

THE UNION OF SKILLS

ARE WE HONOURING JACQUES DELORS' VISION ON LIFELONG LEARNING?

Jacques Delors' 1996 [Learning: The Treasure Within](#) report proposed an ambitious and comprehensive approach to lifelong learning, anticipating current challenges. Europe is confronted with educator shortages, underachievement in basic skills, limited participation in learning, rising inequities, barriers to validation and recognition of learning, revealing a system in need of reforms.

Delors understood the need to re-envision education and training as an ongoing process for improving knowledge and skills, bringing about personal development, and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. The 'global village' he spoke of is under attack with increasingly siloed views of education and training at the national level and with a [deprioritisation of funding](#). Europe is far from Delors' vision, with the science community and civil society networks of education and training providers [decades-long warnings on our current system's shortcomings](#).

The Union of Skills (UoS) responds to Delors' plea: 'The improvement of education [...] requires policy-makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities. They cannot leave it to market forces or self-regulation to put things right...'. Therefore, the Lifelong Learning Platform stands ready to help achieve this ambitious perspective.

BACKGROUND

The [Political Guidelines of the President of the European Commission](#) announced in summer 2024 lined up the Union of Skills (UoS) for the mandate's first 100 days. It will subsume existing education and training initiatives at the EU level and launch and plan new actions, ensuring policy coherence. The Lifelong Learning Platform has long advocated for increased **policy coherence** across education and training initiatives at the EU level, most recently [calling for an Executive Vice-President for Lifelong Learning](#) to oversee connections between the numerous actions. EVP Roxana Mînzatu meets this portfolio and is in charge of delivering a new vision for education and training.

OUR VISION FOR A UNION OF SKILLS THAT LEVERAGES ALL OUR POTENTIAL

A UoS is an EU that lives and breathes a culture of lifelong learning. Many Europeans still do not participate in learning, with a significantly high rate of early leaving from education and training, a limited rate of adult participation, and declining adult literacy and numeracy skills, including for those participating in higher education. **Motivation** to pursue education and training is declining, while appreciation for learning is missing across the EU. [PISA results](#) revealed the challenges in maintaining learner engagement, while negative experiences in education and training made learners apprehensive about engaging consistently. If barriers to learning – time, financial considerations, compatibility with work and care responsibilities, accessibility and relevance of



learning opportunities, obsolete pedagogical methods – are removed and outreach is improved, motivation for learning is bound to improve.

These challenges have been identified in the [Belgian EU Presidency Conference on Lifelong Learning](#), which insisted on the fragmentation of sectors in education and training, the barriers to access learning, the decreasing motivation and the lack of transparency of learning opportunities. The UoS must address these universally acknowledged challenges.

PROVIDING A LEARNING OFFER TAILORED TO LEARNERS' NEEDS

A UoS is an EU that ensures that education and learning offers are meaningful to people's lives and careers while reaching them in their communities. Formal education institutions and traditional training providers face significant pressure from society and the labor market to deliver rapid solutions, which often become outdated just as quickly. Teacher shortages are worsened by high-stress levels, low recognition levels, fewer training opportunities and limited potential for pedagogy due to increasing demands on educators. Learners find themselves lost in a very fragile, fragmented and increasingly expensive training market. Navigating the learning offer and matching it with the learners, society and market needs is the real problem we need to address.

A UoS must look at the overall education and training offer happening in different learning environments to expand **strategies for learning and monitoring beyond formal education**. It must intensify efforts on **flexible pathways, validation, (automatic) recognition and guidance** to ensure that all available competences are leveraged and people are empowered.

ADDRESSING THE EQUITY AND INCLUSION GAP

A UoS is an EU that leaves no one behind and understands that a universal learning approach does not fit all. 21.4% of people in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Based on the Education and Training Monitor data, PISA and PIAAC outcomes and Cedefop's research on participation in learning, these disadvantaged learner groups fall further behind in terms of lifelong learning. They are being marginalised, are at greater risk of resorting to extremist movements and have less access to knowledge processes on changes in society and labour markets.

As most EU initiatives continue to focus on highly-skilled individuals or individuals already pursuing training, the UoS must take more meaningful action in increasing the participation to learning of those not regularly engaged and exploring how to ensure that each learner, regardless of their background, can update their competences. **Equity and inclusion are crucial** to social cohesion, lifelong learning and prosperity. A competitive Europe is a Europe where everyone contributes to social and economic prosperity in their own capacity.

BRING BACK THE KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING



A UoS is an EU that values all types of competences and considers their interplay. The multiple competence frameworks and the ever-changing occupational competences require a systemic approach that does not privilege one shortage over another. The focus must fall on **key competences for lifelong learning and transversal competences**, as the fundamental basis for skills acquisition and for preparing learners to adapt to the new occupational competences and the sector-specific work.

The private sector and stakeholders in education and training align on **valuing transversal competences** linked to critical thinking, communication, teamwork, learning to learn, adaptability, digital skills, citizenship competences among others. However, it is essential to **insist on such competences rather than solely on niche occupational ones** which risk being obsolete in the near future. **Stakeholders must work together**, to identify blindspots, and provide a holistic approach to learning.

A ROBUST GOVERNANCE FOR A SUCCESSFUL AND IMPACTFUL IMPLEMENTATION

The UoS' success depends on **leveraging existing structures** while simplifying processes and ensuring that Member States, the EU institutions and the broader community of stakeholders collaborate. Under the stewardship of the Presidency of the Council, the High-Level Group of the European Education Area should be upgraded to a **High Level Task Force that coordinates the policy coherence between the UoS initiatives**. The Task Force members would be lifelong learning experts nominated by each Member States. This specific expert should be the coordinator of a national task force that brings together all ministries to discuss holistically on connecting all education and training sectors. This emboldens better coordination at national and European level. The Task Forces, at both European and national level, must be supported by the EU agencies and tools and initiatives such as, but not limited to, EQF, ESCO, Europass, Learning Lab for Investment in Quality Education.

Social dialogue and civil dialogue representatives should join the Task Force as observers. In terms of social dialogue representatives that join the Task Force, they should be selected from the existing social dialogue process at the EU level, having employers or unions joining on rotation. On the side of civil dialogue, it is time to develop a structure within DG EMPL that can reach the same status as social dialogue. A temporary mandate could ensure a presidency of the civil dialogue structure in education and training, akin to the [guidelines provided by Civil Society Europe](#). The organisation representing the civil dialogue presidency would have observer status in the High-Level Group.

STRONGER SECTORIAL DIRECTOR GENERAL MEETINGS AND CROSS-CUTTING WGs / EXPERT GROUP

The existing structures, such as Director Generals meetings for various sectors (preferably expanded to all sectors to include ECEC, school, VET, higher education, adult education) and Working/Expert/Advisory Groups, should be retained **to provide expertise to the High-Level Group and the European Commission. However, they should avoid sectoral overlap and build on each other.** Suppose the DG meetings are already structured sectorally, which remains highly needed for the organisation of each Member State. In that case, the Working Groups/Expert Groups/Advisory



Groups need to be broadened on transversal topics **and coordinated by units from DG EMPL and DG EAC**. For example, the following cross-cutting Working Group themes could be considered:

- basic skills
- learning and skills mobility
- validation and recognition
- equity, inclusion and wellbeing
- partnerships in education and training
- twin transitions
- values and active citizenship education

It must be noted that a strong sectoral representation remains mandatory across the WGs, to ensure that the transversal approach trickles down to how the sectors collaborate with each other.

BETTER MONITORING MECHANISMS AND DATA COLLECTION

When considering impact and implementation, the most crucial element is monitoring progress and improving the data available. It is necessary to abide by principles of transparency and data availability, as all education and training stakeholders should be able to exchange data, while respecting privacy requirements, in order to be better equipped to engage in decision making and implement measures in accordance with learners' needs.

The **European Semester needs to be better leveraged**. The lack of data on adult learners, learning mobility, and equity challenges, among many other aspects, results from insufficient reliance on stakeholders that can provide data and insufficient cross-checking of available data sources. **Stakeholder groups from the national level** should aid the Member States with data provision. Such stakeholder groups could be formed by national-level member organisations of EU networks joining the EU-level civil dialogue process. Finally, the **emergency clauses** to the arbitrary straitjacket of the Stability and Growth Pact must be strategically applied. Beyond defence, **education and training is a key sector** undergoing a crisis. **Education and training investment must be excluded from debt sustainability calculations.**

BUILDING THE PATH AHEAD - EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION

Create Competences

- Designing Roadmaps and Implementation Plans for all existing initiatives under the European Education Area facilitates Member States' capacity to enact reforms. The work done on the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success is the perfect example.
- It's high time for **European-wide Individual Learning Accounts**. Europass can label eligible courses, funding from various EU schemes can be pooled to address needs at EU level, while the resources and practices of the Euroguidance Network must be leveraged in this context. It can be an actionable model to speed up ILAs' implementation nationally. However, changes to ILAs and Europass must respect the diversity of learning offers, include non-formal training providers and reflect on improving quality assurance for non-accredited



high-quality training impacted by administrative/financial barriers. A European-level ILA depends on developing a common language and understanding for learning outcomes, to ensure alignment of obtained credentials and certifications across all sectors of learning.

- Skills forecastings depend on strong foundational competences. For this reason, we need an **Action Plan on Basic Skills not limited to learners under the age of 15**, considering that adults also experience significant skills gaps. Focusing on literacy, numeracy, and science is insufficient without considering life and basic skills, such as digital skills, citizenship skills, and personal, social and learning-to-learn (PSL) competences based on the approach provided by the [LLLPlatform's Position Paper 2023 on Key Competences for All](#).
- Competence creation depends on skilled educators. We need an **EU Teachers Agenda that goes beyond teachers in schools and looks at all types of educators and ancillary staff**. A perspective on improving working conditions and career structure, while making the profession intellectually stimulating can be found in [LLLPlatform's Position Paper 2024](#).
- The STE(A)M Education Strategic Plan must address the **core mission of STE(A)M learning: interdisciplinarity**. It must **chart a way for interdisciplinary teaching methodologies, assessment methods, learning outcomes and curricula design**, leveraging aspects of each science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics subject for holistic learning. We encourage the Commission to bring together all competence frameworks under the Plan, connecting all STEM areas with arts education and promoting gender equality in STEM.
- Competence creation for learners of all ages requires increased cooperation and policy coherence across different learning sectors. **The European Strategy for VET must be aligned with the European Strategy for Universities and the New European Agenda for Adult Learning**, finding areas for collaboration and joint overarching objectives.

Circulate Competences

- Circulation presupposes trust across education and training systems. Trust is achieved through strengthened transparency of accreditation and (automatic) recognition mechanisms. Continuing the work of the European and National Qualifications Frameworks is essential. Still, it must be followed by a renewed effort towards **achieving the automatic recognition of learning periods and qualifications and achieving the objectives of the 2012 Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning**.
- Competence circulation is synonymous with learner and worker mobility, which needs more ambitious objectives, more robust indicators and more precise mechanisms for implementation. Advancing the [Council Recommendation Europe on the Move](#) is a prerequisite. Still, it hinges on the European Commission developing **better definitions of target groups, stronger identification mechanisms for their needs and an implementable monitoring scheme**. It is time to transform the aspiration of 20% of beneficiaries from backgrounds with fewer opportunities into a real target!
- Each upcoming EU strategy hinges on the circulation of competences. The upcoming Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Affordable Housing Plan, the review of the Action Plan on the



European Pillar of Social Rights among many others EU level initiatives must be closely connected to the UoS if their objectives are to be achievable.

Cultivate Competences

- Cultivating implies a favourable environment, which Europe lacks. A common approach to **talent management and lifelong guidance and counselling is needed, next to practices that support training uptake**. We call for the ongoing revision of the **Public procurement directives** to link the award of contracts to upskilling/reskilling requirements. The upcoming **Quality Jobs Roadmap** requires a strong nod to conditions that favour upskilling/reskilling while offsetting current barriers linked to work responsibilities or missed paychecks.
- Cultivating skills means better reach and access to services by getting closer to learners and their communities through a **lifelong learning one-stop shop**. Therefore, building a European plan for establishing **Community Lifelong Learning Centers** could be a bold move to address motivation and equity gaps and bring learning straight into learners' communities. A [Briefing Paper](#) developed by Cedefop and LLLPlatform provides an initial blueprint.
- Skills cultivation hinges on Europeans believing in the EU project and in the UoS. Therefore, the EU must meet [demands of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#) and make **European citizenship education as EU competence**, promoting democracy and values in its lifelong learning initiatives. Without active citizenship, the EU cannot counteract Euroskepticism nor ensure all work to advance the EU's common good and safeguard democracy.
- An environment for skills needs funding. The UoS must embolden **public investment in education and training - considering that this is the sector with the [slowest funding increase post-COVID-19](#)**. It must address **administrative barriers to National Recovery and Resilience Plans' absorption rates**, and strategically guide EU funding, especially Erasmus+, towards reforms in education and training. Leveraging private investment is needed, if **education and training's mission is not reduced** to ephemeral labour market needs.

POLICY COHERENCE, NOT POLICY SUBORDINATION

The UoS invariably contributes to broader EU strategies, such as the Competitiveness Compass or the EU Clean Industrial Deal. It ought to be the case, as education and training ensure that people living in the EU achieve social mobility, prosperity, security and contribute to the EU's goals and mission.

This contribution must not be confused with education and training being a means to achieve the end goal of Europe's competitiveness or preparedness. All policies and measures are taken to benefit people living in Europe and their personal and professional development. Competitiveness is needed for people's prosperity and preparedness for people's security. But all is in vain if people are not supported, from cradle to grave, to access fundamental rights to education and training. **Education and training is an end in itself. One that will never be fully quantifiable yet will enrich the EU's capacity to achieve any goal.**

