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Consultation on the update of the Skills Agenda for Europe

General questions:

1. Do you agree with the challenges presented?

As stated in the document, *"a skilled workforce is one of the main assets of the European social and economic model."* With today's climate urgency, it is crucial to update the purpose of skills also to explicitly deliver on the environmental and climatic dimension. Therefore, we appreciate the reference by the European Commission to the need to provide the right skills required by the green and social transition. It is a very much welcome sign of the ongoing "mainstreaming" of the sustainability revolution into all domains of EU policymaking; a process that is very much needed if we really want to make Europe the first carbon-neutral continent. Thinking these large-scale changes together with a digitalised world of work requires a holistic set of skills.

We would therefore have preferred to see this new attention to the green transition from a wider, more encompassing perspective that includes also the aspect of social, organisational and managerial sustainability, as highlighted in our Sustainable Leadership guidelines and our ongoing EU project on Sustainable Leadership. Driving our economies and societies through these turbulent, rapidly changing times, towards a sustainable growth path requires a new awareness of the role managers have in this transition (essentially, becoming coaches, trainers, facilitators and networkers), and their specific needs in terms of sustainability skills, to help them contribute to deliver on the main priorities of the EU.

When it comes to the challenges to lifelong learning services provision, a paradigm shift is needed. Public authorities at member states level have for a long time reacted to skills gap instead of shaping the future labour market proactively. Taking a design-thinking approach, we now need to ask which skills will be needed tomorrow. By then, European managers (and some categories of workers) need to be able to:

- be mindful about environmental and social impacts of individuals and organisations
- measure and account companies' triple bottom line performance in a context-dependent manner
- report on their impact (then incentivise sustainable behaviour)
- mainstream sustainability in corporate strategies
- dispose of a toolbox of best practices in sustainability
- implement sustainable action in a context-aware manner
- share sustainability skills with workers and other stakeholders (train-the-trainer approach)

- contribute to the formulation of sustainability policies.

Today, only 17% of managers have received training or education on sustainability, according to our latest report. In the framework of our project on Sustainable Leadership, we will make a thorough assessment of the specific skill mismatches managers have with regards to the transition.

2. In which ways can Social Partners concretely support the update of the Skills Agenda and modernisation of VET?

We appreciate the model of the dedicated hearing, as it has been developed as one of the deliverables of the New Start for Social Dialogue. As the document correctly identifies, social partners are the closest to the reality of the field and know best than the other actors (public authorities, education providers, etc..) the needs required at labour market level. Their involvement is therefore necessary, at all stages of the consultation procedure as well as in the “top-down” phase, when the policy proposals elaborated are applied on the real world.

Furthermore, at a later stage, the EU shall ensure that social partners at all levels are supported in implementing the skills agenda through capacity building, “train-the-trainer” schemes and funding to conduct sector-specific trainings. Like no others, social partners are able to understand economic imperatives, ensure social justice and incorporate EU objectives in the framework of environmental policy and the EU Green Deal.

[Empowering workers to up/reskill]

3. What new action could be taken to empower workers to up/reskill, taking an inclusive approach?

The background document correctly focuses on one specific weakness of the current upskilling system – its lack of inclusiveness and accessibility. In the context of a fast-changing employment horizon for a growing number of workers, the need to provide individually tailored training solutions that take into full account a wider spectrum of specificities and background details is vital. Furthermore, the reference to diversity is welcome, as we at CEC are fully aware of the great advantage (in terms of efficiency, operational flexibility and innovativeness) of diversity in the workplace.

In this respect, the perspective of offering tools to access directly training services and opportunities – like the proposal for an EU individual training account could allow – can be a promising avenue: such scheme could lead to better comparing training systems, opening up to the possibility of new service providers joining the sector, becoming tool to adjust training subsidies based on societal needs (in particular, for transition skill schemes), facilitate learning and labour mobility for all, enabling individuals to have a more active role in shaping their future. However, we believe it is necessary to ensure at all stages of the process transparency and quality of the different available tools, for instance with quality labels. The need for guidance – via employment services and social partner organizations – coupled with a clear definition of the

employer's responsibility is fundamental and must be enshrined in legislation opening to individually arranged training mechanisms.

Another, more general remark can be raised when reflecting on what possible action can be taken to increase workers' uptake – of all categories and hierarchical levels – of training opportunities. The main incentive remains the possibility to free time – also from working time – to take part in re-skilling and up-skilling initiatives, besides the quality and purpose of offers mentioned earlier. Despite being a significant cost in the short-term for companies, considering the time dedicated to re-training and up-skilling as paid working time offers a return in the long term (in terms of higher working satisfaction, higher productivity and quicker adaptability to the evolution of the market) of great values for employers. Public authorities must create the necessary supporting conditions for this to happen, including by providing financial support.

However, one has not only to consider the demand-side, but also the offer. The motivation and interest may be that low because the trainings often provide skills, methods and purpose for a past labour market. Furthermore, VET and education systems have to better capacitate participants to align professional purpose with socio-cultural ones on the one and economic demands on the other hand. The reality of a predominance of on-the-job learning is a reality policy-makers should also cater to by using a "train-the-trainer" approach: provide managers with the capacities to become trainers for sector-specific, transversal and professional skills needed by their employees.

4. How further progress can be made in the area of validation of skills?

The validation and recognition of skills acquired via informal learning is an important goal to focus upon. This is even more the case if we consider the growing importance of those "transversal skills", social skills and other forms of "immaterial" skills in a fast-evolving economic and social context like the one we are experiencing. Traditional education and training structures are still behind in providing and certifying them – to which we add the set of skills that managers have to develop in order to being able to drive the transition towards sustainability. A further harmonisation in this area, also at the interplay between skills acquired in formal education validation systems and other validation systems, is needed.

[Addressing skills mismatches]

5. Do you consider the Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills and the Platforms for Centres of Vocational Excellence as a good basis for further work to break silos between different skills stakeholders?

We leave it to sectoral social partners to express themselves on this issue.

6. What do you think should be the future priorities regarding skills intelligence?

Even though skill projections may have their usefulness, a more strategic and agile way to deal with future pathways can be obtained with scenario planning. Skill scenarios, depending on changing framework conditions, have the advantage to provide the basics for changing skill needs. Projections in general are not the most effective way to deal with future uncertainties since triggering factors cannot be extrapolated from the present. That's why they are used in a limited extent only in business strategies, but also social sciences.

The suggestion about investigating in which ways AI can be used to improve the capacity of the system to identify skills shortages is very promising. However, the same general reflections concerning the deployment of AI-based solutions should apply: AI must be designed such in a way as to maintain in every step of its application the "human-in-control" principle, based on ethical standards identified and agreed upon at societal level.

In sum, purpose should guide skills intelligence, not an extrapolation of the present as done in the past.

7. What new action could be taken to address skills mismatches?

Using a diversity approach, it can prove useful to diversify the types of tools and training providers. For instance by enabling social partners and civil society organisations to provide trainings closest to local challenges. Those dealing with challenges have the strongest incentive to get the solution right. As regards tools, mentoring programmes and more learning mobility programmes for workers and managers could be strengthened.

[Strengthening collective leadership]

8. Which action could help to increase social partners' engagement in workforce skills development in general?

Social partners could be better supported through capacity-building.

9. How could social partners collaborate among themselves and with national governments to ensure more and better investment in the up/reskilling of the workforce?

The observations raised in the background document about the distance between public authorities and social partners "who are aware of the skills needed in the labour market" call for the necessity to increase the capacity of all stakeholders to cooperate more rapidly and efficiently, and for social partners in particular to influence from more close the decisions of public authorities. In general, investing in social partners' capacity building is essential in order to provide them with the necessary strength to accomplish their tasks. In this domain too, the financial support provided by the ESF+ and the other funds available is very important; in this context, there should be room to reflect about the extent to which the Just Transition Mechanism – in its declared intention to financially support those workers that are hit the hardest from the sustainable transition – can be used too to fund social partners' role and engagement in skills' development.

[Modernising Vocational Education and Training]

10. What are the key priorities in the field of VET for attention in the coming years to address the challenges of achieving social fairness, a carbon-neutral economy and digital transition?

We believe it is necessary to allow for an easier interchange between VET and the academic world: part of the low “appeal” of VET opportunities to younger generations depends also on the “compartimentalization” of education mechanisms, a reality that for instance makes it more complex for students to switch from between curricula. Furthermore, it is essential to integrate in VET curricula transversal skills, as they can greatly contribute to successful school-to-work transition of students and better prepare them for the prospect of re-orienting their professional paths several times during their working life.