

UNION OF SKILLS INITIATIVE

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

Brussels, 17 February 2025

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Skills shortages have been existing in our industries for many decades but they remain a persistent and unsolved issue for our companies. Today, the need for new skills adapted to the twin transition has amplified this challenge, which has resulted in companies across the economy competing for the same talents, in particular in the area of “digital skills.” Indeed, technological developments are moving very fast, and, as pointed out in the Commission Action Plan to fight labour and skills shortages, up to 63% of EU companies trying to recruit information and communication technology (ICT) specialists experience difficulties in filling those vacancies. Moreover, the demand for these experts is expected to more than double by 2030. Our companies are a clear example of this as they constantly struggle to recruit and retain the highly skilled workforce that they need in the digital field, including data analysts, engineers, cybersecurity and ICT specialists. Without these experts, companies can simply not operate.

But not only our industries are short of mechanics, electric and electronic technicians, boilermakers, maintenance workers, welders, draughtsmen, electricians, as well as workers with vocational backgrounds. In addition to vocationally trained workers, the technological transformation of the industrial sector underscores the growing demand for STEM and ICT professionals as outlined above. This demand is particularly acute in (emerging) fields like electric-vehicle production which is critical to the success of the green and digital transition.

In a nutshell, competitiveness today is intrinsically linked to having the rightly skilled workforce. In the same vein, a highly skilled mobile workforce is the basis for an internationally competitive industry that provides quality jobs.

In this context, Ceemet welcomes the Commission’s forthcoming initiative on the Union of Skills. We are in general positive about the Union of Skills if designed in a broad manner and aimed at boosting skills policies at all levels while fully respecting Member States’ competence in the area of education and training. The Union of Skills, and the different initiatives derived from it, should certainly promote transnational cooperation, but without clashing with national strategies in these fields. Furthermore, the upcoming initiatives should not entail additional reporting and administration obligations for Member States nor for companies and other stakeholders.

STEM Education Strategic Plan

Workers with adequate STEM background and STEM professionals are crucial for the sustainability of the industries and for MET companies to move forward, remain competitive and successfully manage the twin transition.

However, despite the large labour market demand for these competences, the supply of STEM graduates is insufficient to meet the demand. Furthermore, the participation of women in STEM continues to remain low. This is particularly worrying.

Indeed, the EU is facing an unparalleled shortage of women¹ in STEM careers and education. Women make up 52% of the European population and make up the majority of tertiary graduates in the EU. Yet, only 2 out of 5 scientists and engineers are women and only 18% of specialists in ICT. At the same time, young girls are attracted to the STEM field in school, and in some countries perform better than boys. Over the years, they lose interest in these fields. This phenomenon of lost talent is referred to as the “leaky pipeline”.

As a result of the STEM labour gap and STEM gender gap, the competition between companies across all sectors to recruit STEM professionals as well as workers with a STEM background is becoming tougher and tougher.

Against this backdrop, **Ceemet welcomes the EU Education STEM Strategy** that should aim at reinforcing the importance of STEM at all levels: national, regional, local. The EU strategy must not collide nor overlap with the national STEM strategies that are currently being developed and implemented in some Member States. Rather, they should serve to complement and reinforce them.

In this regard, we are of the opinion that the Commission could, for example, support the development of STEM labour market analyses to identify the STEM labour gap, unemployment in STEM occupations, labour demand in STEM occupations etc. In fact, skills intelligence across STEM, including comparable data, can support national decision-makers to take the adequate measures to adapt training and education plans & curricula to STEM needs at national level as well as to develop the adequate information and advertising campaigns to raise the interest of their citizens in engaging in STEM.

Likewise, in order to close the gender gap in the STEM field, the Commission could certainly play a role in raising awareness in order to motivate more young people, especially girls and women, to pursue STEM careers and continue to invest in fighting mind-set barriers and gender stereotypes (*for example in the context of the Post 2025 Gender Equality Strategy.*) .

Very importantly, access to EU funding connected to STEM should be simplified and make user friendly.

Similarly, the EU has an important role to play in promoting the exchange of best practices in this field. Over the years, our members have been working hard in devising strategies to attract and retain young and women in STEM fields, nurture children curiosity in STEM and maintain this enthusiasm throughout school years, inspire girls and women, particularly those with

¹ Decision on a European Year of Skills

migrant backgrounds and disabilities to pursue careers in the STEM field, and foster the overall interest in STEM professions etc. Ceemet has gathered many of these successful experiences in the STEM field. We are eager to share these good practices that can be replicated and scaled up at the EU level and throughout Member States and become part of the EU STEM strategy.

Along these same lines, the Tech & Industry Employers continue to emphasize the need for EU and national policy makers to massively boost the investment in STEM related studies and disciplines. Investment in STEM must go hand in hand with encouragement of STEM education from an early age in order to ensure its uptake at a later stage.

Last but not least, training in STEM should be provided to all workers that need it. SMEs should receive support to develop STEM-friendly training programmes.

European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training

The Tech and Industry Employers' also **welcome the European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training**, which should serve to boost the excellence of VET systems as well as its attractiveness as a first-class training choice that leads to quality employment. For us, well-functioning VET systems are an indispensable tool to deliver the right skill sets that our companies need to cope with major technological changes and facilitate the transition to a green economy and reinforce Europe's industrial basis.

In this spirit, Ceemet and its member associations are pleased to continue to work actively towards the update of VET curricula and qualifications in order to align the training provisions to the skills' needs of the labour market. We hold the information regarding the changing skills needs of companies, as well as the list of shortages of occupations in industries. Our contribution to aligning VET systems and labour markets is thus crucial. VET programmes across all sectors need to be labour market-relevant, flexible and regularly updated to meet the changing skills needs of labour markets. We can certainly contribute with our expertise in this area to the development of the EU Strategy on VET.

Last but not least, the Tech and Industry Employers would like to emphasize that fostering permeability between VET, general and higher education will make it easier for students to move between systems and will increase the attractiveness of VET.

As with the STEM strategy, we insist on the need to respect national competence in the development of the EU strategy on VET. This being said, Ceemet and its member organisations welcome and seek to contribute to the debate on the future of VET.

Action plan on basic skills

As regards the Commission's objective of developing an Action Plan on Basic Skills that will address the very worrying underperformance of Europeans in basic skills, Ceemet can only welcome this initiative. The Tech & Industry Employers fully concur that basic skills are crucial to allow a person to continue learning all throughout their lives, foster employability and enable individuals to contribute to society and to achieve personal fulfilment & development. Tackling the underachievement of European citizens in the field of basic skills is thus crucial. However, as employer representatives, we would like to emphasize that the development of basic skills is the responsibility of public authorities in the field of compulsory education.

Once in the labour market, companies could certainly support basic skills training for adults. However, support should be provided for companies that invest in this type of training.

Digital Education action plan

The technological transformation of the economy and the world of work is today moving faster than ever. Hence, the need for digital skills (from basic to specialized) is critical for our industries, especially for the automotive and aerospace sectors, to successfully manage the green and digital transitions. We will not succeed in closing the skills gap without closing the digital skills challenge. However, the most recent data regarding the uptake of digital skills by both individuals and companies is not very encouraging.

Only by investing massively in digital skills and promoting digital education from the basis will enable the European Union to close the digital skills gap. Thus, we look forward to the review of the Digital Education Action Plan together with the adoption of a Roadmap on the Future of Digital Education and Training. It is key to improve the provision of digital skills across all levels of education and training to ensure its uptake at a later stage. In this respect, we await recommendations and advice on how to overcome the challenges of embedding digital competences at all stages of education and training.

Micro-credentials and Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs)

As regards the Council recommendations on micro-credentials and individual learning accounts, whereas Ceemet is convinced that “developing microcredentials” can certainly be an added value tool to support the workforce to be trained on labour market needs and to foster a culture of lifelong learning, we consider that ILAs will not be the solution to increase the motivation of workers to participate in training. We also fear that ILAs might not be the adequate tool to address the skills gap as, national experience shows, that they do not ensure the labour market relevance of training.

As a matter of fact, for us upskilling and reskilling policies also require looking into the reasons why workers, in particular low-skilled ones, are not engaging enough in continuous training and understanding the obstacles that companies face in training their workforce.

For example, the lack of motivation to participate in training, in particular of low skilled workers, has been identified as one of the major obstacles to engage in training. Making employees aware of the added value of training in order to enhance their skills development is thus crucial. In Ceemet’s views, counselling, advice and “career guidance” of workers, is a key tool to encourage them to participate in training. Workers should be mentored and receive advice on the type of training they should undertake. This training should be adapted to the workers’ competences as well as connected to the company’s needs.

Similarly, SMEs, which are the vast majority of MET companies, face specific issues when it comes to putting in place training schemes due to limited financial resources, lack of personnel, lack of training facilities or an inexistent dedicated human resources department. Targeted support, especially financial support, must be deployed in a simple and user- friendly manner for companies, in particular SMEs, to deploy the right skilling schemes adapted to the needs of labour markets.

The role of social partners

As said above for the Tech & Industry Employers it is vital that re-skilling and up-skilling policies be put at the core of a renewed European industrial strategy.

In this regard, we fully concur with the Commission analysis that social dialogue is key for defining and implementing policies aimed at supporting workers' skills development, portability and (fostering) their professional training and reskilling, as well as for the governance of the training system.

Social partners at all levels have a critical role to play in anticipating and managing skills' needs and organising up and re-skilling. For example, they are key actors in counselling and guiding employees, especially low skilled, on the importance of undergoing training as well as in furnishing information about the nature of training, tailored to companies' needs and workers' skill sets.

Moreover, they hold the information regarding up- and re-skilling schemes that have proven to be successful at the national and regional level and have effectively boosted training participation in our industries. We therefore call on EU policymakers to facilitate a structured exchange of best practices and leverage these successful examples.

Again, here we highlight the role of social partners and industry in the development of strategies on the anticipation of skills needs and in the up-dating of VET curricula.

In essence, social partners must be actively consulted and involved in the formulation and the deployment of skills policies at all levels.

The EU Talent Pool

Regarding the EU talent pool, Ceemet is supportive of this proposal, as we believe that it will be yet another manner to overcome skills and labour shortages in all sectors and promote international recruitment. For us, the talent pool has to be opened to all workers, including low, medium and highly skilled workers and be user friendly and easy to navigate: both for employers (including SMEs) and potential employees (TCNs).

We are happy to read that the EU Talent Pool will be open for all jobseekers from third countries residing outside the Union. Thus, while it seems right that efforts to help attract people with the right skills to meet the needs of the EU labour market initially focus on “workers” who are part of the Talent Partnerships, we should not forget that the pool should equally benefit all jobseekers and not only those from countries that are part of the “Talent Partnership” Initiatives. In this regard, we are concerned that the tool will end up facilitating the recruitment of certain workers (Talent Partnerships) over others.

Working in partnerships

The Commission background note highlights the importance of working in partnerships to address the skills gap. We fully concur with the Commission on this aspect. We support the need to promote and strengthen cooperation between all stakeholders, including social partners, education and training providers, employers and industry etc. Reinforced

cooperation between all stakeholders constitutes a fundamental step to successfully address the skills gap.

Ceemet is already actively involved in large partnerships focused on addressing skills shortages including the Automotive Skills Alliance (ASA), the transition pathway for the mobility ecosystem etc. The mix of stakeholders that constitute these large partnerships is indispensable to find forward-looking solutions from different angles in the area of skills. Moreover, these large partnerships, such as the TRIREME project initiated in the frame of the Automotive Skills Alliance, serve to collect, share and analyse good examples of national, regional, local, and company initiatives and social partners' activities that have proven to be successful in tackling the social aspects of the green and digital transitions. Likewise, they also serve to analyse the "less successful" practices in order to identify what has not worked and further develop policy recommendations on that basis.

Career guidance

Last but not least, Ceemet would like to refer to career guidance that is not mentioned in the Commission background note. Whereas we would like to insist on the fact that career guidance is a national competence, Ceemet highlights the need for Member States to invest in effective, practical, and flexible career guidance systems that can inform and guide young people to opt for a STEM-related academic path, vocational education and training, and as a result, to work for the industries.

Career advisors, schools' counsellors and teachers need to be aware of the varied career development opportunities in VET as well as with the multiple employment opportunities intrinsically linked to STEM studies in order to motivate young people to choose VET as a starting point for professional career or to follow STEM studies and disciplines.

Moreover, it is crucial that counsellors and career guiders have a knowledge about industry and are also constantly upskilled and re-skilled themselves in order to be able to keep up with changing trends in the labour market including new skills needs and employability opportunities. Eventually, it is important that career guidance is free from gender stereotypes.
