

# REFLECTING ON THE PAST: ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

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**[Check against delivery]**

“Good morning, signore e signori, ladies and gentlemen, members of the governing board, friends from our partner countries, representatives from the local and EU communities, ETF colleagues and young people from the countries where we work now and in the future – a special welcome to students of UWCAD and young European Ambassadors from our partner countries.

Indeed having you all here today demonstrates the nature of the ETF. We are very grateful for the complex - yet well established - ecosystem we form together in partner countries – quite a few present today – with EU member states, in Brussels with several DGs – Employment, near, intpa, eac, home, growth, jrc – to mention some – the EU parliament, and the community here in Turin, the newly elected European city of innovation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Think for a moment of the year 1994. Then project into the year 2054. What do you see? Open your eyes and come back to this moment, year 2024.

Today, we stand at the intersection of past, present, and future.

We are here to celebrate the 30-year journey of the European Training Foundation — a journey defined by resilience, innovation, and the belief in the match between job market and education as the most powerful tool for change.

We look back. We look ahead. And we take our responsibility seriously at present, as we navigate towards important EU goals: the vision for 2040 – 2040 as the foresight goal of the Commission, and the related EU funding period 2028-2034.



So let us look at these 3 dimensions – past, present and future – and really get into our joint work of this morning! Are you ready?

First the past.

When the ETF was founded three decades ago, the world was a different place. The Cold War had just ended. New nations were emerging, and the European Union was expanding its vision of stability, prosperity, partnership – and peace.

Over these 30 years, the ETF has grown to support over 30 countries. We've helped young people and adults in all our regions obtain skills for the future. We've supported vocational training in our partner countries, even in times of fragility. We have developed into a global knowledge and intelligence hub.

Our approach in human capital development is long-term. Our purpose is that people can build meaningful lives, obtain required skills and find decent jobs.

Education and training have been, and presently are, our lighthouse — guiding us through change, showing the way forward, and connecting us to a shared vision of progress with our stakeholders.

This lighthouse makes it possible for the ETF to navigate the different priorities of our 30+ partner countries, the EU and EU member states – the complex ecosystem we referred to in the beginning.

What about the future?

We believe – I believe – that the idea of education and skills as a lighthouse is even more important in the future. Some may ask why should we even think several years ahead, when there is so much to be done right now. The current storms in the geopolitical landscape can make it difficult to see too far ahead.

The answer is clear. 1994 was a more optimistic period than today. The targets were set for Estonia and the Baltics, later for the Balkans, and for the Southern Mediterranean. We have seen incredible success stories.

We must commit to the same spirit and bold targets today with a more complex geopolitical reality. The mandate of the ETF is more relevant than ever and must reflect the signs of our times. Such big words as resilience, preparedness or competitiveness all require a long-term future-proof and human centric approach

It is not without significance that the EU is the largest donor globally on education and skills with significant increases in past years in this field. The ETF, as a unique thematic EU agency is proud to play its part in the wider EU external action, that is well integrated in the EU neighbourhood with long standing relationships with partner countries and today also with the African Union as was mentioned by Commissioner Schmit.

It is equally heart-warming to see that at the COP29 Climate summit we saw increasing focus on skills. This is all thanks to the efforts of like-minded people who realise that without skills there is no green transition and future within planetary limits. The union of skills is among top priorities of the new commission.

So today, as we look to the future, we must challenge ourselves to shine the light even more brightly for it to provide firm direction even when the day is darker – and believe me as someone coming from Finland the November dark can be very dark.

Following Jean Monnet, the founding father of the EU: I am not optimist, nor pessimist, I am determined.

This morning our focus is on the future vision. The conversations we will have today are more than about celebrating the ETF legacy. They are about imagining what's next. What does education, continuous lifelong learning and the labour market look like in a world of technological change? How can we embed green and digital skills into every curriculum? How can we ensure that no one is left behind, even in the most fragile contexts?

And most importantly, how can we, build education systems that empower people not just to adapt to the future—but to shape it?

So we invite you all to contribute today to the world we imagined in the beginning, the years between now and 2054. Year 2054 is as far from now as 1994.

Bring your ideas, your experiences, and your boldest visions. Write your messages to the future on the postcards provided. Share your stories, your hopes, and your solutions.

As the ETF there is of course method to be evidence-based and impact-driven. We will have innovation circles building on the foresight events we held throughout this year. Today we will conclude the work. The topics include geopolitics, global education, technology in learning, economies and of course our EU neighbours.

Dear friends,

The future of education is not something we observe—it is something we create, together. We can determine the colours and brightness of the lighthouse that then turns into ministerial and commission strategies, funding programs and class room realities.

So my message is this: let us celebrate 30 years of impact, and let us plant the seeds for the next 30 years of transformation. Every now and then remember to close your eyes to stay on course.

Thank you, and welcome."