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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The role of the Union of Skills in strengthening the European Education Area - <i>Policy debate</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the policy debate at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 12 May 2025.

The role of the Union of Skills in strengthening the European Education Area

Education and skills development lie at the core of the European Union's economic and social agenda. To strengthen Europe's competitiveness and its economic and democratic resilience, and to provide equal opportunities for everyone to access education, lifelong learning and good-quality jobs, the European Commission has introduced the Union of Skills, a strategic initiative which aims to enhance education, training and lifelong learning.

In the Commission's vision, the Union of Skills frames education and skills as a fully-fledged and holistic strategic policy tool for economic competitiveness and EU stability.

The Union of Skills introduces two key education-related initiatives:

- an Action Plan on Basic Skills, which focuses on improving basic skills in literacy, mathematics and science, and also digital and citizenship skills;
- a STEM Education Strategic Plan, which seeks to boost proficiency and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

The Union of Skills focuses on four strands to ensure everyone has the opportunity to build solid skills foundations and engage in lifelong upskilling and reskilling for a fulfilling life. The four strands are:

- building skills for quality lives and jobs through a strong educational foundation, with initiatives to strengthen and advance education and skills through the European Education Area (EEA), including new initiatives such as the Basic Skills Support Scheme;
- upskilling and reskilling an agile workforce for the digital and green transitions, including measures to support lifelong learning and upskilling via mechanisms such as the Skills Guarantee Pilot;
- circulating skills across the EU with a view to competitiveness, including measures to facilitate labour mobility by streamlining qualification recognition through the Skills Portability Initiative;
- attracting, developing, and retaining talent for Europe's future through measures such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action 'MSCA Choose Europe'.

The Commission communication also proposes a number of new targets to be met by 2030:

- the share of underachievement in literacy, mathematics, science and digital skills should be less than 15%, whereas the share of top performance in literacy, mathematics and science should be at least 15%;
- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields in initial medium-level vocational education and training (VET) should be at least 45%, with at least one out of every four students female;

- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields at tertiary level should be at least 32%, with at least two out of every five students female;
- the share of students enrolled in ICT¹ PhD programmes should be at least 5%, with at least one out of every three students female;
- the annual number of learners from outside the EU coming to study and obtain a degree at tertiary level in the EU should be at least 350 000.

A new governance framework (as set out in the annex) — including a European Skills High-Level Board and a European Skills Intelligence Observatory — is proposed, to ensure evidence-based policymaking and policy implementation. Both the Board and the Observatory will support the work of the Commission towards a new EU-27 Recommendation on education and skills, and the country-specific recommendations in the European Semester cycle.

The Union of Skills frames education and skills as a strategic tool for economic competitiveness. While the initiative acknowledges key challenges — such as the decline in basic skills, teacher shortages, and the need for digital and green skills — it largely views education and training through a labour-market lens, paying less attention to broader educational values such as personal development and critical thinking.

However, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, set up in 2021 with the overarching objective of building the EEA, remains a key framework for ensuring a holistic approach to education and training in all contexts and at all levels — ranging from early childhood education and care to adult learning, including VET and higher education. It addresses five strategic priorities, several of which align with the objectives of the Union of Skills, and has its own set of ambitious EU-level targets agreed by the Member States, the following five of which are to be met by 2030, the same timeframe as new targets proposed under the Union of Skills:

¹ Information and communication technologies.

- **Low-achieving 15-year-olds in basic skills**

The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%, by 2030.

- **Low-achieving eight-graders in digital skills**

The share of low-achieving eighth-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%, by 2030.

- **Participation in early-childhood education and care**

At least 96% of children between three years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care, by 2030.

- **Early leavers from education and training**

The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9%, by 2030.

- **Tertiary level attainment**

The share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45%, by 2030.

The Union of Skills and the EEA initiatives share several synergies and common goals, such as boosting skills, lifelong learning and mobility. There is, however, a need to ensure that the labour-market-focused approach of the Union of Skills does not overshadow the broader objective of the EEA, which follows the basic principle of spanning education and training systems as a whole, in an inclusive, holistic and lifelong-learning perspective and with the aim of ensuring that these systems contribute to the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens and promote democratic values, equality, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue.

Skills are the foundation of a thriving and competitive economy, so education and training systems should equip citizens with high-quality skills in an inclusive manner, starting from basic skills, which are a key determinant of personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship. Basic literacy and numeracy skills are crucial, but not sufficient to enable individuals to cope with a rapidly evolving socioeconomic environment, and those skills must be complemented by critical thinking, creativity and civic engagement.

Given these parallel efforts and the well-established framework of the EEA, which is deeply rooted in cooperation between Member States with support from the European Commission, and in order to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of education and training systems and policies, the Union of Skills could serve to strengthen and reinforce the EEA by addressing emerging challenges in education and training, and to ensure the efficient use of available resources by preventing any duplication and additional administrative burdens.

To achieve this, education ministers and key stakeholders must be actively engaged in the planning and implementation of the Union of Skills, in order to ensure alignment with national education and training policies and priorities as well as meaningful, better-informed decisions on reforms and investments concerning education, training and skills. An approach which is coordinated across education and training policies and involves all relevant sectors – such as employment, social affairs, the economy and the financial sector – could maximise the effectiveness of both frameworks (the European Education Area and the Union of Skills). This would safeguard the holistic approach to education and training agreed in 2021, while enhancing skills development.

In light of the above and bearing in mind that we are approaching the work on reviewing the strategic framework – including EU-level targets, governance structure, and working methods – on the basis of the Commission’s evaluation of the first EEA cycle, the Presidency invites ministers to indicate how they think the Union of Skills and the European Education Area can complement and reinforce each other so as to foster more inclusive and future-proof education and training systems across the EU and maximise visibility and political support for advancing education, training and skills outcomes at European level.

To steer the policy debate, the Presidency invites ministers to respond to the following questions:

1. How could the Union of Skills and the European Education Area best complement each other in ensuring high-quality, inclusive education and training for all learners, while avoiding duplication and unnecessary administrative burdens?
 2. Following the first cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, which key elements of the Union of Skills should be prioritised in order to support - rather than shift the focus away from - the objectives of the European Education Area, and how could governance be simplified so as to ensure greater coherence and faster, more agile decision-making?
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The European Commission proposal on the governance of the Union of Skills

