

EFEE Statement on the “European Initiative on individual learning accounts to empower all individuals to participate in training”

Brussels, 27 April 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped a new reality for European economies and societies, accelerating the progress of already existing trends, such as the digital and green transition. With the advancement of new technologies, the demand for new skills followed. Currently, however, these demands cannot be met. For instance, although 9 out of 10 jobs will require digital skills in the future, only 4 out of 10 adults are able to meet such requirements.

In a long-term run, this skills gap will have catastrophic consequences for European economies and societies, leading to severe skills shortages and skills mismatches. Employers will face severe difficulties to fill jobs with employees having the right skills and talents. At the same time, employees, especially those being already disadvantaged as they are low-skilled or long-term unemployed, will find it even harder to find employment and thus, are more likely to end up in a cycle of social exclusion, which will be difficult to exit.

As a European sectoral social partner in education and representative of 60 European education employers and formal education providers at levels of education from 26 countries, the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) therefore welcomes the “*European Initiative on individual learning accounts to empower all individuals to participate in training*” and invites the European Commission to consider the following points:

1. As indicated in the inception impact assessment, one of the main obstacles hindering adult learners to make use of existing training opportunities are of financial nature. This is especially true of disadvantaged groups of learners such as long-term unemployed, low-skilled workers, NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) or migrants. To overcome financial barriers, it is essential to build on already-existing initiatives and funds at national level, acknowledging the principle of subsidiarity and national competence. As the first step, we encourage the Commission to undertake a mapping, to capture the state of the complexity and specificities of adult skills provisions systems in Europe. In doing so, it becomes clear that there is a one-size-fits-all approach possible as different professional learning schemes and vouchers already successfully exist in Member States.

Given the great number and variety of national education employers we represent in the field of adult education, we encourage the Commission to involve us at all stages in this design and setting up of the individual learning accounts, starting from its early stage of this mapping process.

2. As the representatives of education employers and formal education employers, we believe that investment in learning is crucial. However, it is important to highlight that the funding of accounts cannot be mandatory for employers as it has been suggested. This could lead to new fixed costs for employers, representing an additional burden if not somehow compensated. Another important consideration needs to be taken with regards to the source of the funding. If accounts are funded from public finances, there will be a risk that financial resources are somewhere lacking in the education sector where they are actually needed. Such a solution could lead to less predictable funding opportunities for education employers, causing in turn a negative impact on the qualitative progress of the education sector. To avoid such scenarios and ensure appropriate and sustainable funding, it is essential to set up a mapping of the current state of play of national budgetary matters available for education as well as a simulation of a therewith bound budgetary change triggered by the initiative.
3. The second main barrier impeding learners to take up upskilling and reskilling opportunities is motivation. In our view, this obstacle is the most urgent one to tackle as motivation represents the incentive to all action and, specifically, progress in learning. Thus, financial incentives alone will not reach the most vulnerable target group as in the end it all comes down to learning culture and the change of mindsets. To achieve this necessary spark, the strengthening of the bottom-up approach, bringing different stakeholders together and fostering communication and the exchange of information between people will be crucial. For this reason, the involvement of social partners from the early onset of this process is of absolute importance.
4. Given the wideness of the lifelong learning market, we would like to highlight that the initiative can only be effective if it first and foremost strives for an integrated solution. For this reason, involving the collaboration of stakeholders from the public and private sector is of absolute crucial necessity. Furthermore, we consider that this initiative should follow a dual approach, strengthening the collaborative dialogue between in-company training and training offered by education providers. This approach could be very beneficial for improving the employability of certain disadvantaged groups of learners such as NEETs. In this regard, a clear communication of responsibility-sharing amongst the different stakeholders is an essential prerequisite, which, in turn, requires strong institutional support as guidance to achieve qualitative and clear results. Moreover, we would like to stress that the collaborative dialogue between in-company training and formal educators is also crucial as they go through an educational quality audit together.

5. Connected to this, we would like to emphasize the importance of quality assurance with regards to the training provided within the individual learning accounts. A fundamental challenge which needs to be taken into consideration in this regard is that individual modules cannot be linked to the European Qualification Framework as the regulations in CVET differ amongst Member States.
6. As a social partner in education, EFEE has committed itself to strengthen the social dialogue, making a valuable contribution to the tackling of challenges against the backdrop of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4. We strive to turn these challenges into opportunities, creating more sustainable, inclusive and fair learning environments, enabling each learner to grow into an active and responsible participant of today's and future societies. Against this backdrop, fostering the collaborative dialogue between stakeholders of the education sector, specifically those from higher education, as well as stakeholders from the labour market has become one of our key priorities. In doing so, we ensure coherence instead of divergence in needs and supply between both sectors. Hence, to avoid a future mismatching of needs in both sectors, we once more like to emphasize the importance of the continuous involvement of social partners in the framework of this initiative.



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