

SKILLS, INNOVATION AND THE PROVISION OF, AND ACCESS TO, TRAINING

RECOMMENDATIONS November 2021



SOCIAL PARTNER RECOMMENDATIONS ON SKILLS, INNOVATION, PROVISION OF AND ACCESS TO TRAINING

KEY MESSAGES

1. Employee training is mainly the responsibility of social partners. When organising employee training, national social partners need to take into account the realities of the labour markets and the needs of workers, including changes of tasks and jobs, innovation, mobility and transitions into and between jobs.
2. Fostering a lifelong learning culture in workplaces is essential to help workers to develop in their career and to improve their employment opportunities. Improving the number of adults participating in training at all skills levels is essential in line with the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights on the right to training and lifelong learning¹ and to foster their employability, to get a higher skilled workforce adapted to rapidly evolving labour market needs, and to increase productivity and innovation.
3. Being aware of the European Commission's intention to propose a Council recommendation on individual learning accounts (ILAs), the European social partners reiterate that a one-size-fits all approach is not appropriate. There are many tools used, for example, paid educational training leaves (by law or through collective agreements), personal training accounts or training funds (cross-industry or sectoral), vouchers, etc, which all have specific objectives and target groups. A key challenge is to make these tools inter-operable. The success and inter-relation of the different tools depends on the country-specific institutional framework. However, an important pre-condition for the tools to succeed is that their existence and their functioning is well communicated to all potential users and be governed together with the social partners.
4. Innovation, that has a market and positive societal impact, will be even more crucial in the years ahead for a socially just and competitive Europe in the face of ambitious environmental targets, digitisation, health risks and demographic ageing. Therefore, it is important to strengthen and enhance social dialogue and further cooperation between Member States, social partners, enterprises and education and training institutions to ensure quality jobs, address unresolved skills mismatches and reduce skills shortages, which are damaging Europe's innovation capacity. In order to ensure that every worker is ready and equipped for the green and digital transitions, it is essential to help them to access the validation of non-formal and informal learning and provide them with training on the new skills that are needed, based on recognising and certifying their existing skills gained during previous trainings and work experiences. This will also be important for Europe's innovation potential. Therefore, enhancing access to training to improve the level and relevance of qualifications is essential.
5. Supporting more upskilling and reskilling of workers will require quality and effective apprenticeships and traineeships which can help with students' integration in the labour market. In order to foster innovation as both a top-down and bottom-up process in every aspect of work, it should include workers in all sectors and sizes of companies. Therefore, workers' training is important to improve their contribution to incremental and breakthrough innovation. It is important to strengthen collaboration between the relevant actors involved in education, training, research, innovation and labour markets. This will help to increase enterprises' capacity to innovate, bring new products to market and ultimately boost an innovation culture.
6. Digitalisation, greening, including efforts to reduce the carbon footprint, and the emergence of new technologies mean that occupational profiles need to be adapted and that workers need to acquire and utilise new skills. The European social partners Autonomous Framework Agreement on Digitalisation outlines measures to be considered by national social partners, such as internal and external validation solutions and the financing of training by employers when a worker is requested to undertake job-related training linked to digitalisation.
7. The European cross-industry social partners support the ongoing efforts made by the European Commission to reinforce European-level initiatives on skills, education and training with a sectoral focus. For instance, the Blueprints for sectoral cooperation on skills, the Pacts for skills in industrial ecosystems, the sector-specific platforms of Centres for Vocational Excellence contribute, amongst other things, to improve training strategies which can respond to the skills needs across sectors, hence supporting Europe's position in the key value chains and industrial ecosystems. European sectoral social partners play a key role in those EU projects. The role of sectoral social partners and dialogue in training provision could also be further enhanced through the promotion and strengthening of training funds.

¹ Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the European Commission

8. The European Commission should ensure that investments, necessary reforms and effective social dialogue aiming to foster skills development, in line with the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights on the right to training and lifelong learning, are embedded in the context of the European Semester. In this respect, the Commission should encourage the Member States to achieve this when implementing the related national recovery and resilience plans and the Council recommendation on VET, Osnabruck Declaration, EU Skills Agenda and the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training 2021-2030.
9. The European Commission needs to fully take into account the tripartite opinion of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) on "Individual learning accounts (ILAs) and strengthening training provision in Europe" that was adopted in August 2021. In particular, ILAs are only one possible tool and should not replace existing employer or government funded and/or social partners driven provisions to training as well as others forms and modalities of training financing.
10. The European Commission, working with the Member States, should set up effective strategies to support mobility and fair transitions on the labour markets. The involvement of public employment services, complemented by private employment services is crucial. An improved training offer to inactive and unemployed people needs to be designed with the involvement of the social partners and in consultation with relevant social service providers. These activities should also take into account national social partners' advice on how public authorities and social service providers can support their actions to improve adult learning in Europe, especially for the unemployed and NEETs.
11. The European Commission should advocate for, and monitor, the meaningful involvement of national social partners in the programming, monitoring and implementation of EU funding streams that aim to support the up and re-skilling of workers, as well as enhancing Europe's innovation capacity. This particularly concerns the European Social Fund+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

To Member States

12. Member States should work with national social partners to ensure sufficient investment in quality, effective and inclusive skills training for all workers and improve adult education and training systems' performance to achieve progress towards the new EU headline target of 60% of adults participating in training every year by 2030.
13. Member States should contribute to ensuring a framework that is conducive to enhancing social dialogue among trade unions and employers at the national and sectoral level, taking into account national circumstances, to provide various types of education and training solutions for adult workers in times of changing labour market needs and growing unmet skills needs. In addition to this, effective skills strategies need to be based on quality research on skills forecasts, skills adaptation and skills development with the support of relevant research and education and training institutions. Such strategies need to improve the skills and competences of all workers to ensure quality jobs and to foster organisational innovation, including basic skills and key competencies, with special attention to critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, digital and ICT skills, environmental responsibility and skills for the green economy, and STEM skills.
14. Member States, with the full involvement of social partners, need to implement the Recovery and Resilience plans in a way that facilitates the access of workers to quality and inclusive training, using these plans to support the national social partners to create, strengthen and/or improve the functioning of training funds.
15. Member States need to strengthen national Continuous Vocational Education and Training (CVET) systems and financial systems to ensure access to incentives for enterprises to offer training to their workers, and for workers to participate in training, including via paid educational or training leave. Empowering private enterprises, workers, social partners and public authorities to play their full roles is fundamental to effective CVET.

16. In fostering the recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States need to fully involve social partners in reforming their skills strategies and in utilising the financial resources that are available under EU financial instruments and support, in particular the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Horizon Europe and the Cohesion funds. In this context, the European Social Fund+ plays an important role in supporting the up and re-skilling of workers. Member States need to ensure meaningful cooperation with, and involvement of social partners in the programming of the European Social Fund+ for the period 2021-2027 and that they have access to use these funds.
17. Member States need to continue efforts to reduce drop out in VET and adult learning also in the context of the current pandemic. It is also important to reduce early school leaving so as to ensure that those who enter the labour market have a sufficient level of basic skills and key competences, and professional skills which are the foundation for further and continuous learning.

To social partners

18. National social partners should work together to best identify how to ensure effective access and entitlement to training, taking into account their existing education and training practices in a way that addresses the long-term needs of individual workers and enterprises due to the recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, greening of economies and digitalisation. The particular role of social dialogue and collective bargaining at the appropriate levels needs to be strengthened in all the countries where social partners agree that this is needed. National social partners should utilise EU and national funding opportunities, notably in the context of implementation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Social partners should develop action at cross-industry and/or sectoral level to find solutions that contribute to the successful workforce adaptation to the digital and green transitions.
19. National social partners, with the support of their national governments where relevant, should explore the establishment or further development of training funds, taking into account national circumstances, as a key instrument to further support training provision and innovation. These training funds, when well designed, can support skills development and address the skills needs of enterprises and workers. Well-functioning training funds are often co-managed by the social partners and where this is not the case an appropriate involvement of social partners needs to be foreseen as part of the governance. Training funds can contribute to quality, effective and inclusive life-long learning and employee training that supports workers to innovate, to appropriately utilise and further develop their skills relative to their job that they hold or, in particular where they are cross-industry, to transition within the labour market, including between sectors.
20. National social partners should strengthen their cooperation to ensure that national skills strategies are based on and delivered through effective social dialogue. In parallel, social partners should also develop their cooperation with education and training providers in order to facilitate the process of updating occupational profiles in a timely and effective way relative to identified needs. Social partners shall be involved in skills intelligence (e.g. on skills forecasting, update of occupational profiles, etc) in order to link labour market needs with education and training curricula and qualifications and to enable workers and enterprises to anticipate and support changes and innovation related to the green and digital transitions. This will support enterprises to be more innovative and productive, as well as ensuring the creation of quality jobs that improve the working conditions of their employees.
21. National social partners should work together to fully implement the Autonomous Framework Agreement on Digitalisation in order to ensure a connection between training and innovation while managing the digital transition in a joint partnership approach.

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