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**TOWARDS A UNION OF SKILLS**

**CONTRIBUTION TO AN AD-HOC SOCIAL PARTNER CONSULTATION**

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*The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) is a confederation of more than 40 national and European trade union organisations from over 20 European countries, with a total of more than 6 million individual members. Founded in 1990, CESI is a recognised European sectoral social partner and advocates improved employment conditions for workers in Europe and a strong social dimension in the EU.*

The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop Communication on a Union of Skills.

As a European trade union confederation representing more than six million members across various sectors, CESI has already in the past raised challenges related to staff and skills shortages in the EU, especially in specific fields and parts of public services.

CESI urges the European Commission to lay out a vision that goes beyond declarative commitments and that paves the way for concrete legislative, financial, and policy measures. CESI stands ready to collaborate with EU institutions, Member States and further social partners to achieve this objective.

It is imperative that the Communication and its component elements and initiatives consider a complete set of implementation and enforcement tools, ranging from hard tools like legislative proposals and infringement procedures to soft policy tools such as the European Semester, EU funding and support for trade unions and inclusive social dialogue at EU and national level.

**1. In your opinion, which are the main challenges employees and employers face that should be addressed by the Union of Skills?**

From a trade union perspective, the Union of Skills should address several key challenges faced by both employees and employers to ensure available skills in labour markets. These relate to:

- **Skills mismatches and lifelong learning**

Young people face difficulties in entering the job market and older employees experience difficulties with adapting to rapidly changing job requirements due to automation, digitalisation, and green transitions. Many workers lack access to continuous training opportunities on the job.

Employers struggle to find workers with the right skills, leading to labour shortages in key sectors, including the public sector employees. From a trade union perspective, it is imperative that sufficient investments are executed in the area of education, skills and (further) training to ensure that the educational and training systems are well staffed, equipped and inclusive for all – children/pupils/students and adult lifelong learners alike. To this end, funding is centrally important, and skills development policies must be more worker-centred, with guaranteed access to lifelong learning, adapted VET schemes and publicly funded further training-on-the-job as part of yearly human resources strategies.

- **Recognition of qualifications and mobility without lowering national standards**

Employees often still face barriers in having their skills and qualifications recognised across EU Member States, limiting their career progression and mobility.

Employers struggle with complex administrative procedures when hiring skilled workers from other regions.

Within the EU, the recognition of professional qualifications plays a crucial role in facilitating labour mobility, and it must be further enhanced. The existing Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications aims to ensure that individuals holding qualifications from a Member State can have them recognised in another. However, the directive is in many respects outdated and incomplete and should be revisited and updated in light of the current changes on European labour markets. By further streamlining procedures for the recognition of qualifications obtained in different EU countries, barriers to labour mobility could be reduced, and professionals could more easily seek employment opportunities in other Member States.

The EU already fosters cooperation among national authorities and professional organisations to maintain high standards of education and training, ensuring that recognised qualifications meet common quality criteria. In this context, the Union of Skills should further contribute to creating a more harmonised EU framework for skills certification, ensuring that qualifications are easily transferable.

- **Inclusive and just transitions (green & digital revolutions)**

Many employees in traditional industries fear job losses due to automation and climate policies.

Many employers need support in transitioning their workforce towards new skills, to avoid facing massive layoffs.

Therefore, targeted Just Transition measures need to be implemented with strong social dialogue, based on retraining programmes and financial support for workers adversely affected by industrial changes.

- **Strengthening social dialogue and worker participation**

Too often, employees have too little say in decisions affecting their work and skills development within their organisations. Employers can benefit from worker input but often lack structured mechanisms for meaningful dialogue. Strengthening worker representation in decision-making processes can ensure that unions and their affiliates are involved in shaping reskilling policies, and that their right to organise is protected.

For the Union of Skills to be truly effective, it must be worker-centred and inclusive. Skills development should not just serve market demands but also empower workers, guaranteeing job security, decent wages, and fair conditions. Strong social dialogue and collective bargaining must be at the heart of skills policies to ensure that no (or as few as possible) workers are left behind.

**2. What would be the priority actions – at European, national, and regional levels – that could be taken to achieve real impact? How can providers of up- and re-skilling and education and training systems be improved to better align with current and future needs?**

From a trade union perspective, achieving real impact in upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning, education and training systems requires a multi-level approach – European, national, and regional – focused on real investments in public goods and services such as education and employment services, ensuring quality jobs, and fostering an inclusive transition in the labour market.

- At **European level** there is need for stronger policy and coordination and funding opportunities such as strengthening the European Skills Agenda, the Pact for Skills and the funding opportunities offered via Erasmus+. The right to training on the job for all workers should be encouraged to be more used at organisational level, ensuring access to employer-funded lifelong learning and recognition of micro-credentials. EU upskilling and reskilling policies should align with the EU's activities in the twin digital and green transitions, while protecting workers in affected industries. Ensuring trade unions' involvement in shaping policies at the EU level, including in the governance of funds like ESF+ and Erasmus+, is of importance.
- At **national level**, improving working conditions in the educational sector and better training educators is a first step.

Moreover, making working conditions better for employees is paramount for enhancing staff retention and facilitating the reskilling and upskilling of the existing workforce. A supportive work environment, characterised by safe working conditions, fair compensation, access to social protection and social security rights, opportunities for career advancement, work-life balance initiatives, and a culture of continuous learning, fosters employee loyalty and thus the availability of skills. Flexible working arrangements and access to childcare, as foreseen in the EU Care Strategy, are needed to solve the compatibility of family and work in order to also give women, who often work part-time, better opportunities to return to full-time work.

More sectoral agreements that require employers to invest in worker training, with tripartite management of training funds would be beneficial. Implementing paid training leave policies or tax benefits to ensure all workers, including those in non-standard and platform work, can benefit from upskilling would be advantageous.

Member state should be further encouraged to engage in more public investments in vocational education and training (VET) to ensure well-funded VET institutions that are responsive to labour market needs and provide quality pathways to stable, permanent employment.

- At **regional level** it would be opportune to develop more regional skills councils that involve trade unions to ensure training programmes meet local economic demands. Public funding should be prioritised for marginalised workers, including older workers, migrants and those in precarious employment. Another positive way to strengthen partnerships between regional authorities, unions, and businesses would be encourage to create local training ecosystems.

### **3. In what ways do you believe your organisation can contribute to the Union of Skills and make it a reality?**

As a European recognised sectoral social partner organisation, including with representativeness in the education sector, and as an umbrella organisation spanning more than 40 trade union organisations with over 6 million affiliates across Europe, CESI stands ready to provide further concrete feedback on specific parts and initiatives of the Unions of Skills – including at hearings organised by the European Commission and with input of practitioners and experts from within the CESI trade union network.

CESI considers itself an intermediary organisation between EU institutions and European policy making and social dialogue on the one hand and workers and teaching staff on the other hand. CESI stands ready to connect EU initiatives with added value to workers and affiliates on the ground.

### **4. How to achieve an appropriate balance between activation of the EU workforce and attraction of skills from non-EU countries?**

From a trade union perspective, achieving a balance between activating the EU workforce and attracting skills from non-EU countries requires a fair and worker-centred approach that ensures job security, decent wages and strong social protection locally. CESI emphasises the following key necessities:

- **Investing in skills and training for EU workers:**
  1. Prioritise upskilling and reskilling programmes to address skills shortages within the EU.
  2. Promote lifelong learning and vocational training in the EU, ensuring workers can transition into emerging industries.
  3. Strengthen public education and VET/apprenticeship systems in the Union to align with labour market needs.

While a new and refined approach to skills is necessary in particular in VET and professional (further) training, in particular in primary and secondary education, curricula should not be emptied of subjects that help them become responsible citizens of tomorrow, such as history, politics and ethics. In a world where political apathy is in many places substantial and liberal democracies often increasingly threatened, the formation of socially engaged and responsible, cosmopolitan, open-minded citizenry remains crucial. Here, a re-orientation towards skills should not take a utilitarian, economic approach but complement social sciences.

Further details about this can be accessed in CESI's position on digital education and digital skills, <https://www.cesi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-Digital-education-and-digital-skills-CESI-consultation-position-EN-20220915.pdf>

- **Ensuring fair working conditions within the Single Market:**
  1. Prevent social dumping locally in Member States by enforcing equal pay and conditions for all workers, regardless of nationality.
  2. Strengthen labour rights and collective bargaining to ensure fair wages and prevent exploitation.
  3. Improve working conditions in sectors experiencing labour shortages to attract and retain EU workers.
- **Ethical and sustainable labour migration from third countries:**
  1. Develop migration policies that are based on labour market needs but also respect workers' rights and avoid brain drain in countries of origin (e.g. in the health care sectors).
  2. Ensure non-EU workers have access to decent pay, benefits and working conditions locally to avoid forcing people to move elsewhere to work.
  3. Strengthen international agreements to ensure ethical recruitment and prevent brain drain in cooperation with third countries.
- **Strengthening social dialogue:**
  1. Involve trade unions in policymaking to ensure that migration policies align with workers rights and social justice.
  2. Encourage cooperation between governments, employers and unions to create fair labour market policies.
  3. Monitor labour market developments to adjust workforce strategies dynamically and enforce the activity of national labour inspectorates in charge of ensuring fair standards for all workers.