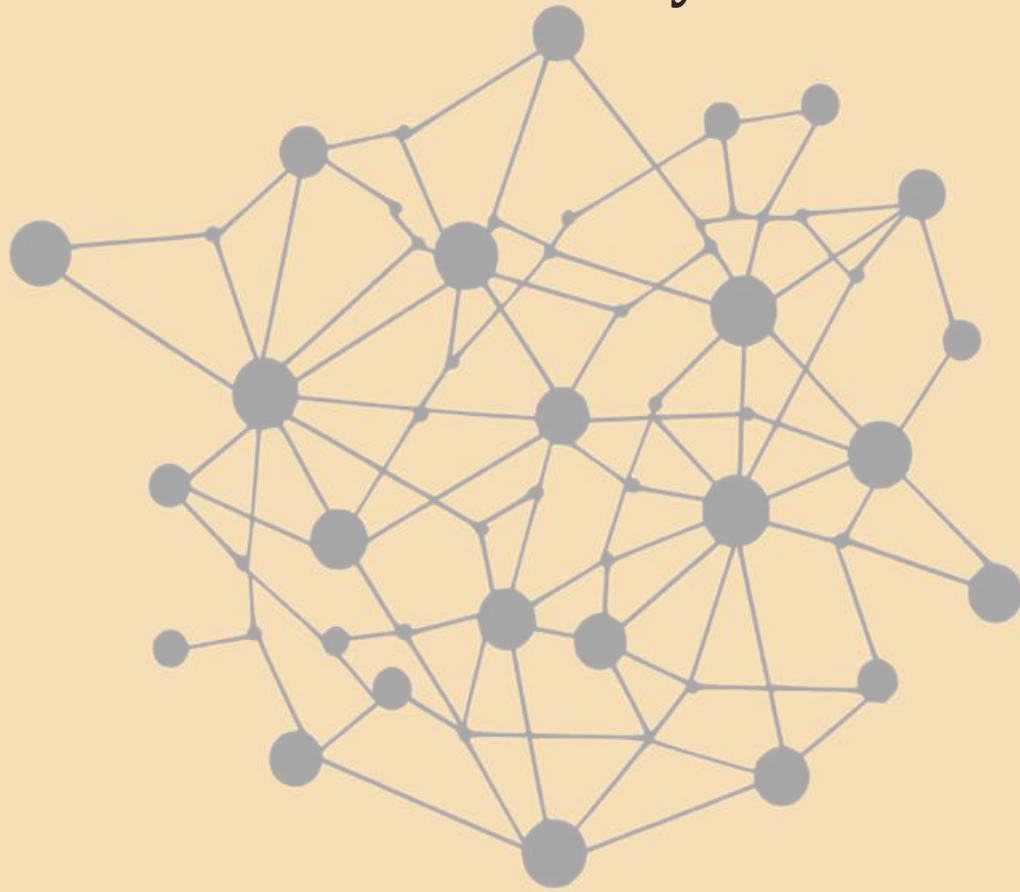


Position Paper

The European Union of Skills: Making It Work for Learners, VET Providers and Local Skills Ecosystems



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EVBB Position Paper

March 2025

1. Executive summary

The European Commission's **Union of Skills** is a new political and policy umbrella to place skills, education and training at the centre of EU competitiveness, social cohesion and the green and digital transitions. It is built on existing tools (European Education Area, European Research Area, Skills Agenda, Skills & Talent Mobility package) and intends to improve coordination, recognition of skills and mobility across the EU¹.

EVBB, as the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training, **welcomes the ambition** of the Union of Skills and particularly its strong place for VET, apprenticeships, lifelong learning and skills mobility. At the same time, we see clear risks if the initiative becomes overly top-down, duplicates existing instruments or overlooks the daily realities of VET providers, teachers, trainers and learners.

From EVBB's point of view, the Union of Skills will only succeed if it:

1. **Puts VET and lifelong learning on equal footing with higher education** and recognises the central role of VET providers in designing and delivering skills solutions.
2. **Strengthens regional and local skills ecosystems** instead of creating additional fragmentation through new EU tools and labels that are detached from practice.
3. **Improves mobility and skills recognition for all learners**, not only those in formal or higher education, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning, micro-credentials and work-based learning.
4. **Delivers real investment and support for staff, institutions and partnerships**, rather than only new strategies and indicators, using ESF+, Erasmus+, RRF, ERDF and other funds in a coordinated way.
5. **Keeps quality and inclusion at the centre**, focusing on basic skills, upskilling and reskilling of low-qualified adults, migrants and disadvantaged groups, and avoiding a narrow focus on high-end talent alone.

¹ Union of Skills – European Commission: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en?



2. What is the Union of Skills?

On 5 March 2025, the European Commission adopted the **Communication on the Union of Skills**², which sets out a broad EU strategy to:

- Build skills, education and training systems that support **quality lives and quality jobs**.
- Make **upskilling and reskilling a regular part of working life**, through lifelong learning.
- **Circulate skills across the EU**, by improving recognition of qualifications and validation of skills, to unlock the full potential of the Single Market.
- Address structural challenges such as skills shortages, demographic change, twin transitions and global competitiveness, as highlighted in reports by Draghi, Letta and Niinistö.

The Union of Skills sits on top of existing initiatives, and is designed to align and reinforce them, including:

- The **European Education Area (EEA)** and **European Research Area (ERA)**;
- The 2020 **European Skills Agenda**, Pact for Skills and Centres of Vocational Excellence;
- The **Skills and Talent Mobility package** and related initiatives on recognition and attraction of talent to the EU;
- Funding streams such as **ESF+**, **Erasmus+**, **RRF**, **ERDF**, **Just Transition Fund** and **InvestEU**, estimated at more than €150 billion for skills in 2021–2027.

In VET, the Union of Skills also announces a **new European VET policy arrangement for 2026–2030**, with the Herning Declaration identified as a key contribution.

² Union of Skills – European Commission: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en?



3. Why the Union of Skills matters for VET and EVBB members

3.1 Structural skills challenges

The Union of Skills responds to an urgent situation:

- Persistent **skills shortages** in many sectors (health and care, construction, manufacturing, hospitality, digital, green jobs) that hinder growth and innovation.
- **Basic skills gaps:** PISA 2022 data show that around 30% of 15-year-olds in the EU lack basic proficiency in mathematics and around a quarter in reading and science; almost half of young people lack basic digital skills, while 90% of jobs require them.
- **Demographic ageing** and shrinking workforces in some regions, which make reskilling, retention and attraction of talent critical.

VET providers are already on the front line of this challenge – updating curricula, creating new programmes with employers, working with local authorities and social partners and supporting learners who often face multiple barriers to participation.

3.2 A new political window for VET

For EVBB, the Union of Skills is a **political window of opportunity** as it:

- Re-replaces **VET, apprenticeships and lifelong learning** high on the EU agenda, linked directly to competitiveness, industrial policy and social fairness.
- Opens the way for a **new European VET strategy 2026–2030**, with strong involvement of stakeholders and monitoring by Cedefop and ETF.
- Connects VET more clearly with **industrial, regional and research policies**, through Centres of Vocational Excellence, skills academies and regional skills partnerships.

However, this window will only be meaningful if VET providers are treated as **co-creators**, not only as implementers.



4. EVBB key messages on the Union of Skills

4.1 VET as a central pillar, not an add-on

EVBB welcomes the strong language on VET in the Union of Skills Communication and the idea of a new European VET arrangement for 2026–2030.

Our position:

- VET – including initial, continuing, adult and work-based VET – must be a **central pillar** of the Union of Skills, on equal footing with higher education and other education sectors.
- The new VET arrangement should **build on**, not replace, successful processes such as the Copenhagen process, the Council Recommendation on VET and the CoVE initiative.
- VET should be clearly recognised as both an **economic** and a **social** instrument – addressing skills shortages and offering pathways for people who are distant from the labour market.

4.2 Stronger role for VET providers and local ecosystems

VET providers and their networks, such as EVBB, are already designing programmes with employers, municipalities and social services. Yet in many EU initiatives they appear mainly as “beneficiaries”, not as **partners in design and governance**.

Our position:

- VET providers must be **formally included** in the design, steering and monitoring of Union of Skills actions at EU and national level (e.g. in expert groups, stakeholder platforms, advisory councils).
- The Union of Skills should **reinforce regional and local skills partnerships**, aligning with place-based demands identified by ERRIN and regional networks. errin.eu+1
- Centres of Vocational Excellence should be recognised as **core instruments** of the Union of Skills, acting as hubs for innovation, teacher training, SME outreach and international cooperation.

4.3 Mobility and recognition for all learners

The Union of Skills aims to make it easier to use skills and qualifications across the EU and to facilitate mobility.



Our position:

- Recognition and portability tools must **cover all forms of learning**: formal VET, non-formal training, work-based learning, micro-credentials and validation of prior learning.
- Any pilot of a **European VET diploma or label** must be co-designed with VET providers and employers, voluntary, and clearly complementary to national qualifications, as Eurochambres underlines.
- Skills and talent mobility measures must avoid **brain drain** from weaker regions; policies should support **circular mobility**, upskilling abroad and return pathways, as pointed out by BusinessEurope and regional actors.

4.4 Quality, inclusion and basic skills

A strong economy requires solid **basic skills** and digital competences for all, not only top performers.

Our position:

- Union of Skills actions must **prioritise basic skills (literacy, numeracy, digital)**, especially among adults with low qualifications, migrants, refugees and long-term unemployed.
- VET providers need sustainable support to run **second-chance programmes**, bridge courses and guidance services for these groups.
- Quality assurance should cover not only higher education but **VET and non-formal training**, with simple and proportionate arrangements that support improvement instead of extra bureaucracy.

4.5 Coherent funding and reduced fragmentation

The Commission highlights that more than €150 billion is available for skills in 2021–2027 across different EU funds.

Our position:

- The Union of Skills should **simplify access** to EU funding for VET providers, especially small and medium-sized institutions, by reducing administrative burden and improving coordination between ESF+, Erasmus+, RRF and ERDF calls.
- Funding arrangements should encourage **long-term partnerships** rather than short project cycles.
- New initiatives (skills academies, labels, platforms) should only be created when there is clear added value and after assessing how existing tools can be strengthened, as Eurochambres stresses.



5. EVBB recommendations

5.1 To the European Commission and EU-level bodies

1. **Give VET a clear, visible role in Union of Skills governance.**
 - Create a **VET and Lifelong Learning Platform** within the Union of Skills governance arrangement, including provider networks (EVBB and others), trade unions, employers, student and regional organisations.
 - Ensure that this platform is involved in drafting the new European VET policy for 2026–2030 and in monitoring progress.
2. **Align the new European VET strategy with the Union of Skills.**
 - Use the Herning Declaration as a base, but translate it into **concrete commitments** on work-based learning, CoVEs, digital and green skills, and support for VET staff.
3. **Strengthen cross-border recognition and portability of VET learning.**
 - Build on Bologna tools, EQF, ECVET legacy and Europass to create **transparent, user-friendly recognition arrangements** for VET learners, apprentices and adult learners.
 - Support the development of **micro-credential ecosystems** that include VET providers, with common quality and recognition arrangements.
4. **Promote a balanced approach to skills and talent mobility.**
 - Ensure that EU Talent Pool and related instruments go hand-in-hand with **support for training, retention and circular mobility** in sending regions.
5. **Make EU funding more accessible for VET providers.**
 - Introduce **simplified cost options**, model templates and multi-annual partnerships for skills projects.
 - Encourage Member States to **use ESF+ and RRF strategically** to invest in VET providers' capacity (digitalisation, staff development, guidance services).
6. **Ensure that new EU tools complement existing ones.**
 - Before launching new labels, academies or platforms, publish **impact assessments** of existing tools (Skills Academies, CoVEs, Pact for Skills) and present plans to improve them.



5.2 To Member States and regions

1. Anchor the Union of Skills in national and regional skills strategies.

- Define **national Union of Skills roadmaps** that bring together education, labour market, industrial and regional policies.
- Involve VET providers, local authorities and social partners in these roadmaps.

2. Invest in VET institutions and staff.

- Use ESF+, RRF and national budgets to improve **staff conditions, continuous professional development, equipment and digital infrastructure** in VET.
- Support VET teachers and trainers in acquiring **green and digital competences** and in working with micro-credentials and modular learning.

3. Support regional skills ecosystems.

- Set up or strengthen regional **skills alliances** that connect VET providers, universities, schools, companies, employment services and civil society. errin.eu+1

4. Advance recognition of prior learning and flexible pathways.

- Put in place **national arrangements for validation and recognition** of non-formal and informal learning, and guarantee that VET providers have the capacity and mandate to implement them.

5.3 To VET providers and social partners

1. Act as co-designers of Union of Skills implementation.

- Engage proactively with national ministries, regional authorities and EU-level working groups, bringing in the **experience from centres, classrooms and workshops**.
- Use EVBB and other networks to **share practice** and provide joint feedback on EU initiatives.

2. Expand flexible, modular and micro-credential-based offers.

- Develop **short learning units and micro-credentials** linked to local labour market demands and aligned with European standards for quality and recognition.



3. Promote inclusive upskilling and reskilling.

- Design and deliver programmes for **low-qualified adults, migrants, refugees and long-term unemployed**, including guidance, basic skills and wrap-around support.
- Work with employers to create **inclusive apprenticeships** and work-based learning places for diverse learners.

4. Strengthen quality assurance and data use.

- Use quality assurance not only for compliance, but for **continuous improvement** and better outcomes for learners.
- Collect and share data on graduates' employment, satisfaction and progression to support evidence-based policy.

6. Conclusion

The Union of Skills has the potential to **change how Europe approaches skills** – by breaking silos between education, labour market and industrial policies and by putting skills at the heart of competitiveness and social justice.

For EVBB, success will be measured not by the number of new strategies, platforms or labels, but by **tangible changes in learners' lives and VET providers' capacity**:

- more learners, including disadvantaged groups, entering and completing quality VET;
- smoother transitions from learning to employment;
- easier cross-border mobility and recognition;
- stronger regional skills ecosystems;
- and VET institutions that are trusted partners in shaping Europe's future.

EVBB stands ready to **work with the European Commission, Member States, regions and social partners** to turn the Union of Skills into a reality that delivers for people, communities and enterprises across Europe.

