New skills agenda for Europe

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, in conjunction with the Committee on Culture and Education, adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Martina DLABAJOVÁ (ALDE, CZ) and Momchil NEKOV (S&D, BG) on a new skills agenda for Europe.

Members welcomed the Commission communication and acknowledged that the EU needs a paradigm shift in the goals and functioning of the education sector in line with the fast changing economic, technological and societal environment.

Developing skills for life and skills for employment: although the main focus of the skills package is the immediate needs of the labour market, Members recommended working in close collaboration with the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in order to anticipate skills needs and to develop a pan European skills needs forecasting tool and lifelong learning.

In order to achieve the objectives of the strategy, the report advocated a **holistic approach to education and skills development** that provides citizens with all the essential skills for lifelong learning, defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship and employment.

Member States are invited to:

- **not only focus on employability skills**, but also skills that are useful to society (managerial skills, social and intercultural skills, management, volunteering, foreign language proficiency and negotiation) in their education and training programmes, while promoting European craftsmanship;
- **go beyond promoting the 'right occupational skills'** and to also focus on those aspects of education that are more work-based and more practical, and that foster an entrepreneurial mind-set, innovativeness and creativity, support people to think critically, understand the concept of sustainability, while respecting fundamental rights and values and participate in the democratic process and social life.

Role of education in the fight against unemployment, social exclusion and poverty: Members are concerned that between 2010 and 2014 investment in education and training fell by 2.5 % across the Union. **Public education systems should be adequately resourced** so that education can fulfil its role in the fight against unemployment, social exclusion and poverty. Access to learning and training opportunities should be a universal right at every stage of life.

Members also considered that the prospect of the new skills strategy in relation to the early stages of education is not sufficiently forward-looking. They therefore called on Member States to **invest in early childhood education and care** (ECEC) in order to increase quality and adopt measures to reduce early school leaving.

Boosting lifelong learning opportunities: concerned about the situation of 70 million Europeans lacking basic skills, Members welcomed the introduction of the initiative ‘Upskilling Pathways’ which should involve the individualised assessment of learning needs, a quality learning offer and systematic validation of the skills and competences acquired, enabling their easy recognition on the labour market.

The key role of non-formal and informal learning: the report stressed the importance of validating non-formal and informal learning, particularly in the case of vulnerable or disadvantaged people such as refugees or low-skilled workers who need priority access to validation agreements.

Significant progress has been made in recent years in the framework of the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018. However, further efforts are needed in establishing **relevant legal frameworks** and creating comprehensive validation strategies in order to enable validation

Fostering digital, science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics (STEAM) and entrepreneurial skills: the report welcomed the Commission's proposal to urge Member States to draw up comprehensive **national strategies for digital skills** with special attention being paid to closing the digital divide, in particular for older persons; points out however that in order for these strategies to be effective, there is a need to ensure lifelong learning opportunities for educational staff.

Members considered that greater importance should be given to STEM education to improve digital learning and teaching. They also highlight the need to include elements of **entrepreneurial learning**, including social entrepreneurship, at all levels of education.

Modernising education and vocational training (VET) and enhancing work-based training: the report called on the Commission and Member States to change the image of VET, with adequate investment, to guarantee that it is more relevant to employers and the labour market and to consider VET as a valid educational and vocational pathway. It also stressed the need to strengthen vocational and career guidance practices in both the education system and adult education.

With a view to reducing the number of people dropping out of school and the number of people who are not working or studying or training (NEETs), Members recommended that there should be a cooperation between secondary schools and businesses.

Teachers and trainers: the report highlighted the need to invest and support the initial and continuing professional development of teachers in all sectors of education. They stressed that strengthening the status and professional development of all teachers and trainers would be a prerequisites for the launch of the new skills agenda.

Funding: the report regretted the lack of funding for the implementation of the proposals. It recommended encouraging Member States to take advantage of the existing funding sources to support the implementation of the strategy, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF).

With regard to implementation, the report stressed the need for the New Skills Agenda to be further elaborated, implemented and monitored **in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders**, including social partners, civil society organisations and non-formal education providers, employment services and local authorities. It called on the Commission to encourage the promotion of greater partnerships with stakeholders.

Lastly, Members announced a **European Year of Adult Learning**, which will help to raise awareness of the value of adult education and 'active ageing' across Europe.