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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The role of vocational education and training in competitiveness and resilience - <i>Exchange of views</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 27 November 2025.

The role of vocational education and training in competitiveness and resilience

Presidency steering note

Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a European backbone

VET has been a pivotal issue in European cooperation for many years, and as Europe faces accelerating green, digital and demographic transitions as well as renewed security threats, such as hybrid attacks on vital infrastructure, the need for a highly skilled workforce has become increasingly clear. Yet across Europe, too many countries continue to face skills shortages, under-enrolment in VET, high drop-out rates and persistent perceptions that vocational pathways are of lesser value than academic ones. Hence, strengthening not only Europe's competitiveness, but also its economic and democratic resilience, and the ability to provide equal opportunities for everyone to access education and training, lifelong learning and quality jobs, has become paramount.

VET as a pillar for competitiveness and resilience

Education and training lie at the core of the European Union's economic and social agenda. In order to strengthen Europe's competitiveness and its economic and democratic resilience, and to provide equal opportunities for everyone to access education and training, lifelong learning and quality jobs, a number of initiatives have been introduced at EU level in recent years. These initiatives are aimed at education, training, skills development and lifelong learning participation. They include the Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience¹ and Commission initiatives such as the European Skills Agenda², the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027³ and the Pact for Skills.

¹ OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1.

² COM(2020) 274 final.

³ COM(2020) 624 final.

The 2024 Draghi Report on the future of European competitiveness stresses that investment in skills – particularly vocational and technical skills – is fundamental to achieving strategic autonomy, innovation and social cohesion in Europe. The report points to a number of challenges in education and training, such as aligning VET with changing labour market needs, falling levels of education, the lack of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, under-exploited STEM talent and a severe lack of basic digital skills.

After setting out the challenges, the Draghi report calls for a European strategy to address skills gaps focused on all stages of education. It also insists on the need to strengthen, among others, basic literacy and numeracy skills, digital skills, green skills, STEM skills and transversal skills.

These findings and recommendations call for renewed impetus for the further development of VET as an attractive and high-quality educational pathway with promising career opportunities for learners.

A call for coordinated action to strengthen the role of VET

Despite Member States' efforts, the key focus of the shared EU challenges remains on attractiveness, labour market relevance, inclusiveness and partnerships, including guidance, work-based learning, digitalisation, and higher VET.

In this context, future European cooperation in education and training, and in particular on VET at all levels, should further support countries in addressing labour market needs, enhancing excellence and inclusiveness, and fostering innovation in VET systems. At the same time, education and training, including VET, must ensure that individuals have the necessary professional skills, including the ability to play an active role in democratic societies.

European-level efforts should amplify and complement national reforms by providing direction, tools and platforms for cooperation, allowing VET to become a true driver of societal resilience and competitiveness. In addition, in order to reach the full potential of European VET, strong cooperation between education and training providers at all levels, companies and governments is essential to ensure that VET curricula remain relevant and responsive to evolving labour market demands and societal requirements. This multi-partite collaboration enhances the quality of education and training, fosters innovation, strengthens pathways for learners to access higher education and/or meaningful employment opportunities and empowers individuals to take an active part in democratic societies, thereby reinforcing the overall competitiveness of European economies.

In light of the above, the Presidency invites Ministers to respond to the questions below for an exchange of views on the topic. We kindly ask that interventions be limited to a maximum of three minutes.

- How can we align VET programmes to labour market needs to a greater extent and at the same time ensure high-quality, inclusive education and training for all VET learners that provide them with the necessary professional and societal skills?
- How can we increase not only the attractiveness, but also the gender balance of VET programmes – especially STEM?
