

Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position on a European-level graduate tracking system of VET learners and tertiary education students

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Background

The European Commission established a working group on graduate tracking systems for the mandate of 2018–2020 following the proposal of the European Commission to the Council which adopted a [Recommendation on tracking graduates](#) in November 2017. The Council Recommendation on tracking graduates asked the EU to facilitate the exchange and sharing of expertise and knowledge between organisations in different countries in order to support progress at national level; the collection of new comparable data on graduate outcomes across EU Member States through a pilot European graduate survey; and capacity building and cooperation amongst stakeholders on improving graduate tracking.

The participants of the working group are representatives of ministries of education or of national statistical offices, stakeholders and social partners. The working group established 4 taskforces to work on *the development of options on comparable European graduate data* (Task force 1), *collecting information on mobile graduate learners and employees* (Task force 2), *collection of information on administrative data items* (Task force 3), and *principles and standards for VET* (Task force 4). ETUC has a representative in Task force 4 and cooperates with ETUCE representative in Task force 1. The Report of the Graduate tracking working group is foreseen to be finalised and published in October including recommendations to ministers of education in the EU/EFTA/EEA countries.

One of the groups piloted a European-level graduate tracking survey and the European Commission has published [two reports](#) on 5 June 2020 arguing for the benefits of “an EU-wide graduate tracking system”.

Joint ETUC and ETUCE position

We, as representatives of workers’ trade unions and education trade unions, consider the plans of the European Commission towards introducing a European-level system of tracking graduates’ achievements in the labour market problematic for several reasons. We understand, as we are represented in the European Commission’s Graduate Tracking Working group, that according to the recent plans, the final report of the working group will propose to the EU member states to introduce a European-level graduate

tracking survey, in addition to or blended into national graduate tracking surveys where such exist, to be financed partially by the EU and participating EU member states, and supported by a to-be-established EU-level Secretariat and national contact points. Our concern is that while the European Commission's draft report highlights the voluntary nature of the participation of the countries within such a harmonized survey, it foresees that all EU member states would take part in this survey by 2028.

1. We support the work of the European Commission's expert group on bringing together experts from ministries of education, national statistical offices, stakeholders and social partners to a **learning platform** to exchange experience on national and regional graduate tracking systems. We believe that graduate tracking for the sake of improving information about graduates' possibilities in the labour market is **important for the governments and social partners** to develop together, within **social dialogue**, effective policy solutions and actions on job security, adult learning and employee training to support graduates' successful employability and just transition in a fair and quality labour market. In addition, graduate tracking should improve **equal access to education and training** especially for the vulnerable groups, social-economically disadvantaged people, and ensure inclusiveness in all fields of studies when giving feedback to education.
2. We understand that there are discussions within the European Commission's Graduate Tracking Working group to introduce a **European-level graduate survey** and shape it around questions to the graduates on their employment status, working conditions, geographical destination of employment, employment in relation to fields of study, link of level of employment and qualification level, education level of parents, career progression, mismatch between study subjects and employment, reasons of different level of employment and study, skills mismatch, study mobility, social mobility and integration, learning experience of the graduate in relation to employment, employment duration, employee satisfaction, job search duration, and work based learning experience. We think that **national surveys among graduates and administrative data on employability** together are important tools to gain information about permeability of learners between education and the labour market. However, these data need to be interpreted in line with information about the **possibilities companies provide to young workers**, eg fair recruitment and retention processes, quality and inclusive employee training, fair working condition and appropriate salary, and career possibilities. In addition, many young workers accept jobs they do not want due to the **absence of social protection**. In addition, employability of the graduates depends on many factors including the number of vacancies in the region. It is important to provide **feedback to the education institutions** on the graduates' achievements in the labour market, but we ask to be careful about translating these results to introduce major changes in the education curricula in line with labour market needs. We underline that the

achievements of the graduates in their job search and recruitment, and their possibility to fully use their skills and competences and learning outcomes in their jobs depend to a great extent on the **possibilities the employers provide** to them. The European Skills and Jobs survey of CEDEFOP shows that 45% of the workers think that their skills do not fully match to the jobs they do. It is also essential that employers understand better the qualifications and learning outcomes of those they recruit and follow the skills development of their employees throughout their career in the same company. 26% of workers who started their job with matched skills to the job claim to have become overskilled over time, while **18% of adult employees experienced that their skills were not used effectively in the work place and they became underskilled**.¹ The overskilled are mostly higher-educated male workers, typically employed in middle- or lower-skilled occupations (plant and machine operators, elementary jobs) and certain sectors (hospitality, arts and entertainment). Nevertheless, **more than one in five (22%) EU employees fail to develop their skills in their current jobs also due to lack of training provision**. 70% of the companies suffer from skills shortages but few of them link this to obstacles they create to find skilled workers, eg recruitment problem, geographical location of the company, salary level and working conditions.² These problems will be more serious following the impact of the **COVID-19 crisis** on companies and their budgets to be allocated to training of their employees.

3. From the abovementioned reasons it is not appropriate, even dangerous, to draw conclusions from graduate tracking survey results with the aim to **reform education systems** and use such results to blame graduates' education, the schools, teachers and trainers for the employability of the graduates and accuse them of ineffectiveness and low quality education. We remind the European Commission about the importance of implementing the **first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights** which clearly underlines that the purpose of education is to prepare the learner to become a democratically responsible citizen as well as to prepare for the labour market" Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to **participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market**".
4. We note that the Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates³ called the European Commission to establish a group of experts to progress the recommendations, develop the pilot phase of a European graduate survey in tertiary education, and "*should the pilot phase prove successful*, the Commission will consult Member States about whether to proceed to a full roll-out of a European graduate survey in tertiary education". We note that we are not

¹ CEDEFOP, 2018 [Insights into skill shortages and skill mismatch](#)

² CEDEFOP, 2015 [Skills, qualifications and jobs in the EU: the making of a perfect match?](#)

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017H1209%2801%29>

convinced that a European level **graduate tracking pilot**, which was tested among few higher education students, should be a recommendation to the EU member states and be potentially extended to VET graduates. While there are **many European-level skills intelligence** on employability of young people (by Eurostat, OECD, Cedefop, etc) we wonder what benefit the introduction of a European-level graduate tracking system would bring to the citizens of Europe, social partners, teachers and trainers, learners and workers. In addition, many countries have well-established **national tracking systems** for purposes (information on education and employment, funding, etc) and under different methods (collection of statistics or surveys among graduates following different time periods after graduation). Therefore, we doubt about the **usefulness** of such a single European-level survey.

5. At the same time, it is essential to ensure **data safety** of the respondents of any graduate tracking surveys and **transparency of the results of graduate tracking** among interested actors, eg the learners and social partners. For the VET sector the expert group developed a common set of principles to improve national tracking systems, where necessary, which we consider a very practical and helpful tool. However, we believe that graduate tracking systems at national level should be further developed in order to gather information also about learners who attended **CVET courses**.
6. We have also strong concerns related to the **governance, the ownership and the use of the information** derived from a single EU-level survey on graduates as an EU-level centralised graduate tracking survey and system would monitor the graduates' achievements but also would have more intelligence and impact on employment and education systems of Europe, while the first strongly depends on **national social dialogue and collective agreements** and the second clearly is a national competence. In addition, we worry that such a harmonised European-level graduate tracking system would neglect **national competences on education and institutional autonomy of vocational and higher education institutions on developing curricula** when linking graduates' employability to learners' programmes. We believe that such a survey would not only **harmonise graduate tracking systems** but have an attempt of **harmonising learning outcomes and education programmes** while ignoring the **competence of the industry social partners on updating and developing professional and occupational profiles in VET**.
7. The European Commission plans to ask the Member States to set up **national centres/reference points on graduate tracking** of both higher and vocational education and training and to establish a European secretariat for monitoring graduate tracking systems via these national centres according to annual work programmes. We question how the **relevant social partners from the education sector and industries should be involved and play a role in the work of these national centers**.

8. We believe that a European-level graduate tracking survey among higher education students may have negative impact on **institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions**. We recall the Paris Communiqué which stressed that “Academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education form the backbone of the European Higher Education Area”.
9. Finally, we discourage **using ESCO⁴** in relation to defining occupations of graduates within surveys about graduates and in relation to the planned future European level graduate tracking survey, as the results would be misleading. We remind that learning requirements and work tasks behind a commonly agreed title of occupation mentioned within ESCO usually are different in the countries.

⁴ ESCO: [European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations](#)