

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA

FORUM OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE EEA EFTA STATES

RESTRICTED

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FOURTEENTH MEETING OF THE EEA EFTA FORUM

Brussels

14-15 November 2016

Opinion on a New Skills Agenda for Europe

Rapporteur: Jon Askeland

The EEA EFTA Forum of Local and Regional Authorities (the Forum):

- A. Having regard to the Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – A New Skills Agenda for Europe – Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness (COM(2016) 381 final), the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee (COM(2016) 382 final) and the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (COM(2016) 383 final);
- B. Having regard to the participation of the EEA EFTA States in the European Union's work on education within the Education and Training 2020 Framework and the Erasmus+ programme;
- C. Noting the reinforced subsidiarity principle set out in the Lisbon Treaty and its explicit reference to the local and regional dimension and self-government;
- D. Having regard to the important role of local and regional authorities in providing education and training in the EEA EFTA States;
- E. Acknowledging the impact of European Union law and policy on local and regional authorities in the EEA EFTA States through the EEA Agreement;
- F. Noting the role of the Forum as a body in the EFTA structure:
 - 1. Recognises the importance of skills and competencies as the global currency of the future, and the necessity of providing the right skills for wellbeing and engagement in schools, employability and citizenship in a plural society;
 - 2. Is of the view that a new skills agenda is crucial for the future development of Europe, including the EEA EFTA States, and supports the Commission's proposal;
 - 3. Stresses the need to improve levels of qualification for all, including third-country nationals, asylum seekers and refugees, in order to bridge the gap between labour

market needs and the population's skill set, and enable active participation in labour market which promotes social inclusion and integration. This calls for active cooperation between the social partners, education and training providers and local, regional and national authorities;

4. Regards the New Skills Agenda as an important programme to fill the skills gap in Europe, reduce the skills mismatch, and improve skills intelligence and information sharing. While skills should be imparted first and foremost at the primary school level, the Agenda is also important for adults who need to upskill to enter the labour market, keep their jobs, change jobs or move abroad;
5. Stresses that teachers' training and continuing education should be organized so as to give teachers the tools to impart new skills and address the need for new competencies;
6. Highlights the need to address skill shortages, which are often particularly problematic for smaller, rural local and regional authorities, and welcomes the Commission's action to this end;
7. Welcomes the Commission's proposal for a Skills Guarantee (Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults) aimed at improving employment opportunities and full participation in society for low-skilled adults, but would like to see the package specify clear learning goals and set out conditions that need to be met by candidates in need of the guarantee;
8. Believes that the Skills Guarantee should be designed with reference to national as well as regional conditions, while also considering that investment in human capital should be seen as social investment;
9. Welcomes the Commission's intention to revise the Key Competences Framework, paying special attention to promoting entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented mindsets. The significance of key competences, whose aim is also to empower people to meet rapidly changing labour market demands, must be discussed in different fora at EU, national, regional and local level. This should involve close cooperation between representatives of local and regional authorities, the labour market, education and research sectors and civil society;
10. Vocational education and training (VET) is currently undervalued, and its attractiveness and the opportunities it may bring need to be highlighted. Therefore, the Forum supports the Commission's organisation of the proposed themed weeks and cooperation with the World Skills Organisation to promote VET. It furthermore encourages the EEA EFTA States to continue promoting vocational training through information days and skills competitions, including "hands-on" activities;
11. Emphasises the need for flexibility in the vocational training system allowing the students to obtain formal qualifications for parts of a study programme with which they can continue building future learning on;

12. Stresses the need for both private and public sector employers to provide apprenticeships and encourages the requirement for apprentices in public procurement contracts;
13. Emphasises the importance of digital learning that can engender a more individualised, accessible and inclusive education, as well as opportunities for online and distance learning;
14. Supports the idea of measures to guarantee that migrants who have recently arrived and are working thanks to targeted measures have access to continuing training so as to avoid them later being forced to leave the labour market;
15. Supports the review of the European Qualifications Framework to ensure that national qualifications systems are updated regularly and that reporting follows a standardised format, but is of the view that it should be up to each Member State to decide on the means to achieve this;
16. Encourages the EEA EFTA States to continue working to increase the exchange of best practices regarding newcomers' skills and qualifications;
17. Instructs the Secretariat to forward this Opinion to the EFTA Standing Committee at Ministerial level.