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SOCIAL AGENDA

n°49

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EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL SKILLS WEEK

*Interview with Commissioner
Thyssen*



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NEW FORMS OF WORK

*Better access to social
protection*



Vocational education and training

Key in the face of today's challenges



Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion come under the remit of European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen.

The website of Commissioner Thyssen:
ec.europa.eu/commission/2014-2019/thyssen_en

The home page of the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion:
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Welcome to n°49



Michel Servoz

Director General of the European Commission's Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion department

There is the perception: Vocational education and training (VET) is the "poor neighbour" of a university education.

And there are the facts: VET graduates are quicker than their university peers in finding a job; and lifelong learning is key to addressing the challenges of digitalisation, globalisation, migration and demographics which the EU is facing.

Perception is a cultural issue. As for the facts, they speak for themselves. They reveal that high quality initial and lifelong vocational education and training is crucial to addressing the skills gaps and mismatches we are facing right now throughout Europe.

The skills issue is not only central to employment and social policy-making, it is also a major macro-economic issue: Substantial gains in growth and jobs are being lost and the very sustainability of the highly competitive social market economy, that the EU stands for, is at stake.

For the second year running, from 20 to 24 November, the European Commission is organising a European Vocational Skills Week. It seeks to connect all the vocational education and training providers throughout Europe and help them highlight both locally and in Brussels what they have to offer, in effect creating a kind of cross-border VET community.

By doing so, the Commission endeavours to tackle the skills issue from both ends at the same time: changing the mind-set which perceives VET as second best or last

"Vocational education and training – a strategic issue"

resort, as opposed to purely academic education; and improving the quality of vocational education and training, including through the cross-border exchange of good practices among VET suppliers throughout Europe.

Cross-border exchange and mobility is one area where the EU has an outstanding track record with the Erasmus programme, the 30th anniversary of which we are celebrating this year. Of the 9 million learners that have benefited from Erasmus since 1986, 1.5 million were VET learners. The Commission is taking steps to increase the share and numbers of VET learners that can benefit from cross-border education and training. The demand is there, craving to be satisfied.

Last year, almost 800 000 people got involved in the European Skills Week. This year, we hope to reach the 1 million mark. Be one of them!

NEWS IN BRIEF



More than ever: With 235 million people at work, more people are in employment in the EU than ever before.

State of the European Union: Social priorities

13 SEPTEMBER 2017

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker delivered his 2017 State of the Union Address to the members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, presenting his priorities for the year ahead and outlining his vision for how the European Union could evolve by 2025. He presented a Roadmap for a More United, Stronger and More Democratic Union. He said that unemployment is at a nine year low. Almost 8 million jobs have been created during this mandate so far. With 235 million people at work, more people are in employment in the EU than ever before. "The European Commission cannot take the credit for this alone. Though I am sure that had 8 million jobs been lost, we would have taken the blame", he added. On the issue of the posting of workers, he stressed that "In a Union of equals, there can be no second class workers. Workers should earn the same pay for the same work in the same place". He also announced his intention to create a European Labour Authority: "It seems absurd to have a Banking Authority to police banking standards, but no common Labour Authority for ensuring fairness in our single market. We will create one."

European classification of Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications: Live

28 JULY 2017

The European Commission launched the first full version of the European classification of Skills, Competences, Occupations and Qualifications (ESCO). Available in 26 languages (the 24 EU languages, plus Icelandic and Norwegian) ESCO facilitates communication between the labour market and the education/training sector by providing a common language that can help overcome labour market imbalances and increase occupational and geographical mobility in the EU. Education providers can use it to describe the expected learning outcomes of their curricula and to better understand the labour market trends and future skills needs. It can also serve as the digital enabler of labour market mobility (see page 20).



Common language: ESCO facilitates communication between the labour market and the education/training sector, between qualifications and people.

Employment and social developments in Europe 2017: Heavy burden on the young

17 JULY 2017

The Commission published the 2017 edition of its yearly Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) review. It confirms positive labour market and social trends and continued economic growth. With over 234 million people having a job, employment has never been as high as today in the EU and unemployment is at its lowest level since December 2008. But evidence also shows that there is a particularly heavy burden on the younger generations, exacerbated by demographic ageing: they tend to have more difficulties in finding a job; are more often in non-standard and precarious forms of employment; and are likely to receive lower pensions, relative to wages. This is why the 2017 ESDE review focuses on intergenerational fairness: making sure that all generations benefit from the current positive economic trends and that young people in Europe will have at least the same opportunities as their parents.



Heavy burden: it is more difficult for young people to find a job and when they do, they are often in non-standard and precarious forms of employment.

European Solidarity Corps: Occupational strand on track

10 JULY 2017

Thousands of jobs and traineeship placements kicked off, half a year after the European Commission launched the European Solidarity Corps, following the matching of voluntary placements which started in March 2017. The European Commission supported two projects led by the Italian and French Public Employment Services, which offer a solidarity-related job or traineeship in another EU country to up to 6 000 young people. The projects brought together public employment services and organisations from different EU Member States, such as employers' organisations and training institutes, to provide job or traineeship offers in solidarity-related areas to young people between the age of 18 and 30.

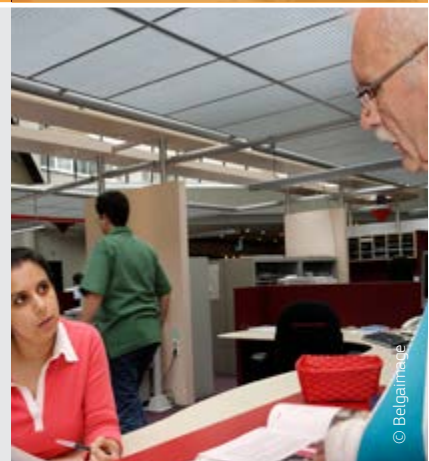


Solidarity-related: two European Solidarity Corps projects offer solidarity-related jobs or traineeships in another EU country to up to 6 000 young people.

Social security goes digital: Quicker and easier exchange of information

3 JULY 2017

The Commission launched the Electronic Exchange of Social Security Information system (EESSI), a new IT platform that will connect electronically around 15 000 social security institutions of EU Member States plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. This will make it easier to combat fraud and error, as national social security institutions will use standardised electronic documents in their own language, ensuring that the data they exchange is correct and complete. The new tool will also benefit citizens who have lived and worked in several of the participating countries, and who will see their social security benefits calculated quicker and more efficiently.



Cross-border connection: a new IT platform connects around 15 000 social security institutions in EU countries plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

SOCIAL POLICY

Three options for 2025

What kind of social dimension should the EU have by 2025?

The debate is on.

On 1 March 2017, the European Commission launched a debate on the future of the EU. It did so by publishing a White Paper which sets out five scenarios on how the EU could evolve by 2025: delivering a reform agenda as the EU is presently doing; gradually re-focusing on the single market; carrying on as today but allowing willing EU countries to do more together in specific areas... such as social policy; doing less but more efficiently in some policy areas; and doing much more together, sharing more power, resources and decision-making across the board.

Nearly two months later, on 26 April, the Commission presented a reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe by 2025. It was soon to be followed by other such papers, on harnessing globalisation, deepening the Economic and Monetary Union, the future of Europe's defence and the future of EU finances.

Inter-linked

All these papers are inter-linked, designed as they are to feed the reflection process with national governments and parliaments,

social partners, other EU institutions and citizens at large. A debate sparked off by the White paper, to which the reflection papers are annexed.

The one on globalisation, for example, points out that progressive tax policies and investing in innovation and strong welfare policies could help redistribute wealth more fairly, and that the use of EU structural funds to assist vulnerable regions can help mitigate the negative impacts of globalisation.

And the one on the economic and monetary union presents three options to assist countries when they are hit by an economic shock too large for them to cope with on their own. One of them is a European Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme.

At the centre

The fact that the other reflection papers also address issues of relevance for Europe's future social dimension shows that social considerations should not be limited to areas of "classical" social



Success story: The Erasmus+ programme could be extended to at least 30% of students, pupils, vocational trainees, apprentices and teachers.



A possible option: a European Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme.

policy. Indeed, social issues are very much at the centre of the debates on the future of the EU.

The aim of the reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe is to provide a perception of what might be achieved at EU level in the field of social and employment policy.

It asks two fundamental questions: what challenges should EU countries tackle together in this area and what added-value can EU-level instruments provide?

And it presents three possible options: limiting the social dimension to free movement; those countries that want to do more in the social field may do so; or all EU Member States deepen the social dimension of Europe together. To fuel the debate, it gives concrete examples of what each option would mean in practice and lists the pros and cons.

Mobility only

Under the first option, EU social policy rules would have to do essentially with promoting cross-border movements of people. The present rules governing social security rights of citizens moving from one EU country to another, posting of workers, cross-border health care and the recognition of diplomas, would stay in place.

However, there would no longer be EU minimum standards, for instance for health and safety of workers, working and rest time,

or maternity and paternity leave. Nor would the EU anymore foster opportunities for Member States to exchange best practices in areas such as education, health, culture and sports. Social and regional reconversion programmes that are co-funded by EU funds would have to be discontinued or funded nationally.

Some do more

The 2008 economic and financial crisis made many people think that the countries sharing the euro as a single currency need to do more together in the social field. Upward convergence in this area would avoid abrupt adjustments in the living standards of their citizens and preserve the overall strength and stability of the euro.

The EU Treaty already contains a provision for "enhanced cooperation": a group of at least nine countries may adopt legal acts that bind only the countries that take part (as a last resort and only if all the EU Member States agree that they may proceed that way).

Existing EU-level funding could be used to support joint actions, or dedicated funds could be set up by the countries taking part.

Under the second option, therefore, a person's diploma could be automatically recognised throughout the area. A person could easily identify him/herself with a single social security number and national authorities could easily check whether that person is insured and can be reimbursed or receive benefits more smoothly.



Another possibility: a European labour inspectorate.

Citizens could receive higher unemployment benefits than they do today or the period for which they can rely on unemployment benefits may be shortened. People could still lose their job but in the participating countries, they would stand a better chance of finding a new job faster and they would be supported during the transition, thanks to joint re-training and skilling instruments.

All do more

Under the third option, a qualitative leap would be required. For example, social legislation would not only set minimum standards but fully harmonise citizens' rights in particular areas.

Binding benchmarks would be developed and more funds, conditional on reaching certain benchmarks, would be made available at EU level. European agencies, such as a European labour inspectorate and a European transport agency, could be set up to manage cross-border situations.

In practice, this would mean, for example, that all EU countries could agree on common rules determining the employment status of digital platform workers. They could mutually recognise each other's diplomas.

The Erasmus+ programme would be extended to at least 30% of students, pupils, vocational trainees, apprentices and teachers. A European disability card would be valid across all countries. Citizens could transfer their medical information electronically when receiving treatment in another EU country and use e-prescriptions to get their medication dispensed.

More information:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe_en

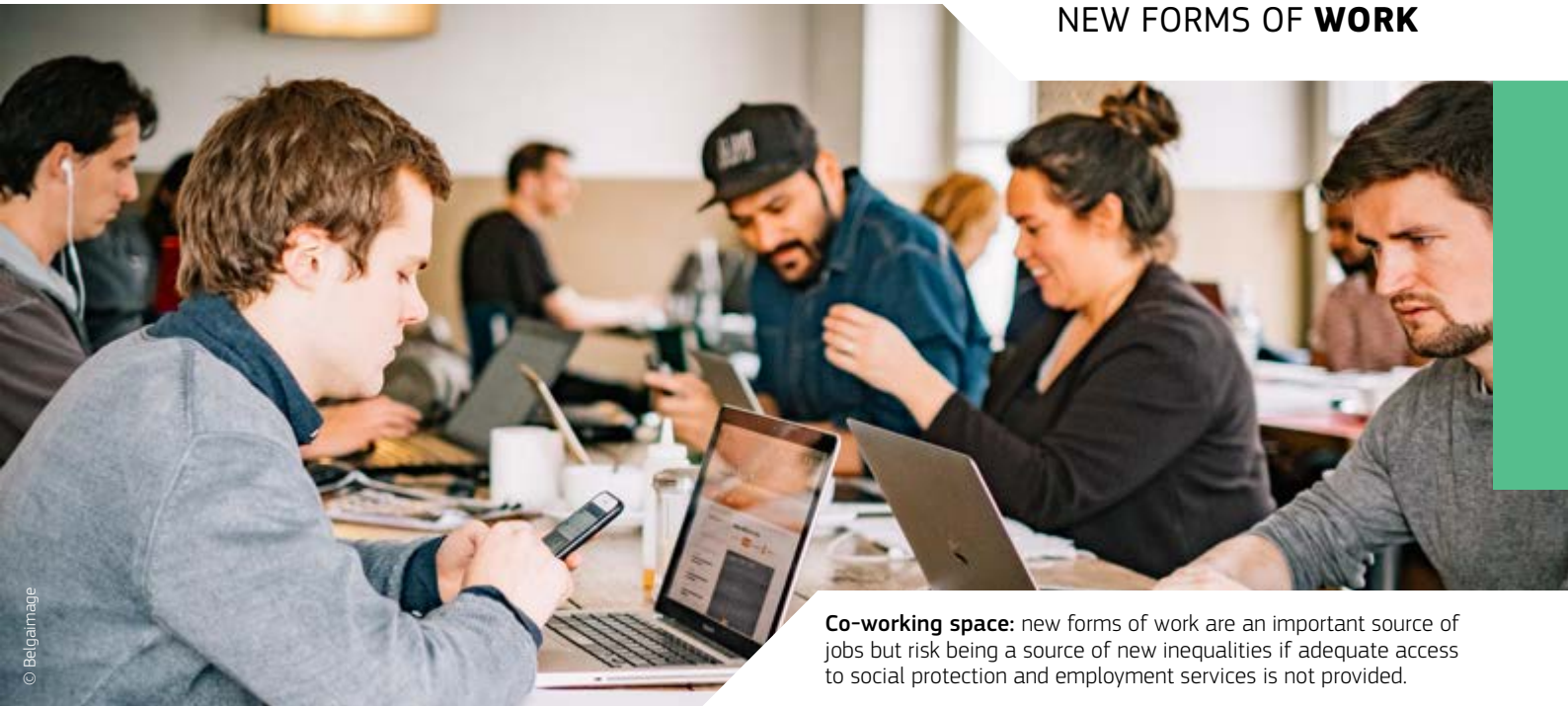
From Rome to Gothenburg

On 25 March, the EU Heads of State and governments adopted in Rome a Declaration highlighting the importance of a strong social Europe.

Values such as equal opportunities are fundamental to the European project itself. The single market and its social market economy should be supported by sustainable growth. This entails common social, environmental and consumer protection standards. The challenges facing EU countries – such as demographic changes, migration, technological developments and globalisation – need to be addressed at European, if not global, level.

Together with the European Commission, the Swedish government is preparing a social summit for fair jobs and growth, due to take place in Gothenburg on 17 November.

Until then, the Commission hopes that the reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe will have paved the way for a full and open discussion about where European societies want to go and how the EU can help them get there.

NEW FORMS OF **WORK**

Co-working space: new forms of work are an important source of jobs but risk being a source of new inequalities if adequate access to social protection and employment services is not provided.

Ensuring effective access to social protection

The European Commission is consulting on the need for better access to social protection and employment services for people in non-standard work and self-employment

When the European Commission adopted a European Pillar of Social Rights, on 26 April 2017 (see Social Agenda n°48), it also launched two social partner consultations: one on access to social protection for people in all forms of employment; and one on modernising the rules on labour contracts (see page 12).

As far as access to social protection is concerned (unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, disability benefits, pensions etc.), the first stage consultation finished in June. At the time of printing, the second stage consultation and a general public consultation were scheduled for October. After which the Commission was likely to present a set of proposals.

Inadequate access

Access to social protection and related employment services (training, career counselling etc.) for people in all forms of employment is crucial, not just for the economic and social safety of the workforce but also for well-functioning labour markets that create jobs and

growth. Yet, many people in non-standard work and self-employment fail to have adequate access.

Since these forms of work (all forms other than full time, open-ended employment) make up a rising share of job opportunities, there is a risk that a growing part of the working population may be left without the social security and employment support that is needed to manage life-long working careers in rapidly changing labour markets.

Historically, social protection has primarily been designed for workers in standard employment. Self-employed people (pursuing a gainful activity for their own account) and people in non-standard work have been more marginally covered.

In the 1990s, many EU countries connected social protection with the provision of employment services and training through "active" labour market policies. While leaving out the self-employed, they often formally included workers in non-standard forms of employment into

their enlarged security package. Yet, the effective access of these workers to social protection has remained limited, mostly because the eligibility criteria are not adapted to their specific situation.

In several EU countries, the right, obligation and ability to have full social protection coverage of those employed on non-standard contracts or as self-employed, continue to differ markedly from those enjoyed by workers with standard contracts – and this is increasingly problematic.

New inequalities

In recent years, structural and crisis-driven economic and labour market transformations have resulted in an increase in non-standard work and new forms of self-employment, as well as in an upsurge in transitions from one labour market status to another. Different relationships between employer, employee and customer are emerging rapidly, blurring the boundaries between employment and self-employment.

These new forms of work are an important source of jobs, especially for young people. However, if adequate access to social protection and employment services is not provided, they risk being a source of new inequalities and precariousness.

In the long run, differential access treatment based on the type of employment, threatens the sustainability of national labour market and social protection arrangements. It distorts the playing field and opens the way for a free-riding behaviour on the part of workers and businesses that erodes the economic basis for standard employment and for the social protection that supports it. Indeed, standard jobs

will be subject to competition from jobs exempted from the bulk of social security costs. Even in the short run, differential treatment will increase labour market segmentation and impede labour mobility and employment transitions.

European dimension

There are big differences between EU Member States as far as access to social protection is concerned. Moreover, insufficiently covered forms of employment are common in sectors with considerable cross-border trade, such as construction, transport and digital platform-based service provision and commerce.

This distorts competition within the EU single market and risks creating a race to the bottom which runs counter to the fundamental EU aim of ensuring a level playing field and upward social convergence between Member States.

For all these reasons, the European Commission wants to explore ways of ensuring that Member States provide people in all forms of employment with social security cover, making it possible for non-standard workers and self-employed people to build adequate rights.

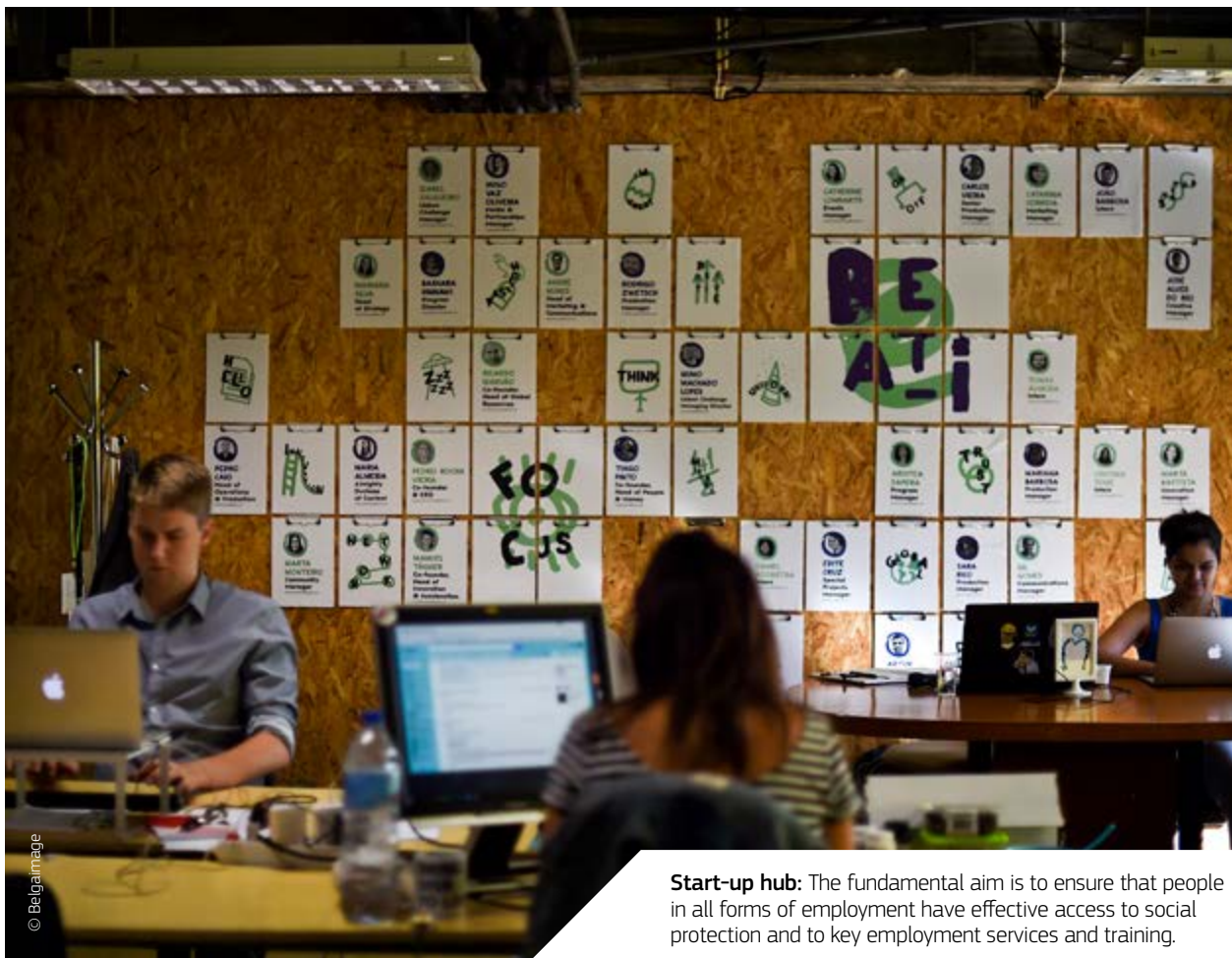
Indeed it is crucial that social protection systems and employment services become more accessible, transparent and simpler. This will allow people to acquire the benefits and services they need and to transfer their acquired entitlements when they change jobs or forms of employment.

A set of principles

In this area of strong national competence, an EU initiative would



Insufficient access: Insufficiently covered forms of employment are common in sectors such as transport, construction and digital platform-based service provision and commerce.



Start-up hub: The fundamental aim is to ensure that people in all forms of employment have effective access to social protection and to key employment services and training.

primarily seek to promote a series of common principles through a package of legislative and non-legislative measures.

These principles would range from: ensuring similar social protection rights for similar work, tying social protection rights to individuals and making them transferable; to making social protection rights and related information transparent and simplifying administrative requirements.

The fundamental aim is to ensure that people in all forms of employment have effective access to social protection and to key employment services and training, as well as to facilitate transitions between (or combinations of) dependent employment and self-employment.

In the process, the sustainability of EU countries' social protection systems would be better ensured. And the employment situation would also improve, as more people would be encouraged to take the risks associated with non-standard work and self-employment.

More information:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1312&langId=en>

Higher poverty risk

In 2015 the poverty risk of the self-employed was three times higher than that of salaried workers. Similarly, poverty risks for non-standard workers were markedly higher than those for workers with a permanent full time job. Moreover, around 15% of temporary and part-time workers were income poor.

Unemployment insurance is not accessible for the self-employed in 10 EU countries. Almost a third of people on temporary full-time contracts do not qualify for unemployment benefits.

Some 40% of the self-employed do not qualify for sickness benefits. Employment services for the self-employed – such as training, mentoring and advice – are only available in a few Member States.

People in self-employment make up 15% of the EU workforce and people in non-standard employment 20-25%. Up to half of these are estimated to have insufficient access to social protection and employment services.

WORK CONTRACTS

Better conditions for all workers

The European Commission proposes venues to revise the employment contract rules in the EU

What is a worker?

Reviewing the Written Statement Directive entails defining more precisely what is meant by "worker" or "employee", at least when implementing EU labour law. This concept varies from country to country, leading to differences in the coverage of the Directive.

Currently, the Written Statement Directive leaves EU Member States free to apply their own definition of what is an employee. However, the case-law of the EU Court of Justice tends to refer to the EU definition of worker as developed in the area of free movement of workers: any person who, for a certain period of time, performs services for and under the direction of another person in return for which he/she receives remuneration.

Therefore the Commission suggests clarifying the scope of the Directive by including a common definition and making clear that it applies to every worker, including domestic workers, paid trainees, paid apprentices as well as temporary agency, on-demand, intermittent, voucher-based workers and on-line platform workers.

In parallel with its initiative to define new rules for access to social protection and employment services (see page 9), the European Commission is reviewing the Written Statement Directive of 1991.

As it stands, this Directive stipulates that an employer must notify to an employee, in writing: the identities of the parties; the place of work; the nature of the work; the date of commencement; the expected duration; the amount of paid leave to which the employee is entitled; the periods of notice should the contract be terminated; the payment; and the length of the employee's normal working day or week etc.

Twenty-six years after its adoption, many workers in the EU still do not receive a written confirmation of their working conditions, or at least not all the information they need, nor in a timely manner.

This includes in particular "atypical" or "casual" workers such as "on-call" workers, those who have zero-hour contracts (in which no particular number of hours or times of work are specified) or intermittent workers; especially in sectors such as agriculture, hotels and catering, education, and healthcare. It also concerns specific categories of workers, such as domestic workers and paid trainees.

Indeed, many workers are not sufficiently aware of, or do not possess a confirmation of, some of their basic rights such as



Not always in writing: many workers in the EU still do not receive a written confirmation of their working conditions, especially in sectors such as agriculture, hotels and catering, education, and healthcare sectors



Upward convergence: ensuring a set of minimum working conditions across the EU and across all forms of contracts would create a framework within which new forms of work could develop.

holiday pay, duration of the probation period, protection against unfair dismissal or applicable conditions when posted abroad.

Vulnerable position

In recent years, some employment relationships have put workers in a vulnerable position or pushed flexibility to an unsustainable level, whatever the quality of information they receive at the beginning.

By and large, there is now a core group of protected persons (typically working under standard open-ended contracts or long-term contracts), alongside a wide divergence in practice and/or uncertainty in coverage, for many other categories of workers.

Beyond the provision of information to workers, therefore, the Commission seeks to establish additional basic rights for all workers and help them predict their work organisation and income, including when in extremely flexible forms of employment such as zero-hour contracts.

At the time of printing, the Commission was on the verge of launching a second round of consultation of the social partners on possible avenues for EU action concerning: the scope of application of the Directive, so that it may cover all workers (see box page 12); a list of information rights applicable to all workers regarding their employment conditions; a floor of basic rights; and a modification of the means of redress and sanctions to improve compliance with the Directive.

Upward convergence

If a set of minimum fair working conditions were to be ensured across the EU and across all forms of contracts, this would set a framework within which new forms of work could develop.

It would also offer fair protection to workers, a clear reference framework for national legislators and a level playing field for business within the internal EU market. This in turn would reduce incentives for unfair competition.

All in all, a revised Directive would therefore ensure that all

workers get the right set of information about their working conditions in a written form. It would also reduce precarious employment relationships and achieve upward convergence towards equal access to a number of basic rights for all workers.

More information on the Written Statement Directive:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1313&langId=en>

Two principles of the Social Pillar

Workers have the right to be informed in writing at the start of employment about their rights and obligations resulting from the employment relationship, including on probation period, according to Principle 7 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted by the European Commission on 26 April 2017 (see *Social Agenda* n°48).

Prior to any dismissal, workers have the right to be informed of the reasons and be granted a reasonable period of notice. They have the right to access to effective and impartial dispute resolution and, in case of unjustified dismissal, a right to redress, including adequate compensation.

Principle 5, on "secure and adaptable employment", is also very relevant to the revision of the Written Statement Directive.

More information on the Social Pillar:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

SPECIAL FEATURE



Marianne Thyssen: Vocational education and training and skills play a central role in the new European Pillar of Social Rights; skills gaps and mismatches also have a great macro-economic impact.

Marianne Thyssen - turning vocational education and training into a smart choice

Ahead of the next European Vocational Skills Week, in November, the European Commissioner in charge of employment, social affairs, skills and labour mobility highlights the strategic importance of vocational education and training and skills in addressing today's Europe-wide challenges

Do you see important connections between Vocational education and training (VET) and other elements of your portfolio?

Yes, of course: Technology is altering the way people live, work and do business; digitalisation and automation are framing our future – leaving some unable to keep up; the European Union has an ageing population; and people change not only jobs but even careers more often than earlier generations. Vocational education and training is therefore a key element to help people stay on top of their game. Life-long learning will become ever more important in the future. Those who have the right skills find a job more easily, earn higher wages and can provide better for the future and old age. That's why VET and skills have a central role in the new European Pillar of Social Rights (see Social Agenda n°48).

VET is important also from a macro-economic point of view?

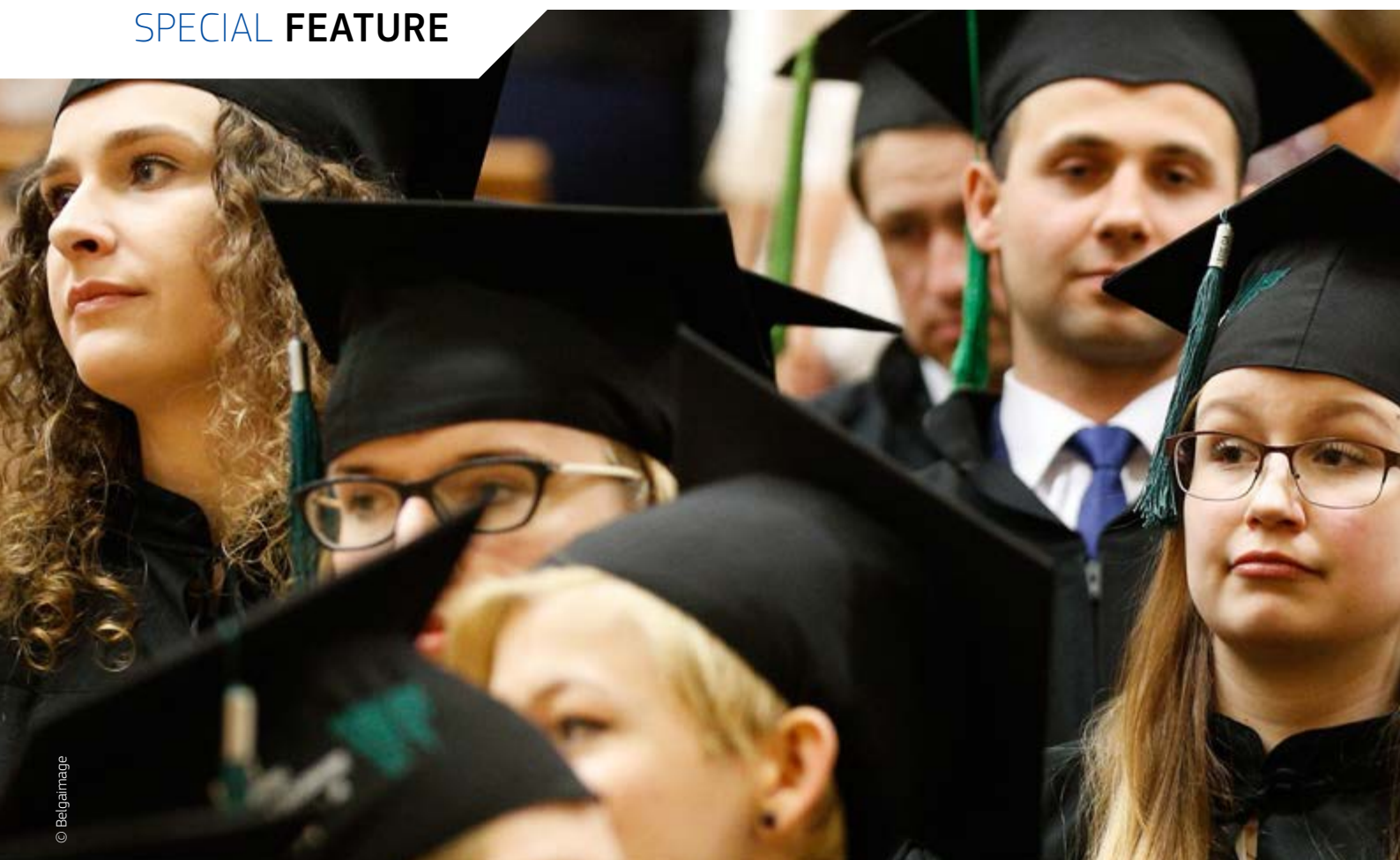
Skills gaps and skills mismatches have a huge impact: 40% of European employers have difficulty finding people with the skills they need to grow and innovate; while over 60% of students and recent graduates perceive a mismatch between the skills they learned at school and what their job requires. We cannot afford the cost of not using all available skills. Everyone needs to be able to put their skills to good use, including migrants, women and young people. Vocational education and training presents opportunities for people young and old, men and women, to gain the skills they need on the job market. Young VET graduates, for example, find jobs more quickly than their peers with university degrees! Apprenticeships provide hands-on work-based learning to match labour market demand. They're also a solid basis for satisfying careers and to prepare young people for life more broadly.

VET is a smart choice in a smart working world

Why do you see awareness-raising on VET as so important?

VET can be seen as the "poor neighbour" of a university education. Well, it is not: it's an equal one! Because of this "image problem", a campaign was needed everywhere in Europe to present the more positive and genuine picture, highlighting the quality and attractiveness of VET, the fact that it is innovative, inclusive and that it has the capacity to respond to labour market needs. VET is a smart choice in a smart working world! Our first European Vocational Skills Week in 2016 was a huge success. The second Week will take place from 20 to 24 November 2017 and we want to build on this experience and go even further. I know that some Member States have been organising their national campaigns for some years, but they all agree that a Commission-led campaign that brings all VET stakeholders together across Europe has a clear added-value. We provide a platform to enable them to share their own experiences and show the best of each country for the benefit of others. Many participants in the 2016 Week mentioned that for the first time they felt a sense of being part of a European VET community. This is a formidable achievement, and I'm very proud of that.

SPECIAL FEATURE



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What are your expectations for the 2017 Week and the future in the skills area?

I am expecting an equally successful – if not more successful – Week this year! In the 2017 edition we will repeat some of the features of 2016. First of all, the mapping of all sorts of vibrant contributory events across Europe, mobilising people to get involved in their local area; secondly, awards to recognise innovation and excellence in VET; and a third is the focused communications campaign. But we will also do new things. We will showcase great VET projects funded by the EU in a digital exhibition. This Week will focus on three sub-themes: learner mobility, business-education partnerships, and sector skills. Finally, we will hold a concluding summit of our 2-year European Pact for Youth, with its focus on the private sector working to get young people into employment. My sincere hope is that our efforts will have a knock-on effect on VET take-up – I would like to see our VET colleges and centres overflowing with students who go on to inspiring and well-paid jobs across Europe!

Was the success of the first Week last year a surprise to you? What did you particularly like?

I didn't know what to expect last year, as it was the first time we had organised such a campaign. I knew that there was a clear appetite to change mind sets and negative stereotypes on VET qualifications and I was very positively surprised when we had

nearly 1000 events registered across Europe – in total almost 800,000 people got involved! I loved the energy and enthusiasm of the trainers and learners I met during the Week. I was happy to see just how much had been achieved by the winners of the awards that I had the privilege of presenting. And the general sense of motivation and engagement was very compelling!

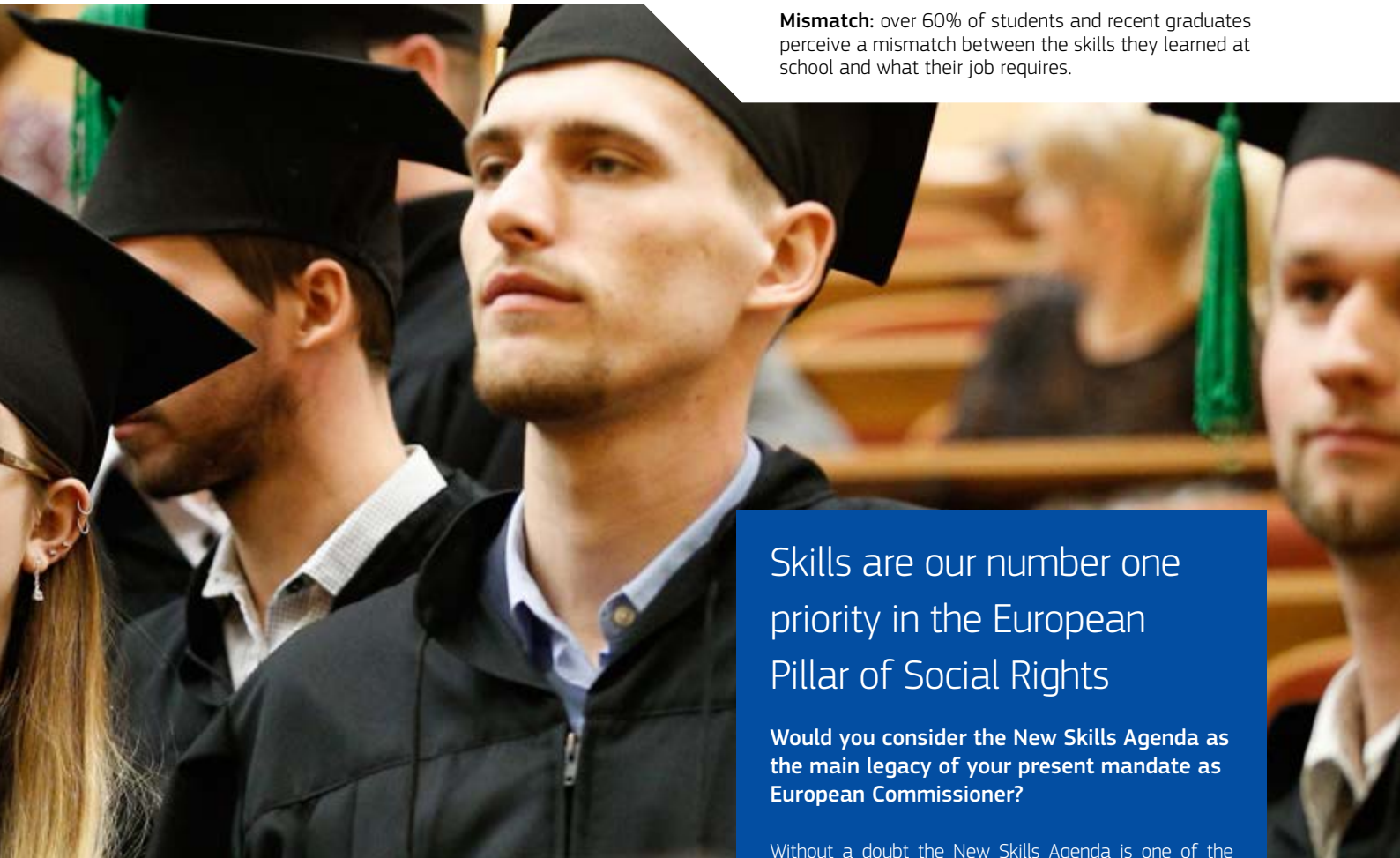
What added value can the EU bring to the VET area and by bringing VET providers together?

VET is about working with others to create learning opportunities that meet the needs of an increasingly interdependent and connected business world across Europe. The EU adds value by creating cross-border links, a European conversation for VET stakeholders, so that they can get inspired and enhance what they do. Let me underline the importance of our VET providers with whom we engage regularly, seeking their advice and asking about their needs. I really admire their enthusiasm. They are key stakeholders of the European Vocational Skills Week. Again this year, we plan a dedicated meeting for VET providers as part of the Week's activities.

Can the EU also add value to the cross-border dimension of education, especially with the 30th anniversary of Erasmus, and ErasmusPro becoming operational?

Absolutely. Year after year Europeans tell us that they consider

Mismatch: over 60% of students and recent graduates perceive a mismatch between the skills they learned at school and what their job requires.



Skills are our number one priority in the European Pillar of Social Rights

Would you consider the New Skills Agenda as the main legacy of your present mandate as European Commissioner?

Without a doubt the New Skills Agenda is one of the central social initiatives this Commission has launched. Providing people with the right skills is an essential task that goes beyond mere figures. It creates very tangible results on the ground. The New Skills Agenda also directly supports one of my main goals: to reconnect people to the European project. Our legacy consists of leaving Europe a better place to live and work than when we started. When President Juncker asked me to take on the responsibility of Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility three years ago, Europe was still struggling with the impact of the economic and financial crisis, which had a profound effect on our society. Unemployment had reached unacceptably high levels in many parts of the continent, particularly among Europe's youth. Halfway through our mandate, the prospects are looking much better and part of this success is due to EU action on many fronts. We brought forward a number of concrete initiatives to deliver on social Europe. But our work doesn't finish there. The world is changing, the way we live and work is changing. Our institutions, what we learn and how we learn needs to be adapted constantly. That's why skills are our number one priority in the European Pillar of Social Rights. In the end what will count to keep our citizens' support for Europe is to show them results and a Europe that defends a strong social dimension for the benefit of all.

Erasmus+ as the most successful programme for students. More than 9 million learners have benefited from EU funded mobility since 1986. Of these, 1.5 million have been VET learners. During the 2017 European Vocational Skills Week we will exhibit successful VET projects under Erasmus+. And we will organise events specifically on the new ErasmusPro. Now that the Commission's ErasmusPro proposal has been adopted by Member States, we need to mobilise both VET providers as well as companies to make use of this new instrument to support long-duration work placements abroad.

How quickly do you see mentalities evolving, including that of parents, as far as the perception of VET is concerned?

I am eager for results but I also know that changing deep rooted mind-sets takes time: It is not thanks to this campaign alone that society will have a different view of vocational skills. But I would like to see more interest and engagement over time. We are in touch with the European Parents' Association, which is doing what it can to motivate its membership across Europe to re-think and take action on VET. At the same time we have to work hard with Member States and VET stakeholders to modernise our systems, for example through the New Skills Agenda (see *Social Agenda* n°45).

SPECIAL FEATURE



A second European Vocational Skills Week

From Nanterre university near Paris to Aristotle university in Thessaloniki: Of the 9 million learners who have benefited from EU funded mobility since Erasmus was created in 1986, 1.5 million were VET learners.

From 20 to 24 November, vocational education and training organisations across Europe will showcase the excellence and quality of their offer for the second year running

Discover your talent and perceive vocational education and training as an equal first choice, alongside more traditional education routes: this is the message which the European Commission has been proclaiming ever since June 2016, when it adopted a New Skills Agenda for Europe (see Social Agenda n°45).

A few months after the launch of the Agenda, nearly 800 000 people took part in almost 1 000 national, regional and local activities across Europe, as part of the first European Vocational Skills Week, organised by the European Commission from 5 to 9 December 2016. Another 1 500 participants joined the workshops, conferences and other events organised in Brussels, while a social media campaign reached out to many more.

The aim of the Week was to demonstrate the crucial role of vocational education and training (VET) for skills and jobs, innovation and competitiveness. And to make participants discover how they can use and improve their talents and abilities through VET.

It covered themes such as adult learning and reskilling, youth employment, apprenticeships and mobility, businesses and VET and improving quality assurance in VET. At the closing event, European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen presented nine

awards for outstanding, innovative and remarkable performances.

The success was such that the Commission is organising a second Week, from 20 to 24 November 2017. It is banking on a 50% increase in the number of registered events and a 30% increase in the number of participants, to reach the 1 million mark.

Thematic approach

One of the novelties of this second Week is that it will have a thematic approach: three sub-topics will enrich the "Discover your talent" central theme.

A focus will be placed upon cross-border mobility for apprentices and VET learners, as 2017 marks the 30 years of Erasmus, the famous EU cross-border educational mobility programme. In June, the Member States gave the go-ahead to implement the ErasmusPro initiative. It will provide 50 000 new opportunities for VET learners and apprentices to benefit from long-duration work placements abroad over the next three years. It includes the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial and language skills, with the participation of the private sector.

Another theme will be business-education partnerships: not only to offer new apprenticeships and internship opportunities but



Polish apprentices in Germany via Erasmus+: a focus will be placed upon cross-border mobility for apprentices and VET learners.

also, for example, for companies to make advanced equipment available to VET schools and institutions.

And the third sub-topic is "sectoral approaches to skills development". Digitalisation, for example, affects economic sectors differently. Sectors need to develop and implement sector-wide agreed skills strategies to cope with upcoming challenges.

A Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills describes a new strategic and European approach to sectoral cooperation on skills. The implementation of the Blueprint is being supported financially by the Erasmus+ Sector Skills Alliances (€24 million in 2017), which support the set-up of sustainable cooperation on skills development between key industry stakeholders in a given sector, education and training providers, and public authorities

Cultural shifts

The thematic focus of the Week is a means to an end. The European Vocational Skills Week is a campaign to change mind-sets. VET can and should come into its own. The Commission will be creating metrics to measure cultural shifts over time.

The gradual evolution of the VET community will be key. Already in 2016, there was evidence of such an evolution. That now needs to extend all the way to citizens and households. This is why the Commission is openly advocating further "VET Weeks" in future years.

More information:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1261>

Cross-border challenges

There are approximately 13 million VET learners in the EU and thousands of VET providers. VET systems vary considerably from country to country but one common challenge they are facing is the need to improve the image and esteem of VET, and attract new learners (both young and adults).

Something else that the VET systems have in common is the need to connect across borders throughout Europe (including the candidate countries for EU membership and the European Free Trade Association Member States).

By taking part in the European Vocational Skills Week, VET providers and companies are put in touch with one another and benefit from existing networks that were not known to them, or even establish new networks and partnerships among themselves.

Cross-border mobility

Homing in specifically on mobility is a main aim of the second European Vocational Skills Week. The EU aims to have 6% of vocational education and training (VET) learners undergo a cross-border mobility experience by 2020. At present, it finances 3% of VET learners' mobility, through the Erasmus+ programme. Some countries also use their own resources or even other EU funds, such as the European Social Fund, for this purpose.

The problem is mainly one of offer, and not so much of demand. Less than 50% of the eligible applications for VET mobility under Erasmus+ can be financed, due to scarcity of financial resources. If enough resources were available, the 6% objective could be reached not in 2020 but right now.

SPECIAL FEATURE

When qualifications meet **skills**

The European Commission has launched a free and open European Classification of Skills, Occupations and Qualifications (ESCO) service platform

On the one hand, you have qualifications and on the other, their learning outcomes, i.e. the concrete skills you must master to acquire those qualifications.

Since it adopted the New Skills Agenda for Europe in 2016, the European Commission has taken steps to deal with both: improve the way qualifications in one European country may be compared to those in other European countries; and connect them with the skills they entail, in a cross-border comparable way.

Translation grid

On 22 May 2017, the EU Council of Ministers adopted a revision of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning: a common reference framework of European generic levels of learning. Created in 2008, it serves as a translation grid between national qualifications systems.

On top of covering all types and levels of qualifications - including from higher education, vocational education and training (VET) and general education - the EQF also includes qualifications awarded by the private sector and international organisations. It has been modernised and deepened so that it may keep up with future developments.

If all EU Member States have national occupations classification, few have a skills classification. On 28 July, the European Commission therefore launched the first full version of ESCO - the European Classification of Skills, Occupations and Qualifications - which connects each occupation to a set of skills. It was formally launched at a conference in October (see box).

ESCO provides the European classification to which Member States have to map their national classifications, on both occupations and skills, in order to promote the mobility of workers and enhance job vacancy transparency throughout Europe.

Complementary

The EQF and ESCO are therefore very complementary.

Through the EQF, EU countries reference their national qualifications framework to a European one, to make it easier to compare qualification levels from one country to the other.

And through ESCO, they can now share the skills, and therefore the learning outcomes, which each classification entails, using a standardised European terminology which will make them comparable across borders.



Connecting worlds: ESCO connects the world of education and training to that of the labour market by providing a common language for job hunters, employers, educators and employment services.



Bosnian and Spanish nurse in a German hospital: European countries can now share the skills and learning outcomes which each classification entails, using standardised European terminology.

And this they do in 26 languages (the EU official languages plus Icelandic and Norwegian, as EU skills tools also cover Iceland and Norway, plus Switzerland and Liechtenstein!)

In addition, ESCO is free of charge and it uses the Linked Open Data approach, which makes it easily accessible to a wide array of users: public and private employment services, education and training institutions, online service providers...

Common language

One word sums up the rationale behind the creation of ESCO: connecting. Above all, ESCO connects the world of education and training with that of the labour market, by providing a common language for job hunters, employers, educators and employment services alike.

ESCO also connects existing occupational classification transparency instruments, between themselves and with the service providers on the ground. It helps employment services or electronic tools better match people with jobs.

It enhances cross-border mobility across Europe. It will be the backbone of the interoperability of EURES, the European Employment Service online platform and cooperation network, which has recently been revamped.

ESCO also encourages mentality shifts. It will help education and training systems shift their emphasis from the education and training process used to acquire a qualification, to the resulting learning outcomes: the qualifications themselves and the skills developed in acquiring them, i.e. what was actually learnt and acquired. It also promotes an evidence-based approach to policy making, both in the area of labour market policy and of education and training.

Userled

The ambition of ESCO is to become a de facto standard for identifying and communicating occupations, skills, competences and qualifications throughout Europe. It seeks to be voluntarily adopted by the stakeholders concerned thanks to its sheer

added value, ease of use and responsiveness to users' needs. Indeed, one of its guiding principles is to be userled.

For this to happen, ESCO needs to be continuously updated and adapted to changing circumstances, and to remain flexible. This leads to the issue of ESCO governance, which ultimately will be settled as part of the on-going discussion on a proposed common governance for all EU skills tools.

More information:

<https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home?resetLanguage=true&newLanguage=en>

A process dating back to 2010

Work on ESCO started in 2010. Three years later, a pilot version called ESCO.0 was launched, followed by other experimental versions, including ESCO.0.8 which was used recently by different stakeholders and companies to test a variety of user cases.

If the full public version of ESCO (ESCO.1) was launched on 28 July 2017, its formal launch took place during a conference, in Brussels, on 8-10 October.

During the first day of the conference, stakeholders using ESCO (job boards, the EURES network, the Public Employment Services network, universities...) presented 25 of the pilot projects carried out with ESCO 0.8, to demonstrate the different facets of ESCO.

On the second day, in which LinkedIn Vice-President John Herlihy took part, the focus was more on explaining the added-value of ESCO.

SPECIAL FEATURE



Highlighting informal skills: European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen overseeing young asylum-seekers using the EU Skills Profile Tool to register the informal skills they learned from working in kitchens.

A skills profiling tool for **non-EU** nationals

The European Commission has launched a free multilingual skills profile tool for third-country nationals, including asylum-seekers and refugees

On 7 June 2016, the European Commission put forward an Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals, including refugees. It aimed to turn integration into an opportunity, for third-country nationals as well as for other vulnerable groups in EU countries and for these countries' overall social cohesion and economic performance. The Plan supports a key action of the New Skills Agenda of 10 June 2016: the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals.

On 20 June 2017, the United Nations' World Refugee Day, a beta version of the Tool was launched at parallel events in Brussels: A stakeholder conference; and the Commissioner's visit to a Belgian reception centre for asylum-seekers managed by FEDASIL. And a full version of the tool was due to be released in October.

Early identification

The specific purpose of the Tool is to support early identification of the skills of asylum seekers, refugees and other third-country nationals, in order to facilitate their integration into the labour market and wider society.

It is intended for use by any organisation or service that may be offering assistance to third-country nationals: national administrations, asylum centres, public employment services, social services or non-governmental organisations. It aims to get to know individuals, their skills and experiences and provide recommendations on their next steps on the road to integration.

Concretely, it takes the form of a web editor which allows two languages to be displayed side-by-side on screen. As a result, a non-EU national and an interviewer/advisor (e.g. a social worker) may complete together a set of questions dealing with their expectations, skills, education, training and professional experiences, even if they don't share the same language.

The interviewer can then complete the Recommendations section with suggested next steps. He/she can recommend organisations that award official accreditation for informal skills, or award bodies that recognise foreign qualifications, and signpost the person concerned to further education or language training. At the end of the process, the interviewees receive their skills profile, complete with next steps.

Available in 30 languages, the Tool uses the standardised European terminology of ESCO, the European Classification of Skills, Occupations and Qualifications service platform, which was launched on 28 July (see page 20). Thanks to the standardised and multilingual character of the Tool, the skills profiles remain valid and understandable right across Europe. If a non-EU national moves to another EU country, he/she does not have to start all over again.

Like ESCO, the tool is available for free, and open source code will be made available. It is also highly flexible and potential organisational users may download all or part of it, to integrate into their own systems.

Informal skills

At the beta launch on 20 June, European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen oversaw young girls from Senegal and Mauritania using the Tool to highlight the informal skills they had learned from working in kitchens.

Meanwhile an experienced Palestinian construction worker made the most of the Arabic version to describe his 20 years in the industry, the size of the teams he had led and the types of project management skills he had developed. The comprehensive nature of the Tool means that there are relevant sections for all ages and skill levels.

In the future, asylum-seekers such as these would be able to take their profiles to a variety of services to further their integration process, or even use the Tool as a starting point or roadmap for their continued education and training. They could use it with employment advisors to help them find the right kind of job to match their skills.

Further developments

The Tool is being continuously refined. For example, the Recommendations section, presently made up of free text boxes, could be turned into a more structured format that guides advisers in the process.

20 years to catch up

On average, it takes refugees up to 20 years to have a similar employment rate as native-born people.

One out of five refugees aged 15-64 in the EU in 2014 had a tertiary level of education. Almost 60% of employed tertiary-educated refugees in the EU are overqualified for the jobs they occupy: Most of them have foreign qualifications which employers may have difficulties in evaluating and they often lack documentation of their degrees.

Refugees represent one of the most vulnerable groups of migrants on the labour market. Their employment rate is 56%. One in five economically active refugees is unemployed, one in eight for 12 months or longer and about one in fourteen for two years or longer.

(OECD working paper of 2016, based on 2014 EU Labour Force Survey)

Other languages may be offered and functionalities improved, such as increasing the Tool's flexibility, making it more tailored to individuals, or streamlining the Summary. A user manual has been created, in addition to the guidance already built in throughout the Tool.

The Tool has great potential for being used not just for asylum-seekers and refugees but also for third-country immigrants in need of support, to describe their skills and to find a job that is more fitting or for EU citizens who have been unemployed for a long time.

More information:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&intPagId=5019&langId=en>



Syrian refugee running a small business in the Netherlands: Thanks to the standardised and multilingual character of the Tool, the skills profiles it contains are valid and understandable right across Europe.

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

EU helps **Greece** launch a social safety net

A new minimum income scheme involves creating local one-stop shops for social and employment services

Greece is at a turning point in terms of human capital investment. In February 2017, it started rolling out a Social Solidarity Income scheme (SSI): a basic social safety net, providing the households most in need with a guaranteed minimum income.

Up till then, Greece was the only EU country, together with Italy, not to have a minimum income scheme to protect against extreme poverty - in a country where 35.7% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2015 and where the highest increase in Europe was recorded between 2008 and 2015 (see box).

A top-up

Calculated on a household basis, the SSI is set at €200 per month for a single-person household, increased by €100 for each additional adult and €50 per child less than 18 years old. In single-parent households, the first child counts as an adult.

The actual benefit is determined as a top-up to the assessed income of the household from other sources, including other

social benefits (except disability benefits), so as to reach the guaranteed income, which amounts to about 50% of the national poverty line.

The first Pillar of the SSI involved identifying the households in need of it. A second pillar is now being launched: improving beneficiaries' access to social services through a network of one-stop shops called "Community Centres". As well as a third one: providing "activation" services (e.g. training) to help working-age beneficiaries integrate or re-integrate the labour market. The EU's European Social Fund (ESF) has a crucial role to play in implementing pillars 2 and 3.

250 centres

At the time of printing, 65 Community Centres were already operational, out of the planned 250, with a total ESF support of around €50 million for a three-year operation.

In cooperation with the Greek Public Employment Service



Queuing up inside a Greek Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) building: 250 Community Centres are planned to guide potential guaranteed minimum income scheme beneficiaries through the system.



Household support: With the help of EU funding, Greece has started rolling out a Social Solidarity Income (SSI) scheme providing a guaranteed minimum income to the households most in need.

(OAED), the Community Centres help potential beneficiaries and guide them through the system of available services.

The centres are also interconnected with a number of ESF-supported social structures – such as social groceries, pharmacies, day care centres for disabled people, shelters for homeless people – for which €94 million is allocated from the ESF budget.

Since May 2017, the SSI is directly linked to the EU Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD), €281 million of which has been allocated to Greece: the same eligibility criteria apply and only SSI beneficiaries can receive FEAD assistance.

EU funding mobilised

In the EU 2014-2020 budgetary period, the total ESF allocation for Greece amounts to €3.86 billion. This includes a specific allocation for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) which directly helps young people not in employment, education or training living in regions experiencing youth unemployment rates above 25% in 2012 (€171.5 million for 2014-2015).

44% of the ESF allocation to Greece is dedicated to promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility, 24.6% to education, training and vocational training and 20.4% to social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination.

An adjustment of EU cohesion funds allocations by Member State was carried out for the years 2017-2020, to take into account the difficult situations of countries suffering particularly from the 2008 financial and economic crisis. As a result, an extra €970 million has been allocated to Greece and a new YEI allocation of €79 million was about to be fixed.

More information:

<http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=382>

Severe material deprivation

Between 2008 and 2015, the rate of severe material deprivation went up in Greece from 11.2% to 22.2%, while the share of people living in households with very low work intensity went up from 7.5% to 16.8% and child poverty increased from 36.7% to 37.8%.

Over the same period, one million jobs were lost in Greece. The overall unemployment rate for people aged between 15 and 74 peaked at almost 28% in 2013 and had gone down to 23.5% by the first quarter of 2017 (compared to the EU average of 8.3%). 71.8% of the unemployed have been out of the labour market for more than a year.

The youth "not in employment, education or training" rate went down from 20.4% in 2013 to 15.8% in 2016 but is still well above the EU average of 11.5%. 700 000 people left Greece between 2008 and 2015, almost half of whom were young people aged 20-34, stripping the country of its human capital.

Only 10-15% of the registered unemployed received any unemployment benefits, including benefits for workers in seasonal tourist occupations.

OTHER VOICES

What is needed for good **quality** apprenticeships?

Time to ask apprentices themselves!



Zuzana Vaneckova and Lasse Sjøbeck Jørgensen: a need for a much stronger focus on the quality of work-based learning and on the right to decent working conditions for young people.

From the economic crisis, which has disproportionately affected young generations, to the debate around the future of work, young people in Europe face a variety of challenges, hindering their individual development as well as society as a whole. Of these challenges, one that the EU still struggles to overcome is the increasingly high rate of youth unemployment: a multifaceted phenomenon, which requires thinking beyond silos and embracing a more holistic approach.

Tackling youth unemployment means both addressing the current shortage of entry level jobs, as well as investing in quality education, qualifications and skills to help young people, particularly those most vulnerable, to transition from education to the next stage of their life. Vocational Education and Training (VET) is essential in this process: while addressing skills mismatch alone cannot solve youth unemployment, increasing the supply and take up of VET can help students to better navigate the labour market.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) have a long history of working on quality education, including VET. We strongly believe in the learning purpose of VET and that training opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships have the potential to help young students to develop their competences, increasing their employability. However, too often such potential is wasted: while apprenticeships and internships should first and foremost be a learning experience, in many instances the quality of offers is lacking and young people's needs are not given sufficient consideration.

In 2017 the YFJ and OBESSU, supported by the European Commission, established the European Apprentices Network (EAN). The EAN, composed of individuals who either represent apprentices through their youth organisations or are apprentices

themselves, provides a platform to discuss relevant EU policy developments, inform other apprentices on the ground, and share experiences and challenges, while also acting as a critical friend to the Commission.

EAN members have worked together to identify key priorities for the years to come, including the need for a much stronger focus on quality of work-based learning, as well as on the right to decent working conditions, such as access to social protection and fair remuneration, to be recognised in legally binding agreements. Moreover, the EAN advocates for more inclusive apprenticeships, by demanding more accessible information and equal access to educational and training opportunities.

Platforms such as the EAN constitute a step towards better representation of apprentices, whose voices too often remain unheard, also by supporting the creation of representative bodies at national level. Through the EAN, apprentices can fight for their rights and have a say in decisions that may affect them – a particularly helpful tool now that initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and the European Solidarity Corps are high up on the EU agenda.

While VET and apprenticeships should not be seen as a quick fix for youth unemployment, ensuring that work-based learning opportunities are tailored to the needs and rights of young people would represent a step in the right direction towards a more inclusive Europe.

Zuzana Vaneckova

(board member of the European Youth Forum) and

Lasse Sjøbeck Jørgensen

(board member of the European School Student Unions)

INTERVIEW

Skills for both life and work

Alison Crabb is head of Skills and Qualifications in the European Commission's Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Directorate General



Putting people's talent to use: "Skills for life and skills for the labour market are very closely intertwined".

From 2001 to 2014, you worked in Education and Culture. With the launch of the EU skills profile tool for third-country nationals (page 22), education, culture and employment all come together...

We want to help make sure that third country nationals, including refugees, have the best chance to integrate into society and put their skills to use. Having a job is a big step towards inclusion and out of poverty. In the late 90s, before joining the European Commission, I was seconded by the UK civil service to a charity, the Prince's Trust for Youth, to run a programme which helped young people in difficulty increase their employability and get ready for work. This was one of most challenging tasks of my working life but also one of the most rewarding: By helping to equip with so-called "soft" skills young people who faced tremendous difficulties with drink, drug and crime problems, family violence... even after three or four months, they were a lot more job-ready and better equipped for life.

What lessons do you draw from this experience?

There's no contradiction between "skills for life" and "skills for the labour market". In reality they are very closely intertwined. You need skills to feel confident in society – and that includes getting a job. It's as simple as that. I've always been interested in integration and what it means for the economy, as well as individuals. What I am doing now is part of that continuum: it's about putting people's talent to use on the labour market and looking for the best possible "match" with employers' skills needs. Social integration is one side of the coin; equally important for the EU's competitiveness is having successful labour markets! Skills and qualifications is one part of the answer to some of the biggest challenges of our time – digitalisation, globalisation, an ageing population and migration.

What is the EU's added-value in the skills policy area?

In fields where the main competences are not at EU level, we need to work hand-in-hand with stakeholders, bringing the evidence, arguments and convincing ideas to move things forward. For the single labour market to work well, people's skills need to be easily understood and compared across borders – so we have policies and instruments to put this into practice. Inside the Commission, we try to work as a skills policy hub across different fields. Some EU countries are already developing a "whole of government" approach to skills policy in building up their national skills strategies and at European level we aim to do the same.



Employment and social developments in Europe: heavy burden on the young

Focusing on intergenerational fairness and solidarity in Europe, the seventh edition of the annual Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) confirms that a particularly heavy burden is being placed on the younger generations, although employment has never been as high as today in the EU and unemployment is at its lowest level since December 2008.

The main findings of ESDE 2017 corroborate the rationale and objectives of initiatives such as the proposal for a "New Start Initiative to support work-life balance for parents and carers" and the social partner consultations on Access to Social Protection and the revision of the "Written Statement" Directive, taken recently on the basis of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Review presents a detailed analysis of key employment and social issues and concerns for the European Union and its Member States. In English only.

Catalogue n°: KE-BD-17-001-EN-N

Upskilling Pathways: New learning opportunities for adults

Almost 70 million people in Europe have trouble reading, writing, making simple calculations or using a computer. The new Upskilling Pathways initiative will provide a fresh start to people in need of basic skills development through tailored learning offers and skills assessments to help them acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or a broader set of skills. In all EU languages.

Catalogue n°: KE-04-17-437-EN-N

European Alliance for Apprenticeships: Four Years On

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships was created in 2013. This publication details the achievements and successes of the Alliance so far. It provides information on policy, supporting organisations and funding opportunities. It also contains success stories and explains plans to build upon the work of the Alliance in the coming years. The Alliance brings together stakeholders in employment and education, aiming to increase the quality, supply and attractiveness of apprenticeships across Europe. Available on-line and in print, in English, French and German.

Catalogue n°: KE-04-17-152-EN-N

EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals: 2 languages simultaneously

A multilingual online editor that makes it possible for refugees, migrants and other third country nationals to present their skills, qualifications, and experiences in a way that is understood across the European Union, the EU Skills Profile Tool has been developed by the European Commission and made available for all users free of charge (see article page 22). In due course, the Tool will be available in all official EU languages, Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Sorani, Somali and Tigrinya, and can display any two of these at one time on screen. This brochure is available in German, Greek, English, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and Farsi.

Catalogue N° KE-01-17-401-EN-N

To download or to order these publications, please go to <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en>

To subscribe to the 'Social Agenda' magazine or to other publications of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, please fill in the registration form available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=740&langId=en>

Useful websites

The website of Commissioner Thyssen: http://ec.europa.eu/commission/2014-2019/thyssen_en

The home page of the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: <http://ec.europa.eu/social>

The website of the European Social Fund: <http://ec.europa.eu/esf>