

## **Deepening problems for education and training: European Semester Country Specific Recommendations 2024**

### **Background**

On 19 June, the European Commission published its [European Semester](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)<sup>1</sup> and Country Reports (CRs), known as the '[Spring Package](#)'. The Semester is the EU mechanism used to ensure coordination across economic and social policies amongst Member States, with the CSRs representing the corrective course prescribed by the Commission to ensure Member States meet its annual economic and social priorities. The 2024 Semester guides Member States' investment and reforming of education and training, and, different from its past editions, it contains a Social Convergence Framework. This mechanism aims at identifying gaps across EU Member States in different areas of the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as making the European Semester more focused on social policy, offsetting the previous concern that economic concerns always trump social concerns in the European Semester process<sup>2</sup>.

### **Addressing skills shortages: for the benefit of industry or the benefit of the learner?**

The underlying theme of this edition of CSRs is **competitiveness**. Across all Member States, the preamble to the CSRs reflects on labour and skills shortages which are impacting the well-functioning of key industries while limiting the capacity of the EU Member States to be competitive. Across multiple Member States, employer surveys are used to highlight how they are not finding adequately skilled workers to fill in their quota. This translates to recommendations linked to skilled shortages in almost all EU Member States that received education and training recommendations. It must be highlighted that eight countries<sup>3</sup> did not receive any CSR in this sector, while Slovakia is the only country which received one CSR in the education and training sector without referring to skills shortages or labour market-related upskilling/reskilling.

This is a continuation of the trend from the past two years<sup>4</sup> which has prioritised a focus on the development of technical skills. This focus was initially linked to the green transition and the energy sector, then it was transferred towards some other key strategic sectors for the EU, but this year it

<sup>1</sup> Find [here](#) LLLP's mapping of the CSRs for each Member State.

<sup>2</sup> Bart Vanhercke and Jonathan Zeitlin (2020). Socializing the European Semester? Economic Governance and Social Policy Coordination in Europe, [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> HR, DK, IE, IT, PL, PT, RO, ES.

<sup>4</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2022). Reaction on European Semester Spring Package, [here](#); Lifelong Learning Platform (2023). Reaction on European Semester Spring Package, [here](#).



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appears to take a more broad perspective, with specific mentions of industries only in a few EU Member States. **The EU-level narrative on upskilling/reskilling frames shortages only around the idea of competitiveness, limiting the goal of learning simply to serving industry demands.** The wider benefits of learning in terms of social returns such as health, democratic participation, motivation, and development of transversal competences, to name a few are absent. The focus on technical skills **misses out that learners can progress and adapt to systemic changes far better when the entire knowledge-skills-attitudes triad is being developed. To this end, transversal competences and key competences for lifelong learning are the ones in need of development**<sup>5</sup>. The short-termism approach to technical skills across the CSRs, which is put in place exclusively to run behind industrial needs, risks opening up a similar crisis a few years from now when new skills will be needed.

The problem across the various CSRs is that whenever labour shortages were discussed, they were immediately associated with skills shortages. However, there is an insufficient discussion of whether or not the available jobs across the EU are quality jobs. The current challenges experienced in the labour market are not solely related to skills but rather to the fact that the jobs provided and their requirements for high skill levels do not counterbalance the working conditions, contractual status, and remuneration offered.

### **The silent threat: inequity in learning**

**Equity in learning outcomes has been a persisting problem in the EU**<sup>6</sup>, which only seems to have worsened during COVID-19. It is referred to across the CSRs, even in a cross-sectorial way, as it is associated with VET, adult education and school education. Nevertheless, it is not followed up by a sufficient extent of recommendations.

On the side of adult education, inequity is framed along the lines of **adult participation in learning**, where BE, BG, CZ, EE, and MT are lagging behind. However, the challenge is that the participation of those most disadvantaged adults is even lower across all the other EU Member States, while there are very little references to this challenge in the CSRs associated with the different Member States. When it comes to formal education, most challenges are introduced from the perspective of the [dismal 2022 PISA results](#) which show a decline in basic skills for all learners under the age of 15. This is then expanded to reflect on the fact that disadvantaged learners, especially those with a migrant background, consistently underperform compared to more advantaged, and native, peers. Nevertheless, BE, BG, FR,

<sup>5</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2023). Position Paper on Key Competences for All: a lifelong learning approach, [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2023). European Education Area midterm review process report, [here](#).



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LU are the only four countries receiving recommendations on improving equity in their education system, while countries like AT and SE, are recommended to provide skills development to disadvantaged learners in adult education. The problem is that references on equity exist across AT and SE in formal education as well, but also in countries such as CZ, DK, DE, EL, NL, RO. However, AT and SE did not receive any CSR on equity in formal education, while CZ, DK, DE, EL, NL and RO received no CSR on the topic of equity in education and training.

As the CSRs insist mostly on providing a labour force for the success of specific industries, it seems to fail to address the fact that **Member States are creating a two-stream Europe with those most disadvantaged left behind**. The complaints about skills shortages refuse to account for the systemic failure of providing equity in education and training across the EU. The challenge of equity is a priority of the European Education Area, it has been addressed consistently across the EU research<sup>7</sup>, and yet for the past decades inequalities seem to only exacerbate. More glaring are examples of reforms which seem to be successful in improving academic performance (see FR and DE) which, however, are deemed to be too small scale. The result is that they fail to address 70% of disadvantaged learners in FR<sup>8</sup>, respectively 90% in DE<sup>9</sup>. Such promising reforms seem to be missing out exactly on the population of most disadvantaged students. Therefore, **policy tools are available but insufficiently upscaled**, and the CSRs do not encourage these policy tools to be further used and improved.

### **Investment: When the ‘less is more’ adage no longer works**

Underinvestment in education and training has been marked as having negative impacts on the education and training system in BG, DE, EL, and RO. On the other hand, the high share of investment in BE and FR was mentioned as at odds with the significant underperformance and inequity identified in the two countries’ education and training systems. Irrespective of the conflicting messaging, there is **no recommendation to call for investment in education and training**.

The CSRs were launched at more or less the same time when the European Commission published its 2024 edition of the [Investment in Education report](#). The message in this report is that across the entirety of the EU, **funding in education and training as a share of public investment or a share of GDP has been on a decline compared to pre-COVID-19 rates and has had the biggest decline compared to other sectors such as social protection, healthcare, economic affairs**. This additional decline comes on

<sup>7</sup> Eurydice (2020). Equity in school education in Europe, [here](#); Eurydice (2022). Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe, [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2024). European Semester Country Specific Recommendations France, [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> European Commission (2024). European Semester Country Specific Recommendations Germany, [here](#).



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top of the investment in education and training never recovering to pre-2008 crisis levels. From decade to decade, the sector seems to be more impacted as the inequity gaps and the academic performance of learners are on a downward trend.

The return of the EU fiscal rules after the COVID-19 freeze brings ominous signs of austerity. Based on the previously discussed figures, it has become clear that Member States no longer prioritise to the same extent the education and training sector. Taking this into account, it is crucial for the **CSRs to raise concerns that current investment levels limit reforms to targeting a fraction of the learner population.** This is bound to widen gaps, leaving those most disadvantaged even further behind. The Social Convergence Framework introduced this year in the Semester has to be directed at the general acceptance across the EU that most Member States fail to put sufficient financial and policy effort into the sector even as the convergence gaps towards the EPSR objectives are widening. **The European Semester remains more focused on economic concerns as the impact of labour shortages on private gains counts more than ensuring access to learning for all.**

### **The teaching profession**

A final consideration will be given to the teaching profession. The recent [Education and Training Monitor](#) has raised the alarm on the vocational crisis that the profession is experiencing and the grave shortages across the EU. Considering the aforementioned challenges on equity in learning, need for skills development and underfunding in education and training; the educator profession requires more support than ever. BG, CY, FR, NL, MT and SE are the only countries in the EU which have a CSR dedicated to the profession, while FR is the only one to mention improving working conditions. Teacher shortages are a challenge for all EU Member States, but based on the CSR analysis this aspect does not warrant immediate action in an overwhelming majority of Member States.

The LLLPlatform has dedicated its [2024 Annual Theme to the 21st challenges of the educator profession](#) and will publish a Position Paper by the end of the year on improving the stance of all educators in the sector. Hinting at the outcomes of the paper, it is essential to consider all professionals in the sector, not only teachers, if there is a chance to provide a robust system that can actually tackle inequity and underachievement for all learners. Moreover, professional development cannot be the only tool to focus on within EU policies. Though much needed, the training of educators must be coupled with better working conditions, autonomy in the workplace, capacity to innovate, and improved career structure, among many other aspects.



## Steps forward

In light of the persistent challenges in the sector, the LLLPlatform proposes the following set of actions.

- LLLPlatform urges the flexibilisation of EU financial rules to exclude investment in essential public services, such as education and training, from the calculation of debts and deficits. Without encouragement for long-term reform of the lifelong learning system, Member States cannot dedicate adequate resources to create a path for proactive reform rather than reactive crisis management.
- LLLPlatform calls for **a review of the implementation of all CSRs provided across the years.** Though this is regularly done in the Semester process, there is a need to dedicate specific attention to recommendations linked to improving the equity of education and training in EU Member States. There needs to be a dedicated look at equity because the generic recommendation of ‘improving equity in education and training’ does provide a clear roadmap on how this can be achieved. In the absence of such clarity, Member States approach with an extreme diversity this challenge. There is a need to take stock of what has been done so far and what works, so that upscaling can take place.
- LLLPlatform demands that the **European Commission uses the next cycle of the European Semester to provide an in-depth analysis of the funding trends in education and training, as well as a specific roadmap for the adequate funding needed for the sector.** Considering that education and training are referred to for boosting the competitiveness of the EU, there is a need to understand that such an endeavour cannot take place without a financial top-up.
- LLLPlatform requests the European Commission to **fully enforce the mandatory consultation of stakeholders** in each EU Member States in the preparation of the European Semester Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations. The consulted stakeholders are currently selected arbitrarily, with some Member States having stronger consultative mechanisms than others, which skews the perspective of the data and, on occasion, produces inaccurate data. To this end, there is a need to establish mandatory national stakeholders groups for each sector relevant for the European Semester, including education and training.

LLLPlatform will continue monitoring the European Semester and developing its members' capacity to engage with the European Semester Officers in each EU Member State.



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