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Subject: The future of skills and the changing role of VET in education and training systems  
- *Discussion paper*  
(*Public debate in accordance with Article 8(2) of the Council's Rules of Procedure*) [*proposed by the Presidency*]

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Following consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 20 November 2017.

**The future of skills and the changing role of VET in education and training systems*****Presidency discussion paper*****1. Introduction**

Technological transformation, digitalisation, globalisation, demographic trends and environmental challenges are rapidly changing our societies and economies by putting a high premium on the need to innovate, increase productivity and adjust to changes. Employers are demanding ever-higher levels of skills proficiency and new skills are emerging; meanwhile, societies' expectations of enhanced well-being and inclusive growth are increasing. In this context, the purpose of the policy debate during the Education Council meeting is to contribute to the discussions on the changing role of education and the links between education and the labour market, and to reflect upon the policy choices made whilst designing the future skills and vocational education and training (VET) policies. The Presidency believes that the provision of education, including in the VET field, should strive for excellence and that there is a need to modernise education, because the existing traditional approaches to teaching and learning, which have been justified up to this point, may not correspond to the expectations of the learners and societies of the future.

Against this background, the Estonian Presidency is inviting ministers to hold an exchange of views at the November EYCS Council, in order to reflect on the changing role of VET in education and training systems and lay down preliminary guidelines for the forthcoming debates on the future of European cooperation in the VET sector.

## 2. The changing role of VET and streamlining policy agendas

The Estonian Presidency held lengthy discussions on challenges and possible future cooperation in education while negotiating the Council conclusions on school development and excellent teaching and the Council conclusions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education. The topics we touched upon in our general education and higher education conclusions – such as equity, accessibility, coherence of governance and resource management, the need to invest in teachers and academic staff, and inclusivity – are also relevant for VET policies. In addition, there is a need to better understand the contextual factors, such as changes in the labour market and in work organisation and its content, heterogeneity of learners and their needs, and digitalisation, which will influence the development of VET for the coming decades. VET has to adapt to these changes and provide the skills needed to drive positive social and economic change.

The expert level discussions<sup>1</sup> have recently touched upon such topics and policy choices as skills orientation in VET (i.e. specific, generic and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills<sup>2</sup>), the long- and short-term pay-off of skills for individuals and societies, balancing the VET sector's expectations of employers and employers' expectations of VET, educational pathways and learners' (career) choices, the position of VET within the qualification system and in relation to other education sectors, etc. As regards the last point, we are observing a blurring of the boundaries in education systems between general education<sup>3</sup>, VET, higher education and adult learning, and with the increase of permeability in education we are also facing new challenges related to complex interdependencies within education systems. These paradigmatic changes suggest we should reconsider the way we design education and training systems as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The topic of the future of VET was discussed during the DGVT meeting in Tallinn on 9-10 October 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 21st century skills is one of the frameworks for describing the changing need for skills besides e.g. Education 2030 and the global competences developed by the OECD. Most of the frameworks stress the relevance of the following skills: collaboration and teamwork, creativity and imagination, critical thinking, and problem solving.

<sup>3</sup> See the CEDEFOP project on the changing nature and role of VET in Europe.  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/changing-nature-and-role-vocational-education-and-training-vet-europe>

The Presidency believes there should be a more holistic and comprehensive approach to policies across different education sectors, driven by a humanistic, learner-centred approach to policy-making. During the ministerial discussion at the Council meeting, the Presidency would like to encourage participants to think about the nature of the change needed (if any) in how education and training systems are organised into sectors (general education, VET, higher education, adult learning) and about the future role of VET in skills provision.

It is also important to discuss how VET can contribute to modernising our economies and industries and whether there is a need to streamline the social, innovation, employment, industrial and other relevant policy agendas. The Presidency believes that VET should play a stronger role in developing innovation ecosystems that constitute a fundamental precondition for economic growth and prosperity. Traditionally, innovation is considered to be driven jointly by universities, research and the business sector. We believe there should be a more solid place for VET in innovation ecosystems. Deeper integration of VET into the innovation ecosystem means linking innovative business models and new technologies with skills provision. This would result in enhanced knowledge transfer within education systems and also between education and economic sectors (such as industry, services, etc.) and help to make VET more relevant to learners' and society's needs as well as increasing its attractiveness. The Ministers are invited to elaborate on the possible role of VET in innovation ecosystems in their countries.

### 3. Meeting skills needs in VET

Today, in the area of technological (r)evolution, we are facing a window of opportunity to build a sustainable and prosperous Europe – but we are also facing the challenges that come with it. Achieving the best-case scenario – increased productivity, better quality jobs<sup>4</sup> and less inequality in our societies – will not happen by itself. A broad range of skills, knowledge and competencies are an inevitable prerequisite for the personal development and self-fulfilment of learners as well as for social and economic growth and sustainable development. The Member States are committed to creating strong partnerships with social partners and other stakeholders both within and outside the education sector to ensure access to VET, to guarantee the provision of high-quality VET, to create conditions for success for all VET learners, to establish continuous information and feedback loops and to achieve a better understanding of the skills needed in the labour market. We have made substantial progress in several domains; however, there remain some areas that may need further development.

Firstly, we still face tensions and imbalances in how we frame the policy dialogue between different stakeholders on the topic of skills strategies. Across Europe, Member States rely on skills forecasting mechanisms and skills intelligence tools that can help inform policy-making. In this context, further debate is needed on the nature of the dialogue between different stakeholders in VET and on the role of skills intelligence and forecasting in decision-making. We also urgently need platforms for joint discussions about the changing role of employers, trade unions and schools in the context of future skills and VET.

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<sup>4</sup> See the OECD framework for measuring and assessing job quality.  
(<http://www.oecd.org/employment/the-crisis-has-had-a-lasting-impact-on-job-quality-new-oecd-figures-show.htm>)

Secondly, VET outcomes have traditionally been assessed on the basis of the labour market relevance of the skills acquired and the labour market outcomes of graduates. The evidence we have on economic (r)evolution and recent trends in the labour market suggests there is a need to further strengthen the focus on the long-term adaptability and personal development of learners, so as to equip graduates with more generic, transversal skills, knowledge and competences as well as with (occupation- or sector-) specific skills. The Member States are committed to paying particular attention to the development of key competencies in both initial and continuing VET, and in many countries good progress has been made so far. However, further efforts may be needed to strengthen quality assurance systems in order to build a comprehensive understanding of VET schools development and to achieve a better balance between what we value and what we assess and measure in VET.

VET providers have a strong culture of promoting equity, underpinned by a lifelong learning approach; VET is open to learners of all backgrounds, at all stages of their life. The pace of innovation might require all people to engage in lifelong learning for upskilling, re-qualification or skills updating purposes. The third challenge therefore relates to the capacity of education and training systems and especially of VET to cater for increasing demand in lifelong learning as well as catering for the huge diversity of learners, which could be demanding for teachers and trainers and make traditional approaches to teaching and learning less effective and less appealing to learners.

#### 4. The future of European cooperation

The first education document adopted in Luxembourg at Council level was the Council Decision of 2 April 1963 laying down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy (63/266/EEC), which means that European cooperation on VET became a source of inspiration for shaping education systems in Europe almost 45 years ago.

Today our cooperation and relationship have widened and grown deeper. More structured cooperation in VET, together with long-term strategic objectives, was launched in 2002 with the Copenhagen process, which led to the development of EU initiatives and instruments such as EQAVET<sup>5</sup> and ECVET<sup>6</sup> to promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning and work-based learning. We have made good progress in achieving the common strategic objectives for VET set in the Riga Conclusions of 2015.

There is an increasing degree of convergence between education, social, employment and skills policies. VET forms an integral part of the Erasmus+ programme and the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training 2020. The Presidency believes that, as an integrated programme, Erasmus+ has become a great example of bringing positive change by achieving better synergies across educational sectors and policy fields. The Erasmus+ programme gives a new impetus to EU-level cooperation in VET and contributes to promoting both equity and inclusivity as well as quality of VET provision.

VET is also the cornerstone of the New Skills Agenda, an ambitious initiative which aims to strengthen the internal market by promoting a well-functioning and fair European labour market and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. However, there is a need to revisit European cooperation in the field with a view to devising more targeted responses to the challenges we face and to drive social and economic change in a proactive way.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708(01))

<sup>6</sup> [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708\(02\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708(02))

In light of the above, the Presidency has invited an external speaker to launch the debate by giving his own perspective on the issue of connecting vocational education, the labour market and wider society. Ministers will then be invited to exchange views and share experiences in relation to the following questions:

- **What is the place of VET in the future of education and the provision of skills? Do you believe that change is needed in how education and training systems are organised into sectors (schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, adult learning)?**
- **How can VET be more linked to innovation ecosystems involving research institutions, universities and enterprises?**
- **How can we support learners in developing skills to ensure a smooth entry into the labour market and long-term adaptability, and to help them to cope with the increasing pace of technological development and fast changes in working life?**
- **How can EU-level policies and funding instruments, in particular the Erasmus+ programme and the EU programme on education and training after 2020, facilitate the modernisation of VET in the EU?**