



EURODIACONIA RESPONDS TO 'A NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE'

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Eurodiaconia is a network of 47 organizations in 32 European countries providing social services and working for social justice. Founded in the Christian tradition, Eurodiaconia works to ensure that our societies provide opportunities for all people to live in dignity and fulfilment. Ensuring that people are equipped with the right set of skills to promote inclusive growth and develop their full potential as citizens in close relation with their communities is a key element of our members' mission.

In practice, Eurodiaconia members' commitment to skills is reflected in their provision of work integration services for unemployed persons, persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, persons with disabilities and other groups of people for whom skilling interventions pave the way for work inclusion. Another core area of work for our members are health and social care services; in our members' view, the skilling of staff in the sector is –together with qualification and training- a cornerstone to guarantee quality in the provision of services, especially in a context where staff shortages combined with rising dependency ratios proves challenging to that aim. Finally, as actors whose activity is closely interwoven with communities, Eurodiaconia members also provide non-formal education and skills, transferable to the labour market, through social and community activities, as well as by volunteering opportunities.

In this context, Eurodiaconia welcomes the launch of a New Skills Agenda for Europe¹ as an ambitious effort which points in the right direction to achieve a Social Triple A, boosting employment, competitiveness and economic growth in Europe whilst also ensuring social inclusion and well-being. Access to skills is a bridge to build better and more equal opportunities for people and promote inclusive economic growth. This is, in the eyes of Eurodiaconia, an essential and priority dimension of the Agenda. Strategic as skills are to make the EU a more competitive economic area, the positive social distributive effects of investing in skills cannot be overlooked, especially in the light of rising inequalities during the years of economic crisis. In addition, skills are key enablers for community building and citizenship; they are, therefore, essential to build cohesion in our societies and in the EU as a whole. The opportunity and core relevance of the recently launched Agenda, if targeted with these factors in mind, is consequently unquestionable.

Civil society has the right 'know-how' to deliver on the Agenda and its Skills Guarantee

- The New Skills Agenda comprises a set of 10 actions that will be carried out between 2016 and 2018. As part of these actions, a proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee has already been launched². The Skills Guarantee is targeted at adults with low qualifications –below completed upper secondary education– and aims to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

¹ COM (2016) 381/2, *A New Skills Agenda. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness*.

² COM (2016) 382 final, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Skills Guarantee*.





Eurodiaconia fully agrees with the idea that upgrading the skills of those with lower qualifications should be a priority. In addition, it is positive to see recognized in the text the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) as part of potential partnerships which implement the Skills Guarantee on the ground, together with social partners, education and training providers, employment services and other actors³.

However, Eurodiaconia believes that CSOs role should be further promoted in light of their wide experience of skilling actions for persons currently unable to access the labour markets. These groups are, firstly, usually correlated with lower qualification levels and, secondly, have weaker links with other suppliers of skills such as social partners, public employment services, providers of formal education and training, etc. Furthermore, the variety of service users gathered around not-for-profit providers of work inclusion services, sometimes with complex needs, makes CSOs a ready actor to provide tailor-made learning offers, which is one among three pillars in the Skills Guarantee. If people with low qualifications are to constitute the main target of the Skills Guarantee, CSOs should therefore be recognized as among the main actors in its implementation.

Further to this, and beyond the Skills Guarantee level, the Agenda's stress on dialogue with social partners –and employers, in particular- as a key engine for skill development and a better match between supply and demand of talent is only a very partial approach to these goals. It is essential to recognize CSOs' role as employers on an equal footing. Besides, in light of their vast experience of service provision under social enterprise frameworks, CSOs are better prepared to deliver on social entrepreneurship skills, which constitute a building block of the Agenda. Eurodiaconia, therefore, calls for a more adequate mainstreaming of CSOs well-established role and vast potential to supply skills in the Skills Guarantee and the Agenda at large⁴.

- In order to ensure a prompt and effective delivery of the Skills Guarantee's goals, Eurodiaconia believes that lessons learned from the Youth Guarantee should be taken into account. In particular, the Skills Guarantee should aspire to a prompt implementation, have an integrated approach with accompanying social services, be more open to partnerships with CSOs and employers and be more flexible in order to accommodate users with special integration needs. In the eyes of Eurodiaconia, it is essential that the Skills Guarantee is viewed as a labour market intervention measure rather than job creation one.

Building a coherent approach to skills for unemployed persons

- The Skills Guarantee and the Agenda is potentially good news for the inclusion of unemployed persons in Europe. As Eurodiaconia stressed in its [response](#) to the proposal for a Council recommendation⁵, skills were clearly omitted from what is otherwise a well-guided plan to integrate (long-term) unemployed persons into labour markets. The Agenda has to fill in this gap and Eurodiaconia acknowledges that the design of the Guarantee, based on three steps –skills assessment, tailor-made learning offer and validation and recognition of skills individual plan and offer–, is reminiscent of the same three-step approach adopted in the Council Recommendation on the re-integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market. It is essential that the instruments in the Guarantee become quickly and seamlessly incorporated into the implementation phase of the Council Recommendation

³ *Ibid*, point 11

⁴ As an example, the omission of CSOs in the provision of transversal and soft skills (*Ibidem*, p.12) and the sole recognition of social partners is nothing less but striking.

⁵ European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market*, COM (2015) 462 final.



on LTU, which is currently underway. Only when this goal is achieved, the Agenda will realise its full potential as a device which both prevents and repairs the loss of jobs.

Defining health as a strategic sector for skill development

- In light of the pressing demographic challenges and needs of a large number of disadvantaged groups in need of quality health care services, Eurodiaconia welcomes that the Agenda recognizes the strategic character of the health sector, which is one among those included in the Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills aimed to improve skills intelligence and tackle skills shortages in specific economic sectors. However, building on our experience as providers of health and social services, Eurodiaconia recommends that the Blueprint thinks of the health and social care sector as one in order to put users' well-being at the centre of any action on skills. The Agenda would, in this way, constitute a golden opportunity to mainstream integrated care as the best way to design and deliver health services in a more effective manner, bringing health, social services and supporting activities together.
- Eurodiaconia is happy to see skills at the core of a health-related initiative considering that the provision of long-term care is a labour-intensive activity. Focusing on the skills of the staff employed in the sector will have major positive effects on the growing number of care users and, also, will represent a great boost for a sector with great potential for job creation⁶. Whilst the digital skills stressed in the Agenda represent a major component of quality staff in the health sector, Eurodiaconia calls for the Blueprint to look at skills and qualification needs from the broadest possible point of view, acknowledging the special nature of health and social care services as activities with a strong person-centred focus and, hence, involving a much wider set of skills. The experience of service providers like Eurodiaconia should be taken into account in order to have more effective piloting of skills partnerships (p. 11).

Eurodiaconia recognises the need to develop skills in the care sector, where staff often lack adequate skills due to insufficient quality training opportunities, both upon entering the profession and during career development. This is especially the case in the social care sector, where vocational training and qualifications should facilitate better career opportunities that contribute to the provision of higher quality services. Such actions should be accompanied with the availability of lifelong learning opportunities which ensure the responsiveness of staff to the changing needs and demands of service provision in the sector. Improving professional status and training would also play a positive role in terms of increasing the attractiveness of the care sector as a career option, an aspect of key importance in light of the continued rise in the demand of formal carers.

- The health and social care sector is featured by a very high mobility of professions, both within the EU and from third countries to the EU. In light of this, it is important the Agenda looks at the sector with a strategic, EU-wide perspective which aims to tackle complex and sometimes conflicting issues. For instance, the brain drain of care professionals and the need to ensure adequate protection for all EU citizens in a context where the demographic shock is, with different intensities, common to all Member States⁷.

⁶ See, for instance, the thematic fiche on *Health and health systems* published as part of the 2016 Country Specific Recommendations under the European Semester.

⁷ On this topic, see Eurodiaconia's research on [The education, training and qualifications of nursing and care assistants across Europe](#), aimed to address mobility in the sector through informed comparability of qualification and skills of professionals within and outside the EU.



Refining the Agenda's approach to migrants' skills

- One of the Agenda's strands identifies the need to make skills and qualifications more visible and comparable. As part of this, it envisages the creation of a *Skills Profile Tool for third country nationals* which contributes to an early profiling of migrants' skills and qualifications. Eurodiaconia welcomes the fact that the Agenda sees in migrants' skills an asset with a positive potential in terms of employment and economic growth in the EU. Eurodiaconia shares the sense of emergency given to understanding which are the skills, qualifications and professional experience of newly arrived migrants. Indeed, a prompt response is vital in a context where the humanitarian crisis is sometimes accompanied by a political rhetoric which wrongly identifies migrants as a net burden to the EU economy. A smart way to respond to the above mentioned emergency is to rely on experienced actors like Eurodiaconia members and their know how on skilling actions, which are the first firm step towards sustainable integration of migrants in receiving countries.
- In this regard, Eurodiaconia urges the EC to draw the Agenda fully in line with the content of the Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals⁸, where upskilling actions on migrants –especially those with lower skills and qualifications– is fully embraced and developed, with specific reference to social entrepreneurship, civic education and non-formal actions. Eurodiaconia believes it is essential that the perspective contained in the Action Plan is also reflected in the Agenda, which has instead opted to focus on allowing for the transparency, comparability and profiling of skills. Whilst this is, indeed, a topic of key importance, it nevertheless constitutes a partial and passive approach to unlocking migrants' full skill potential.
- In fact, the coherence between the profiling-driven approach to migration and a fully-fledged strategy to make the most of migrant's potential to the EU economy needs to be clarified. In particular, Eurodiaconia has a strong concern over the possibility that early profiling of migrants and refugees translates into priority action on the integration of better skilled and qualified incoming people. Eurodiaconia firmly believes that equality and humanitarian principles should in every case prevail over qualification as an indicator of incoming people's productive potential. Besides, one of the Agenda's underlying principles is that investing in people's skills will reap social and economic benefits over time. In this way, the possibility that all people benefit from social investment in skills -irrespective of their initial skill endowments- should be clearly enshrined in the Agenda and avoid every possibility to cream the better skilled migrants.

The success of the Agenda depends critically on re-examining the big picture

- The Agenda is a major policy initiative with a large strategic component. For the Agenda to thrive, it needs to be accommodated into a broader enabling macroeconomic framework. In this regard, it is essential to understand that investing on people's skills and capabilities can only be successful when such investment is not treated as a cost but an outlay which will bring positive benefits sustained over time. In its ambition, the Agenda needs to look at the bigger picture. Whilst we agree on the existence of significant skill mismatches in some sectors or occupations, as well as of low skill endowments of certain groups of people, it is important to recall that the present economic crisis has more to do with the demand side of labour markets than with the supply. Taking account of this, positive skill outcomes will only take place in an ecosystem which fully supports the need to invest in people's skills to ensure Europe's competitiveness, wellbeing and social inclusion. According to Eurodiaconia, the Agenda misses a very good opportunity to send this message.

⁸ COM(2016) 377 final



- In light of the Agenda's ambition, Eurodiaconia believes that making the best use possible of existing funding programmes is not enough. Beyond the potential adjustments in the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework for 2014-2020 foreseen in the document, Eurodiaconia firmly believes that more funding is needed to underpin the Agenda's ambitions. In any case, any concrete initiative which explores financial instruments for skills investment for SMEs through the EIB or via the EFSI⁹ should also be tailor-made to CSOs' in order to ensure delivery by a key actor in skill provision.
- In the same vein, in light of the key implications of skill development for economic growth, Eurodiaconia would also like to see a more explicit insight of the Agenda's links with the European Semester and the Europe 2020 strategy –in particular, its education and employment targets– to ensure the Agenda's real impact. It is essential as well to define the Agenda's role with regard to the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals as soon as possible. Establishing such connections will cement the Agenda's place among the long-term goals and overarching policy frameworks of the EU and, therefore, guarantee its statute as a strategic initiative.
- Access to and development of skills is rightly identified as a right for citizens in the Agenda. Accordingly, the same idea is prominently featured in key domains of the draft outline of a European Pillar of Social Rights¹⁰. Eurodiaconia fully agrees with such right-based approach to skills and, for the same reason, will be looking forward to seeing how the Pillar can act as an enabler for the Agenda's objectives. In fact, in light of the Pillar's great potential to that aim, Eurodiaconia is concerned with the absence of the Pillar in the Communication's closing section on 'Delivering the Agenda'.

We thank you in advance for your attention and remain at your disposal if you would like more information on our proposals.

Yours sincerely,



Heather Roy, Secretary General

⁹ *A New Skills Agenda*, pp. 13-14

¹⁰ Notably, on the domains devoted to 'skills, education and lifelong learning' (1), 'active support to employment' (4) and 'equal opportunities' (6). All three domains are part of the 'Equal opportunities and access to the labour market' chapter in the draft Pillar.