

## Position paper

# A New Skills Agenda for Europe Establishing a Skills Guarantee

2016

EASPD is the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. We are a European not-for-profit organisation and represent over 15,000 social service provider organisations across Europe and disability. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.

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A third of EASPD's membership provides employment and training services to Persons with Disabilities. It is our understanding that the huge experience developed by our sector in terms of supporting persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups in gaining relevant and useful skills for the labour market would be of particular interest to the European Commission and the authorities working on the implantation of the new skills agenda and the Skills Guarantee.

## Key points

1. Mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in the documents, in particular the rights to education and to employment
2. Ensure people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups are able to benefit from the Skills Guarantee through mandatory target groups
3. Develop individualised and accessible processes adapted to specific needs in the procedure to register, the assessment of skills and the teaching methods used
4. Implement tailor-made support for on-the-job learners, apprentices and employees
5. Ensure the collection of disaggregated data to properly identify the needs and trends and develop adequate education, training and employment strategies
6. Include the social services sector as a priority sector to tap into its job creation potential and ensure the development of accessible, affordable, available and adaptable services

## I. Context

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Following its recent policy developments in the field of education, training and employment, in particular the [Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee](#), the [reviewed priorities for the Education and Training 2020](#) strategic framework and the [Council Recommendation on the Integration of the Long-Term Unemployed into the Labour Market](#), the Commission has published in 2016 its proposal for “[A New Skills Agenda for Europe](#)”.

“With the right skills, people can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens”. Based on this opening premise, the Commission proposal highlights the shortcomings of training and developing new skills in the EU, and proposes 10 key actions to improve skills acquisition, relevance and quality.

The 10 key actions identified are

1. Establishing a Skills Guarantee
2. Launch a Key Competences Framework
3. Improving the attractiveness and visibility of VET
4. Launch the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition
5. Revise the European Qualification Framework
6. Launch a Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals
7. Revise the Europass Framework
8. Analyse the issue of brain drain
9. Launch a Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills
10. Launch an initiative on tertiary graduate tracking

Keeping in mind that education and training is mainly a competence of Member States and not the European Union, the New Skills Agenda aims foremost to coordinate practices and policies of member states and support investment in adequate education and training.

The new priorities for the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework acknowledge that education is both about skills and employability, as well as a central tool for the social inclusion of young people. As such, the New Skills Agenda focuses on skills and employment as another crucial tool for social inclusion.

Overall, the focus of the Commission remains on productivity and growth, but also includes the importance of participation in inclusive labour markets<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see ‘The economic impact of inclusion in the open labour market for persons with disabilities’, [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/EuropeanSemester/beyer\\_study\\_economic\\_impact\\_of\\_inclusive\\_labour\\_markets.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/EuropeanSemester/beyer_study_economic_impact_of_inclusive_labour_markets.pdf)



## II. Establishing a Skills Guarantee

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The first key action proposed in the New Skills Agenda to reinforce the acquisition of basic skills is the Skills Guarantee. The proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee would set up a Skills Guarantee to work in parallel to the already existing Youth Guarantee. It would be targeted at adults who have not completed upper secondary education or equivalent (EQF 4) and who would not be able to benefit from the Youth Guarantee.

The skills of these low qualified adults would first be assessed to identify the existing skills and the training needed. A tailor-made education or training would then be offered, delivered around the structure of learning outcomes. The pre-existing and acquired skills would finally be validated and recognised towards a qualification.

This proposal has some excellent elements, and would certainly be a **very positive tool** to support the acquisition of basic skills and facilitate the inclusion or re-insertion in the labour market of low qualified adults.

Of particular note, the proposal correctly identifies **low qualification as a barrier to participation not only in the economy but in society as a whole**, and that low-qualified individuals are at higher risk of long-term unemployment<sup>2</sup>, social exclusion and lower quality of life. Furthermore, access to education and training is more difficult for vulnerable groups, putting them at risk of combining barriers to enter the labour market.

The proposal also underlines the **importance of flexibility in the provision of education and training**. First, the offer of education or training must be adapted to the needs and competences of the individual. Second, the learning environment, the content and the teaching methods must be appropriate to the specific needs of the individual. Third, the structure of the education or training should be divided in learning outcomes that facilitate the valorisation of specific skills and competences<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, the proposal recognises the **importance of upskilling and re-training those already employed**. The social sector is particularly in need of such training of staff to support and facilitate the transition from institutional care to community-based care.

However, the proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a Skills Guarantee does fall short in several key aspects, some of them similar to what has been observed with the existing Youth Guarantee.

First, the **proposal doesn't mention people with disabilities**, though the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the EU, should be transversal to all European legislation. The higher the education, the lower is the participation of people with disabilities, leading to too many persons with disabilities lacking skills – in particular the emotional, social and civic skills – to enter the open labour market on an equal basis and participate in society. As such, the **proposal should ensure that a Skills Guarantee targets efficiently such vulnerable groups**. Not doing so would

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Long-Term Unemployment, see 'Service Provision to Tackle Long-Term Unemployment', [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/PressReleases/position\\_paper\\_on\\_tackling\\_ltu\\_-\\_april\\_2015.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/PressReleases/position_paper_on_tackling_ltu_-_april_2015.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In line with EASPD's recommendation 'Towards more inclusive learning environments in Europe', [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/salzburg\\_education\\_declaration\\_final.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/salzburg_education_declaration_final.pdf)



most likely lead member states to focus on easier target groups to bolster their report, leaving those most in need behind.

Second, the proposal fails to provide a strong enough framework regarding the accessibility of the Skills Guarantee. For the Guarantee to attain its goals, reach low-qualified adults and allow them to become active economic actors, it needs to provide adequate support for potential beneficiaries. This includes not only a tailor-made offer and delivery, as is planned in the proposal, but also **accessible procedures for registration, accessible assessment methods and adequate support** throughout the education or training process. Social service providers have developed valuable expertise and know-how to develop needed skills to join the labour market through models such as sheltered workshops and supported employment, and they should be included in the design and delivery of the trainings.

Third, the proposal states that Member States should invest in education and training, while remaining within the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. While this remains within the traditional approach of the European Union, this proposal would be a good opportunity for the EU to allow Member States to **include education and social care within the flexibility scope of the Stability and Growth Pact**. As the Commission itself underlined in its renewed Education and Training 2020, the EU needs to focus its effort and invest in social inclusion and civic unity in order for the European project to continue being successful.

### ***Recommendations***

EASPD would recommend the following amendments to the proposal:

(8) Access to lifelong learning opportunities remains uneven across socio-economic groups and some groups of the working-age population have less access, in particular third-country nationals **and people with disabilities**.

**(16bis) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ensures the right to education, employment and active participation in society for people with disabilities.**

3. Give low qualified adults the opportunity to undergo an assessment **adapted to the specific needs of the individual**, [...]

6. Deliver the education and training offer in appropriate learning settings, schools or training centres or at work, in which appropriately qualified teachers and trainers apply **accessible, adequate and individualised** ~~adult-specific~~ teaching methods and exploit the potential of digital learning.

12. Taking into account national circumstances and available resources, identify target groups for the delivery of the Skills Guarantee at national level, **including women, third-country nationals and people with disabilities**.



### III. Making Vocational Education and Training a first choice

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The third key action of the New Skills Agenda aims at promoting Vocational Education and Training as a viable, attractive and relevant option for prospective learners. Among other objectives, the Commission will 1) support on-the-job learning experience as part of the studies; and 2) improve data availability on labour market outcomes of VET.

It cannot be stressed enough how **important work-based learning is for people with disabilities**. On the one hand, it reassures the potential employer on the skills and competences of the person with disabilities and thus fights the ongoing stigma in employment. On the other hand, it empowers people with disabilities to pursue a career in the open labour market, giving them a first successful experience.

#### **Recommendations**

However, this can only be successful with the appropriate support being made available. Similar to what was highlighted in the [Council Recommendation on the Integration of the Long-Term Unemployed into the Labour Market](#), it is crucial to **implement tailor-made processes to support the individual for his inclusion in the labour market**<sup>4</sup>.

The goal of the New Skills Agenda to improve data availability is also positive. To be effective, the **data should however be disaggregated**, on one hand identifying the labour market outcomes of VET specifically for people with disabilities and other target groups; and on the other hand highlighting which sector sees the largest growth potential. As one of the sectors with the largest job creation potential, the health and social services sector must be promoted and valorised to encourage young people to opt in this career path<sup>5</sup>.

EASPD would recommend the following amendments:

- Supporting opportunities for learners to undertake a work-based learning experience, **accompanied with an adequate individualised support**, as part of their studies
- Improving disaggregated data availability on labour market outcomes of VET **for different target groups and divided by sectors, including the health and social sector**.

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<sup>4</sup> An example of successful support is the Supported Employment Methodology, [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/PressReleases/annex\\_1\\_supported\\_employment.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/PressReleases/annex_1_supported_employment.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> For more information on how to unlock the job creation potential of the health and social services, [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Policy/Employment/job\\_creation\\_potential\\_of\\_social\\_services\\_sector\\_final\\_2april2015.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Policy/Employment/job_creation_potential_of_social_services_sector_final_2april2015.pdf)



## IV. Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition

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The aim of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition is to ensure everyone in the EU is equipped with the necessary skills not only to enter the labour market but also to participate in society at large.

The Agenda thus highlights that “almost half the EU population lacks basic digital skills; with around 20% of people having none at all...”. It is unfortunate the Commission does not provide more **disaggregated data on different target groups**. Research has shown that people with disabilities suffer a digital skills gap<sup>6</sup> which further puts them at risk of social exclusion.

### *Recommendations*

In order to develop effective national digital skills strategies, as the New Skills Agenda requires of Member States, it is crucial to **include key indicators on vulnerable groups** in the annual Europe’s Digital Progress Report.

EASPD would recommend the following amendment:

The Commission will monitor progress annually through its Europe’s Digital Progress Report (EDPR), **including key indicators on vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, women and third-country nationals**.

## V. Analysing the issue of brain drain

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In its 8<sup>th</sup> key action, the Commission aims to “further analyse the issue of brain drain” and how to tackle it.

Brain drain is often understood as high-ends skilled workforce leaving their home country, where they benefitted from education and training, to work in a better paying country.

It should be underlined however that the same phenomenon also affects the health and social sector in the EU. As there are **staff shortages in the social services sector**, a high proportion of health and social services staff in Western Europe are third country nationals or come from other EU Member States.

This situation leads on the one hand to shortages of qualified staff in origin countries such as those of Central and Eastern Europe, and on the other hand to pressure on the working conditions of the labour force in host countries<sup>7</sup>.

### *Recommendations*

In its analysis of the issue of brain drain, the Commission should ensure to **identify indicators and potential solutions specific to different sectors**, and should include in particular the social services sector.

EASPD would recommend the following amendment:

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the Entelis Manifesto, <http://www.entelis.net/en/manifesto>

<sup>7</sup> On this matter, see the report on ‘In-work poverty in the social service sector’, [http://easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/one\\_pager\\_eohr - in-work\\_poverty\\_report.pdf](http://easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/one_pager_eohr_-_in-work_poverty_report.pdf)



The Commission will further analyse the issue of **brain drain, differentiated per sectors and countries**, and promote the sharing of best practice as regards effective ways of tackling the problem.

## VI. Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills

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One of the aims of the New Skills Agenda is to promote and facilitate career choices and skill development that fit the needs of the market and improve growth in the EU. The 9<sup>th</sup> key action, launching a Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills, is designed to support the development of partnerships in the sectors of automobile, maritime technology, space, defence, textile and tourism. This would be achieved through tools such as coordination, private investment (supposedly through the European Fund for Strategic Investments - EFSI), EU and national funds.

Considering the recent and pressing challenges such as the changing demographics, the refugee crisis and the cuts to social expenditure of the past decade, it appears that the **European social sector is also facing urgent short and medium-term challenges**<sup>8</sup>, in particular when it comes to the recruitment and retention of staff..

Beyond the need to bring the people at the centre of the European project and despite the challenges, the health and social sector has also proven to be a resilient and growing sector which has created 1.8 million new jobs since 2008, providing a much needed **potential for economic growth and job creation in all countries in Europe**<sup>9</sup>.

### *Recommendations*

The Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills is a good initiative promoting cooperation between relevant stakeholders. However, the **social sector should be included as one of the priority sectors**. Not only is it needed to face European challenges, it would also have an important economic impact throughout the EU.

EASPD would recommend the following amendment:

The Blueprint will be [...] piloted in 6 sectors, with preparatory work starting in 2016: automotive, maritime technology, space, defence, textile, tourism **and social care**.

## VII. Initiative on tertiary graduate tracking

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In order to better understand the performance of young people when they graduate from universities and VET providers, the Commission plans to track their performances and choices after their graduation.

This data would allow the Commission as well as Member States to develop adequate and relevant education, training and employment strategies, adapted to the characteristics of the labour market.

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<sup>8</sup> For more, see the article 'There is no path to social inclusion, social inclusion is the path', <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/no-path-social-inclusion-social-inclusion-path/>

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Policy/Employment/job\\_creation\\_potential\\_of\\_social\\_services\\_sector\\_final\\_2april2015.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Policy/Employment/job_creation_potential_of_social_services_sector_final_2april2015.pdf)



For this objective to be possible, it is however paramount that the policy makers receive **data that reflect the reality and complexity both of the labour market and of the graduates**. Effective education, training and employment strategies can only be formulated if the target groups are correctly identified.

### **Recommendations**

The proposal should thus ensure that the initiative on graduate tracking is articulated around gathering disaggregated data. On one hand, **key indicators for graduates** should include women, people with disabilities, third country nationals, etc. On the other hand, **key sector such as the social sector should be identified** in order to assess the impact of employment strategies on different sectors.

EASPD would recommend the following amendment:

[...] the Commission plans to propose as a first step in 2017 an initiative on tertiary graduate tracking **including key indicators for graduates and key sectors** to support Member States in improving information on how graduates progress on the labour market

## **VIII. Conclusions**

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The New Skills Agenda and the proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a Skills Guarantee are both **positive documents taking important steps towards improving the education and training** in the European Union.

While being limited due to the lack of direct EU competence in the field of education and training, the proposals have a broad scope, the 10 key actions covering items from the low qualified adults, to the high-ends skills passing through the digital divide and the challenges faced by the migrants and refugees.

Nonetheless, these documents provide an **opportunity to strengthen the European social sector** and, as a consequence, **the European social cohesion**.

The first step needs to start with **collecting disaggregated data** at all levels, including the target groups of employment strategies, the graduates, the career choices and labour market opportunities.

This data then needs to be used to **provide individualised, tailor-made support to the most vulnerable groups in Europe**, such as people with disabilities, women and third country nationals, to gain the skills they need to enter the open labour market.

Social services must also be part of the focus of employment strategies to tap into their **job creation potential and ensure the development of quality, accessible services** for all employing trained staff with a career perspective.



## IX. Annexed documents

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- Commission, **Communication: A New Skills Agenda for Europe - Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness**, 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>
- Commission, **Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee**, 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016DC0382>
- Council and Commission, **Joint Report on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)**, 2015, [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2015.417.01.0025.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2015:417:TOC](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2015.417.01.0025.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2015:417:TOC)
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- Council, **Recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market**, 15 February 2016, [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016H0220\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016H0220(01))
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- EASPD, **Towards more inclusive learning environments in Europe**, 2015, [http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/salzburg\\_education\\_declaration\\_final.pdf](http://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/salzburg_education_declaration_final.pdf)
- Entelis, **Entelis Manifesto – Towards full digital inclusion**, 2016, <http://www.entelis.net/en/manifesto>
- Janis Blackburn, **Initial report on In-Work Poverty in the social service sector**, 2015, [http://easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/one\\_pager\\_eohr\\_-\\_in-work\\_poverty\\_report.pdf](http://easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/one_pager_eohr_-_in-work_poverty_report.pdf)
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EASPD – European Association of Service providers of Persons with Disabilities

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