

Towards a European Vocational and Practical Education Area

A mutual recognition of vocational education

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Recognising that:

- Significant disparities in the labour market exist among different regions within the EU, with some areas experiencing very high levels of unemployment while other regions face limited economic growth due to labour shortages.¹² Mutual recognition of vocational skills and qualifications is key to supporting mobility and career opportunities across the EU/EEA, increasing the movement of labour within the EU/EEA.
- While the EU average unemployment rate remains relatively low, 77% of companies struggled to find employees with the required skills in 2019.^{3 4} Especially the availability of skilled staff is the most important problem for a quarter of the EU's small and medium-sized enterprises, representing 99% of all EU businesses.⁵⁶ More sectors struggle to find high and low-skilled workforce with the right skills. In 2021, 28 occupations were classified as having shortages, including the healthcare, hospitality, construction, and service sectors. In addition to shortages of IT and (cyber-)security specialists.⁷
- There is unexploited potential in the synergy between vocational education, research, and industry, as the collaboration of these sectors can lead to the development of innovative solutions, technological advancements, and the creation of a skilled workforce that is essential for valorisation, driving economic growth and global competitiveness of the Internal Market. Brainport Eindhoven and Merck in Darmstadt are examples of knowledge hubs that rely on

¹ Eurostat. (n.d.). EDAT_LFSE_22_custom_5498375 [Data set]. Eurostat.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_22_custom_5498375/default/table?lang=en

² Soldani, E., Causa, O., Luu, N. & Abendschein, M. (2022). The post-COVID rise in labour shortages across OECD countries. VoxEU. [The post-COVID rise in labour shortages across OECD countries | CEPR](#)

³ Eurostat (n.d.), Unemployment rate 2022. [UNE_RT_M](#)

⁴ Eurofound, European Company Survey 2019. [European Company Survey 2019 | Eurofound](#)

⁵ Eurostat, Key Figures on European Businesses, 2022 Edition, p. 10.
[Key figures on European business: 2022 edition - Products Eurostat News](#)

⁶ Cedefop (2021). The green employment and skills transformation: insights from a European Green Deal skills forecast scenario. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/112540>

⁷ European Labour Authority, Report on labour shortages and surpluses 2021 and ENISA, Cybersecurity skills development in the EU, March 2020. [Cybersecurity Skills Development in the EU — ENISA](#)

skilled workers to drive innovation, valorise knowledge and create economic growth through collaboration between academia, industry, and government.⁸

- The Bologna process has improved the ability of companies to recruit academically educated professionals to enable innovation by establishing a common framework for higher education across Europe, facilitating the recognition of qualifications, and promoting the mobility of students and researchers, thus creating a more competitive and attractive environment for companies seeking highly-educated employees. However, the Bologna process limits itself to higher tertiary education, excluding vocational education from the benefits arising from the Bologna process.⁹
- Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as the backbone of our economy, serve as essential employers, driving innovation, job creation, and economic growth in Europe. Notably, SMEs are responsible for creating two out of every three jobs, contributing to 50% of Europe's GDP, and being a key driver behind 50% of innovations. This highlights the indispensable role of SMEs and vocational educated employees working at SMEs in shaping the economy of the future.¹⁰

Acknowledging that:

- The EU's task is to ensure the freedom of work and movement within its member states through policies such as the free movement of people, labour, and services, creating a single market that benefits citizens, businesses, and economies.
- Skilled workers are crucial to the growth and development of the economy, and investing in their training and development is essential to drive innovation, increase competitiveness, and improve living standards.¹¹
- *The European Commission adopted the proposal to make 2023 the European Year of Skills.* This initiative stems from the challenges and opportunities brought to the labour market by the digital and green transitions, which call for new skills of the workforce. The European Year of Skills aims at boosting competitiveness, investment in training, and upskilling opportunities to make sure that workers acquire the skills demanded in the labour market, including digital skills.¹²

⁸ Leydesdorff, Loet (2012). "The Knowledge-Based Economy and the Triple Helix Model" University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communications Research. <https://www.leydesdorff.net/thmodel/eaepe03.pdf>

⁹ Bosio, G., & Leonardi, M. (2010). The impact of Bologna Process on the graduate labour market: demand and supply. *Giornale Degli Economisti e Annali Di Economia*, 69 (Anno 123)(3), 29–65. [THE IMPACT OF BOLOGNA PROCESS ON THE GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET: DEMAND AND SUPPLY](#)

¹⁰ European Commission (2020). Unleashing the full potential of European SMEs. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/863069/EU_SMEs_strategy_en.pdf.pdf

¹¹ International Labour Organization (2014). Skills mismatch in Europe: Statistics Brief. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_315623.pdf

¹² European Year of Skills. (n.d.). European Year of Skills. https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en

- The Bologna process has played a crucial role in promoting higher education reforms, introducing a common framework for higher education across Europe based on a three-cycle degree system, emphasising student-centred learning, and promoting quality assurance mechanisms. Furthermore, it played an important role in facilitating student mobility through initiatives such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the recognition of qualifications. Additionally, the Bologna process contributed to cooperation and dialogue between institutions, stakeholders, and countries across Europe. These changes have contributed to the development of a more integrated, transparent, and attractive European Higher Education Area, and have helped to enhance the quality and relevance of education and training, promote academic excellence and internationalisation, and create new opportunities for students, researchers, and professionals across Europe.¹³
- Currently, the EU has several instruments to stimulate student exchange and encourage cooperation between Member States. The European Qualification Framework (EQF) is, for example, a framework to compare the different professional qualifications at an EU-level. Member States are responsible for standardising the different qualifications to the EQF. In the EQF, vocational education is scaled in the levels 1 to 4. Also, there is the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) to monitor the quality of vocational education in all Member States. Furthermore, the European Credit System for Vocational Education & Training (ECVET) makes it easier for students to have their study outcomes recognised elsewhere.
- CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) cooperates with the European Commission and Member States to develop validation systems. The European Guidelines identify main challenges facing policy makers and practitioners and present possible responses to those challenges¹⁴. Moreover, CEDEFOP published a report¹⁵ to make VET qualifications easier to understand and compare. The study takes a closer look at those acquired through initial VET and assigned to EQF levels 3 and 4 via national classifications and frameworks. It explores what they have in common and in what way they differ. It looks at their purpose and value on the labour market or for further learning, and how they are assigned to the national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and EQF levels. An interesting was that the use of European Skills, Competences, and Occupations Classification ESCO has limited usefulness for indicating the importance of specific VET learning outcomes.
- Erasmus+¹⁶ offers the opportunity for providers of vocational education and training (VET) and other organisations active in the field of VET to organise learning mobility activities for VET learners and staff. For staff, activities such as job shadowing, courses, and teaching or training assignments can be organised in another organisation abroad. For learners, learning periods abroad and participation in skills competitions.

¹³ European Commission. (n.d.). The Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process_en

¹⁴ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5577>

¹⁵ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

¹⁶ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/organisations/learning-mobility-of-individuals/vocational-education-training>

Calls on:

- The European Commission and CEDEFOP to build upon EQF to develop a comprehensive and enriched common framework for vocational education across Europe aligned with NQF to increase the comparability of qualifications, to facilitate the mutual recognition of degrees across different countries, to introduce new reference points for comparing VET qualifications and to improve the mobility of students and workers across the European Union.
- The European Commission building upon ECVET to develop a thorough framework for the mutual recognition of vocational education degrees, including the development of common standards and the establishment of a system for the recognition of prior learning
- Member States to provide information on the level and content of vocational education degrees in a clear and transparent manner to ensure compatibility with the European Qualifications Framework.
- Member States to cooperate among each other and with the European Commission to establish mechanisms for the recognition of vocational education degrees obtained in third countries, such as candidate member states
- The European Commission and Member States to intensify efforts to pro-actively promote, and support learning abroad programmes, such as apprenticeships, internships, and mobility schemes, as a means to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational education, improve language and intercultural communication skills, and foster employability and entrepreneurship among learners and apprentices.
- The European Commission and Member States to remove barriers for participation in learning abroad programmes, such as apprenticeships, internships, and mobility schemes by providing adequate funding, information, guidance, and recognition of degrees acquired abroad, and by encouraging cooperation and partnerships between vocational education, companies, and social partners across Europe and beyond.