

SOCIAL PARTNERS' CONSULTATION ON THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

CEI-Bois contribution

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1. Introduction

The European Confederation of Woodworking Industries (CEI-Bois) represents 22 European and National organisations from 16 countries and is the body representing the industrial European wood sector: more than 160,000 companies employing 930,000 workers in the EU. Moreover, CEI-Bois has been recognised by Eurofound as the most representative European employer organisation in the woodworking sector.

CEI-Bois welcomes the launch of a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training (VET). A strong, attractive and future-ready VET system is essential to ensure the competitiveness, resilience and sustainability of Europe's industrial base.

The following contribution reflects the perspective of the European woodworking industries in response to the questions raised in the consultation.

2. Main challenges

From the perspective of the European woodworking industries, the main challenges are the following:

- **Capitalisation and scaling-up of existing initiatives**

Over recent years, numerous initiatives aligned with the objectives of the proposed Strategy have been developed within the wood-based sector, often supported by EU funding programmes and based on targeted research into skills needs and technological developments. These initiatives have generated valuable knowledge, tools and training approaches. A key challenge is ensuring more systematic capitalisation and wider uptake of such results across Member States. The forthcoming Strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen mechanisms for scaling up and embedding successful sectoral practices into mainstream VET systems.

- **Attractiveness of VET and sectoral image**

Despite strong employment outcomes, VET pathways in manufacturing and craftsmanship continue to face image challenges. This affects enrolment in wood-related programmes and contributes to persistent shortages in occupations within the sector. Improving the attractiveness and visibility of modern, sustainable and technologically advanced wood-related careers remains essential.



- **Responsiveness to technological change**

The woodworking industries are undergoing rapid transformation driven by digital manufacturing, automation, AI and circular economy requirements. VET systems must be sufficiently agile to respond to these developments. Ensuring continuous updating of curricula, strengthening links between initial and continuing VET and supporting lifelong learning are critical to maintaining competitiveness.

- **SME-related constraints**

The woodworking sector is predominantly composed of SMEs. While SMEs are central to apprenticeship provision and practical training, they often face resource and administrative constraints. Supporting SMEs for their participation in high-quality work-based learning is therefore essential.

3. Priorities of the VET Strategy

CEI-Bois supports the main areas of focus outlined in the background note, including innovation, digitalisation, AI, circular economy, etc. However, the importance of transversal competences and soft skills could be stated more explicitly. Recognising these skills as integral to vocational excellence would strengthen employability and SME competitiveness.

Regarding concrete actions that could be prioritised and supported at European level, CEI-Bois suggests:

- Establishing structured mechanisms to identify, disseminate and scale up successful VET-related project results, including training tools that integrate technical and transversal competences.
- Encouraging stronger links between VET providers, SMEs, research centres and industrial value chains. Such cooperation environments are particularly well suited to develop integrated learning approaches combining technical, digital, green and transversal skills.
- Strengthening work-based learning by reducing administrative burdens for SMEs, providing targeted financial incentives where appropriate and facilitating exchange of best practices in apprenticeship models.
- Supporting tools enabling quicker integration of digital, AI-related and green competences into training programmes.
- Improving attractiveness and permeability by promoting flexible pathways between VET, higher VET and tertiary education, reinforcing career progression opportunities. Clear progression routes also enhance the attractiveness of VET and support the development of entrepreneurial and project-management competences.

4. European cooperation

Effective implementation requires structured and long-term cooperation frameworks.

The Strategy should facilitate regional and European sectoral partnerships bringing together social partners, VET providers (initial, higher and adult education), research centres, regional authorities and SMEs. Such partnerships can conduct forward-looking analyses on technological and market developments and translate them into concrete training updates.

The Strategy should provide formal and operational mechanisms ensuring that European and national social partners are effectively involved in skills intelligence and anticipation exercises, curriculum development and updating, monitoring labour market relevance and dissemination of good practices.



Close coordination between the VET Strategy and EU industrial, competitiveness and sustainability initiatives would enhance coherence and effectiveness.

5. Sectoral skills needs

The woodworking industries are experiencing structural transformation linked to sustainability objectives, digitalisation of production processes and evolving market expectations. The key challenge over the next 5–10 years is not only quantitative labour supply, but the qualitative adaptation of competences to ensure sectoral resilience, competitiveness and innovation capacity.

Across the sector, the following competence areas are expected to require particular attention:

- Integration of sustainability principles into vocational profiles, including resource efficiency, material optimisation, waste reduction and circular use of wood-based materials.
- Understanding of circular value chains, including life-cycle thinking, durability, reparability and responsible sourcing practices.
- Digital competences linked to production processes, including the use of digital tools in design, planning and manufacturing environments.
- Capacity to adapt to technological change, particularly in SMEs where new technologies are introduced progressively and require flexible workforce responses.
- Interdisciplinary cooperation along the value chain, as innovation increasingly depends on coordination between designers, engineers, production staff and clients.
- Continuous upskilling and reskilling mechanisms, ensuring that workers can update their competences throughout their careers in response to regulatory, environmental and technological developments.
- Enhanced cooperation between training providers and industry, to ensure that curricula reflect evolving production realities and sustainability standards.

The sector's structure, predominantly composed of SMEs, requires training systems that are flexible, modular and accessible. Ensuring that VET systems support lifelong learning and rapid adaptation to change is therefore essential. The European VET Strategy can support this adaptation by:

- Encouraging systematic integration of green and digital competences across vocational programmes.
- Supporting agile mechanisms for updating occupational standards and curricula.
- Facilitating cooperation between social partners and education providers.
- Promoting accessible lifelong learning opportunities tailored to SME environments.
- Supporting dissemination and broader uptake of tools and methodologies developed through sectoral initiatives.

By focusing on resilience, adaptability and innovation capacity, the VET Strategy can strengthen the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the European woodworking industries.

6. Sector-specific challenges

Several core occupations in the woodworking industries remain shortage occupations across many regions. Increasing enrolment, improving completion rates and enhancing the attractiveness of these careers are key priorities.

Sectoral training initiatives demonstrate that regularly updating training offers is essential to maintain relevance. Supporting agile sector-driven updating mechanisms is therefore important.



Ensuring that SMEs can continue to provide high-quality work-based learning requires practical support measures and simplified procedures.

7. Concluding remarks

CEI-Bois welcomes the development of a European Strategy for VET as a strategic instrument to strengthen Europe's industrial competitiveness and support the twin transition.

The Strategy should:

- Build on existing sectoral expertise and EU-supported initiatives.
- Strengthen structured involvement of social partners.
- Support SMEs in delivering high-quality work-based learning.
- Integrate digital, green and transversal competences.
- Enhance attractiveness and permeability of vocational pathways.
- Align skills development with Europe's industrial and sustainability ambitions.

CEI-Bois remains committed to contributing constructively to the further development and implementation of the Strategy.