Joint Social Partners' Reaction to the European Strategy on Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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The European Union is facing an unprecedented simultaneous combination of economic, technological and societal transformations. The green and digital transitions, in particularly the emergence of artificial intelligence, combined with demographic change and intensifying global competition, are reshaping labour markets and increasing demand for new skills across all sectors. Against this backdrop, vocational education and training (VET) systems play a central role in ensuring both Europe's industrial competitiveness and the provision of quality employment opportunities.

industriAll Europe, representing workers in the industrial sectors, and Ceemet representing employers in the metal, engineering and technology-based industries, jointly welcome the European Commission's initiative to develop a renewed European VET Strategy. The European social partners in the industrial sectors share a common interest in strengthening VET systems to ensure they are responsive, inclusive, high-quality and capable of meeting current and future skills needs.

This joint paper aims to provide an assessment of the key challenges facing VET systems in Europe, to outline shared priorities, and to identify areas where coordinated action at European, national and sectoral levels are essential.

Ceemet and industriAll Europe agree that significant structural challenges continue to hinder the full contribution of VET to competitiveness, employment and social cohesion.

VET systems in many Member States suffer from limited attractiveness, with vocational pathways often perceived as a second choice compared to general or higher education. This perception problem contributes to insufficient enrolment in VET programmes, despite strong demand for VET graduates in the labour market. A competitive industrial sector underpinned by pro-active industrial policy is also essential to create attractive career opportunities for people involved in VET.

We also recognise shortcomings in the alignment between training provision and labour market needs, as well as in the participation in continuing vocational education and training (CVET). In some Member States, insufficient capacity within VET systems does not fully respond to growing demand for vocational pathways, creating barriers for young people seeking to access high-quality training opportunities. Ensuring adequate, accessible and high-quality VET opportunities (while considering the shared commitment with the employers) is therefore essential to guarantee equal opportunities, strengthen the attractiveness of vocational pathways and address future skills needs. The social partners also stress the importance of recognising diplomas, qualifications and professional experience to support worker mobility and the development of skills throughout working life.

At the same time, MET companies play an increasing role in delivering training. In fact, they continue to be the largest training provider in the MET sector. However, support must be provided to SMEs in particular so they can develop labour market relevant training programmes. European funding should

be better targeted towards SMEs, ensuring that they can effectively access and benefit from available support.

Workers, in particular low-skilled, should therefore receive, as possible, guidance and mentoring by their employer in line with national practices, to help them identify the most appropriate training opportunities.

Making VET a First-Class Pathway

VET must be recognised and promoted as a first-class educational pathway, offering high-quality learning opportunities and leading to sustainable and rewarding careers.

Ensuring excellence in VET requires continuous investment in modern infrastructures, updated curricula and high-quality teaching. Work-based learning, including apprenticeships, is widely recognised as a key component of effective VET systems, providing learners with practical experience and facilitating their transition into employment.

At the same time, attractiveness is closely linked to outcomes. Improving the image of VET also depends on ensuring that it leads to quality jobs and career progression opportunities. It is important to ensure that VET programmes remain relevant, flexible and responsive to evolving industrial needs. A shared objective is therefore to ensure that VET systems offer both high-quality skills and strong labour market outcomes, while addressing persistent stereotypes associated with vocational education.

Moreover, we believe that vocational education has also a role to play in providing students with a sufficient educational foundation that enables them to qualify for higher education.

Strengthening Social Partner Involvement

The social partners jointly underline that effective VET governance requires strong and systematic involvement of employers and trade unions at all levels.

Experience across Member States shows that VET systems perform best when social partners are actively engaged in the design, implementation and evaluation of training programmes, as well as in skills anticipation and workforce planning.

Social partners stress the importance in providing up-to-date insights into skill needs, technological developments and occupational requirements and developing training pathways that are aligned with labour market needs.

Strong social partner involvement should also extend to company and sectoral levels, including through joint skills initiatives, sectoral funds and collective agreements where appropriate.

Expanding and Improving Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a cornerstone of effective VET systems. However their availability needs to be expanded, their quality improved and in many countries they should be easier to implement, in particular for SMEs.

A joint approach is therefore needed to increase the supply of apprenticeship places, ensure high-quality training frameworks, provide and maintain targeted public support for companies, especially SMEs, and strengthen public investment and incentives that encourage company investment in training.

Investing in Lifelong Learning and CVET

The twin green and digital transitions, together with rapid technological change, are transforming jobs, skills needs and production processes at an unprecedented pace. Ensuring that workers can adapt to these changes and fully benefit from them requires a strong commitment to lifelong learning and continuous skills development. Both social partners therefore recognise lifelong learning as a key pillar of a just transition.

Recognising both the scale and speed of the transformation, the MET social partners acknowledge that flexible, practice-oriented, labour market relevant training solutions, including on-the-job learning, can form an important part of the response, helping workers and companies adapt to evolving skills needs. They also emphasise the importance of recognition and transferability of skills and competences acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning in order to facilitate amongst others labour market mobility, including transferability between industrial sectors

Improving Career Guidance and Skills Anticipation

Improving the attractiveness of VET requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond training provision alone. MET social partners underline the importance of high-quality career guidance systems that start at an early stage and continue throughout individuals' working lives.

Guidance systems should be better connected to labour market realities and involve close cooperation with social partners and industry. Counsellors and educators need to be equipped with up-to-date knowledge of occupational opportunities and sectoral developments.

At the same time, improving attractiveness requires ensuring that VET pathways offer clear opportunities for progression. Stronger permeability between vocational, general and higher education pathways, allowing individuals to move more easily between systems and combine different forms of learning.

Conclusions

industriAll Europe and Ceemet reaffirm their shared commitment to strengthening vocational education and training systems as a cornerstone of Europe's economic resilience and social cohesion. Both organisations agree on the urgency of addressing skills shortages, increasing investment in training and strengthening social partner involvement.

The European VET Strategy should therefore provide a coherent and coordinated framework that supports Member States, promotes cooperation and ensures that VET systems are not only capable of responding to changing labour market needs, but also contribute proactively to Europe's industrial transformation, supporting innovation, competitiveness, quality employment and a just transition. Both organisations stand ready to continue contributing constructively to this process. ***