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UEAPME position paper on the Draft 2008 joint progress report on the implementation of the “Education & Training 2010 work programme”

1 - Introduction

The European Commission published on 12 November 2007 the *draft 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the “Education and Training 2010 work programme”*. This is the third biannual joint report of the Commission and Education Council, which are always presented in view of the Spring European Council.

The European Commission identified three areas which need particular attention:

- Raising skill levels
- Lifelong learning strategies
- The knowledge triangle (education, research and innovation)

UEAPME's comments reflect to a large extent its position on the last joint progress report.¹ This shows that while on the one hand the progress has continued, certain serious shortcomings have still not been addressed.

2 - General comments

Education and training play a central role if the Union wants to achieve the Lisbon strategy objectives as modern Education and training systems are vital for growth and employment. Therefore Education and training policies should play an even more prominent role within the next cycle of the Lisbon strategy.

European craft small and medium sized enterprises acknowledge that a lot has been achieved under E&T 2010 so far, but restate again that the pace of reforms must be increased. In particular the implementation at national level must be stepped up.

UEAPME shares the view of the European Commission that particular attention must be paid to the issues of *raising skill levels*, *lifelong learning strategies*, and *the knowledge triangle*. However, UEAPME would like to recall that the following three additional priorities are key for the success of the European economy and therefore need to be addressed urgently:

- *Reducing the number of early school leavers*
- *Enhancing the attractiveness and quality of Vocational Education and Training*
- *Increasing and facilitating Mobility in education and training*

¹ http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2005/051220_EducTraining2010.pdf

3 - Main Priorities for European employers of Craft and Small and Medium-sized companies

UEAPME persists as already mentioned in its position paper on the last joint progress report on the need to focus on the following three priority areas. The three priorities are related to permanent weaknesses of the education and training systems, highlighting problems which can not be solved overnight.

Reducing the number of early school leavers

This priority is fundamental. Primary and secondary education form the foundation of all subsequent learning, be it in vocational education and training or in general education. Therefore, there is an urgent need for an intensification of efforts and increasing of investment into basic education. Every citizen should be equipped with a minimum level of knowledge and basic competences which will allow him or her to follow any further continuous training or lifelong learning opportunity for increasing his or her competences. Craft and SMEs have concrete experiences with the integration of many young people who have failed in the secondary education system and where companies are obliged to invest a lot of time and money to solve the various difficulties such situations create.

Attractiveness and relevance of vocational education and training

UEAPME agrees with the Commission that improving the attractiveness and quality of VET continues to be a key challenge for the future. As SMEs are the backbone of the European economy and the main job providers, they are more than ever in need of high-qualified and high-skilled workforce able to innovate and develop a spirit of enterprise for the vast majority of job profiles they offer. Therefore, in order to upgrade VET one has to:

- Adapt the education and training systems according to the new competence requirements of the labour market
- Better recognise and valorise initial vocational training, in particular initial vocational training in alternation
- Enable and create links between VET and general education, so that the parity of esteem of VET and general education (including higher education) would be fostered as declared in the Helsinki communiqué. The newly adopted European Qualifications Framework (EQF) should facilitate this necessary permeability between the systems.

Increasing and facilitating Mobility in education and training

Mobility within Europe is still limited and for educational reasons even more. In particular the mobility of apprentices and young people in initial vocational education and training faces obstacles which need to be addressed. This is a priority especially important to European crafts, small and medium-sized enterprises. Recent European initiatives such as the EUROPASS, the EQF and the proposed ECVET are useful and necessary tools to facilitate mobility. However, the current European mobility programmes (ie ERASMUS and LEONARDO) favour young people coming from a higher education background rather than from a professional education and training background. This situation needs to be tackled with the creation of a specific initiative for apprentices and young people in initial vocational training. This is a question of equity and social justice, but also about reinforcing European citizenship.

Additional to these three priorities for the education & training 2010 work programme, UEAPME adopted its own priorities² which coincide with many of the priorities outline by the European Commission. The priorities of the European craft, small and medium-sized enterprises for the second half of the “Education & Training 2010 work programme are:

The promotion and development of Lifelong learning training

UEAPME calls for:

- The promotion of quality, development and accompaniment of the training of trainers in the enterprise notably through the exchange of good practices.
- The improvement of mobility of apprentices in Europe through the creation of a special programme for apprentices and young people in alternating training under the umbrella of the European integrated lifelong learning programme.
- The promotion of all SME-friendly and SME-useful initiatives to ensure mutual recognition of qualifications.
- The fostering of the validation of informal and non-formal learning as well as competences acquired in the workplace.
- The establishment of equal value between education and vocational training and general education and training through among others the use of level 6, 7 and 8 of the European Qualification Framework (EQF)
- The reinforcement of the cooperation between the world of education and the economic world through the necessary cooperation between universities and Craft and SMEs.

The development of entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship and the spirit of initiative must be integrated into all programmes of education and training from the youngest age. This subject should also be integrated in school curricula, especially with a focus on SMEs (start-ups, entrepreneurship).

Guidance

Occupational guidance must allow each person to find the ways and means of training pathways and contact with enterprises adapted to his/her individual capacities in relation to the needs of the economic world.

Craft Chambers and associations must therefore be strengthened in their function of providing orientation and guidance. Any body which is assigned this task must involve and consult representatives of SMEs.

The EU should provide financial means facilitating SME-relevant guidance structures able to better take into account the size and employment potential of SMEs and craft enterprises (e.g. “human resource developers for SMEs”).

The development of training to serve the needs of craft enterprises and SMEs

Continuous training must be permanent. The European Union must give the necessary impulse so that every country integrates this necessity in its policies and implements adequate framework conditions for SMEs in order to enhance their participation in lifelong learning, (e.g. promoting appropriate incentives for individuals and for enterprises, etc.).

² http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2007/0711_training_priorities_EN.pdf

SMEs should be able to determine according to their economic situation their own needs for further training. Therefore, an appropriate SME-support structure should be developed for fostering the culture of “a learning business”, the human resource management and the development of individualised pathways.

4 - Specific comments

Raising skill levels

UEAPME fully agrees on the need to further raise the skills levels in the EU. Competences and skills together with innovation form the key components of productivity and are essential for the competitiveness of enterprises. Raising competence and skill levels which respond to the labour market needs is urgent in order to guarantee peoples’ employability and to contribute to the competitiveness of the European economy. UEAPME therefore welcomes the *recommendation of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning*, and the Portuguese Presidency initiative *New Skills for New Jobs*.

Achieving higher skills levels is closely linked with the reduction of the number of early school leavers and the need to ensure the quality of teachers and trainers. Teachers and trainers play a key role in the education and training systems because they are the ones who transmit competences and skills necessary for the labour market to the young people.

Lifelong learning strategies

Lifelong learning is crucial for European SMEs as it enhances the employability of the European workforce. Implementing lifelong learning is a major challenge at national level. UEAPME welcomes the fact that most Member States have defined lifelong learning strategies. However, to make them really meaningful public authorities should fully include social partners in the design and implementation of these lifelong learning strategies.

European Social Partners stressed at various occasions the shared responsibility for the investment into the development of competences and qualifications.³ While the amount of spending cannot be always the most relevant indicator, but rather the efficiency of the spending, it is still worrying that with all the rhetoric on the importance of lifelong learning, the Member States have not continued to invest in education and training.

The knowledge triangle (education, research and innovation)

There is a clear need to better link the individual aspects of the knowledge triangle, research, innovation and education. Particularly important for SMEs in this context is:

- To better link the general education, including higher education to the needs of the labour market
- To create a close partnership between higher education and industry, including SMEs

³http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2002/FINAL%20DSE%20Framework%20of%20actions%20EN.doc

In this context UEAPME welcomes the decision taken by the Council and the Parliament on the financing of the EIT, but UEAPME would like to warn once again that it has to bring a real added value for SMEs and take their specificities into account.

It is important that partnerships are not limited to large companies, but that there are also co-operation agreements with SMEs, which need to benefit from the results of applied research for improving their capacity of technical innovation based on research development.

E&T and the integrated guidelines

UEAPME considers the necessity to create more synergies between Education & Training 2010 and the integrated guidelines, which emphasise in particular:

- Expanding and improving investment in human capital through efficient lifelong learning strategies, increased access to initial vocational secondary, and higher education, and enhanced participation in continuous and workplace training (IG 22)
- Adapting education and training systems in response to new competence requirements through better identifying occupational needs and key competences and anticipating future skill requirements, as well as recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and ensuring the attractiveness, openness and high quality standards of education and training systems (IG 23)

As well as on:

- promoting entrepreneurial culture in education and training (IG 10)
- increasing investment in R&D and attracting more students into scientific, technical and engineering disciplines (IG 12)
- Guidance and training (IG 18)
- Geographic mobility (IG 20)

For that reason, the outcomes of this new joint progress report 2008 on the implementation of Education and Training 2010 work programme is essential to feed into the discussions on the revision of the integrated guidelines dedicated to education and training issues.

Involvement and contribution of Social Partners

Social partners at European and national level need to be fully included in the reform process in order to make them relevant to the labour market. The European cross-sectoral Social Partners outlined in their recent *Joint analysis of the challenges of the labour market* that neither the level of educational attainments nor the level of participation in lifelong learning activities is on track to reach the European benchmarks.⁴

Therefore they called upon Member States to

- Make the education and training systems better adapted to the need of the individual and the labour market;

⁴ http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2007/071018_cross_key_challenges.pdf

- Promote the parity of esteem and the permeability between vocational education and training and other forms of education, including higher education
- Enhance the active participation of adults in further education and training, independent of their previous educational attainments
- Support measures of recognising and validating qualifications and informal and non-formal learning/competencies
- Improve the availability and quality of adequate training offers for individuals and employers, in particular taking into account the needs of SMEs

Initiatives at European level

A multitude of European initiatives were carried out since the last progress report including the recommendation on key competences, the recommendation on the EQF and the upcoming recommendation on ECVET. We very much hope that these initiatives will support the needed reforms of the national Education and Training systems. However, there is an urgent need to focus on the implementation of these instruments. European craft, small and medium sized enterprises welcome the decision of the vast majority of Member States (currently only two are missing) to create a NQF - National Qualifications Framework - based on learning outcomes.

Preparing post-2010

The future of European education and training policy is significant for UEAPMEs members as it concerns them in two ways. On the one hand, European craft small and medium sized enterprises are the main providers of company based vocational education and training. On the other hand, SMEs, and in particular micro enterprises, are the main net job creators on the European labour market⁵. Therefore their education and training needs should be considered and UEAPME, as their representative, should be consulted on time and be involved in the discussions for preparing the education and training strategy post-2010.

Conclusion

- UEAPME welcomes the current draft 2008 joint progress report on the implementation of the “Education and Training 2010” work programme.
- Education and training is a fundamental component of the Lisbon strategy and the outcomes of 2008 progress report of the Education and training 2010 work programme should better feed into the revision process of the integrated guidelines on growth and jobs.
- A lot has been achieved under E&T 2010 but the pace of reforms must be increased.
- Therefore UEAPME supports the Commission’s call for an acceleration of the pace of the reform process, particularly because of the time needed for these reforms to bring results.
- UEAPME sees the topics of *early school leavers, the attractiveness and quality of Vocational Education and Training and mobility in education and training* as main priorities for the next stage in the education and training reform process.
- The involvement of Social Partners in the discussions at European and national level is crucial.

⁵ See the European Social Partners joint analysis of the challenges of the labour market

- Many initiatives adopted at European level in the last years need now to be fully implemented at national level with the involvement of the national social partners.
- In order to better tackle the challenges of the European Labour Markets, European Social Partners are calling upon Member States to reform their education and training systems and better adapt them to the realities of the labour market.

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