

Building the Union of Skills

Education as the Foundation



Building the Union of Skills: Education as the Foundation

FOUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Keep education at the forefront of developing future skills and recognise the importance of all types of skills
2. Foster lifelong learning and acknowledge the value of diverse skills development
3. Stimulate mutual and automatic recognition for all education sectors and set clear goals and criteria for the Joint European Degree and VET diploma
4. Double the Erasmus+ budget to meet the ambitions of the Union of Skills and align its goals with the European Education Area.

With this position paper, Neth-ER embraces the Commission's commitment to establishing a European Union of Skills, paving the way for a competitive Europe driven by knowledge. Neth-ER provides four recommendations to create a true European Union of Skills.

Netherlands house for Education and Research (Neth-ER) is an association based in Brussels representing eleven Dutch organisations involved in the field of education, research, and innovation.



In Depth

The education spectrum as a fan



The Dutch “waaier” (or fan model) illustrates the diverse and equal importance of different education sectors in shaping our society. Rather than ranking educational pathways as higher or lower, it emphasises their complementary roles in fostering a well-rounded, skilled, and adaptable population. This model acknowledges universities, universities of applied sciences, and vocational education and training (VET) schools as equally vital pillars of a dynamic and inclusive society. By valuing both academic and practical learning, the “waaier” ensures that individuals can develop their talents in ways that align with their strengths, ambitions, and societal needs.



I. Keep education at the forefront of developing future skills and recognise the importance of all types of skills

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise the **central role of the education sector in skills development**, ensuring curricula not only meet labour market needs but also foster lifelong learning, self-development and social contributions.
- Recognise **the importance of all skills**, including interpersonal, transversal and social-emotional abilities, alongside technical expertise, to foster adaptability, resilience in a well-rounded, resilient European society.

A central role for the education sector

Neth-ER welcomes the Commission's attention to the importance of skills development in Europe. As Mario Draghi's report highlighted, Europe's competitiveness depends on closing the skills gap both in the VET as well as the higher education sector. While building the Union of Skills to tackle this gap, the Commission must not forget the central role of the education sector in skills development.

Our education institutions are where people become prepared for the labour market of tomorrow, but its purpose and importance goes beyond this. The education sector holds a key position in the creation of a prosperous society by allowing people to learn and discover new subjects and interests. It supports people in their self-development and offers them the skills to contribute to societal challenges. It fosters lifelong learning, strengthens democratic values and enables individuals to be adaptable and resilient.

The content of the curricula offered by our education institutions must, therefore, not be solely determined by the labour market. The education sector is well equipped to match its programmes to the needs of the labour market of today and tomorrow. The cooperation between the education sector and the labour market should be supported instead of restructured through the Union of Skills.

Recognise importance of all skills

Neth-ER recognises the importance of STEM skills (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) to support the digital and green transition. However, in a rapidly changing world, people must be able to learn how to be adaptable and resilient. It is, therefore, essential to recognise the invaluable role of interpersonal, transversal and social skills as well. It is this combination of diverse skills – ranging from technical expertise to international and intercultural competences and democratic engagement – that is necessary to create a resilient European society. Education and training must, therefore, be encouraged to contribute to the development of all skills. This includes cognitive, creative, and social-emotional skills, as well as the ability to learn, adapt, and think critically. There must also always be room for learning for the sake of learning, and for self-discovery.

By fostering a diverse skill set, education equips individuals with the tools to navigate complexity, contribute meaningfully to society and shape their own futures. Skills must, thus, be defined broadly and include competences and attitudes. Together with the education sector and industry, Member States should identify similarities in how professions and skills are defined. Only then, mutual understanding of the value of different sets of skills can be established. This will also make it easier to pinpoint where exactly labour and skills shortages exist and ensure easier recognition of different qualifications. Inspiration can be drawn from national initiatives such as CompetentNL

In Depth Hydrogen Works



Hydrogen Works puts together a broad training programme in the field of hydrogen. It involves education, training, traineeships and internships at secondary vocational education, higher education and professional level. **The entire Groningen educational chain** (ROC Alfa-college, ROC Noorderpoort, Hanze University of Applied Sciences and the University of Groningen) is working together on a coordinated approach, in collaboration with the business community, social organisations and governments. This collaboration leads to a demand-driven supply of knowledge, in line with market needs.

The programme runs from 2022 to 2027 with a total size of 7 million euros and is in the process of training more than 1,000 new hydrogen experts and retraining some 325 existing energy experts and their trainers. The training programme is highly **interdisciplinary**, based on the idea that the success of new technologies depends largely on their social embedding.

Educational institutions have a responsibility to students and researchers both in-depth specialised knowledge and **broadly applicable and transversal skills** so that they can work together interdisciplinarily in a rapidly changing world; the Wubbo Ockels School for Energy & Climate contributes to this by connecting research and education and bringing science and society together. Hydrogen Works is a striking example of this.

Hydrogen Works in Brief:

- All joint vocational and higher educational institutions in the Northern Netherlands are involved, in cooperation with social partners including the business community.
- Improving education and transversal skills to respond to new challenges and stay competitive.
- The project contributes to a sustainable European energy supply.
- The hydrogen economy provides a boost to growth, innovation and jobs in the region.



II. Foster lifelong learning and acknowledge the value of diverse skills development

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Foster a **lifelong learning culture** by supporting upskilling and reskilling and promoting public-private collaboration to address skills shortages and future workforce needs.
- Integrate **STEAM** in the **STEM Education Strategic Plan** to foster creative thinking and breakdown disciplinary barriers.
- Further **develop and promote the GreenComp and DigComp** frameworks while ensuring a human-centred approach to digital and green skills development.

Create a lifelong learning culture

Neth-ER supports the Commission's dedication to creating a lifelong learning culture in education and careers. In an everchanging world, it is vital that people can continue to develop themselves. The Union of Skills brings momentum to ensure the education sector can stay well equipped to combat skills shortages and mismatches. Establishing a lifelong learning culture is also crucial for the development of green and digital education – especially with the rise of artificial intelligence – and is crucial to tackle labour shortages. Upskilling and reskilling is essential here.

Neth-ER, thus, welcomes the inclusion of up- and reskilling as one of the four pillars of the Union of Skills. It supports the Commission's plan to reevaluate state aid rules applicable to training to invest in up- and reskilling. This aligns with explorations in the Netherlands and can provide a solution for the strict separation of public and private resources for lifelong learning. The Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science already looked into the options for a role of public education institutions in up- and reskilling so both public and private partners can offer such training. The Commission should further encourage such efforts in the EU Member States.

A STEAM Education Strategic Plan

In its 2024 position paper on the European Education Area¹, Neth-ER urged the Commission to put forward a European strategy for the development of STEAM skills (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics). We, thus, welcome the Commission's STEM Education Strategic Plan. This strategy will be crucial to encourage learners to pursue careers in STEM and to tackle stereotypical gender roles. Neth-ER supports the Commission's commitment to increase the number of students involved in STEM fields as well as to attract more women and girls to STEM studies.

Other disciplines, however, should not be forgotten. Neth-ER was happy to hear Executive Vice-President Mînzatu's enthusiasm about STEAM during her hearing and to see the Commission promises to promote STEAM approaches to break down disciplinary barriers and foster creative thinking. Neth-ER urges the Commission to further include a STEAM approach in its STEM Education Strategic Plan.

¹ NETH-ER POSITION PAPER Committing to the EEA: Inclusion, Strategy & Cooperation April 2024



In Depth **LLO Katalysator**



The “**LLO Katalysator**” (Lifelong Learning Catalyst) is a Dutch initiative designed to accelerate and strengthen lifelong learning (Leven Lang Ontwikkelen, LLO) by fostering collaboration between businesses, educational institutions, and government bodies. It aims to align education and training with labour market needs, enhance access to upskilling opportunities, and support the development of flexible and digital learning pathways. By acting as a bridge between stakeholders, the LLO Katalysator helps create a future-proof learning ecosystem that enables individuals to continuously develop their skills in response to evolving societal and economic demands.



In Depth **CompetentNL**



CompetentNL is a Dutch initiative that aims to create a more transparent and accessible skills-based labour market. It focuses on mapping and recognising competencies across different sectors, ensuring that workers, employers, and educational institutions have a shared understanding of skills and qualifications. By promoting a standardised approach to skills recognition, CompetentNL helps individuals showcase their competencies more effectively, supports lifelong learning, and strengthens the connection between education and the labour market. This initiative plays a key role in fostering a dynamic and future-proof workforce in the Netherlands.

Further develop GreenComp and DigComp

The continuous development of green and digital skills must be encouraged in the Union of Skills. Neth-ER urges the Commission to diffuse and promote the GreenComp and DigComp frameworks. Options should be explored to integrate both frameworks into curricula and initial teacher education. Neth-ER looks forward to the Commission's 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills as well as the promised update of the DigComp framework.

Neth-ER believes that in both these initiatives the development of digital skills should be approached in a human-centred manner. A balanced approach should integrate technical proficiency with critical thinking, digital literacy, and responsible technology use. Regarding green skills, we welcome EVP Minzatu's commitment to support sustainability education through the work of the upcoming Teacher Academies. Just as with DigComp, Neth-ER presses the Commission to further develop GreenComp and ensure both frameworks are easily accessible for its intended users, such as curriculum developers.



III. Stimulate mutual and automatic recognition for all education sectors

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Stimulate the automatic and mutual recognition of all qualifications** through the Skills Portability Initiative, building on existing good practices and aligning it with the European Qualifications Framework.
- **Establish clear goals and criteria** for the **Joint European Degree and European VET Diploma**.
- **Streamline the implementation of microcredentials** by removing legal barriers, exchanging best practices, and coordinating efforts between the European, national and regional level.

Stimulate recognition for all qualifications through the Skills Portability Initiative

In order to address labour shortages, the automatic and mutual recognition of all types of qualifications should be stimulated. This means not only academic recognition, but also professional recognition. The Skills Portability Initiative under the Union of Skills should be the key facilitator of this together with the announced Common European framework for the automatic recognition of study qualifications and learning periods abroad in school, VET and higher education. Overall, to be successful in the ambition of automatic and fair recognition for all levels of learning, the differences between education sectors should be acknowledged to avoid conceptual confusion and to develop “fit for sector” support structures.

It is necessary that these initiatives are built on existing good practices in recognition - such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention - and are linked to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to ensure transparency and ensure skills are easily transferable. For VET specifically, Member States should find likeness in their national VET systems and professions through the best practices of previous initiatives such as

EQAVET. They should also build on the commitments made in the Osnabrück Declaration of 2020 and should continue building this forward in the renewal of the Declaration under the Danish Presidency this year.

Further inspiration for the Skills Portability Initiative can be drawn from common agreed standards to facilitate automatic recognition and from legally binding treaties such as the Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications which can be used as a blueprint for the rest of EU. Furthermore, the Union of Skills inspires to rethink recognition and explore “cross sectoral recognition” of skills, in order to enable a higher education qualification holder to “upskill” in their chosen career field with a VET module and vice versa.

Clear goals and criteria for the Joint European Degree and VET Diploma

Neth-ER supports the Commission's mission to further develop the Joint European Degree. The Joint European Degree can contribute to skills development as it would offer higher education institutes flexible and practicable access to subject-specific knowledge, research infrastructures and cross-border societal challenges and solutions. It would allow students and staff to gain experience they would not have otherwise while also building an international network. Existing tools such as the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes should be used and simplified to realise the European Degree. This will also avoid double and/or conflicting processes. Universities and universities of applied sciences should be able to implement European Degrees on a voluntary basis, emphasising the academic autonomy of education institutions.

In the case of the European VET Diploma, Neth-ER urges the Commission to initially focus on the fair, automatic and mutual recognition of VET diplomas. Neth-ER is open to the introduction of a European VET Diploma. The Commission must first focus on the automatic and mutual recognition of VET diplomas in order for the European VET Diploma to have its intended impact. In this regard, Neth-ER welcomes the European Strategy for VET as its needed as a base for an innovative, adaptive and strong VET sector.

Streamline implementation for microcredentials

Neth-ER appreciates that the Commission recognises the importance of microcredentials in order to tackle the skills gap. We highly encourage the Commission and Member States to continue working on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on the common European approach to microcredentials from 2022.

As of now there are still many obstacles within the Member States, including legal barriers, that need to be removed in order for microcredentials to be implemented. Best practices must be exchanged between European, national and regional organisations to further help the implementation of the European approach to microcredentials. Through this, implementation can be better coordinated between Member States and in turn help reach other EU goals such as better labour mobility.



IV. An adequate budget for Erasmus+ and completing the European Education Area

RECOMMENDATIONS

- At least **double the Erasmus+ budget** to ensure it can meet the ambitious goals of the Union of Skills while continuing to enhance the quality of education across Europe.
- **Enhance learning mobility** through Erasmus+ to develop essential intercultural and transversal skills and leverage **European University Alliances (EUAs) and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as flagship initiatives** for skills development.
- Align the goals of the Union of Skills with the **European Education Area** and continue **working towards its completion** by 2025.

Adequate budget for Erasmus+ to match ambitions

Throughout the years, Erasmus+ has proven to stimulate the development of skills in various ways. The introduction of the Union of Skills further proves the indispensable importance of programmes such as Erasmus+. Ambitions to reach the goals of the Union of Skills through funding from Erasmus+ should be met with an equally ambitious budget for the programme. Neth-ER calls on the Commission to at least double the budget of the next Erasmus+-programme. Without sufficient funding, it is not possible to reach these and other ambitions. The budget of Erasmus+ should not solely be used to fund the targets of the Union of Skills, but should continue to enhance the quality of education throughout Europe.

Skills development through learning mobility

The mobility experiences Erasmus+ offers add to the development of indispensable skills for European society. By participating in learning mobility, students and staff are able to cultivate intercultural and transversal skills, learn how to adapt to new environments and experience new perspectives, and are able to transform into world citizens. Developing these skills is crucial for students, as well as for teachers, researchers and staff. The necessity for a Union of Skills further proves the importance of learning mobility, especially as a way to let knowledge and skills move freely in the European market.



In Depth T-Shore



T-shore is an EU Erasmus+ project in the field of Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE), with partners from the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Denmark & Norway. It is a **partnership of SMEs, vocational schools, training providers and sectoral organisations** working toward **creating a set of harmonised curricula** for the future of the ORE turbine technicians of tomorrow. The four million euro project began in June 2022 and runs until June 2026.

The project has developed 6 regional CoVEs (Centres of Vocational Excellence), with the goal of **improving public-private cooperation** in the field, with VET at the heart of each partnership. TCNN and Noorderpoort have established the T-shore CoVE North Netherlands, and Scalda and WCM have used best-practice learned in the project to improve upon their WindDock CoVE.

The content of the harmonised curricula is based on six 'competency profiles' that were drawn from a wide-scale survey on the needs of industry. These profiles are a mix of safety, soft skills and technical skills and form the conceptual background for the Entry Level Module Programme.

This flexible, entry level (EQF3-5) programme is designed to introduce students to the core skills and knowledge required to work on board of an offshore turbine. The modules have been carefully designed to comprise a mix of e-learning, classroom learning, and realistic learning scenarios that provide vital experience of how to perform real-world maintenance on turbine components.



In Depth

Innovative Universities In Music & Arts In Europe (IN.TUNE)



Innovative Universities in Music & Arts in Europe (IN.TUNE) is the **only European University Alliance in the field of music and arts**. It brings together eight universities from North, East, South and West Europe. Its members are committed to the development of a joint long-term strategy with a strong artistic dimension for high quality education, research, innovation and service to society, becoming a role model for the wider higher education community across Europe and beyond.

One of IN.TUNE's ambitions is to continuously improve the skills of students through an exchange of expertise and experience to reinforce joint curriculum development in several work packages with a focus **on artistic skills, career skills, and research and reflective skills**. The work packages on capacity building and societal engagement also pay attention to **up- and reskilling and lifelong learning**. They focus on upskilling teachers and non-academic staff inside the institutions as well as up- and reskilling alumni and professionals working in industry. Work is also being done about circulating skills through measures on seamless mobility and automatic recognition throughout the alliance.

IN.TUNE is also active in its advocacy for **STEAM**. The value of adding the Arts to the acronym STEM is based on the insight that it is not sufficient to equip learners with skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in order to make them fit for the job market of the future, unless this goes hand in hand with creativity, critical thinking, and drive for innovation which artistic disciplines provide. IN.TUNE has formed a topical group on STEAM in the Community of Practice FOREU4ALL involving all alliances to advocate for this issue.

European University Alliances and Centres of Vocational Excellence as flagship initiatives for skills development

Neth-ER is happy that the Commission recognises the importance of the European University Alliances (EUAs) and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in the framework for the Union of Skills. Neth-ER looks forward to the proposed investment pathway for the EUAs as well as the Commission's proposed intention to further strengthen the CoVEs. Both initiatives are crucial parts of Erasmus+ that aim to transform education. Neth-ER welcomes the Commission's proposal for a pilot for transnational university-business partnerships for sectors with severe skills gaps. However, it also urges the Commission to consider how existing initiatives such as the EUAs and CoVEs can be used for this purpose as well. In both the CoVEs and EUAs, for example, education institutes are able to connect different regional ecosystems in Europe in which industry is also represented.

In general, the importance of other KA2 projects should not be forgotten. Cooperation Partnerships have proven to help the education community engage with internationalisation and achieve key objectives related to inclusion, active participation, the green transition and digitalisation, and the modernisation of European education. In all cases, a sufficiently larger budget for Erasmus+ is needed to facilitate new goals and initiatives.

Complete the European Education Area

While it is crucial the Commission gives skills development the required attention through the Union of Skills, there is still a European Education Area that needs to be completed. The goals and initiatives of the Union of Skills need to be aligned with the objectives of the European Education Area. It is crucial that the Commission continues working towards the completion of the EEA in 2025 as promised. Neth-ER underlined this in her 2024 position paper on the European Education Area. Neth-ER looks forward to the evaluation report on the European Education Area and steps to further complete the EEA.



“The experience of doing an Erasmus+ mobility semester is invaluable. The experience of studying in a different country for a period of time enables a student to come into contact with a variety of students from all different countries in Europe, thus, granting them the opportunity to improve themselves in terms of language and intercultural understanding. An Erasmus+ mobility forces students to leave what is familiar and to explore learning from a different context, a skill that is essential for one’s future in a connected Europe.”

Board Dutch National Student Association (ISO)





Netherlands house for
Education and Research

The Netherlands house for Education and Research (Neth-ER)
is the Brussels based association of eleven Dutch organisations active in
research, innovation and education. These are:

ISO – Dutch National Student Association

JOB – Union of Vocational Students

KNAW – Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

LSVb – Dutch National Student Union

MBO Raad – Netherlands Association of Vocational Education Colleges

Nuffic – Netherlands Organisation for the internationalisation of education

NWO – Dutch Research Council

TNO – Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research

NFU – Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres

UNL – Universities of the Netherlands

VH – Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences

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