Critical observations on the Herning Declaration in the context of the Osnabrück Declaration

1. Continuity and strengthened commitment

Positive:

The Herning Declaration reaffirms the goals of Osnabrück, maintaining focus on resilience, inclusiveness, digitalisation, and green transition in VET. It also clearly builds on existing EU-level strategies like the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Council Recommendation on VET, and the Skills Agenda.

Critical point:

While continuity is valuable, the Herning Declaration could go further in evaluating *what has worked* and *what has not* in the 2021–2025 period. There's little critical self-assessment or learning from gaps in Osnabrück implementation.

2. Shift from recovery to competitiveness and technological readiness

Positive:

The Herning Declaration reflects a clear pivot from post-COVID "recovery" (Osnabrück's priority) toward future competitiveness and managing advanced technologies, including AI and XR (extended reality). It also integrates recent EU-level developments such as the AI Act, Europe on the Move, and Year of Skills, showing responsiveness to policy evolution.

Critical point:

Although the declaration embraces emerging technologies, the ethical and pedagogical implications of AI, big data, and immersive tools in VET are underexplored. There is also the risk of techno-centrism: technological readiness may overshadow human-centred, inclusive approaches if not balanced.

3. More operational clarity at national and EU Levels

Positive:

Herning continues the structure of Osnabruck declaration with the clear division of actions: National level (e.g. teacher shortages, adult learning, inclusive mobility) vs. European level (e.g. strategy-making, Erasmus+, international partnerships). This structure allows for better tracking of responsibilities.

Critical point:

However, national actions rely heavily on voluntary engagement, especially for sensitive areas like teacher well-being, mental health, and gender equality in STEM. There is also still a lack of binding accountability mechanisms or benchmarks to ensure national progress. However, we do have different structures within each of the countries which still affects the unification of the European Education Area.

4. Inclusiveness and social fairness – maintained but not elevated

Positive:

Herning upholds the principle of inclusiveness as core to quality VET, continuing Osnabrück's equity agenda. Also, targets for gender in STEM, adult participation in CVET, and mobility are specified, which is a positive step.

Critical point:

The approach to inclusiveness is still mainly quantitative (targets, participation rates), with less emphasis on qualitative inclusion (e.g. learner voice, culturally responsive pedagogy, barriers for migrants or minorities). Additionally, the impact of gained knowledge should be measured which goes beyond numbers and reflects qualitative dimensions like learning outcomes, depth of understanding, and actual usefulness of the skills acquired. The main goal should be if what changes we have achieved at the labour market, in the society and in our environment.

The declaration does not take into account how different types of inequality (like gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status) can overlap and affect people in more complex ways.

5. Mobility and internationalisation – expanded and aligned

Positive:

Stronger links with Europe on the Move, EU enlargement, and international VET cooperation highlight an expanded vision of cross-border learning. Also, the inclusion of new Candidate Countries is a strategic diplomatic move, aligning VET with geopolitical developments.

Critical point:

There is a risk of disparities between advanced systems and newer or war-affected countries (e.g. Ukraine) widening if support mechanisms are not equitably designed. Additionally, virtual and hybrid mobility is mentioned in Osnabrück but not clearly updated in Herning to reflect recent digital evolution. Underpinning QA principles and recognition procedures have not been evenly implemented across EU member states and beyond. Need to encourage the development of common guidelines (e.g the Bologna process and European standards and guidelines).

6. Governance and stakeholder involvement – strong rhetoric, unclear execution

Positive:

Both declarations value social partnership and multi-level governance. However, Herning puts more emphasis on stakeholder involvement in AI readiness, teacher training, and curriculum reform.

Critical Point:

EU level: EU VET providers associations are often referenced symbolically, with no clear roles and active involvement in monitoring, decision-making, or funding allocation. The Declaration could have proposed structured mechanisms for co-governance (e.g. learner assemblies, VET stakeholder councils). In ACVT, EU VET providers associations should be represented with a consultative role rather than just an observer role. The Bologna process (and its open formal coordination mechanism) can give an example how to involve the key representatives of the educational sector, with clear evidence of the added value of involving sector representatives.

National level: The involvement of national stakeholders, including VET stakeholders, but also learners' organizations and teachers' unions, should be admitted and fostered.

7. Addressing shortages of teachers and trainers

Positive:

It is positive that the problem of teacher shortages is addressed since the problem is increasing fast in EU.

Critical point:

Still, just making the profession attractive will not solve the increasing problem. Making the profession attractive, will just attract some experts from other sectors, where another gap will increase. Namely, the labour shortage is now a general problem in the EU. There should be very serious consideration regarding this issue how to address this problem.

Options:

- recognition, also at economic level, of the skills set of trainers, including both pedagogical and technical ones;
- no flexibility in the teachers' profession, with no possibility to have roles at both VET centres and companies;
- Reasonability of profession is not respected, giving no possibility to integrate seasonal profession with training duties;
- collaborative agreements with professionals and companies to teach at VET schools and have access to relevant info on learners' or graduates' profiles.

8. Expanding Higher VET to EQF levels 6-8

We support increasing higher level skills and flexible learning pathways. For this reason we are surprised that there is no mention of micro credentials in the declaration. However, we are concerned about the quality assurance of qualifications above EQF level 5. If the learning outcomes are the similar as those provided by bachelor or master degrees, then such higher VET qualifications should be quality assured to the same standards as higher education qualifications. Otherwise such qualifications will not have the same parity of esteem. Furthermore, quality assurance by higher education agencies allows for mobility and recognition within the European Higher Education Area, that should be open to as many learners as possible.

Osnabrück's gaps not fully addressed in Herning

Several key issues mentioned in Osnabrück remain underdeveloped, such as:

- The permeability between VET and higher education still lacks concrete policy or funding guidance.
- The role of non-formal and informal learning validation is not elevated despite lifelong learning being central.

Conclusion: A strategic but safe follow-up

The Herning Declaration effectively updates the strategic focus of the Osnabrück Declaration by addressing digitalisation, AI, and labour market changes while maintaining social fairness and inclusion at its core. It demonstrates stronger operational clarity and responds to policy evolutions. The strategy does not bring in any fresh, daring ideas on how to involve people in decision-making, include diverse voices in meaningful ways, or honestly look at what has worked (or not) in the past.

However, it lacks bold innovation in participatory governance, qualitative inclusion, and critical evaluation of past achievements. It takes a technocratic rather than transformative stance, focusing more on alignment and expansion than rethinking how VET can reshape society and economic justice. It takes a very technical, management-focused approach instead of trying to bring big, meaningful changes. It mainly talks about improving or growing the existing system, rather than reimagining how vocational education could help build a fairer society and economy.

It is important to know that in some countries the rate of implementation of Osnabruck declaration or actions is very low. We will not achieve the desired impact if EU will not take care for a balanced implementation. The main message would be:

EU should make a good evaluation of the state of art in MS regarding the implementation of EU strategies and constantly follow, monitor, assess its implementation and take actions if the actions are not being implemented correctly or at all.

There is one world, from the ministries point of view, there is another world that the VET providers are experiencing, needing, doing.

All involved sides should be interested to make the right impact in our society, environment and labour market.