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2020/0137 (NLE)

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

**on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social
fairness and resilience**

{SWD(2020) 123 final}

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

• Reasons for and objectives of the proposal

The proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET)¹ for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience was announced in the Communication "A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions" of 14 January 2020². It is an important part of the ongoing implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** strengthening principle 1 “education, training and lifelong learning”.

The “Common vocational training policy” as defined in the Treaty of Rome, has been taken forward by the launch of the Copenhagen process in 2002 bringing together Member States, social partners, the Commission and was supported also by associations of VET providers. **VET accounts for about half of the upper secondary graduates in the European Union.** It is catering for the preparation of young people to successfully enter working life and for the upskilling and reskilling needs of people of working age for multiple purposes: for people in employment to help them to continuously upgrade their skills, adjust them to the changing work requirements or negotiate job changes, and for the unemployed to help them acquire the skills needed to re-enter the labour market; and more generally to empower the learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to thrive in their professional, social and personal development.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has seriously disrupted standard education and training activities, including VET across Europe. Despite the fact that Member States have quickly moved towards digital learning solutions, the containment measures and ensuing crisis have put the resilience of the system to the test. The situation in VET was further aggravated by the fact that practical training – in form of work-based learning and apprenticeships – has been suspended in most sectors.³

The economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity to accelerate reforms in VET and strengthen its resilience, notably by digitising learning offers and methods and agile adaptation to changing labour market needs. This includes paying attention to the need to ensure access to digital tools and technologies for every learner, teacher and trainer, as well as appropriate guidance measures. Digital tools such as simulators, virtual and augmented reality have the potential to increase the accessibility and efficiency of training, notably for small and medium-sized companies providing apprenticeship places. Inter-company training centres and Centres of Vocational Excellence can also play an important role here.

The pandemic is expected to lead to the deepest recession in the EU’s history and young people entering the workforce at this time will find it harder to secure their first job⁴. Earlier crises have shown that young people are indeed likely to be hit hardest. Further strengthening

¹ Vocational education and training is to be understood as the education and training which aims to equip young people and adults, with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market and may be provided in formal setting and in non-formal settings, at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework, including at tertiary level.

² Communication from the Commission A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions, COM(2020) 14 final.

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https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/cedefop_community_apprenticeship_experts_synthesis_how_are_european_countries_managing_apprenticeships_to_respond_to_the_coronavirus_crisis.pdf

⁴ European Economic Forecast, Spring 2020. Institutional paper 125, May 2020. European Commission.

of VET systems is therefore crucial for the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, as VET has proven to be an essential part of the efforts to support youth employment in the previous economic and financial crisis. Notably apprenticeships, work-based learning, but also short-term VET programmes targeting unemployed people, proved to be a pathway to increased employability and easier access or return to the labour market⁵. The present proposal will contribute to high quality offers, in particular, of apprenticeships and other vocational programmes under the **Youth Guarantee** by ensuring their labour market relevance, digitalisation and environmental sustainability of VET. It will also call for reinforced support for apprenticeships and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships to renew and boost commitment to quality and affective apprenticeships opportunities.

Modernisation of VET systems is also warranted as the **world of work and skills is changing**. On-going developments such as automation and digitalisation of production and services continue to reshape the labour markets. In addition, the broader twin transitions towards a **more digital and greener economy** will require VET to adapt so that vocational learners acquire the skills needed for the green and digital transitions, while also reconfirming and strengthening the central role of VET in the **lifelong learning continuum**. Here especially also cross-cutting learning, bridging the gap between formally separated or parallel areas of learning e.g. the health and the environmental sector⁶, is essential.

With the policy framework for European cooperation in education and training and specific priorities for VET ending in 2020, there is an opportunity to define a new and more ambitious Union policy on VET that responds to the challenges described above. The overall objective should be to modernise the EU's VET policy to meet the large upskilling and reskilling needs driven by the common ambition to be fit for the challenges of the 21st century, in particular to support the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to building a more sustainable, fair and resilient European Union.

The proposal is firmly embedded in other upcoming Commission policy initiatives, notably the Commission Communication on the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience⁷, on the Communication on Youth Employment Support - A Bridge to Jobs for the next generation⁸, the Digital Education Action Plan, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), and the European Education Area, which cover all levels and types of education and training.

- **Scope of the proposal**

The Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience aims at renewing the EU's VET policy by:

- (a) **modernising the Union policy on VET** by supporting the transitions to a green and digital economy in times of demographic change, as well as upward convergence of national VET systems. Given the crucial role VET and, in particular, apprenticeships play in improving employability, the proposed modernisation will equally **support youth employability and adults in need of continuous up- and reskilling**. It will

⁵ Employment rates of graduates from vocational education and training was gradually increasing from 73.7% in 2009 to 79.5% in 2018

⁶ As for example recommended in the 2019 Communication on a Strategic Approach to Pharmaceuticals in the Environment

https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-dangersub/pdf/strategic_approach_pharmaceuticals_env.PDF

⁷ COM(2020) 274 final

⁸ COM(2020) 276 final

also include the increased use of digital tools and continued digitisation of VET systems, which will contribute to increasing their resilience;

- (b) **confirming the central role of VET in the lifelong learning continuum** and its strong links to all education and training sectors, which calls for permeability and transparency;
- (c) **streamlining the European cooperation process** in the field of VET by integrating and adapting the instruments for VET quality assurance (EQAVET) and flexibility and tailored provision (ECVET);
- (d) **simplifying VET governance at Union level** (related to integrating the current ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations into the present proposal and repealing them as a consequence) and defining the working methods, types of support activities at Union level and a monitoring framework to assess progress towards the implementation of this Recommendation, in full coherence with the broader governance framework for education and training.

Concretely, for actions to be taken **at national level**, the new elements are the following:

- **Underlining the crucial role VET systems play for the young people** entering the labour market and adding that VET systems should play an equally important role for the adults in need of continuous up- and reskilling;
- **Granting VET providers a level of autonomy** to allow them to react quickly to skills challenges, offer fast reskilling programmes and work in close partnerships with employers from both public and private sectors;
- **Modularising VET programmes** and expanding them to higher levels of qualifications and microcredentials;
- **Linking VET to forward-looking economic strategies and innovation systems;**
- **Promoting Centres of Vocational Excellence**⁹ (mainly through Erasmus+) linked to smart specialisation strategies and offering innovative services that include clusters¹⁰, business incubators, support to start ups and technology diffusion in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to make VET resilient and fit for increased digitalisation, digital readiness and to foster transition from sectors that are in decline to new growing sectors;
- **Embedding environmental and social sustainability** into VET curricula and organisational management including linking the environmental aspect to other fields;
- **Ensuring better permeability** between the systems of education and training;

⁹ Centres of Vocational Excellence are intended to be world-class reference points for training in specific areas for both initial training of young people as well as for continuing up-skilling and re-skilling of adults, through flexible and timely offer of training for the skills needs of companies. They operate locally, being closely embedded in the local innovation ecosystems and clusters and bringing together a wide range of local partners, such as providers of vocational education and training, employers, research centres, development agencies, and employment services (among others), to develop "skills ecosystems" that contribute to regional, economic and social development, innovation, and smart specialisation strategies.

¹⁰ Industrial clusters are groups of specialised enterprises, often SMEs, and other related supporting actors in a location that cooperate closely. There are around 3000 specialised clusters in Europe, accounting for 54 million jobs. The renewed EU industrial policy strategy recognises clusters as a powerful economic development tool to support industrial innovation on the ground.

- Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, **increasing the digital readiness of VET institutions**, by promoting new learning environments, tools and pedagogies in particular linked to digitalisation, catering for both VET specific and transversal curricula and content, and by including the digitalisation aspect in the EQAVET framework;
- **Increasing attractiveness of VET** for learners and companies, including micro, small and medium-sized, e.g. through internationalisation and increased opportunities for mobility of learners and staff offered by the Erasmus+ programme and other funding opportunities;
- Addressing **gender** bias and gender stereotypical choices and supporting diversity and inclusiveness;
- **Defining a set of indicators and objectives** to enable both quantitative and qualitative monitoring of performance of vocational education and training systems.

In addition to reconfirming the role of the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT), the proposal also puts forward the following **new elements at EU level**:

- **Providing support service** that caters for the various dimensions of VET systems (e.g. apprenticeships, Centres of Vocational Excellence, continuing vocational education and training, quality assurance), bringing together the management of several separate support structures (EQAVET and ECVET secretariats, apprenticeship support services, expert working groups);
- **Supporting the digital readiness of VET institutions** through the reinforced deployment of the SELFIE tool and its gradual extension to cater for work based learning ¹¹;
- **Promoting European VET as a global reference point in skills development** and boosting mobility and recognition of vocational qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, including through development of the concept of the European Vocational Core Profiles as part of Europass platform and complemented, where possible, by vocational digital content;
- **Introducing a peer review process on quality assurance** in VET to support upward convergence in quality, transparency and mutual trust.

The political context

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Commission has proposed a bold and comprehensive **plan to repair and prepare for the next generation**. The plan presents a roadmap on how to kick-start the European economy, protect and create jobs, boost the green and digital transitions, and make it fairer, more resilient and more sustainable for future generations. It underlines that improving and adapting skills, knowledge and competences has become all the

¹¹ SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies) is a free, easy-to-use, customisable tool to help schools assess where they stand with learning in the digital age. It has been designed by JRC with the aim to help schools embed digital technologies into teaching, learning and student assessment. It can highlight what's working well, where improvement is needed and what the priorities should be. The tool is currently available in the 24 official languages of the European Union with more languages to be added over time. SELFIE gathers – anonymously – the views of students, teachers and school leaders on how technology is used in their school. This is done using short statements and questions and a simple 1-5 agreement scale. The statements cover areas such as leadership, infrastructure, teacher training and students' digital competence. The results of the self-assessment can be used strategically at system or institutional level to deploy follow-up capacity building and infrastructure investments, in line with the gaps identified.

more important.

The Next Generation EU¹² will raise new financing on the financial markets for 2021-2024 for the newly proposed **Recovery and Resilience Facility**¹³ and **REACT-EU**¹⁴. Both programmes will include investments in **skills, education and training** to lay the basis for a green, digital and resilient recovery. The Commission has also adjusted its proposals for the future European Social Fund Plus to give even stronger support to **youth employment measures and education and skills**.

As part of the Recovery Strategy, the Commission has also proposed to provide substantial additional funding of EUR 30 billion for the **Just Transition Fund**, bringing the total to EUR 40 billion. This funding will be used to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the transition towards climate neutrality in the regions most affected, for example, by supporting the re-skilling of workers helping SMEs to create new economic opportunities, and investing in the clean energy transition and in the circular economy.¹⁵

This links in with the **European Green Deal**, which is the EU's new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. Investing in a **more circular economy**¹⁶ has the potential to help the EU to reduce its dependency on external suppliers and increase its resilience to global supply issues. The upcoming **Renovation Wave** will focus on creating jobs in construction, renovation and other labour-intensive industries.¹⁷ The transitions in these areas lead to an increased need in re- and upskilling. VET programmes can play a key role in delivering on these skills and are likely to play an important role also when delivering on other European Green Deal initiatives¹⁸.

The Commission also adopted a **New Industrial Strategy for Europe**¹⁹ to address the twin green and digital transitions. It calls for decisive action to make lifelong learning a reality for all and ensure that education and training keep pace with the twin transitions. It also calls on higher education and VET to provide more scientists, engineers and technicians for the labour market. Equally, the **SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe** highlights how an increasing number of SMEs is confronted with the challenge of finding the necessary skills and the fact that availability of skilled staff or experienced managers remains the most important problem for a quarter of SMEs in the European Union²⁰. VET is particularly relevant for SMEs to make sure that their workforce has the skills needed on the labour market.

The opportunities and challenges of the ongoing digital transformation and Europe's policy

¹² COM(2020) 456 final

¹³ COM(2020) 408 final

¹⁴ COM (2020) 451 final

¹⁵ COM (2020) 442 final

¹⁶ COM(2020) 98 final

¹⁷ COM(2020) 456 final

¹⁸ For example, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (COM(2020) 380 final) highlights the key role skills play in the transition to a green economy and the fight against biodiversity loss, focusing on training and reskilling of the workforce across a wide range of sectors. This will also contribute to the future Zero Pollution Action Plan for Air, Water and Soil where it is important to bring together education and skills from different domains, such as environmental and health, to address these increasingly cross-cutting challenges. The Farm to Fork strategy (COM(2020) 381 final), which aims at transforming the way our food is produced and delivered to our plates, also recognises the key role of knowledge and guidance to support the transition.

¹⁹ COM(2020) 102 final

²⁰ COM(2020) 103 final

response have been outlined in the strategy **Shaping Europe’s Digital Future**, which highlights the need to invest in education and training and digital skills of all Europeans taking into account the adopted **Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025**²¹.

2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

• Legal basis

According to Article 166(1) TFEU, the Union shall implement a vocational training policy, which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training. The aim of Union action under the Article 166(2) TFEU shall be to:

- facilitate adaptation to industrial changes, in particular through vocational training and retraining,
- improve initial and continuing vocational training in a lifelong learning perspective, to facilitate vocational integration and reintegration into the labour market,
- facilitate access to vocational training and encourage mobility of instructors and those undertaking training, particularly young people,
- stimulate cooperation between educational or training establishments and firms,
- develop exchange of information and experience on issues common to the training systems of the Member States.

According to Article 165(1) TFEU, the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems. The aim of Union action under the Article 165(2) TFEU, second and fourth indents, shall be to:

- encourage mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study,
- develop exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States.

• Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)

In its work towards the development of quality education and training and the implementation of a vocational training policy, the EU is responsible for encouraging co-operation between Member States, supporting and supplementing their action where necessary.

The quality and convergence of VET systems underpins the free movement of people, goods and services, the resilience of the EU workforce, and ultimately a successful sustainable internal market and can, therefore, only be addressed at the European level.

Article 166(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union defines that the Union shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training.

²¹ Communication from the Commission “A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”, COM/2020/152 final

Article 165(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union defines that the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems.

In line with the principle of subsidiarity, the proposal outlines the new Union VET policy and makes recommendations to this end.

This Recommendation is without prejudice to the Directive 2005/36/EC²² as amended by Directive 2013/55/EC²³ on the recognition of professional qualifications and the regime of automatic recognition provided therein.

- **Proportionality**

The actions proposed under the Recommendation are proportional to the pursued objectives. The proposal for a Council Recommendation supports the reform processes launched by individual countries and complements Member States' efforts in the area of vocational education and training. The proposed action respects Member States' practices and the diversity of systems. It accommodates a differentiated approach reflecting Member States' different economic, financial and social situations and the diverse labour market conditions.

- **Choice of the instrument**

The proposed instrument is a Council Recommendation, which respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. It builds on the existing body of European Union law and is in line with the type of instruments available for European Union action in the areas of education and training and employment. As a legal instrument, it signals the commitment of Member States to the measures laid down in this Recommendation and provides a strong political basis for cooperation at European Union level in this area, while fully respecting Member States competence in the field of education and training and social and employment policies.

3. RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Ex-post evaluations/fitness checks of existing legislation

Not applicable.

Stakeholder consultations

A thorough and targeted consultation has taken place since 2017 with a view to define the cornerstones of the future-fit vocational education and training in the context of emerging trends and challenges (digitalisation, automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, green and sustainable economy, including climate change, globalisation, new business models, new forms of work organisation, demographic developments, ageing, migration).

These consultations involved all relevant stakeholders:

- Member States and social partners grouped in the Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training and the tripartite ACVT which adopted an [Opinion on the future of Vocational Education and Training post 2020](#),

²² OJ L 255, 30.9.2005.

²³ OJ L 354, 28.12.2013.

- European Social Partners (with their position papers: [ETUC](#), [SME United](#) and [BusinessEurope](#)) and in a dedicated hearing in January 2020, and;
- [European VET providers associations](#).

[A survey on the challenges and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vocational education and training](#) undertaken by the Commission in March-May 2020 with the following findings:

- Several tools are available for creating material for distance learning. However, in general VET online material is less developed, as far as the practical parts of training and work-based learning are concerned;
- VET learners might be at disadvantage compared to learners from other educational tracks, as more efforts are put into general school subjects, and less into typical vocational content;
- There is substantial disruption to the apprenticeship ‘supply chain’. Apprentices have largely discontinued their company attendance in the sectors whose activities have been shut down (e.g. restoration, well-being, tourism, and manufacturing). In some cases, discontinuation and termination of financial compensation, where applicable, increases the rate of drop-outs;
- Little capacity for employers to focus on training either for youngsters or for their employees over concerns for ensuring business continuity. However, some employers and training providers made best use of the confinement period to support the training of their employees and to accelerate deployment of digital learning systems and content;
- While it is a significant challenge for teachers and trainers as well as learners to adapt swiftly to this dramatic change, many stakeholders have mobilised themselves to help (VET providers, local governments, publishers, NGOs, companies, etc.);
- There is a strong call for a European online platform (which is safe, quality assured, multilingual, etc.) that would offer opportunities for networking and exchanging good practices and would provide digital solutions, also for work-based learning.

A similar analysis carried out by CEDEFOP also points to some challenges for the VET sector: distance learning is piecemeal and its use very much depends on the schools’ and teachers’ e-skills and availability, and on the sectors concerned. Its use ranges from mere communication/keeping in touch with students, to access to resources (videos etc.), to actual teaching. The analysis also brought to light that apprentices continue their training and work, particularly in companies providing essential services such as healthcare and food, as long as health and safety measures are observed. By contrast, apprentices discontinued their company attendance in sectors whose activities have been shut down by regulation, such as, in most countries, hospitality, wellbeing, tourism.²⁴ Given the high prevalence of women in these sectors, it is estimated that they have been in particular affected.

More broadly, the following evidence and fora were used to define the future VET policy:

- CEDEFOP project on [“Changing nature and role of VET in Europe”](#) (2016-2018),
- CEDEFOP Opinion Survey on VET (2017) based on responses of a total of 35,646 citizens of the Member States,
- A Commission [Study on VET mobility in Europe](#) (2019),

²⁴ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fr/news-and-press/news/how-european-countries-manage-apprenticeships-respond-coronavirus-crisis>

- Discussions taking place during events of the European Vocational Skills Week (2018, 2019),
- Further evidence from the OECD and the ILO.

The proposal to amend and integrate elements of the two EU VET specific instruments ECVET and EQAVET, while also repealing the original instruments, is based on:

- A dedicated [Study on EU VET instruments](#) (EQAVET and ECVET) (2019, taking into account previous evaluation studies),
- Results of a Working Group of the ACVT which was set up to agree on the future development of European VET instruments (1st semester 2019).

Impact of the proposal on the Council Recommendations on the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education (EQAVET) and proposed way forward

Two specific VET instruments have been developed and implemented since 2009 to support Member States in making VET more flexible (the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training - ECVET) and in improving the quality of their VET systems (the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training - EQAVET). In line with the results of their recent evaluations, both instruments need to be modernised and streamlined.

The objective of the **ECVET Recommendation**²⁵ was to improve the recognition, accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes, supporting mobility and lifelong learning as well as the establishment of an EU credit system in VET. This initiative was further developed following the 2002 Copenhagen Declaration²⁶ on the future priorities for enhancing European cooperation in VET, which stated a need for a system supporting 'the transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels'.

According to the abovementioned evaluations on EU VET instruments, ECVET has widely contributed to the development of a better-quality mobility experience through the use and documentation of units of learning outcomes, with almost all Member States using now ECVET in international mobility. However, the concept of ECVET points was generally not applied and ECVET did not lead to the development of an European credit system in VET.

Based on the feedback received during the stakeholder consultation and the experience gained with the ECVET implementation over the last 10 years, the present proposal incorporates and reinforces some elements of the 2009 ECVET Recommendation and abandons others that do not bring an added value or respond to a real need in the VET systems. In particular,

- The principle that qualifications are made of units of learning outcomes is integrated and reinforced in the proposal (modularisation). This is seen as a pre-requisite to increase flexibility of the VET programmes and facilitate validation as means to boost the take-up of up- and reskilling. It is also instrumental in facilitating mobility of VET learners and the recognition of learning outcomes achieved during such mobility periods. Furthermore, it can also support the automatic mutual recognition of VET qualifications and cooperation at sectoral level, including support through

²⁵ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

²⁶ Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002, on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training

the Blueprints²⁷ for sectoral cooperation on skills. To this end, a concept of European Vocational Core Profiles will be explored with the aim to define a certain share of a common training content at European level. The profiles have the potential to significantly facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of vocational qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, and the development of joint VET qualifications and curricula;

- The mobility tools developed under the 2009 Recommendation (e.g. learning agreement and memorandum of understanding) related to supporting geographical mobility of VET learners will be further developed in the framework of other EU instruments such as those supported by the Erasmus+ programme and linked to the further development of Europass;
- The credit points introduced by the 2009 Recommendation will be discontinued, due to the very low take-up and no evidence of added value. In practice, ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) applied widely in higher education is used also for post secondary and tertiary VET.

The 2009 ECVET Recommendation will be repealed and the ECVET provisions and principles as outlined above will be taken forward on the basis of the present proposal and mainstreamed into other EU policy instruments.

The **EQAVET Recommendation**²⁸ was adopted to improve the quality of VET. The importance of improving quality in VET was already included in the 2000 Lisbon strategy stating that the transition to a knowledge-based economy requires modern and adaptable VET. The 2002 Copenhagen Declaration subsequently proposed EU cooperation in quality assurance in VET with a view to support mutual trust and the recognition of qualifications.

The abovementioned evaluations on EU VET instruments showed that EQAVET has stimulated Member States to review and refine their national quality assurance systems: twelve Member States have improved them specifically as a response to this Recommendation while in most other countries EQAVET has been used to review and adjust their systems. Moreover, several countries have new quality assurance legislation explicitly referring to EQAVET. However, the Recommendation did not contribute significantly to the improvement of transparency of quality assurance arrangements between countries and did generally not foster mutual trust. Furthermore, there is also a perception by some stakeholders that the tool is mostly applied in school-based initial VET.

Over the last ten years, many activities such as peer learning activities and working groups on dedicated quality assurance topics have been developed in the framework of the EQAVET Network at EU level. One of these activities, called the EQAVET+ initiative, consisted of developing specific indicative descriptors on several quality assurance topics not addressed in the 2009 Recommendation. This exercise was developed in response to the 2013 external evaluation of the Recommendation indicating areas for improvement.

Taking into account the results of the different evaluation studies as outlined above, this proposal will therefore:

²⁷ The Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills is a new strategic approach to mobilise stakeholders to develop demand-led sectoral skills strategies in Europe. It provides a strong basis to launch larger efforts. To date it has been piloted in additive manufacturing; automotive; batteries; bio-economy; construction; defence technologies; energy value chain digitalisation and energy-intensive industries; space; maritime technologies; maritime shipping; microelectronics; steel; textile-clothing-footwear-leather; and tourism.

²⁸ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

- Repeal the 2009 EQAVET Recommendation and integrate the work on quality assurance in VET in the EU into the present proposal;
- Integrate the EQAVET+ initiative adding elements about learning outcomes, certification and assessment, stakeholders' consultation, the role of teachers and trainers;
- Add an additional indicative descriptor on flexibility of VET learning pathways given the increased need to develop flexible VET provision and on the need to contribute to environmental sustainability;
- Include the aspect of the digital readiness of VET systems and institutions;
- Define new working method through peer reviews of quality assurance at VET system level in order to improve mutual learning, enhance transparency of quality assurance arrangements of VET provision and reinforce mutual trust between Member States;
- Maintain the mission and functions of EQAVET national reference points (NRPs).

Impact assessment

The proposal was developed on the basis of evidence collected in studies and through broad consultations of stakeholders. Given the complementary approach of the proposed activities to Member States' initiatives, the voluntary nature of the proposed activities and the scope of the impacts expected, an impact assessment is not necessary.

Regulatory fitness and simplification

Not applicable.

4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

No additional budget or staff resources will be required from the EU budget. Moreover, this initiative shall not prejudice the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and future programmes.

5. OTHER ELEMENTS

Implementation plans and monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements

At the national level, the present proposal invites the Member States to modernise their VET systems in line with national priorities and education and training practices.

The Commission will report to the Council on the implementation of the Recommendation every five years, building on the Cedefop annual monitoring and in close cooperation with the ACVT.

Explanatory documents (for directives)

Not applicable.

Detailed explanation of the specific provisions of the proposal

Recommendations to Member States

The proposal invites Member States to work towards implementing the Union policy on VET.

This policy is inspired by the ACVT Opinion on the future of VET post-2020²⁹.

The COVID-19 crisis has underlined the urgency for the main avenues of reform actions in making VET more resilient and fit for the future challenges. It has emphasised the need for increased agility of VET in response to rapid changes, acceleration of digitalisation of VET, modern and innovation learning approaches and more investments in skills and competences of teachers and trainers.

One of the key messages of the ACVT Opinion is to foster the establishment of European VET culture, which is **result-oriented, supports Member States in setting goals** and develops methods to assess their attainment. Building on earlier consultations on possible benchmarks in the area of vocational education and training and, the proposal also foresees a number of quantitative objectives to be achieved by 2025 as listed below:³⁰

- **the share of employed graduates should be at least 82%³¹;**
- **60% of recent graduates from VET benefit from exposure to work-based learning** during their vocational education and training³². This objective refers to all forms of work based learning, and will thereby contribute to increased apprenticeship opportunities which can be supported with the Youth Guarantee;
- **8% of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad.³³**

The first and third objectives build on existing ET 2020 benchmarks on Graduate employability and mobility in VET, while the second one builds on the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective apprenticeships. The Staff Working Document explains in detail the rationale and methodology for these indicators and objectives.

The proposal further defines a number of principles to be followed at national level to implement the abovementioned Union policy. These principles are structured around **the following thematic objectives**:

1. Vocational education and training is agile in adapting to dynamic labour market changes

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EU's economy, rapid technological developments, digitalisation, the transition to a resource-efficient, circular and climate-neutral economy, new business models and new forms of work organisation accelerate changes in the skills required by the labour market. Member States need to put in place **appropriate frameworks and measures to ensure that VET is resilient and can respond swiftly to changing labour market demands**. Better skills anticipation and graduate tracking mechanisms are needed to respond to the changes in economic sectors and occupations and to adapt accordingly the content of vocational education and training. A decisive element is the speed at which this adaptation is taking place. Levels of autonomy and funding which

²⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20479&langId=en>

³⁰ The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to slow down the achievement of the objectives in the first years, but with the recovery, progress towards these objectives are expected to accelerate.

³¹ This will cover the age group 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education and training 1-3 years ago.

³² This will cover the age group 15-34, having left education and training 1-3 years ago. The indicator will be based on data that will be collected as of 2021 as part of the EU LFS.

³³ This will be measured as the share of mobile learners in a calendar year, as a proportion of a cohort of VET graduates in the same year. The indicator will be based on the mobility data sourced from Erasmus+ data and VET graduate data sourced from the UOE. In addition, where appropriate, data from national authorities' mobility programmes could also be used to complement the data from Erasmus+.

facilitate fast VET providers' responses to evolving skills needs are needed. VET prepares people for specific occupations. At the same time, learning content for both young and adults needs to strike a balance between key competences, including life skills,³⁴ and more occupation-specific skills.

Work-based learning and apprenticeships, in particular, are effective approaches to ensure labour market relevance of VET. In times of recession, small companies might not be able to provide apprenticeship places. A stronger preventive approach and a reinforced focus of the Youth Guarantee on apprenticeships as well as appropriate support measures, in a form of inter-company training centres or expansion of digital training tools, can contribute to a stable supply of apprenticeships also during unfavourable economic conditions.

2. Flexibility and progression opportunities are at the core of vocational education and training

Flexibility and opportunities to progress within education and training sectors and between them are key elements of future-fit VET systems. Furthermore, ensuring that VET programmes are **personalised and learner centred**, is essential for ensuring a strong engagement of the learners and attractiveness of VET pathways leading to increased employability.

Modularisation – breaking vocational qualifications into smaller parts of learning outcomes – is the way to flexibly update the content and to customise it to the needs of individuals. Validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning will facilitate up- and reskilling, leading not only to full qualifications, but to micro-credentials or partial qualifications. It also helps to bridge between different fields, which is necessary for the developing area of green and sustainable economy.

3. Vocational education and training is a driver for innovation and growth and prepares for the digital and green transitions and occupations in high demand

Responsiveness of VET to structural changes can be enhanced by a more proactive approach of **linking VET more strategically to forward-looking economic strategies, entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems**. It is a way of not only reacting to changes which are already happening but co-creating economic and societal transitions – notably in the current context of recovery, focus on strategic industrial ecosystems (health, pharmaceuticals and others), and a resource-efficient, toxic-free, circular, climate-neutral and digital economy. This has potential to reduce the response time of adaptation of VET curricula.

Member States should continue to implement **VET excellence** approaches that foster integration of VET in skills ecosystems, in smart specialisation strategies, National Skills Strategies, innovation systems, circular economy strategies, renovation initiatives or National Energy and Climate Plans. Development of VET at higher qualification levels and supporting entrepreneurship and start-ups are important elements of the required response. This should be coupled with complementary structural policy measures that can help make business environments more attractive, foster investment and diffusion of innovation. **Centres of Vocational Excellence** connected via a transnational European framework can be an effective tool to drive skills development to foster transition from sectors that are in decline to new growing sectors and to embed green and digital skills (e.g. building on the EU Digital

³⁴ Life skills may include resilience, media literacy, civic competence, financial, environmental and health literacy. Open, democratic societies depend on active citizens who can discern information from various sources, identify disinformation, take informed decisions, are resilient and act responsibly.

Competence Framework for Citizens, and the European e-Competence Framework for ICT professionals) in a vocational context.

Greening the VET sector requires first and foremost a greening of the VET programmes, curricula and content, but also managing the VET institutions with due attention paid to environmental footprint. This requires support for VET institutions in adapting their programmes and making sure that they match the needs of businesses that are in the frontline of delivering on environmental goals but also ensuring that infrastructure and technology are in line with sustainability requirements, thus contributing also to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, for example by helping to provide the skills needed for the Renovation Wave and the green and sustainable transition. Furthermore, as also illustrated by the COVID-19 crisis, VET institutions need to embrace digitalisation and to have a clear digital strategy that addresses multiple dimensions: provision of digital learning content, pedagogical approaches in digital learning, but also better use of data for following learners progression, developing tailored approaches and skills forecasting.

4. Vocational education and training is attractive and based on modern and digitalised provision of training/skills

While VET provides very good employment prospects in occupations highly demanded on the labour market, it still faces a challenge of low attractiveness for learners and companies in most Member States. This means that more efforts are needed in **increasing attractiveness of VET** by innovating and modernising VET, notably in terms of new learning environments, tools and pedagogies, with a special focus on digitalisation. ICT based simulator, virtual and augmented reality tools have the potential to significantly modernise and innovate VET provision, increase its efficiency and accessibility compared to expensive physical equipment. This can be particularly beneficial for small companies and apprenticeships organised in small and medium-sized companies.

New types of skills can be acquired through collaborative teaching, inter-disciplinary and project-based learning. Another aspect of attractiveness is **permeability**: education and training systems should enable vertical and horizontal pathways between VET, general school education, higher education and adult education. Higher VET programmes should be further expanded to support increased needs for advanced vocational skills. High quality guidance services have potential to increase attractiveness of VET as well.

Internationalisation, transnational mobility, including virtual skills competitions³⁵, strong links with the other education and training sectors, research and labour market actors are key to innovate how VET is designed and delivered.

Increased quality of VET will only be possible with well-trained and motivated **teachers and trainers**. Staff in VET needs to be supported in developing skills and providing tools to master new technologies, to work in multicultural environments, and understand changing labour market needs. Motivation, career progression and well-being of teachers and trainers in VET are key to increase attractiveness of their profession. The so called hybrid teachers – a type of personnel who is part-time working in a company and part-time as a teacher in a vocational school - have a potential to contribute to a stronger cooperation arrangements between VET schools and companies in a more structured and frequent manner. Hybrid teachers can bring the necessary innovation to school-based environment and can address the

³⁵ Skills competitions raise the profile and recognition of skilled people, and show how important skills are in achieving economic growth and personal success. They establish high standards for skills excellence in various professions, and measure the attainment of those standards through the competitions. They inspire young competitors to reach new heights, helping them turn their passion into a profession.

growing shortage and ageing population of vocational teachers. The concept provides interesting career perspectives for individuals and provides benefits to both schools and companies, among others by sharing the salary costs.

5. Vocational education and training promotes equality of opportunities

Good quality VET also contributes to the **inclusion of vulnerable groups**. This means that broad accessibility needs to be ensured and any remaining barriers to participation, including for people with disabilities, low-skilled adults, ethnic and racial minorities, including Roma, and people with a migrant background be removed. This can also help address the equity concerns in access to digital learning tools, internet connection and necessary IT devices, raised during the COVID-19 crisis. Targeted measures and flexible formats of training can prevent early leaving from VET and provide opportunities for drop-outs to re-enter VET.

There is also a need to address gender bias by promoting balance between traditional ‘male’ and ‘female’ professions, including by encouraging participation of women in vocational training for what are usually traditional ‘male’ professions and of men in ‘female’ professions.

6. Vocational education and training is underpinned by a culture of quality assurance (explained above)

7. Implementation at national level

Sustainable partnerships between all relevant stakeholders and including public private partnerships, is key to achieve **effective governance in VET**. Member States are invited to make best use of existing European tools, such as Europass, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) or ESCO (the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) and maximise synergies among them also with a view to promote automatic mutual recognition of vocational education and training qualifications/diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad. European Union funds and instruments continue to focus on skills and provide opportunities to finance reforms of vocational education training. For more effective and efficient implementation of the Recommendation, it is proposed that responsible national authorities define measures to be taken for the implementation of this Recommendation at national level within one year of its adoption by building on relevant existing national arrangements and existing financial frameworks and follow through their implementation.

EU level support

The proposal aims to reconfirm the key role of the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) in the EU governance on VET policy, while also calling for more structured working method on the basis of a rolling work programme. It also calls for greater cooperation with other key stakeholders such as learners’ representatives and providers of vocational education and training.

The proposal does not bring any change to the broader governance structures in the area of skills, education and training.

The support of the European Commission to Member States with a view to the implementation of this Recommendation could be gradually deployed through reinforcing support for structural reforms on apprenticeships through the apprenticeship support service³⁶

³⁶ As the key follow-up action to the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships the Commission launched an Apprenticeship Support Services in November 2018. The aim is to support members of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships to work towards more and better apprenticeships through a knowledge and a networking hub. It also includes bench-

and a new boost to European Alliance for Apprenticeships in synergy with the Youth Guarantee as well as expanding support services for vocational education and training together with CEDEFOP. The activities could cover a range of services, including mutual learning, expert advice, bench-learning, analytical work and capacity building for implementing this Recommendation.

Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) aim at fostering “upward convergence” of excellence in VET, operating at two levels:

1. National: in a given local context, embedding Centres of Vocational Excellence closely in the local entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems and clusters and acting as technology diffusion centres for SMEs including digital learning tools (ICT based simulators, virtual and augmented reality), and connecting them at European level.
2. International³⁷: through Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence to establish world-class reference points for vocational training by bringing together CoVEs that share a common interest in specific sectors/trades (e.g. aeronautics, e-mobility, green and circular technologies, ICT, healthcare, etc.) or innovative approaches (e.g. digital solutions, artificial intelligence) to tackle societal challenges (e.g. climate change, resource depletion and scarcity, pollution, delivery of Sustainable Development Goals, integration of migrants, upskilling people with low qualification levels, etc.).

The platforms will be open for countries with well-developed vocational excellence systems, as well as those in the process of developing similar approaches, aimed at exploring the full potential of VET institutions to play a proactive role in support of growth, competitiveness and innovation. Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence are not intended to build new VET institutions and infrastructure from scratch. Instead they aim to bring together a set of local/regional partners such as initial and continuing VET providers, tertiary education institutions including universities of applied sciences and polytechnics, research institutions, science parks, clusters, companies, in particular micro, small and medium-sized, chambers and business associations, social partners, sectoral skills councils, professional/sector associations, clusters, national and regional authorities and development agencies, public employment services, etc.

The *SELFIE self-reflection* tool which supports education and training institutions in using effectively digital technologies for teaching and learning, can play an important role. The tool will be further developed and expanded to cover cooperation with employers in work-based learning schemes. The EQAVET framework is adapted to also include quality criteria/descriptors related to digitalisation of teaching and learning including through use of the SELFIE tool. The tool will be further developed and expanded to cover cooperation with employers in work-based learning schemes. The EQAVET framework is adapted to also include quality criteria/descriptors related to digitalisation of teaching and learning including through use of the SELFIE tool.

European VET systems have the potential to establish themselves as a *global reference point for skills development*. There are a number of actions to be taken at European level which can promote European leadership in a global training market, such as support to internationalisation of vocational education and training systems, promotion of skills

³⁷ learning, a methodology combining benchmarking with peer learning, and which provides a structured process to mutual learning among Member States on improving their apprenticeship systems. This refers to both European and non-European dimension. The international platforms of COVEs must include EU countries, and can also include other countries to the extent that their participation brings an added-value to the platform.

competitions or organisation of communication campaigns to raise the attractiveness and image of VET.

An innovative element supporting excellence and internationalisation of VET is the concept of *European Vocational Core Profiles* which would define a certain share of a common training content at European level. As part of Europass platform and complemented, where possible, by vocational digital content, the Profiles have a potential to significantly facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of VET qualifications and the outcomes of learning period abroad and the development of joint vocational education and training curricula, qualifications and micro-credentials.

With the view to strengthening the European dimension of increased transparency and ‘trust-building’ the proposal proposes to *introduce peer reviews on quality assurance arrangements* in VET. The focus on the European dimension is a logical extension of successful activities which have taken place since the adoption of the EQAVET Recommendation in 2009 and which have helped the majority of countries to define, review and refine their quality assurance systems. The format and working methods of this reinforced European dimension, aimed at strengthening transparency and trust building, through a peer review exercise needs to be further discussed with all relevant stakeholders.

VET providers and their associations are crucial players in the implementation of the reforms in VET at national level and are directly relevant in the implementation of the EU policies and initiatives. They are multipliers, to disseminate the VET policy agenda and good practices exchanged at the EU level, but they also provide feedback and expertise from a practitioners’ grass root level perspective, to the policy proposals made by the Commission. There is a need to *reinforce a structured dialogue with VET providers with a view to strengthen their capacity and role in the EU level VET cooperation.*

The use of EU funds and programmes (such as the Next Generation EU (Recovery and Resilience Facility, REACT-EU), European Social Fund Plus, European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Interreg, Digital Europe, Just Transition Mechanism, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) to support the realisation of the commitments made in this proposal will be encouraged.

In particular, the proposed Recovery and Resilience Facility and REACT-EU have the potential to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the transition and the COVID-19 pandemic. Most notably, support for apprenticeships, digitalisation of VET institutions as well as the accelerating VET reforms supporting the smooth deployment of quality reskilling programmes supporting occupational transitions for those working in sectors deeply impacted by the crisis could be reinforced.

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 166 and 165 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union³⁸ recognises education and access to vocational and continuing training as a right, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals envisage by 2030³⁹ equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university, and a substantial increase in the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.
- (2) The European Pillar of Social Rights⁴⁰ proclaimed on 17 November 2017 sets out a number of principles to support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems, including Principle 1 on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, and Principle 4 on active support to employment.
- (3) High quality and innovative vocational education and training systems provide people with skills for work which help them to adapt to and deliver on the twin digital and green transitions, to cope with emergency situations and economic shocks, while also supporting economic growth and social cohesion. Thereby providing them with skills that help them get or create jobs in demand on the labour market.
- (4) Strong vocational policies are essential in order to achieve the goal of promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce and labour markets responsive to economic change, set in Article 145 TFEU.
- (5) The Commission Communication on 'The European Green Deal'⁴¹ is Europe's new growth strategy aiming to transform its economy and society and put them on a more sustainable path. Schools, training institutions and universities are well placed to engage with pupils, parents, businesses and the wider community on the changes needed for a successful transition. Pro-active up- and reskilling are necessary to reap the benefits of the green transition.

³⁸ OJ C 326, 26.10.2012

³⁹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

⁴⁰ Doc. 13129/17.

⁴¹ COM(2019) 640 final

- (6) The Commission Communication on ‘A strong social Europe for just transition’⁴² highlights the need to place skills, employability and human capital at the centre stage, through the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience⁴³, accompanied by a proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training. It also announces further work on the European Education Area and a new education and training cooperation framework with the Member States.
- (7) The Commission Communication on A New Industrial Strategy for Europe⁴⁴ calls for decisive action to make lifelong learning a reality for all and ensure that education and training keep pace and help deliver the twin transitions. It also calls on higher and vocational education and training to provide more scientists, engineers and technicians for the labour market. The New Circular Economy Action Plan⁴⁵ and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030⁴⁶ highlight the key role of skills in the transition to a green and clean economy.
- (8) The Commission Communication on An SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe⁴⁷ highlights that availability of skilled staff or experienced managers has become the most important problem for a quarter of EU’s micro, small and medium-sized companies (SMEs)⁴⁸ and that lack of skilled employees is the most important obstacle to new investment across the EU⁴⁹. Vocational education and training is particularly relevant for SMEs to make sure that their workforce has the skills needed.
- (9) The Commission Communication on a Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025⁵⁰ highlights the importance of vocational education and training for women and men to ensure a gender balance in professions which are, traditionally, male or female dominated, to tackle gender stereotypes.
- (10) The Commission Communication on EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe⁵¹ sets out a bold and comprehensive plan for European recovery. This plan is based on solidarity and fairness, and deeply rooted in the Union’s shared principles and values. The plan sets out how to kick-start the European economy, boost the green and digital transitions, and make it fairer, more resilient and more sustainable for future generations.
- (11) Since 2013, the Youth Guarantee⁵² has helped young people enter the labour market by offering them a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeships or traineeships within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving school. Vocational education and training has been effective in smoothing transition to the labour market for young people at risk of exclusion. In the future, attractive and labour-market relevant vocational education and training, notably apprenticeships can play an even a stronger role under the Youth Guarantee in preventing young people

⁴² COM(2020) 14 final

⁴³ COM(2020) 274 final

⁴⁴ COM(2020) 102 final

⁴⁵ COM(2020) 98 final

⁴⁶ COM(2020) 380 final

⁴⁷ COM(2020) 103 final

⁴⁸ SAFE survey 2019, https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/ecb_surveys/safe/html/index.en.html

⁴⁹ EIB Investment report 2018/2019, <https://www.eib.org/en/publications/investment-report-2018>

⁵⁰ COM(2020) 152 final

⁵¹ COM(2020) 442 final

⁵² OJ C 120, 26.4.2013, p. 1–6

from becoming unemployed and preparing them for future labour market opportunities, in particular as part of the green and digital transitions.

- (12) The Commission Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) aims at ensuring better labour market relevance of education and training system and equal access to lifelong learning opportunities for all, through up- and reskilling pathways.
- (13) The Commission Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing 'Erasmus': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 provides that the integrated nature of the 2014-2020 programme covering learning in all contexts - formal, non-formal and informal, and at all stages of life - should be maintained to boost flexible learning paths allowing individuals to develop those competences that are necessary to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.
- (14) The present Recommendation is building on a number of initiatives in the area of education and training and skills that have been developed at European level, as summarised in Annex I and will contribute to the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, the updated Digital Education Action Plan, the European Education Area and the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training.
- (15) The present Recommendation fulfils the objective of the European Education Area to develop a genuine European learning space where high quality and inclusive education and training is not hampered by borders and which aims at removing obstacles for recognition of school leaving and higher education qualifications and learning periods abroad, and work towards the smoother cross-border validation of training and lifelong learning certificates.
- (16) Building on the priorities of an enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (the Copenhagen process), adopted as a Council Resolution on 19 December 2002⁵³, the objectives of high quality and flexible vocational education and training and of transnational mobility continued to be at the core of the global vision for the modernisation of vocational education and training defined by the Ministers in charge in 2010 in the Bruges Communiqué⁵⁴.
- (17) In the Riga Conclusions of 22 June 2015⁵⁵, the Ministers in charge of vocational education and training agreed on a set of priorities to support the achievement of this vision, as integrated in the 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)⁵⁶ and in the 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe⁵⁷ which gave a further strong boost to the Union VET policy with a stronger focus on attractiveness and quality.
- (18) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training ('EQAVET')⁵⁸ set out a reference framework to

⁵³ OJ C 13, 18.1.2003

⁵⁴ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/content/bruges-communication>

⁵⁵ https://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf

⁵⁶ OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 25-35.

⁵⁷ COM(2016) 381 final

⁵⁸ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

support Member States in improving the quality of their vocational education and training systems and to contribute to increased transparency of vocational education and training policy developments between Member States. During the ten years of its implementation, EQAVET has stimulated reforms in national quality assurance systems, but did not contribute significantly to the improvement of transparency of quality assurance arrangements. Furthermore, it was mostly applied in school-based initial vocational education and training. Therefore, the 2009 EQAVET framework should be integrated into this Recommendation and elements addressing the shortcomings of its implementation in relation to the quality of learning outcomes, certification and assessment, stakeholders' consultation, the role of teachers and trainers, work-based learning and flexibility of vocational education and training should be added. In order to improve mutual learning, enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements in the provision of vocational education and training and reinforce mutual trust between EU Member States, EU level peer reviews of quality assurance at system level should be introduced.

- (19) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ('ECVET')⁵⁹ set the objective to improve the recognition, accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes, supporting mobility and lifelong learning as well as the establishment of a EU credit system in vocational education and training. During the ten years of its implementation, ECVET has widely contributed to the development of a better-quality mobility experience through the use and documentation of units of learning outcomes. The concept of ECVET points however was generally not applied and ECVET did not lead to the development of a European credit system in vocational education and training. Therefore, this Council Recommendation should include the key principles of ECVET (e.g. units of learning outcomes) related to flexibility. The ECVET tools (e.g. learning agreement and memorandum of understanding) supporting mobility of vocational learners, are to be further developed in the framework of other EU instruments such as those supported under the Erasmus+ programme. For vocational qualifications at post-secondary and tertiary level, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System already in use may be applied.
- (20) The Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships⁶⁰ identifies 14 key criteria that Member States and stakeholders should use to develop quality and effective apprenticeships ensuring both the development of job-related skills and the personal development of apprentices.
- (21) CEDEFOP monitoring of the priorities agreed in the Riga conclusions of 22 June 2015 shows a number of areas where countries have progressed with the modernisation agenda of vocational education and training, in particular in relation to apprenticeships and work based learning, quality assurance, setting up of skills anticipation mechanisms and of advisory bodies involving social partners, increasing permeability and flexibility and recently a stronger focus on digital skills. However, in light of the green and digital transitions there is a need to significantly expand and improve the offer for continuing vocational education and training both for young people and adults, while also increasing the attractiveness and quality of initial vocational education and training.

⁵⁹ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

⁶⁰ OJ C 153, 2.5.2018

- (22) Many countries have in place initiatives to promote excellence in vocational education and training and to better connect VET to innovation and skills ecosystems. Building upon these examples, the concept of Centers of Vocational Excellence is successfully being piloted with a view to becoming world-class reference points for training in specific areas for both initial training and continuing up-skilling and re-skilling.
- (23) In its Opinion on the Future of Vocational Education and Training⁶¹, adopted in December 2018, the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (‘ACVT’) set the vision for an excellent, inclusive and lifelong vocational education and training that meets the requirements of the future generated by economic, technological and societal changes. This Opinion invited the Commission to prepare a proposal to streamline and consolidate the EU policy framework for vocational education and training, its governance and existing instruments in the form of an overarching Council Recommendation.
- (24) For the purposes of this Recommendation, vocational education and training, is to be understood as the education and training which aims to equip young people and adults, with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market and may be provided in formal and in non-formal settings, at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework, including tertiary level.
- (25) Given its non-binding nature, this Recommendation respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and should be implemented in accordance with European law, national law and practice. In particular, this Recommendation is without prejudice to the Directive 2005/36/EC⁶² as amended by Directive 2013/55/EC⁶³ on the recognition of professional qualifications and the regime of automatic recognition provided therein.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES:

- (a) work towards implementing a Union vocational education and training policy which:
- *equips young people and adults with the skills to thrive in the evolving labour market and society, to manage the recovery and the just transitions to the green and digital economy, in times of demographic change and throughout all economic cycles,*
 - *ensures inclusiveness and equal opportunities and contributes to achieving resilience, social fairness and prosperity and*
 - *establishes European vocational education and training as a global reference for skills development;*
- (b) deploy actions and investments for implementing this policy, in accordance with the principles defined below in points 1-23 and
- (c) work towards achieving by 2025 the following **objectives** which are part of relevant European monitoring frameworks, including in the area of education and training and social and employment policies:
- **the share of employed graduates should be at least 82%⁶⁴;**

⁶¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20479&langId=en>

⁶² OJ L 255, 30.9.2005.

⁶³ OJ L 354, 28.12.2013.

⁶⁴ This will cover the age group 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education 1-3 years ago.

- **60% of recent graduates from VET benefit from exposure to work-based learning** during their vocational education and training⁶⁵. This objective refers to all forms of work based learning, and will thereby contribute to increased apprenticeship opportunities which can be supported with the Youth Guarantee;
- **8% of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad**⁶⁶.

Vocational education and training is agile in adapting to dynamic labour market changes

1. Vocational education and training programmes offer a balanced mix of **vocational and technical skills** well aligned to all economic cycles, constantly evolving jobs and working methods and **key competences**⁶⁷, including solid basic skills, digital, transversal, green and other life skills which provide strong foundations for resilience, lifelong employability, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development;
2. Vocational education and training curricula, programme offers and qualifications are continuously updated using **strong skills intelligence** (i.e. graduate tracking systems, skills anticipation mechanisms, including at sectoral and regional levels);
3. Providers of vocational education and training have an appropriate degree of **autonomy, flexibility, support and funding** to quickly adapt their training offer to changing skills needs, green and digital transitions and economic cycles;
4. Vocational education and training programmes at all levels comprise **work-based learning** components that are further expanded also in continuing vocational education and training; **apprenticeship schemes**⁶⁸ are further developed, to enhance Youth Guarantee offers⁶⁹, and are complemented by appropriate support⁷⁰ and measures to stabilise the offer of apprenticeships, and to address specific challenges of small companies;

Flexibility and progression opportunities are at the core of vocational education and training

5. Vocational education and training programmes are **personalised and learner centred**, offer access to face-to-face and digital or blended learning, flexible and modular pathways that recognise the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, and open up career and learning progression; continuing vocational training programmes are designed to be quickly adaptable to sector, business or individual up- or reskilling needs;
6. Vocational education and training programmes are based on **modules or units of learning outcomes** and validation mechanisms are in place allowing the transfer,

⁶⁵ This will cover the age group 15-34, having left education and training 1-3 years ago. The indicator will be based on data that will be collected as of 2021 as part of the EU LFS.

⁶⁶ This will be measured as the share of mobile learners in a calendar year, as a proportion of a cohort of VET graduates in the same year. The indicator will be based on the mobility data sourced from Erasmus+ data and VET graduate data sourced from the UOE. In addition, where appropriate, data from national authorities mobility programmes could also be used to complement the data from Erasmus+.

⁶⁷ As defined in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

⁶⁸ As defined under the Council Recommendation of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships

⁶⁹ As defined under the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee

⁷⁰ These might include inter-company training centres

recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes with a view to gaining a qualification, a partial qualification, or a micro-credential, as relevant;⁷¹

Vocational education and training is a driver for innovation and growth and prepares for the digital and green transitions and occupations in high demand

7. Vocational education and training is made resilient by being integrated into economic, industrial and innovation strategies, including those linked to **recovery, green and digital transitions**. As a consequence, the offer of **continuing vocational education and training** needs to be significantly expanded by fostering the acquisition of entrepreneurial, digital and green skills as the demand requires;
8. **Centres of Vocational Excellence** act as catalysts for local business investment, supporting recovery, green and digital transitions, European and regional innovation and smart specialisation strategies, development of vocational education and training at higher qualification levels (EQF levels 5-8) and provide innovative services such as clusters and business incubators for start-ups and technology innovation for SMEs, as well as innovative reskilling solutions for workers at risk of redundancy;
9. Vocational education and training institutions have access to state-of-the-art infrastructure, have in place **digitalisation strategies**⁷² and embed **environmental and social sustainability** in their programmes and organisational management, thus contributing to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals;

Vocational education and training is an attractive choice based on modern and digitalised provision of training/skills

10. **Higher vocational education and training programmes** at EQF levels 5 to 8 are further developed to support a growing need for higher vocational skills;
11. Vocational education and training is part of the **lifelong learning continuum** and **flexible and permeable** pathways are in place between both initial and continuing vocational education and training, general education and higher education;
12. Vocational education and training programmes are delivered through an appropriate mix of **open, digital and participative learning environments**, including learning conducive workplaces and are supported by state-of-the-art and accessible infrastructure, equipment and technology, and versatile pedagogies and tools, notably ICT based simulators, virtual and augmented reality which increase the accessibility and efficiency of training provision, including for small enterprises⁷³;
13. **Teachers, trainers and managers** in vocational education and training undertake initial and continuing professional development in order to: deliver high quality training; foster technical and digital skills and effective innovative training methods; work with digital learning tools, and in diverse and multicultural environments. Their career paths become more attractive through broader recruitment approaches,

⁷¹ In accordance with the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning

⁷² For example, the SELFIE self-reflection tool supports VET institutions in using digital technologies for teaching and learning effectively and in enhancing their cooperation with employers in work-based learning schemes.

⁷³ These may furthermore include collaborative teaching, inter-disciplinary and project-based learning, and new organisational methods in training institutions and companies, as well as artificial intelligence.

enhanced career opportunities, e.g. hybrid teachers/trainers⁷⁴, as well as strengthened cooperation between vocational teachers/trainers and companies;

14. **Internationalisation** strategies support a strategic approach to international cooperation in vocational education and training, including in border regions of the EU; such strategies promote successful national practices worldwide and participation in international **skills competitions**;
15. Opportunities for **learning mobility** of vocational learners and staff, including virtual mobility, long-duration mobility and mobility to third countries are in place, facilitated by the use and recognition of units of learning outcomes and of relevant European tools;⁷⁵
16. Clear and user-friendly information on learning and career opportunities, and validation opportunities, in the entire EU is ensured through high quality **lifelong guidance services**, making full use of digital services;

Vocational education and training promotes equality of opportunities

17. **VET programmes are inclusive** for vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, low-qualified/skilled adults, ethnic and racial minorities, including Roma, people with migrant background and people with fewer opportunities because of geographical location; Targeted measures and flexible training formats prevent early leaving from education and training and support the school-to-work transition;
18. VET programmes are **accessible** through digital learning platforms, supported by tools, devices and internet connection, in particular for vulnerable groups and people in rural or remote areas;
19. Targeted measures promote **gender balance** in traditionally “male” or “female” professions and address gender related and other types of stereotypes together;

Vocational education and training is underpinned by a culture of quality assurance

20. The **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework** (the EQAVET Framework) as described in Annex II is mainstreamed in national quality assurance systems, for both initial and continuing vocational education and training; it covers vocational education and training in all learning environments (such as school-based provision and work-based learning, including apprenticeship schemes) and all learning types (digital, face-to-face or blended), delivered by both public and private providers, and is underpinned by a set of common indicators for quality assurance in vocational education and training applied both at system and provider level, as listed in Annex II;
21. A **Quality Assurance National Reference Point** for vocational education and training continues to bring together all relevant stakeholders at national and regional levels to:

⁷⁴ Hybrid teachers/trainers refer to a type of personnel who is part-time working in a company and part-time as a teacher in a vocational school or centre. This approach has a potential to contribute to a stronger cooperation arrangements between VET schools and companies in a more structured and frequent manner. Hybrid teachers can bring the necessary innovation to school-based environment and can address the growing shortage and ageing population of vocational teachers. It provides interesting career perspectives for individuals and provides benefits to both schools and companies, among others by sharing the salary costs.

⁷⁵ For example, templates for the Memorandum of Understanding and the Learning Agreement

- take concrete initiatives to implement and further develop the EQAVET Framework,
- inform and mobilise a wide range of stakeholders, including Centres of Vocational Excellence, to contribute to implementing the EQAVET framework,
- support self-evaluation as a complementary and effective means of quality assurance to allow the measurement of success and the identification of areas for improvement, including with respect to digital readiness of VET systems and institutions
- participate actively in the European network for quality assurance in vocational education and training,
- provide an updated description of the national quality assurance arrangements based on the EQAVET Framework,
- engage in EU level **peer reviews**⁷⁶ of quality assurance to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements, and to reinforce trust between the Member States;

Implementation at national level

It is recommended that Member States take actions to implement this policy at national level, together with social partners and other relevant stakeholders. In doing so, they should:

22. Ensure sustainable public-private **partnerships** for the governance of vocational education and training. Involve social partners and all relevant stakeholders, including vocational education and training institutions, industries and businesses of all sizes, public and private employment services, intermediary bodies such as chambers of industry, commerce and crafts, professional and sectoral organisations, national coordinators for the Youth Guarantee, ESF and other EU initiatives, the information technologies sector, Centres of Vocational Excellence, clusters, learners' and parents' organisations, as well as local, regional and national authorities. Promote such partnerships at regional and sectoral level;
23. Make best use of the **European transparency tools** such as the European Qualifications Framework, , the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), Europass and the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO), facilitate automatic mutual recognition of full or partial qualifications, micro-credentials and the outcomes of learning periods abroad⁷⁷, enable learners to use the various features of Europass (e.g. recording their experience, skills and qualifications in an online profile that serves for career guidance, obtaining digitally signed credentials, and receiving suggestions and searching for learning and job opportunities, qualifications, validation, recognition, etc.);
24. Make best use of **European Union funds and instruments** supporting reforms and/or investment in vocational education and training, including on digitalisation

⁷⁶ A peer review is a type of mutual learning activity with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level, based on a specific methodology to be developed by the European Network for quality assurance in vocational education and training.

⁷⁷ In line with the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

and environmental sustainability, such as the Next Generation EU (Recovery and Resilience Facility, REACT-EU), European Social Fund+, SURE, the European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Interreg, Digital Europe, the Just Transition Mechanism and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the Modernisation Fund; stimulate further investments in vocational education and training from both public and private sectors;

25. Define **measures to be taken for the implementation of this Recommendation** at national level within one year of its adoption and follow up their implementation, including with adequate national resource allocations and with a strong focus on mainstreaming digitalisation and environmental sustainability across the entire VET sector.

HEREBY WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

implement the Union's vocational education and training policy, supporting the action of the Member States, including through:

26. Ensuring **effective governance** of the EU policy for vocational education and training through the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training, on the basis of a rolling work programme and in cooperation with Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training⁷⁸, learners' representatives and providers of vocational education and training;
27. Ensuring that the EU policy for vocational education and training is fully reflected in taking forward the EU Recovery Plan, the European **Green Deal** and the **New Industrial Strategy for Europe** and is part of the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, the **Digital Education Action Plan**, the overall European cooperation framework for education and training and the **European Education Area**;
28. Reinforcing support for **structural reforms on apprenticeship** through the apprenticeship support service and a new boost to the European Alliance for Apprenticeships in synergy with the Youth Guarantee; gradually expanding **support services** for vocational education and training in cooperation with CEDEFOP;
29. Supporting the goal of gradually establishing and developing 50 European Platforms of **Centres of Vocational Excellence** and exploring **European Vocational Core Profiles**, as part of Europass platform and complemented, where possible, by vocational digital content, with a view to facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of qualifications, and the development of joint vocational education and training curricula, qualifications and micro-credentials;
30. Supporting qualitative and effective **digitalisation of VET provision** in both school-based and work-based learning through promoting the use of **European competence frameworks** and **self-assessment tools**, such as SELFIE⁷⁹ and exploring the feasibility of an EU wide survey for VET schools;
31. Promoting **European vocational education and training as a global reference for skills development**, including by supporting internationalisation of vocational education and training systems in cooperation with the ETF, skills competitions and communication campaigns to raise the attractiveness and image of VET and

⁷⁸ Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training are designated by the Member States; the Commission maintains their list, on the basis of the information provided by the Member States.

⁷⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/education/schools-go-digital/about-selfie_en

providing user-friendly access to information about vocational education and training and related career opportunities, building and further developing the Europass features;

32. Supporting the Member States' efforts for the implementation of this Recommendation, strengthening capacity of vocational education and training institutions, including their digitalisation and environmental sustainability and promoting research in VET at both national and EU level through funding from the relevant **Union funds and programmes** (the Next Generation EU (Recovery and Resilience Facility and REACT-EU), European Social Fund+, SURE, European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Interreg, Digital Europe, Just Transition Mechanism, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Modernisation Fund);
33. Ensuring **qualitative and quantitative monitoring** in line with the common objectives defined in this Recommendation as well as other relevant data, including on investment, and feeding this data into the European Semester and relevant European monitoring and reporting frameworks and **reporting** to the Council on the implementation of the Recommendation every five years, building on annual monitoring by CEDEFOP.

This Recommendation replaces the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training ('EQAVET'), and the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ('ECVET').

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council
The President*