THE OSNABRÜCK DECLARATION 2020

on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies

Declaration of the Ministers in charge of Vocational Education and Training of the Member States the EU Candidate Countries and the EEA countries, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, meeting on 30 November 2020 (tbc) to agree on a new set of policy actions in VET for the period of 2021-2025 to complement and operationalize the vision and strategic objectives formulated in the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.

We, the Ministers in charge of Vocational Education and Training (VET) reaffirm our commitment, as discussed in our joint meeting with the European Social Partners and the European Commission in Osnabrück on 16 and 17 September 2020, to contribute to the post-COVID recovery and to further developing the European Education and Training Area through future-oriented and innovative education and training systems to support the digital and green transition and better employability and competitiveness to stimulate economic growth.

All objectives and actions will be implemented with due respect to the subsidiarity principle and in accordance with national VET circumstances.

We stress that a strong partnership with social partners is vital for achieving the objectives and deliverables set out in the Osnabrück Declaration.

We value the support by European level VET providers' associations and learners' organisations by issuing their position papers in line with the Osnabrück Declaration.

The COVID-19 pandemic as well as digitalisation and climate change strongly affect our economies, employment and societies. Vocational Education and Training (VET) is rightly asked to contribute to response strategies for unprecedented incidents, such as the post-COVID recovery but also to cope with challenges such as demographic change, digital innovation, sustainable or climate-neutral approaches, growing demand for STEM skills and the increasing need to constantly upskill and reskill[1] throughout the working life. VET is gaining a new momentum with the newly updated European Skills Agenda[2] and the Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET[3], helping to bring effect to the right of individuals to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning as stated in the first principle of the European Pillar for Social Rights. The Copenhagen Declaration of 29-30 November 2002 launched the European strategy for enhanced cooperation in VET, commonly referred to as the 'Copenhagen process'. Cooperation within the almost 20-year long Copenhagen process has become a catalyst for modernising VET in many EU Member States and candidate countries and has supported work towards Europe's strategic goals and targets. We will build on the achievements of our cooperation agreed in the Copenhagen Declaration (2002) and reaffirmed in the Communiqués of Maastricht (2004), Helsinki (2006), Bordeaux (2008), Bruges (2010) and the Riga conclusions (2015). The Copenhagen process provides a tripartite platform to intensify, complement and operationalise the European VET policy, as adopted by the Council of the

[1] We use the term skills in its broad sense, i.e. also covering competences

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1196

[3] ibidem

European Union. It also provides the platform to strengthen cooperation with social partners, chambers, VET providers and learners' organisations for the next five years. It will also contribute to the further development of the European Education and Training Area through future-oriented and innovative education and training systems, supporting a just transition towards the digital and green economy.

1. Rationale

An excellent and inclusive European VET is more than a response to developments and challenges that individuals and organisations face; VET is an enabler of innovation and an essential foundation of a green, digital and sustainable growth. It enhances countries' resilience to crisis, develops quality opportunities of lifelong learning for all citizens, and turns the digital and green challenges into driving forces able to reconcile sustained recovery, environmental sustainability and fair distribution of the benefits of growth among all citizens and societies.

An excellent and inclusive European VET is equally necessary for the competitiveness of European enterprises and a well-functioning European labour market.

Apprenticeships and work-based learning embedded in a real-life work environment foster employability. VET equips our labour force with knowledge, skills and competences that are relevant for the ever-changing labour market and offers upskilling and re-skilling for inclusion and excellence. VET has a distinctive focus and identity, a strong role at the interface of education and training, employment and economic policies. VET development can only be effective when policies are coherent and interconnected, underpinned by a balance between continuity and new directions.

Taking into consideration the proposal for a Council recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, as well as the updated European Skills Agenda, the Osnabrück Declaration focuses on four main areas for the years 2021 to 2025:

1. Resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET
2. Establishing a new lifelong learning culture – relevance of C-VET and digitalisation
3. Sustainability – a green link in VET
4. European education and training area and International VET

We build this Declaration on underlying principles that include the due consideration for social dialogue and need for a strong partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, including social partners, companies, employers' organisations, chambers, branch associations, VET providers, learners' representatives, national, regional, local public administrations, employment services, social economy organisations. Companies as learning venues are crucial to a modern and excellent VET. We highlight the shared responsibility with companies to promote the provision of skills that are needed. The need for sufficient investment and the involvement of all stakeholders is also key to achieve its objectives, especially in the context of the pandemic. A quality and inclusive VET should provide citizens with equal training opportunities, regardless of their personal and economic background and place of residence.

The underlying principles also include the need to keep high quality apprenticeships and work-based learning, to consolidate achievements as well as the need for a better integration of initial and continuous VET to ensure reskilling and upskilling, including pathways from IVET to CVET. Citizens, learners, their families are at the core of our concern; accessing and benefitting from a qualitative, inclusive and responsible VET should be a right for all learners.

In a context of high uncertainty, investing in people's skills and competences is also the best option to increase confidence of European citizens; this goes in pair with improving the efficiency of labour markets.

OBJECTIVE 1: RESILIENCE AND EXCELLENCE THROUGH QUALITY, INCLUSIVE, AND FLEXIBLE VET

New technologies, new business models, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, demographic change, climate change and the economic crisis due to Covid-19 demand for flexible responses of VET systems with an appropriate governance. A flexible and resilient VET is able to adjust to disruptions and to turn threats into opportunities, thus enabling innovation, productivity and resilience of our economies and societies at local, regional, national and European level. While VET enables citizens to cope with change it should also enable them to shape change. Innovation in VET closely relates to issues of new skills, curricula, education methodologies and forecasting tools.

We are thus determined to exploit the potential of digital learning and artificial intelligence to support learners in developing their knowledge, skills and competences. Labour market and skills intelligence[4] as well as research should inform VET decision-makers and support VET providers and practitioners in developing and adapting their VET offers to changing labour market and social needs. Learners need more guidance and tailored support to design their learning and career paths. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that digital learning can play a complementary and important role to support learning. Alongside with top-down governance approaches the role of various horizontal collaboration networks is growing under the new conditions, including the formation of communities of practice for mutual support and knowledge generation, especially with regard to emergency solutions.

We witness increasing labour market needs for a different mix of skills and qualifications, as well as structural changes in the VET landscape. Both developments call for a modernised inclusive VET. Since individuals will have to regularly reskill and upskill to adapt to the fast-evolving digitalisation[5], VET excellence at all qualification levels including higher EQF levels will become ever more relevant to maintain employability. An excellent VET prepares learners for the world of work of today and for the future, enabling job creation in the context of effective and quality labour markets. An excellent VET contributes to strengthening democratic citizenship and European values. Achieving these goals will require developing capacities of VET institutions with active involvement of stakeholders. A high-quality VET that includes entrepreneurial education empowers learners to open new businesses.

The role and scope of VET institutions are changing. Boundaries between higher education (HE) and VET are blurring; obstacles are still to be overcome; policies are striving for greater permeability in education and training systems. Excellent VET is valued in societies, and links with recognition and permeability to HE as well as with smooth access to the labour market.

We thus support an initiative for VET excellence in Europe and emphasise the relevance of VET programmes at EQF levels 5 to 8 on a par with HE to offer VET graduates a flexible, inclusive and valuable path to high-level jobs and career opportunities in response to current and future socio-economic needs. We consider well-targeted quality investments in VET and enhanced cooperation with and among social partners and relevant stakeholders including learners crucial.

Short-term deliverables for 2021-2025

Support at EU level

- Promote exchange of best practice and peer-learning activities on innovative policy reforms and VET excellence, also addressing sustainability and digitalisation challenges and the linkage of IVET and CVET qualification offers as attractive career pathways

[4] Skills intelligence is understood as the outcome of an expert-driven process of selecting, combining and presenting evidence – based on skills forecasts, graduate tracking, skills surveys, big data analysis and other methods – to map and anticipate skill trends.

[5] Taking into account the European Social Partners' Framework Agreement on Digitalisation (2020)

- Develop and strengthen Centres of Vocational Excellence as innovative incubators and skills ecosystems encompassing learning, training and research activities, VET, HE and research in selected sectoral fields or socio-economic challenges, including support for entrepreneurship and digital and innovative VET resources for all

Actions at national level:

- Explore the possibility to set up a network of voluntary experts and executives, retired or on sabbatical, to support their peers in the fields of VET and apprenticeships as part of the EAfA
- Support the development of digital infrastructure for learning and teaching purposes in VET including for instance artificial intelligence and AR/VR technologies and develop suitable institutional teaching and training arrangements underpinned by adequate infrastructure especially in remote and rural areas thus ensuring social inclusion
- Reinforce work-based learning and apprenticeships by implementing the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships and making use of the on-demand support services, and policy learning initiatives. Strengthen the use of quality and inclusive apprenticeship as a tool to support school/training-to-work transitions of vulnerable groups and to improve citizens' qualification levels.
- Support Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and improve permeability between vocational and academic pathways, including work-based learning and enhanced cooperation between VET and HE and research centres and thus establishing quality and effective VET and apprenticeship offers at EQF level 5 and above
- Develop national and regional skills intelligence systems including skills anticipation and graduate tracking, and enable social partners, decision-makers, stakeholders and providers to adapt and update VET offers, curricula and guidelines timely and effectively

OBJECTIVE 2: ESTABLISHING A NEW LIFELONG LEARNING CULTURE – RELEVANCE OF CVET AND DIGITALISATION

As job and qualification profiles change and new professions emerge in the wake of the digital and green transitions, individuals need support to upskill and update their skills in a permanent manner. European and national qualification frameworks have developed as cornerstone of qualification systems supporting transparency and quality of qualifications. It is necessary to promote VET as an attractive and high-quality pathway for jobs and life. Attractiveness can be achieved in particular through adaptability, flexibility, high-quality, inclusiveness and permeability of training pathways.

Lifelong learning means that individuals are enabled to master a wide range of skills and competences and navigate through the education and training system, using state-of-the art technologies and learning tools across the boundaries of education and training institutions. CVET should thus turn to a systemic approach to adapt to the technological shift during the whole work life. Further developing a new lifelong learning culture and providing quality, accessible and inclusive, relevant and sustainable lifelong learning systems is a responsibility of all stakeholders – national and regional authorities, social partners, VET providers and learners.

IVET and CVET offers should be better interlinked, compatible and be based on skills intelligence at European, national and/or regional levels. A new lifelong learning culture implies that individuals benefit from career guidance throughout life, can engage in quality and inclusive VET programmes and acquire key competences to actively handle their education, training and employment phases with the support and increased responsibility of all stakeholders. It relies on social and occupational demand-driven and practice-oriented VET policies and frameworks. A new lifelong learning culture also implies that work-based learning and on-the-job learning standout in CVET strategies: learners of all ages and companies should be aware of their needs and develop learning-conducive work environments to fulfil their full potentials. It is important to ensure effective career guidance and access to quality education and training

for all and especially for vulnerable learners including through, for example training entitlements, accounts, bi-partite funds and other incentives.

Dedicated teachers, guidance counsellors, trainers and mentors who benefit from high quality and inclusive initial and continuous professional development and act as multipliers and mediators are key to a lifelong learning culture. In many ways, the teaching and training staff will be actively involved in the change management in its wake. Digital teaching and training require VET staff to develop new methodical-didactical approaches to apply in the connected world. To this end, the attractiveness of teachers' and trainers' profession[6] needs to be increased, for instance by supporting access of business professionals to the teachers and trainers profession in the VET institutions in line with national legislation and conditions of access to the teaching profession .

Short-term deliverables for 2021-2025

Support at EU level

- Develop an inventory of strategies and actions relevant for re- and upskilling, in the context of green and digital transition and building on EU-wide surveys such as Continuing Vocational Training Survey, European Company Survey and other relevant evidence by the Commission and Cedefop
- Further improve strategic skills anticipation at EU level, particularly through Cedefop's work on skills intelligence in consultation with the European Commission, national governments and social partners
- Launch and support the Pact for Skills, mobilising partnerships, incentives and commitments for actions in line with the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce in agreement with Member States and companies
- Explore financial and non-financial incentives for IVET and CVET addressing adult learners, promotion programmes with public funding for CVET and other financial incentives, where appropriate linked to collective bargaining agreements, to encourage individual learning, taking into account the synergies between different policy areas e.g. employment, social inclusion and education policies as well as national and regional specificities
- Improve European statistics together with national statistical offices, including work on statistics on public and private investment in adult learning
- Facilitate mobility for learning and work in Europe, provide access to transparent and reliable information on skills, learning opportunities and labour market trends, facilitate the Europe-wide interconnection of digital platforms for learning and career management and enable education and training institutions to issue digital diplomas and certificates (Europass Digital Credentials), thus facilitating transparency and recognition of qualifications across Europe, through the new Europass platform

Actions at national level

- Develop national skills strategies for quality and inclusive lifelong learning with all relevant national, regional, sectoral stakeholders and social partners. Besides education and training provision, the national skills strategies may include guidance, incentives for improved skills provision by employers, increased participation by employees, validation of prior learning and targeted public approaches outreaching to inactive and unemployed individuals, NEETs or individuals at risk of unemployment
- Develop targeted information measures on the benefits of CVET and ensure user-friendly access to information on IVET and CVET offers at national and regional levels addressing gender and other stereotypes for an equal, fair and diverse society

[6] In line with the Council Conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future (2020/C 193/04)

- Develop with respective stakeholders digital learning solutions supporting access to CVET opportunities and the awarding of CVET credentials and certificates opening the possibility to obtain full qualifications without neglecting on-the-job CVET and the positive effects of learning conducive work environments
- Support linking national VET platforms or databases to the Europass in accordance with the Europass decision and the EQF Recommendation where appropriate
- Support VET teachers, trainers, guidance counsellors, adult educators and mentors by equipping them with the adequate skills and tools, for and through digital technologies; in particular through systematic approaches to, and opportunities for, initial and continuous professional development in both school and work-based settings, as well as distance education and training, enabling them to progress in their careers

OBJECTIVE 3: SUSTAINABILITY – A GREEN LINK IN VET

Acting in a responsible manner towards the environment affects European societies and economies. Sustainability is a transversal concern that intersects with labour demand, education, skills, occupations and the geographical distribution of jobs and workers. Companies, private sector organisations and societal initiatives are major drivers towards sustainability in economy and society. IVET and CVET should strive to embed skills for sustainability in its regulations and practices. Moreover, the link between digitalisation and sustainability is central. Developments in technology are driving the growth of sectors including the education and training sector; the development of open source and digital learning environments can make education for sustainable development more accessible, in and outside of education and training settings, whether in schools, companies or at home.

Short-term deliverables for 2021-2025

Support at EU level

- Promote initiatives to support cooperation and knowledge-sharing between VET institutions and providers on learning methods, curricula, guidelines, work-based learning, and quality assurance of education and training offer on green skills, by using European programmes like Erasmus+
- Promote exchange of practices of VET teachers and trainers specifically as regards trends and skill needs relevant to the green economy to peer learn/review and to share best practice
- Call for new commitments and partnerships for quality and effective apprenticeships linked to green technologies and occupations, under the renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships, focusing on the economic sectors that will be on the frontline of the transition to a climate-neutral Europe
- Explore opportunities to make EU VET policy cooperation climate neutral for instance through wider use of videoconferences, webinars, virtual conferences with all VET stakeholders and social partners

Actions at national level

- Create incentives for greening VET provisions, including education and training in green technologies and innovation, in energy efficiency, circular economy, environmental awareness, sustainable use of learning and training material, digitalisation to reduce climate effects, and others
- Define labour market relevant skills for the green transition to be incorporated in curricula and VET provision, including basic skills across all sectors and occupations and sector-specific skills in cooperation with the social partners
- Define and support provisions to enable teaching and training staff, managing teams in VET providers, as well as trainers and mentors in companies to act as multipliers and mediators in view of increasing digitalisation and sustainability in provision and management of training offers

OBJECTIVE 4: EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING AREA AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF VET

The globalisation of markets and demographic trends call for modernisation and adaptation of VET systems and institutions at national, regional and sector level within the Member States. Global development also offers great opportunities for Europe as a place of education and training. In addition, this objective refers to the ambitious intention of the Copenhagen declaration to make Europe a world-wide reference for learners. In this context, the European and national qualification frameworks as well as Europass have paved the way.

Mobility in VET has increased significantly over the last two decades with more than 1,5 million VET learners and staff having benefited from Erasmus+ mobility. In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, virtual and hybrid mobility, in particular has gained a new impetus. Cooperation projects leading to joint VET offers and qualifications are gaining impetus. Migration is challenge for all. Transparency and comparability of qualifications and competences help competent bodies, education and training providers, employers and individuals to make informed choices and decisions. We should make full use of EU initiatives and programmes (EQF, Europass, Erasmus + for example) in this context.

Those initiatives and programmes support transparency of qualifications, provision of opportunities for all learners to engage in flexible and inclusive pathways and encourage individuals to switch horizontally from a learning site in one country to another learning place in a different country while achieving their full qualification or completing any IVET or CVET learning pathways. Against the background of the demographic change, this will also help the cross-border mobility of skilled workers and professionals, thus improving the matching of supply and demand in the labour market.

All in all, we should promote European VET systems as a common European education and training area, which is recognised as a worldwide reference for vocational learners. This also includes the development of Europass based principles and standards as attractive and secure alternatives to commercial data processing platforms and products from other world regions. An EU VET policy could, supported by ETF and Cedefop, reach out to education and training in the neighbourhood countries and in other world regions.

Short-term deliverables for 2021-2025

Support at EU level

- Reinforce mobility, including long-term mobility in VET, based on common quality criteria and on the promotion of recognition of learning outcomes of VET
- Explore the possibility for structured transnational exchange between VET stakeholders, VET teachers and trainers, social partner representatives; assess the potential of European tools such as EPALE, e-Twinning, Europass
- Further develop Europass in close cooperation with Member States and the European social partners by considering specificities of national and regional VET systems. Make sure that VET learners can access anytime anywhere, including with mobile devices, multilingual information on learning mobilities, European VET offers, qualification requirements for job offers, thus supporting the European Education and Training Area
- Support the preparation and participation of national teams to the EUROSKILLS Competition to raise the attractiveness and image of VET and to promote VET excellence of Europe and to achieve champion status in the global WorldSkills Competitions

- Cooperate with international organisations, in particular OECD, ILO, UNESCO, Council of Europe, World Bank and other regional VET networks in the world with a focus on a common World VET agenda (common World VET conferences, promoting best practice exchange of regional VET innovations and instruments of common interest)

Actions at national level

- Support and facilitate the mobility of VET and adult learners, including apprentices, for example by developing support structures and providiing information on opportunities in host countries
- Increase the rate of mobility of VET learners as well as teachers and trainers, while strengthening measures to ensure the quality and recognition of the learning outcomes, as well as adequate support structures. Foster longer periods of mobility of VET learners abroad and ensure that work-placements of apprentices are in line with the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships[7] taking into account national regulations and collective agreements, including health and safety provisions
- Develop VET internationalisation strategies, mobilising partnerships and including commitments for concrete and targeted actions, with all relevant stakeholders in accordance with national or regional regulations
- Promote intercultural knowledge, skills and competences as part of qualification and curricula requirements in VET qualifications in line with the Key Competence Framework
- Cooperate with other EU countries in preparation of national teams for international competitions like WorldSkills and EuroSkills

In support of successful implementation of the agreed actions, we ask Cedefop and the ETF to monitor the Osnabrück Declaration and report annually to the ACVT and DGVT accordingly.

[7] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0502(01)&from=EN