



## ETUC views on “Skills first approach”

Discussed by ETUC’s “Training, VET and Skills Committee” on 23 October 2024

### Background

The European Commission’s focus on labour and skills shortages resulted in an increased attention to skills and less on qualifications. [ETUC’s assessment on this policy](#) underlines that labour shortages and skills shortages topics need to be discussed separately. The “Skills first approach” was mentioned in the [COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION \(EU\) 2023/2611 of 15 November 2023 on the recognition of qualifications of third-country nationals](#) in relation to the Talent Pool initiative as “A ‘skills first’ approach advocates for identification and full use of a person’s skills – whether they are acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings – rather than basing assessments solely on qualifications. Measures to attract talent and to increase participation in the labour market can be maximised and should be underpinned by a ‘skills first’ approach that values skills and seeks to match people with jobs that reflect their talent and potential.” This policy also suggests to the Member States that if full recognition of regulated profession of a 3<sup>rd</sup> country national is not possible or slow in a host country, then the person could be hired under temporary contract or not full status (eg assistant position). The European Commission put this policy to the centre of the closing event of the European Year of Skills and it appears in many policy areas. Ursula von der Leyen’s [Political Guidelines for 2024–2029](#) and the [Draghi Report](#) advocate “high-quality skills irrespective of where and how they were acquired” and “a shift from formal delivery of diplomas to preparing students with the right skills for the rapidly evolving economy and labour market.”

[ETUC Action programme 2023-27](#) underpins that European workers need “support in just transition to improve their skills, qualifications and consequently wage levels, working conditions and career and transition prospects”. It underlines that implementation of the 1<sup>st</sup> principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights means to “ensure the right to education and training for all by guaranteeing high quality and inclusive employee training and paid educational leave for all workers, preferably during working time, and the right to access to full qualifications, validation of non-formal and informal learning and work experience, and free and quality career guidance and counselling. It is important to ensure this right by law or collective agreements.”

### ETUC views

Reducing labour shortages and skills shortages needs to be achieved by ensuring quality and attractive jobs for all workers, which includes the right to access employee trainings,



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recognition of trainings, and validation of their skills and competences in order to support them to improve their qualification levels.

Qualifications are essential in certain sectors where access to the professions are **regulated**. Regulations to access several professions and defining the necessary skills and competences of the profession and their qualification requirements are necessary to ensure **quality of work and services**. This is beneficial for both the employers and trade unions.

The “skills first approach” may seem attractive in some sectors as it can promise quicker access to the labour market. However, in many cases this approach offers low quality and precarious jobs, lower wages and bad working conditions especially to women workers, creating social cohesion problems by reinforcing gender pay gap. In many sectors and companies the level of qualifications of the workers links to wage levels and it is not possible for the workers to improve their salary, working conditions and career development possibilities, including right to access to quality employee trainings, without improving the qualification level. Therefore, right to access to full qualifications should be defined by collective agreements and/or by law. Trainings should be provided and paid by the employers in working hours, and paid educational leave should be guaranteed for all workers.

In those professions which are **non-regulated** by law, access to jobs need to be guaranteed based on the applicant’s skills and competences gained via formal, informal and non-formal education and work experience. However, the “skills first approach” makes wage negotiation individualised and this endangers workers’ collective right to wage negotiation. Thus, qualifications and levels of qualification are essential also for workers who work in non-regulated professions.

It is unacceptable to practice the “skills first approach” in all cases of recruitment. We warn against the extensive use of the [ESCO tool](#) and other machine-lead matching tools used by public and private employment agencies to compare CVs and vacancy notices based on skills and not on qualifications.

Deregulation attempts on accessing professions and reducing levels of qualifications are attacks against jobs and workers. European trade unions also cannot accept changing conditions of accessing certain professions by cancelling or reducing the level of entry qualification. **Adaptation of regulations** or “**deregulation**” of professions and services could be possible only if relevant social partners agreed on this among them.

**Obtaining qualifications should be a right.** It is essential to support access of EU and non-EU workers to the European labour market, but not by reducing qualification requirements. The societal impact of accessing and obtaining qualifications needs to be also considered as studies show that support of far-right political movements are stronger in regions where people have no or less access to education and to obtaining qualifications.



It is important to ensure quick and fair recognition of qualifications and validation of skills and competences of the workers wishing to work in the EU labour market. They need also help with accessing trainings in order to fulfil the necessary requirements of recognition of their full qualification which are essential to enter the same profession as their home country.

European trade unions request the European Commission to:

- Shift the EU policy from skills to **right to access to quality education, training and lifelong learning**, in particular to ensure the right for workers to access trainings and to obtain qualifications;
- enforce the **implementation of the EPSR** in particular the right to employee training, access to **qualifications**, and recognition and validation of skills and competences with the help of effective involvement of social partners;
- guarantee workers' rights, via encouraging **social dialogue** on improving national legislation and / or **enforcing collective agreements**, that all workers' skills and trainings should be documented, certified and indicated how they are defined as part of a full qualification;
- reinstate the **respect of qualifications** in the EU education, training, and skills policies especially in the case of labour and skills shortage and Talent Pool initiatives;
- strengthen the adult learning policy of the EU, especially by more efforts to be made on the implementation on the [Council recommendation on Upskilling pathways](#) in order to ensure access to **all low-skilled and low-qualified adults** to improve their basic skills, key competences, and professional skills;
- in order to ensure that all workers and the unemployed have access to validation of their skills, competences and work experiences, and they have access to quality and **free career and lifelong learning guidance**, enforce the implementation of [Council Recommendations on validations of non-formal and informal learning](#) (2012) and on [lifelong guidance](#) (2008) as Member States achieved little or no progress in improving their **validation and guidance systems**, especially where involvement of the trade unions in strategy setting has been lacking.
- advocate the **role of effective social dialogue** with the relevant sectoral trade unions in **revising professional / occupational profiles** and defining qualification requirements to enter certain professions.
- while respecting subsidiarity on qualifications and different national and sectoral approaches, **clarify** - together with the trade unions - **the European definition** of “partial qualifications” and “micro-credentials” in relation to full qualifications, and their role in the labour market, stressing that partial qualifications and micro-credentials cannot replace full qualifications.
- encourage the Member States to better **regulate the training sector** offering micro-credentials with the involvement and co-ownership of the trade unions in order to end further commodification of the training sector. This should ensure better monitoring of the quality of private training providers, and that trainings for workers out of their workplace and for the unemployed are of high quality and provided by **publicly funded quality assured training providers** whose



certifications can be trusted and are recognised by the labour market and by the formal education sectors;

- require from the Member States **more fair, effective and quicker recognition process of qualifications for migrant and refugee workers**;
- further support the work of the National Qualification Frameworks and the **European Qualification Framework** in order to enhance cooperation among Member States and EU candidate countries on transparency and understanding of qualifications and learning outcomes, and to enhance fair mobility of workers in the EU labour market. **Skills assessment tools and validation systems** need to link the National Qualification Frameworks.
- following that these demands are met, discuss with social partners on how to achieve the **same value of the qualifications** in the labour market gained via traditional education pathways as gained via validation of skills and competences and recognition;