

# POSITION PAPER ON THE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE OSNABRÜCK DECLARATION

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Co-signed by The Organising Bureau of European  
School Student Unions and the European  
Apprentices Network



European  
Apprentices  
Network



**OBESSU**

Organising Bureau of  
European School Student Unions

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions and the European Apprentices Network, as representatives of learners in vocational education and firm promoters of quality inclusive VET, welcome the Osnabrück Declaration and commit to bringing the learners' perspectives to its implementation.

## INTRODUCTION

As learners, we witnessed the impact of Covid-19 on Vocational Education and Training on education and the severe lack of infrastructure for digitally-ready education and training systems. With work-based learning interruptions and companies struggling, we see a big risk in continuing to promote quality opportunities for VET learners, therefore we welcome efforts made by Ministers in charge of VET in promoting digital innovation, sustainability and resilience for VET systems. We reiterate that, while a strong and well-functioning labour market is fundamental to offer quality vocational education, big investments in key competencies for lifelong learning are fundamental to building a stronger Union in which fairness thrives, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is why, while the Osnabrück Declaration represents a necessary step forwards in quality VET, it cannot be implemented without a strong commitment from Member States and all stakeholders to ensure education, training and lifelong learning, gender equality, fair wages and employment conditions, social dialogue and protection and a stronger commitment to ensuring quality employment opportunities to all and putting an end to precariousness among all generations.

## 1. RESILIENCE THROUGH INNOVATIVE AND FLEXIBLE VET

As outlined in the declaration, we believe that VET can play a stronger role in *shaping change*. Learners who choose to follow vocational training should be given the opportunity to participate in such change by contributing their demands and their vision of the future of education and the labour market. We take the opportunity of this position to re-emphasize that the purpose of apprenticeship schemes is not only to foster employability. They are more than that: they promote the personal development and career opportunities of young people. When equipped with transversal skills (e.g. entrepreneurship, communication and much more) and when VET institutions commit to empowering learners at all ages, learners have the power, the agency and the capacity to contribute their views on skills intelligence, they can shape it with developments and innovation they can promote.

Spaces like the European Alliance for Apprenticeships represent fundamental spaces for exchanges and intelligence building where learners can be welcomed as peer contributors. Such experiences should be encouraged on the national level as well through showcasing success stories and good practices. This is why we welcome the idea of exploring the possibility of creating a network expert and executives outlined in the deliverables of the Declaration and we believe learners could contribute to such a group with interesting insights and very relevant first-hand experience.

We also welcome the foreseen action of strengthening Centres for Vocational Excellence, which we believe are a great opportunity for learners. With this regard, we would like to see a commitment from Member States to promote CoVEs specifically in remote and rural areas where people of all ages are at higher risk of social exclusion and where the presence of European sentiment is more than needed than ever to counter euroscepticism through quality education and employment opportunities. Moreover, building on the European Education Area communication, we believe that Centres for Vocational Excellence can play a key role in intergenerational learning, career development and mentoring, as also highlighted in this communication.

From the learner's perspective, the impact of the COVID crisis on apprenticeship is massive. We are convinced that the crisis will affect apprentices and apprenticeships for the period 2020-2025 and we believe this could be strongly reflected in the Declaration. Therefore, we believe it is crucial to conduct research at all levels to assess the negative impacts adequately from the point of view of all stakeholders. We believe this assessment should take into account well-being and be linked with the work of the expert group which will work on creating supporting learning environments as part of the European Education Area. From our perspective, this is necessary to shape a fact-based basis for effective policy measures that ensure resilience in a long-term perspective.

We highly welcome that the declaration once more reaffirms the importance of implementing the EFQEA at national level. From our perspective it is crucial to not only to reaffirm it but also to introduce mandatory reports by the Member States concerning how they ensure that access to fair and quality apprenticeship is a right for young and adult learners. Regular reporting should also include how the EFQEA is enforced in national laws and at company level to ensure fair pay and working conditions for apprentices, as we believe this is key in the short-term future of apprenticeship and vocational training.

## **2. ESTABLISHING A LIFELONG LEARNING CULTURE**

We welcome the idea that adaptability, flexibility and permeability of training pathways represents a fundamental asset to making VET more attractive. We also strongly believe in building education systems that have a strong lifelong learning culture, and that is why we believe that LLL should be encompassed in a broader way than only with upskilling and reskilling through CVET. As we outlined in the introduction, we believe that key competences for lifelong learning should be better encompassed in training programmes and that a holistic approach to lifelong learning is fundamental to achieving even greater attractivity and added value to VET. As learners, we commit to continue bringing our perspective on developing and recognising key competences acquired in formal, non formal and informal learning also through platforms like Europass. We also commit to continue exploring issues of permeability between VET and higher education, convinced that a successfully completed VET path should ensure access to further and higher education.

### 3. A GREEN LINK IN VET

The commitment towards a more environmentally just Europe is without doubt one of the main priorities of OBESSU and EAN. Learners throughout Europe and the world have shown policy makers the importance of a green transition and have been able to put this topic at the top of the agenda worldwide. While we believe that sustainability is a fundamental concern for industry and the labour market, we would like to stress that this is first and foremost a concern for the well-being and sustainability of this and future generations. As such, we cannot stress enough how important the involvement of learners in defining environmentally just transition plans is. However, without the security of having their basic needs met through fair wages and decent working conditions, it is tremendously difficult for apprentices and VET learners to engage with the debate around sustainability, therefore quality VET systems and social protections for learners are a key to this success.

We believe that deliverables foreseeing exchanges of good practices in Europe are a fundamental asset, in which VET institutions need to involve social partners and other relevant stakeholders (including learners) to achieve more comprehensive understanding of strategies that all actors in training institutions can put in place. We would also stress the importance of learning methods, curricula and WBL strategies from outside of our continent and to promote EU programmes outside of our continent, to better create strategies for sustainable development in accordance with Sustainable Development Goals.

### 4. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

We live in an extremely interconnected world, where mobility is the norm rather than an exception. While we welcome the efforts to commit to reinforced mobility, with specific regards to long term mobility, we cannot avoid highlighting promoting mobility without tackling social exclusion would be futile. The participation to the Erasmus+ programme by VET learners is still intimately connected to their social backgrounds and opportunities. Many highlight that VET has the capacity to unlock the potential of migrant and refugee children (Lamonica et al, 2020<sup>1</sup>; Cedefop, 2017<sup>2</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>3</sup>) and while we reject that non-EU citizens should be restricted to VET as they have the right to any educational path and follow their talents, we believe the challenges to mobility in VET are many, also due to the concentration of migrant learners in training institutions. From mobility rights to language barriers and families who don't see the added value of mobility, from differences in social protection to different working cultures and insufficient financial compensation, mobility for young people and adults in VET is not to be taken for granted. As pointed out by the Commission in many occasions, the young age of learners and their language training also remain great barriers to matching the numbers of mobility opportunities in VET to the ones in HE.

  
<sup>1</sup> <https://ervet-journal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40461-020-00092-x>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9120\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9120_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/1ca47cd9-en.pdf?expires=1605268475&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=0884CC8AAF79EDBB124C292D1A1CE587>

To ensure effective mobility programmes for all learners, Member States need to tackle the issue of social disparity in VET and the need to first equalise opportunities in such institutions and need to invest further in intercultural and language skills and internationalisation strategies, as outlined in the Declaration. When it comes to financial support for apprentices going abroad, it is necessary to ensure that funding in the different Erasmus+ programmes is equally balanced and that apprentices are offered clear and extensive information on their mobility possibilities and conditions.

Moreover, in an interconnected Europe where ideas, innovations and experiences travel beyond borders, young learners need further be considered mobile citizens. While parts of the private sector has shown their ability to recognise qualifications from all around Europe, Member States - we believe - should further invest in mutual recognition and validation of apprenticeships and wider vocational prior qualifications among and from outside Europe.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Learners are experts in their own education, and we wholeheartedly welcome the efforts made by European Institutions and Ministers in charge of VET in including learners in this Declaration.

As organisations, both OBESSU and the EAN are committed to implementing this Declaration with all parties involved and be considered as relevant stakeholders in VET, bringing a critical perspective of the learners and in their interest to ensure real representation of learners at all levels.