europass framework is controversial as it implies **considerable changes in scope and governance** compared to the existing [Decision on a Europass framework](#) having been adopted by the Parliament and the Council in 2004. While the original instrument presents a collection of documents (Europass CV, European Skills Pass, Language Passport, Europass Mobility, Diploma Supplement, Certificate Explanations), the new Europass Framework is designed as a comprehensive digital platform, partially comparable to elaborated national education and career information platforms. Further, based upon a previous evaluation, the Commission also suggested to increase synergies between the Europass and other European instruments. According to the proposal the new European platform integrates a broad range of services and European tools encompassing digital self-assessment tools, labour market information (EU Skills Panorama), ESCO, the multilingual European classification for Skills, Competences, qualifications and Occupations, up to the application of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

In light of a recent [analysis for the European Parliament](#), two points are worth mentioning: First, the New Skills Agenda confirms the **role of guidance** either as essential supporting service or as user and promoter of European tools and programmes. In its proposal for a revision of the Europass framework, the European Commission committed itself in cooperation with Member States “to support the development of guidance policy and guidance services” (Article 7f). This corresponds with results of the public consultation, as Europass Centers, EQF Contact Points and the Euroguidance network suggested that web-based tools alone are not sufficient, but are only effective in combination with personal guidance.

A second point concerns the proposal how to design the **governance** of the new Europass platform. It demonstrates efforts of both, to better coordinate the development and use of European tools and also to simplify the hitherto separate financial management. The proposal considerably changed the composition of the existing national and European governance. The structures involved are national Europasscenters, EQF Coordination centers and Euroguidance Centers all having own European networks, groups or platforms for cooperation and an own EU grant. The proposal provides that at national level, National Skills Coordination Points should be established to coordinate strategies, financial management and channel communication of all three structures with the Commission. At European level, the three European networks should be grouped together in a single network, a European cooperation platform. As regards financing, Member States could decide how to allocate resources.

This proposal has given rise to **some controversy**. Starting with stakeholder consultations, several actors and later also MEPs at the Employment and Social Affairs Committee and the Culture and Education Committee expressed concerns. One concern was that the instruments are of heterogenous nature and at different stages of development, in particular ESCO being at a developmental stage. Even more controversial was the proposed governance structure. During the [consultations](#), Euroguidance, for example, raised concerns that the existence of this network, which had been established by the Commission in 1992 in the context of mobility, was not secured as a Member State could decide to concentrate resources on the EQF and Europass. Further, there was criticism with a view to create new overarching European and national structures (European Cooperation Platform, National Skills Coordination Points) partially replacing the existing ones mentioned above. The Commission has partially withdrawn its original proposal (see EQF, below).

Currently, negotiations in the Council are ongoing. The final decision will be negotiated between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission (Trilogue) after the **Council** has achieved its **political agreement (probably end of September, early October)**. At its plenary session of July 2017, the European Parliament has adopted its mandate for these negotiations based upon a joint report by the Employment and Social Affairs Committee and the Culture and Education Committee.

2. [The Commission's proposal on the revision of the European Qualifications Framework](#) (June 2016 together with the New Skills Agenda, Council Recommendation)

The European Qualifications Framework helps to make qualifications systems in Europe comparable with a focus on qualification levels and learning outcomes. As a consequence, it facilitates education and employment mobility across Europe. The proposed revision aimed at improving flexibility and permeability of education systems and extending the scope and application of the EQF. A [workshop](#) for the Employment and the Culture Committee demonstrated **general support for a revision and at the same time reservations** to open up the EQF to third countries and private (sectoral) qualifications or to strive for an early link between the varying national qualification frameworks and the EQF. There were also concerns about changing the current governance structure (see also point 1, Europass).

The **Council adopted a [revised version as a recommendation](#)** in May 2017 including some softer formulations as regards, for example, opening of the EQF towards third countries, the application of common principles of credit point systems and the application of common quality assurance principles. The original governance (EQF Advisory Group) has been kept.

3. **Commission proposal on the review of key competences for lifelong learning** (planned for the fourth quarter of 2017, Council Recommendation)

The [Recommendation adopted in 2006](#) by the European Parliament and the Council includes **eight key competencies**: 1. proficiency in a mother tongue, 2. proficiency in a foreign language, 3. mathematical, scientific and technological competence, 4. digital competence, 5. learning to learn, 6. social and civic competences, 7. sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, 8. cultural awareness and expression. These should be promoted as part of national strategies for lifelong learning. While schools lay the foundations for young people, adults should update and further develop these competences - the latter being a weaker point. A [public consultation](#) of organizations and individuals by the Commission in July 2017 has shown that, in addition to a **clearer definition and promotion of competency assessment** in some areas, some adjustments were considered useful. Some contributions highlighted, for example, a stronger focus on **personal development and related competences** (self-management, self-awareness). In a similar vein, others proposed with a view to personal career development the inclusion of "**career management skills**", referring to the Council Resolution on lifelong guidance (2008). The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2007-2015) worked on policy development in this area. Experience has shown that Member States need to adjust the notion and concepts to their national contexts (e.g. career competencies, transition management).

4. **The Commission [proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishment of a Skills guarantee](#)** (June 2016 together with the New Skills Agenda)

The [OECD study \(PIAAC\)](#) of 2013 found that almost a quarter of the EU population has inadequate basic skills. Therefore, the Commission developed a concept for a Skills guarantee for low-skilled adults to help them improve literacy, numeracy and digital skills. In December 2016, the Council's adopted a **[Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults](#)**. Even if the objective is less ambitious than a guarantee, key elements have been kept: (1. skills assessment, 2. tailor-made learning offer, 3. validation and recognition of acquired skills). The Recommendation also says that Member States should "*provide guidance and/or mentoring services to support learners' progression through all steps of the upskilling process*" (Art. 13).

5. **Commission proposals supporting VET modernisation** (autumn 2017 - planned for 2nd Quarter 2017)

In order to make VET more attractive and effective, the Commission organises the second **[European Vocational Skills week](#)** (20 - 24 November 2017, first week - 2016) combining a wide range of activities at European, national, regional and local levels including an award for examples of excellence. In addition, the Commission will present this autumn a proposal for a **European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships** (Council Recommendation) in October 2017 given the variety of forms and quality across Europe. According to a [study for the European Parliament on Apprenticeships, internships and volunteering](#), dropout is partially very high, there are cases of misuse as cheap labour and indications that participation is decreasing.

6. **Launch** of the [Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition](#) (December 2016 as planned)
Currently, around 100 million people in the EU have never used the Internet, and one in three employees does not have sufficient digital skills. To tackle this deficit, the Coalition for Digital Skills and Jobs started its work in December 2016, thus re-launching the work of the previous [Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs](#) (2013). Members are representatives of the Member States, businesses, social partners, non-governmental organizations and educational institutions acting on the basis of a common charter, implementing targeted initiatives and awarding outstanding projects.

7. **Launch** of "[EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals](#)" (June 2017, planned for June 2016)

In June 2017, the Commission presented a **multilingual online editor**, which is intended to provide an EU-wide presentation of skills. Personal data, expectations, objectives and competences are collected. In the end, an overall assessment and recommendations for action are to be made. The aim is to identify specific needs, such as language teaching, job search or further training, that is, a personal action plan. Workers' administrations and service providers from many countries participated in the development, some countries (for example Germany) have already developed their own tools, which are to be used in the advisory and mediation process of the Federal Agency for Labor.

8. **Launch** of a [Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills](#) (January 2017, planned for June 2016)

The Blueprint shall help to establish **sectoral partnerships at EU level followed by partnerships at national and regional level**. It is about coordinating strategic stakeholders to assess skills requirements and to develop strategic solutions using national and European financial programs. A pilot started with six sectors (automotive industry, defence, maritime technology, space – geo information, textile and tourism). This initiative is connected with the [European Sector Skills Councils](#).

9. [Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates](#) (May 2017 – as planned)

The Commission presented a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the follow-up of the career of university graduates and vocational training institutions. In this way, **better and comparable data about the career paths** of graduates shall be made available across Europe - a valuable information for educational and vocational orientation as well for education planning. The proposal will soon be discussed in the Council. While the Commission has completed a feasibility study (**impact assessment**) for the higher education sector, the latter is lacking in the field of vocational education and training. In some countries, **data protection** issues may be a challenge when it comes to collecting and sharing data across different institutions.

10. **Analysis and exchange of good practice to combat the brain drain** (launch March 2017, planned end of 2016)

The Commission **has launched a study** to identify the main flows of skilled labour in the EU, in terms of Member States, sectors and regions that are most concerned and to map out what Member States are doing to address the movement of skilled labour (both sending and receiving countries). In the first semester 2018, **peer exchanges between MS** will be held. Results are expected in the second semester 2018.

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