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CATALOGUE WITH SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR ENTREPRENEUERSHIP

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The role of universities and societies in general in preparing students for their future careers and lives is a complex and multifaceted one, that involves not only providing them with relevant knowledge and skills but also fostering their personal and civic development. Therefore, enhancing employability and skills development in higher education should not be seen as a narrow or instrumental goal, but rather as a holistic and transformative process that connects education and society in meaningful ways.

Finding the optimal alignment between the expectations and needs of society (including employers), the aspirations and interests of students, and the mission and values of universities is a challenging task that requires constant dialogue and collaboration among all stakeholders.

Moreover, it is important to recognize and leverage the potential of different types of learning experiences that can contribute to employability and skills development, such as curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. These should be integrated and aligned in a coherent and intentional way, to maximize their impact on students' learning outcomes and personal growth.

Improving local and regional policies related to the labor market and employment of young graduates can help create a more conducive environment for economic growth and development. Some elements of improvement should take into consideration the following topics:

- o **Encourage collaboration between the private and public sectors**: Local and regional governments should encourage partnerships between the private and public sectors to create job opportunities for young graduates. This could include initiatives such as tax incentives, grants, or subsidies for businesses that hire young graduates.
- o **Focus on developing relevant skills**: Governments should work with educational institutions to ensure that young graduates are equipped with the skills in demand in the local and regional labor markets. This could involve creating apprenticeships or internships that provide young graduates with practical, hands-on experience in their chosen fields.
- o **Support entrepreneurship**: Local and regional governments should create an environment that encourages entrepreneurship and supports young graduates who want to start their own businesses. This could include providing access to funding, mentoring programs, and business incubators.
- o **Encourage remote work**: With the increasing popularity of remote work, governments should work with businesses to create more opportunities for remote work. This could include providing access to high-speed internet and creating co-working spaces.
- o **Develop a comprehensive employment strategy**: Local and regional governments should develop one that considers the needs of the local labor market and the skills of young graduates. This strategy should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that it remains relevant.
- o **Increase access to training and education**: Governments should increase access to training and education for young graduates who need to acquire new skills or upgrade their existing skills to meet the demands of the local labor market.
- o **Encourage diversity and inclusion**: Local and regional governments should work to promote diversity and inclusion in the labor market. This could involve creating policies that encourage businesses to hire people from diverse backgrounds and providing training and support to help young graduates from underrepresented communities succeed in the labor market.

Considering improving local and regional policies related to the labor market and employment of young graduates requires a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration between the private and public sectors, conducting the aforementioned actions. They can be put into two blocks, policies, and education.

Educational context

Resuming the need to match the demand of the labor young graduates' skills and capabilities is essential to our market with the current offer consisting of young graduates' skills and capabilities are of essential importance for the educational system. The main issue is managing the two different processes that are shifting at a different pace, business that is changing rapidly, and formal education that is resistant to prompt changes. The solution can be found by implementing formal and non-formal educational courses as a path to make the **educational process more flexible and complementary** than it is today.

Formal education refers to education provided by an accredited institution and leads to a recognized degree or diploma upon completion of a program of study.

Formal higher education is characterized by several distinct features, including:

- o **Accreditation**: Formal university education is accredited by a recognized governing body or agency that ensures the quality of education and degrees awarded by the university.
- o **Curriculum**: The curriculum is structured and designed to provide a broad-based education in a particular field of study, usually leading to a degree.
- o **Faculty professors**: The faculty members are experts in their respective fields and are typically required to hold advanced degrees.
- o **Learning environment**: The learning environment is formal, with students attending lectures, seminars, and workshops, and engaging in structured academic activities.
- o **Assessment:** Students are assessed through various methods, including exams, assignments, projects, and presentations.
- o **Resources**: Universities provide access to resources such as libraries, research labs, and online databases to support student learning.
- o **Standards**: Formal university education adheres to high standards of academic integrity, ethics, and professionalism.
- o **Certification**: Successful completion of a university degree program results in certification of academic achievement that is widely recognized and valued in the job market and in society.

Non-formal education is any organized educational activity outside the formal education system. It is often designed to cater to the needs and interests of learners who may not be able to access or benefit from formal education or supplement it. Non-formal education can take many forms, including community-based learning, vocational training, adult education, distance learning, and informal learning through activities such as reading, volunteering, or participating in cultural events.

Here are some key characteristics of non-formal education:

- o **Flexible and learner-centered**: non-formal education is often designed to be flexible and learner-centered, with programs that can be adapted to the needs and interests of individual learners.
- o **Diverse learning environments**: non-formal education takes place in many settings, including community centers, workplaces, libraries, and online platforms.

- o **Emphasis on practical skills**: non-formal education often focuses on developing practical skills that can be applied in the real world, such as job skills, language skills, or digital literacy.
- o **Informal assessment**: non-formal education may use informal assessments, such as self-assessment, peer evaluation, or practical assessments, rather than formal exams or standardized tests.
- o **Lifelong learning**: non-formal education emphasizes lifelong learning, with programs designed to meet the learning needs of people of all ages and backgrounds.

Non-formal education is a diverse and flexible form of education that caters to the learning needs of people outside the formal education system. It provides opportunities for lifelong learning, practical skill development, and personal growth.

The substantial point is to reach a shared understanding of how institutions/universities address employability. The educational process is a complex one, and attributes that graduates should ideally acquire typically include a mix of transversal and discipline-specific skills. The interplay between professional, technical, and transversal skills is crucial. Employers have a demonstrated interest in transversal skills, even in jobs with strong tech. This raises the question of how a continuum can be created between education and training, and how training can meet both employers' demands and academic requirements in terms of content and duration. Therefore, employability is not only defined from the perspective of the labour market or employers, but also from the perspective of who graduates will become in the future because of their learning journey in higher education, and how higher education provides for graduates over a career span.

Moreover, this learning journey would not end with a university degree, and employability is not attained once and for all upon students' graduation. While a university degree is needed and appreciated by employers, that degree education may no longer be sufficient to ensure employability throughout one's lifetime. In this regard, how universities engage with lifelong learning is crucial. Skills development does not end upon graduating from formal education. Universities may offer lifelong learning in multiple ways (continuing professional development for graduates, non-degree credits, certificates or courses, initial education offers as part-time arrangements for adult learners, etc.). Therefore, institutional commitment to employability and skills demand should be seen as multifaceted – and not limited to curricular and extra-curricular activities for students during their first foray into higher education.

European context of the educational process

According to a document issued by EUA (European University Association), named: Learning & Teaching Paper #13, **Meeting Skills and Employability Demands**, Thematic Peer Group Report, (March 2021), there are several challenges that are essential in achieving greater employability of graduates. Those are as follows:

CHALLENGE #1

There is an inherent tension between what employers may want, what students may want, and what the university may actually deliver through a study programme.

The communication gap between academia and non-academic stakeholders can create misunderstandings and make it difficult to identify the relevant skills and competencies employers are

seeking. This challenge is compounded by the fact that employers' needs vary depending on the discipline, making it hard to identify whom to engage with and what they want.

Finally, universities must balance the short-term skills required by employers with the long-term skills needed for students to thrive in the future job market. Achieving this balance can be challenging, especially since employers' needs change over time. However, it is crucial to ensure that students acquire a broad range of skills that are relevant and sustainable for the future.

CHALLENGE #2

Meeting skills demands require differentiated approaches.

Meeting the skills demands of the labor market requires differentiated approaches, and universities need to consider a variety of factors beyond just the development of generic skills and interdisciplinary collaboration. Academic conservatism within certain disciplines can make it challenging to introduce new approaches, while inflexible degree programs may limit opportunities for students to develop the skills they need. Additionally, the way universities approach employability is shaped by national policies and frameworks, which can have implications for recruitment, funding, and alumni engagement. To effectively prepare students for the workforce, universities need to consider these broader factors and develop strategies that align with national lifelong learning ecosystems.

CHALLENGE #3

There is a real issue of equity and equality.

One challenge we face is ensuring fairness and justice for all students. We recognize that universities often rely on a combination of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities to foster skills development and employability among students. However, we also realize that extra-curricular activities are not equally accessible or appealing to every student and that they may create or reinforce existing inequalities.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Recognize and give value to employability as an institutional endeavor.

Employability is a key institutional goal that requires a flexible and collaborative approach. According to the Cambridge Business English Dictionary, employability is "the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed". However, different fields and programmes may have different definitions and requirements of employability, depending on the labour market and the stakeholders involved. Therefore, it is important to develop a common understanding of employability at the university level but also to allow for some variation and adaptation at the faculty or department level. This can be done by engaging with relevant employers, professional organizations, alumni, and other external partners to identify the specific skills and competencies that are needed for each field or programme.

Employability is not only about acquiring technical or academic knowledge but also about developing transversal skills that can be applied in various contexts and situations. These include teamwork, public speaking, problem-solving, critical thinking, and so on. These skills can be fostered through the design of learning and assessment activities that are authentic, challenging, and reflective. Moreover, employability

can be enhanced by providing students with opportunities to gain practical experience and exposure to the world of work, such as internships, work placements, projects, or simulations.

Employability is a shared responsibility that requires teamwork across the institution. It involves not only the academic staff and programme directors, but also the support units that provide career guidance, quality assurance, work placement coordination, alumni relations, and so on. These units need to work together to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to employability across the institution. They also need to provide structures, support, and evaluation for the employability initiatives and activities that are implemented at different levels.

Employability is a dynamic and ongoing process that requires constant monitoring and improvement. It is not enough to define employability once and for all, but rather to keep track of the changes and trends in the labour market and society at large. This can be done by collecting feedback from various sources, such as employers, graduates, students, staff, and external evaluators. The feedback can then be used to review and revise the employability policies, strategies, and practices at the institution.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

Articulate curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular interventions in a meaningful way.

One of the challenges of higher education is to articulate curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular interventions in a meaningful way. These interventions aim to enhance students' employability and prepare them for the changing demands of the labor market.

Curricular interventions are those that are integrated into the courses and programs that students follow. They include internships, work placements, practical courses, and various teaching methods that expose students to real-life situations and problems. These interventions require clear frameworks and criteria for assessment and recognition, as well as collaboration between academic staff and external partners.

Co-curricular and extracurricular interventions are those that are offered outside of the formal curriculum but still contribute to students' learning and development. They include activities such as volunteering, student clubs, sports, cultural events, and competitions. These interventions need to be coordinated and supported by the institution, as well as recognized and valued by the students and employers.

One way to recognize and validate co-curricular and extracurricular activities is to use digital badges that certify the acquisition of transversal skills such as problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, and communication. Digital badges can be issued by the institution or by external stakeholders in collaboration with the institution. They can also be linked to formal qualifications and credits, or to other forms of non-formal and informal learning.

By articulating curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular interventions in a meaningful way, higher education institutions can provide students with a holistic and flexible learning path that prepares them for their future careers and life-long learning.

Faculty-based quality assurance offices and programme coordinators also conduct studies on job markets and surveys of graduate employers to identify skill gaps.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Make learning visible, self-reflective, and part of a lifelong perspective.

Finally, in line with this commitment towards lifelong learning for graduates, institutions should aim to build lifelong relationships with their graduates. Developing alumni networks and career offices may contribute to this.

In a strategic document of EUA **"Universities without walls – A vision for 2030"** (February 2021), that deals with a perspective of the European universities, EUA puts a scenario in that: Many existing jobs have become automated, but new jobs have appeared. A good part of medium-skilled jobs has disappeared, but high-skilled jobs are plentiful. Learners have become even more diverse in terms of background and age as a much larger part of society applies for some kind of university education.

So, political attention, as well as the attention of university leadership, should be focused on the challenge of transforming the labour force. The provisions of specific new skills come to be seen as the most important task at hand.

Digitally enhanced learning can be a tool in a term that can encompass various forms of learning that use technology, such as websites, eBooks, social media and online communities, online lectures, webinars, and podcasts. It has become a widely accepted and beneficial mode of learning in higher education institutions across Europe, especially in the context of lifelong learning and adult education.

However, digitally enhanced learning also poses some challenges and limitations, as the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed. Some aspects of presential, synchronous learning is difficult or impossible to replicate online, such as social interaction, practical skills, and emotional support. Moreover, digitally enhanced learning requires adequate investment in training, exchange, infrastructure, and quality assurance, which are not always available or sufficient.

Therefore, it is important to find a balance between digitally enhanced learning and traditional learning methods, taking into account the needs and preferences of different learners, teachers, and institutions. Digitally enhanced learning should not be seen as a replacement or a threat to presential learning, but rather as a complement and an opportunity to enhance the quality and accessibility of education.

Universities are confronted with increasing demands for lifelong learning from a diverse and expanding group of learners. To meet these demands, universities are likely to continue using digital tools such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which have become more popular among adult learners in recent years: according to an EUA survey, 65% of institutions offered online courses for adult learners in 2020, compared to 35% in 2014. However, this also implies that universities need to invest more in the quality and sustainability of digitally enhanced learning. This includes providing training, exchange, and infrastructure for staff and students, as well as developing quality assurance processes that cover digital learning modes.

Universities have a social responsibility to welcome and support a diverse range of learners from different backgrounds and experiences. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are key values that guide university policies and practices. These values reflect various developments in society, such as the need for accessibility for people with disabilities, the arrival of refugees in recent years, or the recognition of diverse gender and sexual identities. To promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, universities should collaborate with other

stakeholders to inform learners about higher education opportunities and help them overcome any barriers they may face.

Partnering with business would probably be more prominent in a situation where learners enter universities at many different ages and points in their careers. The survey also showed how many institutions actively reached out to prospective learners through activities like open days, summer schools, and social media. This kind of outreach would likely be very important in a scenario of massive re-skilling and upskilling. According to the survey, counseling and mentoring are very often used to provide access to learning. As learners and types of learning and learning spaces become more diverse, this kind of individual guidance will become increasingly important. This paragraph introduces the main idea of how universities can adapt to changing learner needs and provides some supporting evidence from a survey.

One of the possible challenges for universities in the future is to provide specific and relevant skills for a larger number of learners, which might affect their research mission. However, it is important to emphasize that universities' strength lies in research-based learning, which develops a broad set of skills and a particular mindset among students. Research-based learning is a way of teaching and learning that links research with teaching and helps students to be lifelong inquirers and learners. Moreover, it is likely that the new learning needs would require more complexity and that upskilling would not be possible without connecting learning to ongoing research. Therefore, a balance between education and research missions would lead to a fairer assessment of the academic staff's careers, which is one of the main priorities for action in the EUA vision for 2030.

Policy context

Many initiatives show that improving local and regional policies related to the labor market and employment of young graduates is possible and beneficial for all. However, more efforts are needed to ensure that these policies reach all young people, especially those who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged. Therefore, it is essential to monitor and evaluate the impact of these policies, share good practices and lessons learned, and foster mutual learning and cooperation among local and regional authorities across Europe.

Consequently, improving local and regional policies related to the labour market and employment of young graduates is a key challenge for the European Union. The economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the difficulties faced by many young people in finding and keeping quality jobs. To address this issue, local and regional authorities need to adopt a comprehensive and coordinated approach that involves all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, education and training providers, social partners, youth organizations, and civil society. Young graduates face many barriers to entering and remaining in the labor market, such as skills mismatches, lack of work experience, discrimination, precarious contracts, and low wages. These barriers affect not only their individual well-being but also the competitiveness and innovation potential of the European economy.

Some of the possible actions that can be taken to improve the policies related to the labor market and employment of young graduates are:

- Developing and implementing tailored strategies for different groups of young people, such as those with low skills, those with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those living in rural or remote areas.
- **Supporting the transition from education to work** by providing guidance, mentoring, apprenticeships, internships, and other forms of work-based learning that enhance the employability and skills of young graduates.
- **Promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment** as viable career options for young graduates, by providing access to finance, training, coaching, networking, and business support services.
- **Fostering innovation and digitalization in the labor market** by encouraging the adoption of new technologies, business models, and work practices that create new opportunities for young graduates.
- **Strengthening the social dialogue and cooperation** between local and regional authorities and other actors in the labor market, such as employers' associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, and industry associations.
- **Enhancing the monitoring and evaluation of the policies** related to the labor market and employment of young graduates, by collecting and analyzing data on their outcomes and impacts, as well as on the needs and expectations of young people.

To address this challenge, local and regional authorities need to design and implement policies that are tailored to the specific needs and opportunities of their territories. These policies should aim to enhance the employability and mobility of young graduates, foster their entrepreneurship and innovation capacities, and support their transition to green and digital jobs. Moreover, these policies should involve a wide range of stakeholders, such as education and training providers, employers, social partners, civil society organizations, and young people themselves.

The European Union (EU) has several regulations aimed at promoting employment opportunities for young graduates. These regulations are designed to help young people entering the workforce find suitable employment and to provide them with the necessary skills and experience to succeed in their chosen careers.

Overall, the EU has several regulations aimed at promoting employment opportunities for young graduates and ensuring that they have access to high-quality training and learning opportunities. These regulations are designed to help young people gain the skills and experience they need to succeed in their chosen careers and contribute to the EU's economy and society.

Some examples of good practices in this field are:

- **The Youth Guarantee scheme**, which offers young people aged 15-29 a good-quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.
- **The European Solidarity Corps**, which provides young people aged 18-30 with opportunities to volunteer or work on projects that benefit communities and people across Europe.
- **The Erasmus+ programme**, which supports mobility and cooperation in education, training, youth, and sport.
- **The Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3)**, which helps regions identify and develop their competitive advantages through research and innovation.

- o **The European Social Fund (ESF)**, which co-finances projects that promote social inclusion, employment, education, and lifelong learning.

The aforementioned initiatives are supported by issuing several acts that enable joint action of the member states to deal with the employment of young people, especially with the young graduates. The core documents that provide the frameworks are **"A Bridge to Jobs - reinforcing the Youth Guarantee"** and **"Vocational Education and Training for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and Resilience".** The Commission also proposed instruments to give the necessary funding. The Commission calls on the Member States to approve both proposals quickly and to harness the full potential of the EU budget when stepping up their youth employment support.

The "Bridge to Jobs - reinforcing the Youth Guarantee"

proposal is a Council Recommendation presented by the European Commission in July 2020. Its aim is to support Member States in addressing the challenges that young people face in finding employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main measures proposed in the recommendation include:

- o **Strengthening and expanding the Youth Guarantee**: The Youth Guarantee is a commitment by Member States to provide young people with a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. The proposal suggests expanding the age range covered by the guarantee to include people up to the age of 29.
- o **Supporting vulnerable young people**: The proposal calls for additional support for young people who face challenges in the labor market, such as those who have dropped out of education or training, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or have disabilities.
- o **Encouraging skills development and training**: The proposal suggests promoting skills development and training programs that are tailored to the needs of young people and the labor market, particularly in emerging sectors such as digital and green jobs.
- o **Facilitating access to jobs**: The proposal recommends measures to facilitate the transition from education and training to employment, such as offering job search and placement services, and encouraging cooperation between employment services, education providers, and employers.
- o **Strengthening the governance and implementation of the Youth Guarantee**: The proposal suggests strengthening the monitoring and evaluation of the Youth Guarantee to ensure its effective implementation across Member States.

The proposal was adopted by the Council of the European Union in October 2020, and the Member States are expected to implement the measures in the coming years to improve youth employment outcomes in the European Union.

This proposal aims to prevent unemployment and inactivity of young people by providing better tracking and early warning systems and improving the quality of job offers. It broadens the target group from all unemployed or inactive young people under 25 to all under 30 and supports job creation measures, as well as various activation measures such as counseling, career advice, and advocacy. The proposal also helps accelerate the digital and green transitions by assessing and improving the skills and competencies needed to find a job in an ever-changing labor market. It calls for the modernization and agility of vocational education and training policies to contribute to the EU's sustainable competitiveness, social

fairness, and resilience. It also supports self-employment and social entrepreneurship as important means of speeding up labor market recovery and provides access to social protection for vulnerable groups, including non-standard forms of employment such as platform work.

The Council Recommendation on

Vocational Education and Training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience

was adopted on 24 November 2020. The recommendation aims to improve the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of VET systems in the European Union (EU) to support sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience.

The recommendation outlines a set of key actions and measures to be taken by EU Member States to achieve the following objectives:

- o **Promoting work-based learning and apprenticeships**: Member States are encouraged to increase the availability and quality of apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities to provide young people and adults with the necessary skills to adapt to changing labor market needs.
- o **Enhancing the quality and relevance of VET**: Member States are urged to ensure that VET curricula are closely aligned with the needs of the labor market and reflect new and emerging skills requirements.
- o **Improving the attractiveness of VET**: Member States are called upon to raise awareness of the benefits and opportunities of VET, particularly among young people and their parents, and to combat negative stereotypes associated with VET.
- o **Promoting digital and green skills**: Member States are encouraged to integrate digital and green skills into VET curricula to prepare learners for the transition to a digital and sustainable economy.
- o **Developing effective governance and funding mechanisms**: Member States are called upon to establish effective governance and funding mechanisms for VET systems, including stakeholder involvement, to ensure that they are responsive to changing labor market needs.

The recommendation emphasizes the importance of close cooperation between Member States, social partners, and other stakeholders in the implementation of the above measures. It also highlights the need to ensure equal access to high-quality VET for all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Commission stresses the importance of strong cooperation among all actors, including social partners, the education sector, and civil society organizations, as well as authorities at regional and local levels. The Commission also plans to give renewed impetus to the European Alliance for Apprenticeships to ensure that apprenticeships play a role in the labour market recovery. The Commission counts on the continued efforts of the European Parliament and Council and proposes to discuss strengthened youth employment support with both. Ultimately, promoting youth employment is a joint effort for the benefit of the next generation.

The "European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and Resilience"

was launched in 2016, and updated in 2021, as a framework for improving skills and competencies in the European Union. The agenda is designed to ensure that the EU workforce has the skills and competencies necessary to meet the demands of the rapidly changing labour market and to drive economic growth and innovation.
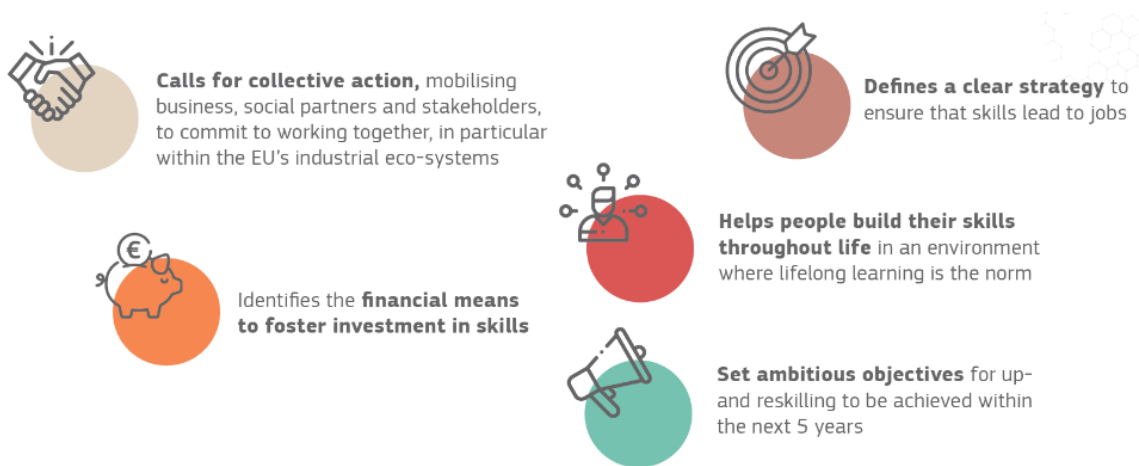
Source: European Skills Agenda

The European Skills Agenda includes 12 actions organized around four building blocks:

- A call to **join forces** in collective action:
    - Action 1: A Pact for Skills
- Actions to ensure that people have the **right skills for jobs:**
    - Action 2: Strengthening skills intelligence
    - Action 3: EU support for strategic national upskilling action
    - Action 4: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET)
    - Action 5: Rolling out the European Universities Initiative and upskilling scientists
    - Action 6: Skills to support the twin transitions
    - Action 7: Increasing STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills
    - Action 8: Skills for life
- Tools and initiatives to **support people** in their lifelong learning pathways:
    - Action 9: Initiative on individual learning accounts
    - Action 10: A European approach to micro-credentials
    - Action 11: New Europass platform
- A framework to **unlock investments** in skills:
    - Action 12: Improving the enabling framework to unlock Member States' and private investments in skills
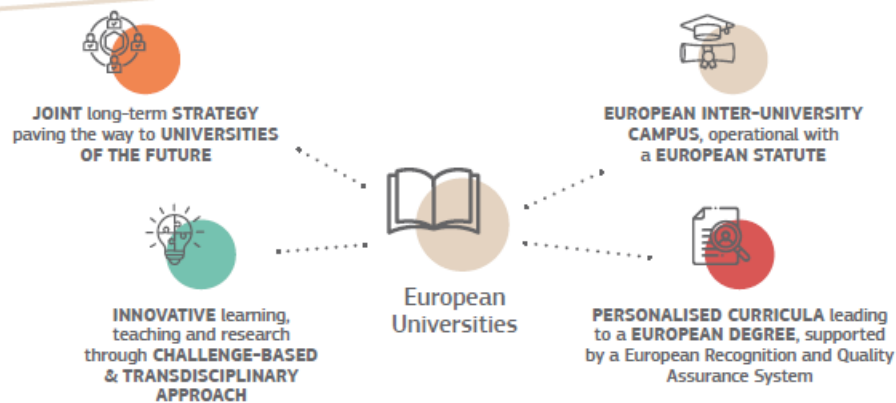
Action 5: Rolling out the European Universities initiative and upskilling scientists

To roll out the European Universities, the Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- engage in the full rollout of the European Universities initiative under the Erasmus programme (2021—2027) and Horizon Europe, including by removing obstacles to effective and deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions and deepening the cooperation with economic operators, in particular to foster the twin transitions. European Universities will set standards for the transformation of higher education institutions across the European Education Area and the European Research Area, also making lifelong learning and talent circulation a reality.

- explore options stemming from their research and innovation dimension to help remove obstacles to effective transnational cooperation between higher education institutions, drawing on the lessons learnt during the pilot calls under Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. The Commission will identify areas of support for Member State action, explore a concrete approach for a "European degree" and the feasibility of a European University statute (to tackle cross-border legal issues) and for a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System.

- work together with the European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT) and other European Research Area relevant initiatives to bring together leading organisations from business, education and research, in particular through the Knowledge and Innovation Communities to develop innovative teaching and learning, train the next generation of innovators, and accompany the transition of higher education institutions to more entrepreneurial organisations.

- bring academia and industry together by testing a new Talents-On-Demand knowledge exchange to meet companies' research and innovation needs, complementing university-business collaboration.

To upskill scientists, in close cooperation with stakeholders and the Member States, the Commission will:

- develop a European Competence Framework for researchers and support the development of a set of core skills for researchers.

- define a taxonomy of skills for researchers, which will allow the statistical monitoring of brain circulation and agree with Member States on a set of indicators to allow monitoring and statistical analysis.

- develop open science and science management curricula for researchers.

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European Universities

PERSONALISED CURRICULA leading to a **EUROPEAN DEGREE**, supported by a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System

Source: European Skills Agenda

The Skills Agenda has four main objectives:

1. Ensuring that people have the right skills for jobs that are in demand: This objective involves identifying the skills and competencies that are needed in the labour market and ensuring that people have access to training and education programmes that will help them acquire these skills.
2. Building a European Skills Guarantee: This guarantee aims to ensure that everyone has access to a basic set of skills, including literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, which are essential for employment and participation in society.
3. Making it easier for people to have their skills and qualifications recognized across the EU: This objective involves developing a common framework for the recognition of qualifications and skills

across the EU, which will make it easier for people to move between countries and for employers to recognize and value the skills and qualifications of workers.

4. Anticipating and managing skills needs: This objective involves anticipating future skills needs and ensuring that education and training systems are able to adapt to meet these needs. It also involves ensuring that the skills of the workforce are continually updated and improved to keep pace with changing technologies and work processes.

The Skills Agenda is a key component of the EU's efforts to build a more competitive, inclusive, and sustainable economy. By promoting the acquisition of the right skills and competencies, the Agenda aims to help people achieve their full potential, while also supporting businesses in their efforts to innovate and grow.

The learning process as it is envisaged in the Skills Agenda clears the barriers between the formally defined cycles of education and has been transferred to an open continuum. So, lifelong learning gets special attention as a tool for justification between higher education competencies and skills of the graduates and the needs of the labor market for upskilling the workforce. The main pillars of such matching are Individual Learning Accounts, Micro-Credentials, and the new Europass platform.

The EU Individual Learning Accounts (ILA)

is a proposed initiative aimed at promoting lifelong learning and improving the skills of European citizens. The initiative is currently in the planning stage and is part of the EU's broader efforts to support the development of a highly skilled and adaptable workforce.

Individual Learning Accounts are intended to provide individuals with a personal account that can be used to finance their lifelong learning and training needs. The accounts will be funded through public or private contributions and will be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their age, employment status, or level of education.

The ILA initiative aims to achieve several goals, including:

- o **Increasing participation in lifelong learning:** The ILA initiative aims to increase the number of individuals who participate in lifelong learning and training programs, particularly those who are currently underrepresented in these programs.
- o **Promoting skills development:** The initiative aims to promote the development of skills that are in high demand in the labour market, including digital skills, soft skills, and entrepreneurship skills.
- o **Encouraging innovation:** The initiative aims to encourage the development of innovative and flexible learning and training programs that can meet the needs of individuals and businesses in a rapidly changing economy.
- o **Supporting social inclusion:** The initiative aims to include disadvantaged and marginalized groups in lifelong learning and training programs, helping them develop the skills and competencies they need to succeed in the labour market.

The EU Individual Learning Accounts initiative is still in the planning stage, and it is not yet clear when it will be launched or how it will be implemented. However, the initiative has the potential to provide individuals with greater access to lifelong learning and training opportunities, helping them to develop the skills they need to succeed in a rapidly changing economy.

European University Association (EUA) welcomes the EC's initiative of Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) as it is yet another building block for lifelong learning, which is of strategic importance in view of the post-pandemic recovery, and of Europe's ambitious development goals, such as social inclusion, green and digital transition, and the circular economy.

Connecting ILA with other instruments, such as the European Qualification Framework, Europass, the European approach to micro-credentials, and the ENIC-NARIC centers, would help to promote the approach and ensure quality, transparency, readability, and recognition of education and training entitlements. In view of the common market and the European Education Area, European cross-border portability should be a central goal.

Given the fast development of scientific knowledge, disruptive technologies, and complex social and political processes, the demand for tertiary-level lifelong learning (LLL) is likely to increase. An inclusive EU lifelong learning policy should consider all citizens, all forms and types of learning, and all learning providers. In this regard, EUA recalls that the contribution of the higher education sector to lifelong learning is significant, although not always as visible or recognized as it could be. Universities provide a considerable share of lifelong learning education and training, through continued professional development and micro-credentials. They do so in diverse settings, including partnerships with each other, education providers from other sectors, industry, employers, and civil society.

Action 9: Initiative on individual learning accounts

The Commission will assess how a possible European initiative on individual learning accounts can help close existing gaps in the access to training for working age adults and empower them to successfully manage labour market transitions.

The Commission will also assess which enabling services and other factors could support individual learning accounts. This could include guidance, validation, and transparency on the quality of training opportunities, as well as educational or training leave provisions. In its work, the Commission will engage in broad consultations with Member States, social partners and all relevant stakeholders.

Everyone is **EMPOWERED** to get the training they need to thrive in fast-changing labour markets

Everyone is well-informed and can access **QUALITY GUIDANCE**

Everyone can choose what, when, how they learn and get their learning **VALIDATED**

EVERYONE has access to quality training throughout life irrespective of their employment status

Everyone can **ACCUMULATE** and carry their training entitlements with them when they change jobs

Individual
LEARNING ACCOUNTS

Source: European Skills Agenda

EU micro-credentials

are short, flexible, and modular learning units that allow individuals to acquire specific skills and competencies that are valued in the labour market. Micro-credentials are typically offered by educational

institutions, training providers, or employers, and they can be earned through a variety of learning experiences, such as online courses, workshops, or work-based learning.

A **credential** is a documented statement containing claims about a person.

- o From the European Skills Agenda communication: "Micro-credentials can be defined as documented statements that acknowledge a person's learning outcomes, which are related to small volumes of learning and that for the user are made visible in a certificate, badge, or endorsement (issued in a digital or on paper)"

- o The European Approach to Micro-Crednetials definition: "A **micro-credential** is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short, transparently assessed learning experience. They are awarded upon the completion of short stand-alone courses (or modules) done on-site or online (or in a blended format)."

- o From MICROBOL: "A micro-credential is a small volume of learning certified by a credential In the EHEA context, it can be offered by higher education institutions or recognized by them, when offered by other providers, using recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures. A micro-credential is designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills, or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural, or labour market needs. Micro-credentials have explicitly defined learning outcomes at a specific QF-EHEA/NQF level, an indication of their associated workload in ECTS credits, assessment methods, and criteria, and are subject to quality assurance in line with the ESG."

By the European Commission:

- o Draft: "A micro-credential is a recognized proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has achieved following a short learning experience, according to transparent standards and requirements and upon assessment. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body, and where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, are shareable, portable, and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications."

- o Consolidated: "A micro-credential is proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards."

- o By EUA: "A micro-credential is a small volume of learning certified by a credential. In the EHEA context, it can be offered by higher education institutions or recognized by them, when offered by other providers, using recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures. A micro-credential is designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills, or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural, or labour market needs. Micro-credentials have explicitly defined learning outcomes at a specific QF-EHEA/NQF level, an indication of their associated workload in ECTS credits, assessment methods, and criteria, and are subject to quality assurance in line with the ESG."

The EU sees micro-credentials as an important tool for promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the skills of the European workforce. The EU recognizes that in a rapidly changing economy, it is essential for individuals to be able to continually update their skills and competencies to remain competitive in the labour market. Micro credentials offer an efficient and flexible way for individuals to acquire new skills and competencies on an ongoing basis, without having to commit to long-term education and training programs.

The EU has launched several initiatives aimed at promoting the development and recognition of micro-credentials, including:

1. The European Skills Agenda: The EU Skills Agenda aims to promote lifelong learning and the development of skills that are in demand in the labour market. Micro-credentials are seen as an important tool for achieving these goals.

2. The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET): ECVET is a system for the recognition of learning outcomes in vocational education and training. The system includes a mechanism for the recognition of micro-credentials, which can be used to build towards larger qualifications.

3. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF): The EQF is a common framework for the recognition of qualifications across Europe. The framework includes a mechanism for the recognition of micro-credentials, which can be used to supplement larger qualifications or as standalone qualifications in their own right.

The EU sees micro-credentials as an important tool for promoting lifelong learning, enhancing the skills of the European workforce, and promoting social inclusion and mobility. By recognizing and promoting the development of micro-credentials, the EU aims to create a more flexible and responsive education and training system that can meet the evolving needs of individuals and businesses in a rapidly changing economy.

Micro-credentials support flexible higher education and lifelong learning, and the claim is how micro-credentials fit into the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Micro-credentials are not a new phenomenon. This is true in our societies and in the academic environment with higher education institutions having a long tradition of offering lifelong learning opportunities and units of learning that are smaller than full degrees. The recent attention to micro-credentials stems from changing societal needs, globalization, digitalization, and the need for upskilling and reskilling the labour force, especially in the context of the recovery plans surrounding the Covid-19 crisis.

Micro-credentials should be seen as complementing conventional qualifications as part of lifelong learning and continuous professional development and as an entry mechanism to a degree programme. However, they do not substitute formal qualifications as their learning outcomes and volume of learning are much smaller. Higher education institutions are one of the key providers of micro-credentials and they are the drivers of innovation in this area. They offer micro-credentials for various reasons. To a large extent, offering them is a way to respond to the needs of society and thus part of an institution's societal mission.

Any future European approach to micro-credentials should aim to increase clarity and transparency and build on the existing EHEA tools. For a proper uptake of micro-credentials, learners need to have access to relevant information about the contents, the quality, the learning outcomes, and the recognition of these learning activities. Employers need to understand what these credentials mean, what their value is,

and how they compare with conventional programmes and qualifications. They can be delivered online, face-to-face, or in blended formats. They can also be as stand-alone units of learning or structured in a sequence of courses that can be embedded eventually within, or cumulate into, a larger credential.

Action 10: A European approach to micro-credentials

The Commission will propose a new initiative to support the quality, transparency and take-up of micro-credentials across the EU. In particular, it will:

- Develop, together with all relevant stakeholders (public or private education and training providers, social partners, chambers of commerce, employers) European standards which address minimum requirements for quality and transparency. This will build trust in micro-credentials and facilitate their portability and recognition across the EU.

- Explore the inclusion of micro-credentials in qualifications frameworks, in dialogue with national qualification authorities.

- Make it easier for individuals to store and showcase to employers acquired micro-credentials through Europass and its Digital Credentials.

This initiative builds, among others, on the results of the evaluation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal learning, which are published in parallel with this Skills Agenda.

Ivana is an experienced supermarket stock manager. A new software is opening up possibilities for less waste – if she and her staff can master its use. By following a short, targeted training module provided by her industry federation, she will be awarded a micro-credential as proof of her new skills – ready to put to use with her current or future employer.

Encouraging the take-up of **FLEXIBLE** and **QUALITY-ASSURED** courses (online or off-line)

Making learning **VISIBLE** and **UNDERSTOOD**

European standards for MICROCREDENTIALS

Supported by **VALIDATION** and **GUIDANCE**

Easy storage and communication through **EUROPASS**

Source: European Skills Agenda

The new Europass platform

is an online tool developed by the European Union to help people manage their skills, qualifications, and career paths. It replaces the old Europass CV and other related documents, which were mainly in a traditional document format.

The new Europass platform offers a range of features, including a personal profile where users can highlight their skills, qualifications, and experiences. Users can also upload and share documents, such as diplomas, certificates, and language certificates, which are automatically added to their profile. In addition, the platform provides access to various tools and resources, such as a CV builder, a cover letter builder, and a job search engine, to help users in their job search.

One of the main advantages of the new Europass platform is its user-friendliness and accessibility, as it is available in 29 languages and can be used on various devices, including mobile phones and tablets. It is

also free to use, and users have control over their data and can choose who can see their profiles and documents.

Overall, the new Europass platform aims to facilitate the recognition of skills and qualifications across Europe and make it easier for people to manage their careers and find new job opportunities.
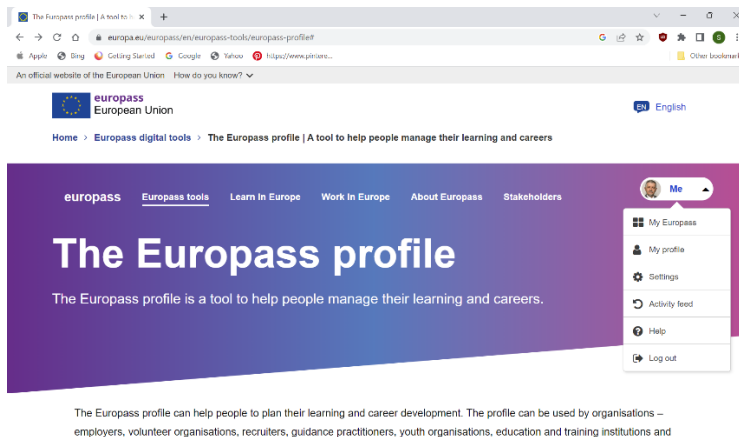
On 23 June 2021, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a decision to designate

2023 as the European Year of Skills

The aim of this initiative is to raise awareness about the importance of acquiring and developing skills throughout life, to promote the acquisition of new skills, and to encourage people to invest in their own personal and professional development.

The European Year of Skills 2023 will focus on five main objectives:

o Raising awareness about the importance of skills for personal and professional development, employability, and social inclusion.

o Promoting a culture of lifelong learning and upskilling, including digital skills.

o Encouraging businesses to invest in the skills of their employees, particularly in response to the challenges of the green and digital transitions.

o Supporting the development of high-quality vocational education and training, including apprenticeships and work-based learning.

o Strengthening European cooperation on skills development, including the recognition of qualifications and the mutual recognition of skills and competencies across borders.

To achieve these objectives, the decision calls on the European Commission, the Member States, and other stakeholders to organise a wide range of activities and events throughout 2023, such as conferences, seminars, workshops, exhibitions, and awareness-raising campaigns. The decision also provides for a budget of €20 million to support the implementation of these activities.

The European Year of Skills 2023 is part of the broader European Skills Agenda, which aims to improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility of skills and to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to acquire the skills they need for their personal and professional development.

The European Parliament and the Council have decided to designate the year 2023 as the European Year of Skills. The aim of this initiative is to raise awareness of the importance of skills development for personal and professional growth, social inclusion, and active citizenship. The European Year of Skills will also showcase the achievements and best practices of the European Union and its Member States in the field of education, training, and lifelong learning. The European Year of Skills will promote a culture of learning and innovation, foster cooperation and exchange among stakeholders, and encourage the recognition and validation of skills acquired in different settings and contexts.

National context

Thera are several documents that are dealing with the national context of the employment of the graduates, but there is a lack of a comprehensive and deliberate strategic approach towards this issue. As a main document that was issued by the Government of North Macedonia is **The National Education Strategy (2018–2025).** But this document has a little elaboration of the problem of employability, especially in Higher education. The gap has been filled with several documents that are the result of joint work of several stakeholders connected with education, business and society. They are briefly presented as follows.

Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, Education for Employment - E4E@mk,

ANALYSIS OF THE SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF SKILLS IN FIVE PLANNING REGIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

This report deals with five planning regions, but we will present the main findings and conclusions that are for the Pelagonia region as a focus of our project task.

Pelagonia region:

1. The regional development index for the Pelagonia region (latest official data 2017) is relatively high and amounts to 0.91, which compared to the previous 5 years has achieved progress of 0.18.

2. The largest region by area covering 18%, and the second by population after the Skopje region. The population in 10 years decreases from 234320 to 226837 inhabitants, and for the next 10 years the number is predicted to decrease even more - 207965 inhabitants due to population aging.

3. The dominant structure of the able-bodied population is 35-39 years old.

Finding: The dominant category represents an older structure in the labor force and a slower dynamic of the influx of the young population, which also means a decrease in the able-bodied population.

4. External migration is of different intensity in different periods of time with a slight upward tendency. This region has a positive migration balance (according to registered persons), which means that more people are coming than leaving.

Finding: A slight increase in the percentage of external migration in the next 10 years may influence an increase in the vacancy rate.

5. Internal migration is relatively high and amounts to 403 displaced persons in the last 10 years and will continue in the next 10 years.

Finding: The high internal migration of people may be due to the shutdown of some sectors that were most affected by the Covid crisis in the country. Also, the skills of people from this region complement the required skills in other regions, which means a decrease in the working population in this region.

6. The vacancy rate is high and is 1.89 compared to other regions, with the prediction that it will grow in the next 10 years.

Finding: The high vacancy rate may be due to an aging population, growth in the number of companies, or a lack of required qualifications.

7. A high number of employed people who lost their jobs, and that of people with higher educational qualifications and master's degrees, which is an unfavorable structure of people who lose their jobs.

Finding: The processes of retraining and upskilling are needed so that the work potential with higher education qualifications is not to be omitted. Higher education institutions need to introduce new qualifications.

8. The unemployment rate is relatively high and amounts to 13.1, with a tendency to decrease in the next 10 years.

Finding: A high vacancy rate with a low unemployment rate indicates that there is no matching of the supply and demand of skills, which means that the processes of retraining and upskilling of graduates must be used.

9. Dominant activities: agricultural and food business, as well as wholesale and retail trade, and according to forecasts for the next 10 years, the food business will grow rapidly, while the agricultural activity will decline.

10. The main growing sectors for the next 10 years in which the number of employees will also grow are the manufacturing industry and information and communication business.

Finding: The information and communications sector is growing in the Pelagonia and Skopje regions, while it is declining in the other three. This situation is unexpected because this sector has great opportunities for development and should be developed in all regions. The agriculture, hunting and fishing, and forestry sector is noticeably declining in the Pelagonia region, which is expected to significantly lower the concentration of skills generated by education and training for this sector in the Pelagonia region.

11. The main declining sectors for the next 10 years, in which there will also be a decrease in the number of employees, are wholesale and retail trade; agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing, and construction, while the mining and quarrying sector is a threatened sector.

12. Deficient Qualifications: Mechanical Worker, Metal Worker, Welder, Architectural Technician, Construction Technician, Interior Architecture Designer Technician, Graphic Technician, Legal Technician, Trade and Marketing Technician, Electrical-Energy Technician, Computer and Automation Electrical Technician, Mechanical technician, Mechanical and Power Technician, Computer Management Technician, Textile Technician, Footwear Technician, Apparel Computer Operator, Food Technician,

Manufacturing Process Technician, Chemical Technology Technician, Furniture and Interior Technician, Woodworking Technician.

Finding: The deficient qualifications are mostly from secondary vocational education and refer mostly to qualifications from the electrical and mechanical sector, but there is a need for qualifications from the sector of textiles, leather, and similar products and construction and geodesy.

13. The number of active business entities has decreased and is 7791 compared to 2018 when it was 8064 (2018 data).

Finding: The decrease in the number of business entities occurs among micro-enterprises, but the number of small, medium, and large enterprises increases, which means that either small and large enterprises appear, or micro-enterprises have grown into small and medium enterprises.

14. Increase of the number of medium-sized companies from 57 to 77 and large companies from 34 to 46.

Conclusions and recommendations from the round table:

- o to ensure a systematic approach and continuous monitoring of the supply and demand of skills.
- o to develop strategies for development at the local and regional level according to the analyzes and predictions.
- o to ensure the supply of key skills for easier employment of young people through the promotion of existing or development of new educational programs in formal vocational education and training in accordance with the needs of the growing sectors in this region.
- o to improve the relationship between companies and vocational schools with strengthened practical training aimed at the key skills and competencies needed by companies.
- o to use the services of the Chamber for providing training programs for retraining and upskilling of the unemployed for a suitable company with the possibility of their employment, especially for specific qualifications.
- o to provide new training programs for retraining in the sector of textiles, leather, construction and geodesy.
- o to design new study programs for higher education qualifications according to the needs of growing sectors with the participation of the business community.
- o practical application of the legal obligation for career counseling of primary education students.
- o to create criteria for enrollment in vocational education.

The second document that attaches employability and matching the needs of labour market and educational offer of skills has been conducted by the European Training Foundation named:

SKILLS DEMAND AND SUPPLY IN NORTH MACEDONIA:

An analysis at regional and local levels. The economic basis for establishing Regional Centers for vocational education and Training VET

The European Union (EU) provides support to North Macedonia in the area of education and skills reforms. As an EU agency, the European Training Foundation (ETF) was requested to provide technical advice to the Ministry of Education and Science and other stakeholders on the conceptualization of regional vocational education and training (VET) centers.

The Government of North Macedonia has adopted a new National Education Strategy (2018–2025), and several priorities and measures aim at making VET more relevant and efficient.

- o Priority 1.4 – The VET system is continuously informed about the current demands of the workforce and the qualifications and skills needs which will be used to inform VET policy development.
- o Priority 2.1 – The efficiency and effectiveness of the VET system is improved in terms of expenditure and relevance to the local, regional and national labour markets.
- o Priority 2.8 – The efficiency of VET reforms is ensured through the centralization of investment and the concentration of results.

The strategic framework includes a commitment to reform the structure of VET provision through the establishment of regional VET centers. This initiative is sequenced in several steps, the short-term goal being the establishment of three regional centers by 2020.

Decisions regarding the establishment of regional VET centers require labour market data and information on skills trends relevant to the local and regional contexts. This report reflects the main findings from an analysis of skills demand and supply in the Southwest, Polog and Northeast regions of the country, where the first regional VET centers will be established. The paper also summarizes the key methodological elements for the future replication of similar skills supply/demand analysis in the other regions of the country.

Conclusions and priorities for action

The specifics of the labour market of the three regions of North Macedonia under examination – Southwest, Polog and Northeast – have been explored and described to support the conceptualization and establishment of regional VET centers, which are considered essential in the reform of education and training in the country. The European Union and the international donor community provide financial and expertise support.

This analysis complements parallel research, which focused on VET providers, in particular vocational schools, in the selected regions. The results of the skills demand and supply analysis at regional and local levels informed the decision makers and stakeholders on the best options for establishing regional VET centers, including the identification of priority education profiles in line with the projections of labour demand.

The underlying demographic and economic characteristics of the three regions have been shown in sufficient detail to assess the potential of labour market development, focusing on a few aspects, such as skills demand and supply, skills need and gaps and developmental aspects that stimulate or, on the contrary, contain opportunities for employment.

In conclusion, in addition to the expectations of economic development in the regions on the part of businesses and VET providers, thanks to factors such as building better links between the education offer and labour market demand, external influences limiting growth have to be carefully considered.

Based on the qualitative component of the study, the organizations of employers/chambers of commerce state that are highly involved in collaboration with educational institutions and seem to be equally committed in the future to cooperation with the regional VET centers that will be set up in the regions

studied. ESA and municipalities also support the development of regional VET centers in their regions. The specific sectors and profiles to be covered by the regional VET centers are almost the same as those encompassed by ESA and the organizations of employers/chambers of commerce. All the target groups demonstrated an interest in becoming involved in building stronger cooperative links between the VET providers and labour market players. The role of the regional centers was identified as particularly important, and the need to set up regional VET centers was considered urgent. It was thus anticipated that they would be launched in the short or medium term.

Based on the experience of this study, it is concluded that the same methodology and analysis can also be performed successfully in the other regions of the country. Existing sources of reliable data have already been identified and the methods used here can be applied to the data of other regions.

Substantial variations in sectoral employment over the short to long term signal a need to boost the flexibility of the workforce to respond to the needs of a changing economy. The educational system also must adapt to these emerging needs by providing appropriate VET services for training and retraining. Besides the current demand for workers with the skills appropriate to specific economic activities, expected trends and variations in employment by sector should be taken into consideration when planning the education profiles and number of students to be enrolled in specific VET programmes.

Investments in infrastructure and attracting big investors to the regions also have to be considered when planning education programmes. The education system can play a huge role in anticipating the future skills requirements in a given region and act in such a way as to attract and stimulate new investment and jobs. These circumstances need to be considered when establishing the regional VET centers, which have to be ready to implement new or updated education and training programmes in time to meet the needs of employers and learners.

The future skill needs in the regions considered here are a matter of interest for all the actors involved in establishing stronger links between the education system (VET provision) and employment. Awareness of the importance of establishing such effective links is relatively high, and all the focus groups demonstrated exceptional devotion to contributing to the process of improving the current condition of the labour market.

The findings of both quantitative and qualitative research signal a number of priorities for action to be considered in implementing education reforms or promoting employment and regional development strategies, and in enhancing cooperation among stakeholders in human capital development.

- o To enhance the provision of skills development programmes, be it in initial or continuing education and training, to match expanding sectors and the needs of learners at regional level.

The structural reform of the VET system in North Macedonia foresees, among others, the establishment of regional VET centers as hubs for enhancing the links between education and the world of work and the provision of education and training in line with the regional and local labour market needs and responding to adults' upskilling/reskilling needs. Regional dynamics, in terms of growing or declining sectors, vary and the level and relevance of education are key predictors of employment. Development opportunities, such as investments in infrastructure, may boost certain sectors and change quite rapidly the skills and education profiles that are in demand. Therefore, the education offer should be flexible and agile enough to respond to such changes.

- To consolidate and expand stakeholders' cooperation at local and regional levels, and to consider the role of the regional VET centers in promoting stronger collaboration with the private sector, social partners and other relevant actors, such as investment, development or innovation agencies, academics, non-governmental organizations.

The stakeholders' survey confirmed the willingness and availability to cooperate of key stakeholders, namely employment organizations, local employment offices, vocational schools and other public or private training providers, local authorities/municipalities, including local economic and social councils. Many stakeholders perceive the establishment of regional VET centers as a positive development to enhance cooperation at local and regional levels and create stronger links between schools, companies and employment offices. Therefore, in conceptualizing the regional VET centers, decision makers and stakeholders could define clear roles and responsibilities to promote or contribute to local and regional cooperation in skills demand analysis, education offer planning or practical training and work-based learning consolidation.

- To embed regular analyses of skills supply and demand at regional and local levels into the labour market and skills information system.

Over the years North Macedonia has developed a labour market information system with particular focus on the long-term forecasting of economic and employment trends and evolution of vacancies. Skills demand is an implicit element of this system. However, various assessments have highlighted the need to consolidate the analytical component of education policy making, be it to back up education planning, or monitoring and evaluation of education outcomes. In general, macro-level analyses are relatively straightforward to implement and the information and statistical basis is well developed. Capturing the regional and, more particularly, the local dimension of skills supply and demand, however, has proved complex due to the low reliability of survey data, from very detailed disaggregation (e.g., low amount of data at the level of regions), or unavailability of data at municipal/local level. Therefore, additional qualitative research instruments (e.g., interviews and questionnaires) were developed to complement the quantitative analysis. A sound information basis, well grounded in local and regional contexts, is essential to define education profiles and overall VET planning. Hence, regional analyses on skills supply and demand need to continue to provide the necessary background for the establishment of regional VET centers in the other regions of the country. This type of analysis could be carried out at regular intervals to inform education planning, but the lack of resources is a major constraint; stakeholders' enhanced cooperation at regional level may help address the sustainability challenge. Capacity-building actions for staff of education, employment and municipal institutions and social partners at regional and local levels is also advisable.