

Union of Skills: New ambition, old barriers?

The Guild welcomes the objectives of the Union of Skills strategy to boost high quality education and skills development, and to foster shared EU values. We particularly welcome the broad definition of skills which goes beyond the immediate needs of the labor market and the recognition of the strategic importance of investing in people's competences. Since these objectives are indeed a **“collective responsibility”**, it requires action not only from the European Commission, but also from governments, employers and education providers, including **new levels of funding** at the EU and especially at the national levels.

As highlighted in The Guild's paper [Skills and competencies for innovation](#), universities have the responsibility to equip students and researchers with knowledge in key subject domains that require both increasing **specialist depth and interdisciplinary breadth**. Through their research and innovation, universities not only drive job creation – they also create demand for new skills which require support and training. Universities' role in providing **lifelong learning opportunities** to adapt to a rapidly changing economy can ensure a sustainable and agile European workforce in the long run.

Moreover, universities have expert researchers and institutes that focus on the relationship between education and skills, lifelong learning, and transversal skills development, including measuring their effects. We invite the European Commission and the Member States to harness this expertise when designing measures such as the European competence framework for academic staff or achieving higher targets of STEM graduates.

- Investment in education and skills should start with **strengthening programmes where Europe already excels**, such as Erasmus+ and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). For example, just to maintain the levels of Erasmus+ mobility planned for 2027, we would need to triple the funding for the next programme period. The average success rate for MSCA under H2020 was 14%. To fund all high-quality proposals submitted under MSCA, the budget would have had to increase almost six-fold. Beyond that, the Union of Skills should focus on European added value through better national regulations, and leverage investment at the national levels.
- The Strategy rightly recognizes the immense potential of the Erasmus+ programme and the MSCA in building partnerships across the world and attracting global talent. Strengthening both inward and outward mobility should be recognized as a fundamental priority, **far beyond focusing simply on mobility in “key strategic fields”**. It would be shortsighted to view these flagship programmes through their contribution to Europe's competitiveness only.
- To make the Union of Skills a reality, we need **active Member States commitment**. Flexible national regulation needs to support universities to be more agile in responding to today's

challenges. This includes, for example, better use of institutional-based external quality assurance which allows for the self-accreditation of study programmes, and the provision of joint study programmes between institutions across Europe.

- We welcome the Commission' work on the **roadmap on digital education and skills** to promote equal digital access for all. A new and dynamic ecosystem, developed in partnership with EdTech providers and EU based digital platforms, offers opportunities for individualised learning and problem-solving education that are not always possible within traditional structure and resourcing.
- Although we welcome support for the European Universities alliances, and their role in leading the development of new opportunities that contribute to skills development, it is crucial to **empower the sector as a whole for pedagogical innovation**, including lifelong learning. We must look beyond the European Universities alliances and the European degree to solve the problem of skills shortages. Investment in pedagogical innovation across the board can attract new cohorts of students and help address declining interest in certain careers.
- The Union of Skills will build on the Pact for Skills supporting the EU's strategic sectors. The mechanism remains the same: pledges provided by businesses and education providers under the EU Skills Academies and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). It would be more beneficial if **these initiatives first demonstrate their effectiveness, relevance and added value**. We are not convinced that the Deep Tech pledge with no funding attached was instrumental in training one million people in deep tech. These initiatives should also expand their focus beyond technological skills, to improve other skills equally important for developing and scaling up technologies. It is also not obvious why similar pilot actions are planned through the Erasmus+ programme (transnational university-business partnerships).
- Governance for the Union of Skills will be closely aligned with the Competitiveness Compass and will be linked to the European Semester. While we welcome that skills and competences will be closely integrated with the EU's central strategic priorities, it is important not to lose focus on the European Education Area. For instance, it is not clear how some new initiatives (like the proposed European Skills Intelligence Observatory) relate to existing ones (in this case, the European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard). Member States and the Commission must continue to push towards achieving the EEA, and we **would welcome it if the Union of Skills accelerates progress within the EEA**, bringing all actors together in its structures, rather than creating new ones.