



LIFELONG
LEARNING
LAB²⁰₂₄
Brussels 

REPORT



In its fourth edition, the Lifelong Learning Lab (LLLab) is the Lifelong Learning Platform's initiative to bring together stakeholders in education and training from EU and national/regional level to share good practices on enhancing cooperation in the sector. Participants to the LLLab counted policymakers from EU, national, regional and local level, educators and teachers, learners, education and training institutions (schools, universities, VET centres) and civil society organisations. The LLLab took place on 17 June during the LLLP Days, connecting European issues with national issues, supporting EU citizens' capacity to engage in policymaking, breaking silos within education and training institutions, and building blocks for the development of national lifelong learning platforms.

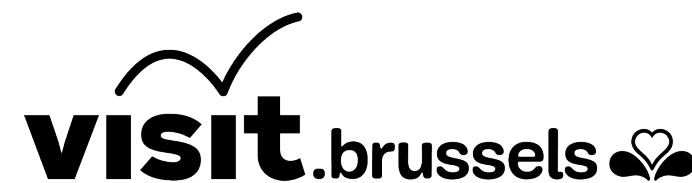


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The 2024 edition of the Lifelong Learning Lab was organised in partnership with VisitBrussels and the European Parliament.



The first three editions of the LLLab took place in [Lisbon, Portugal](#), and [Nice, France](#), and [Girona, Spain](#) matching this training with the country holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU. In 2024, the LLLab's fourth edition was organised in Brussels, during the Belgian Presidency to the Council of the EU, in partnership with Visit Brussels and was hosted by the European Parliament in the Zweig Visitor Centre.

WELCOME WORDS

Before exploring links between the EU and the national context, participants were welcomed at the premises of the **Zweig Visitor Centre of the European Parliament**, by the Lifelong Learning Platform's Director Brikena Xhomaqi.

Elisa Gambardella, President of the Lifelong Learning Platform, SOLIDAR Foundation recognised the achievements of LLLP in creating spaces for discussing lifelong learning in policy. Reinforcing the need for civil dialogue, the President of LLLP pointed out that, in a context of crisis in our EU democracies, the education portfolio is and should be considered as a top job in the EU.

Albrecht John, European Parliament, DG COMM, Outreach Unit emphasised the importance of the outreach of the European Parliament at national levels and the key value of civil society and interactions with CSOs in influencing policy and general public opinion, by building credibility with audiences in Member States.

Iliana Ivanova, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth sent a video message recognising the importance of connection across the EU, and therefore the key role of networks. The need to foster innovation solutions and ensure funding, for example through the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies, which allow for European partnerships and promote cooperation between teacher education institutions and training providers, were mentioned as two crucial points.



KEYNOTE I

EDUCATION PROFESSION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

Dr. Dirk van Damme, former OECD expert and Belgium expert in education and training, was the first keynote speaker of the LLLAB. Dr. van Damme started with a contextualisation of the results of the previous PISA reports and the declining trend observed in PISA test scores in OECD countries. Considering these levels as unacceptable, with Estonia and Ireland showing counter examples, it is argued the COVID-19 pandemic is not fully responsible for the decline, but just exacerbated pre-existing trends.

Despite the number of policy initiatives, several critical challenges persist. The effectiveness of these policies is shown as limited: increasing numbers of sub-standard performers: basic skills in literacy and numeracy are not attained by a significant share of learners; early school leaving, drop-outs, motivation at worrisome levels and severe teacher shortages now in most European countries and the waning attractiveness of the teaching profession. Equality of opportunity approaches are argued by the speaker to be implemented in a way that lowers the expectations for disadvantaged learners.

Dr. Dirk van Damme suggests some policy directions. **Revaluing the teaching profession is key. A lot of education policies in European countries have neglected the teacher.** The trend of student-centred education and redefining the teacher as 'coach' is argued to be devaluing the work of teachers. The lack of value of the teaching profession can lead to higher teacher shortages which have become a serious issue in many countries. Thus, it is essential to put the teacher back in the centre of education. Strengthening teacher professionalism is crucial.

The Commissie van wijzen, the Flemish government commission on teachers, installed by the Flemish Government in December 2022, argues for a large-scale reform of teaching careers, statutes of teachers, labour relations and human relations policies in schools. The commission (of 20 people, half experts, half teachers and school leaders) prepared a comprehensive report with over 70 proposals, published in December 2023. Some proposals to revalue teaching professionalism and school autonomy are: define the teaching career as a continuum of professionalisation, with the right kinds of incentives and rewards for professional development; value all tasks of teachers and enable the school to manage the task load of teachers equitably by defining the workload not in teaching hours; strengthen school leadership, school autonomy and governance, by deregulating staff policies, enabling school leaders to make autonomous decisions on e.g. recruiting teachers and adjust regulation and legislative frameworks accordingly.

Evidence-informed policy and practice is another key policy direction. Compared with a couple of decades ago, education is a much more evidence-informed system as supply of high-quality educational research is growing (but quality still is a challenge) and the demand among policy-makers and stakeholders for evidence-informed policies is also increasing, which shows sensitivity among practitioners for evidence is growing. However, there is still room for improvement. Education is a complex knowledge system, which includes new research evidence, but also tacit, experiential knowledge or common sense. It is important to respect professional knowledge, by acknowledging teachers, individually and collectively, are co-constructing their own knowledge that guides

professional behaviour. Both tacit and experiential knowledge, mentioned above, are argued as very powerful and positive force for the teaching profession and part of the professional identity of teachers. Therefore, evidence-informed education is not about filling an empty basket with 'good' evidence, but about entering a complex field of knowledge dynamics. It is not yet a reality, and there is a need for better research evidence, for example to fight education myths and fashionable ideas, but it's important to keep in mind that the interaction of research evidence with professional knowledge is a complex process.

There is also a need to strengthen education policy through stakeholder engagement. There is a clear governance challenge, as it is argued we have to move from a simple, top-down governance model of education to a complex governance model. Importance of external stakeholders, of opening the school and the societal responsibility and belief in the power of education are crucial aspects. **Education has to be seen as a societal shared responsibility.**



KEYNOTE I EDUCATION PROFESSION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

Finally, **it is key to define lifelong learning as the guiding principle for education policy.**

Not adult learning, but shifting the view of the education systems. An education policy with a life course perspective, with a flexible connection model, which values and connects all forms of learning, formal, non-formal and informal and is less focused only on qualifications is needed.

The Q&A focused on the counter argument for implementing student-centred learning approaches, the need for more public funding and the challenges of a commodification of education. There was also a point on inclusion and lowering expectations of students which can be a factor for parents when deciding the school(s) for their children.

Dr. Dirk van Damme argued that student-centred learning can be a reality but it has to be gradually implemented through the learning process, as students need basic skills to be able to perform other types of tasks. On public funding, the arguments state education funding is not always the problem. It is a concern, but more funding will not make a difference in some countries if other areas don't change and are improved. Dr Dirk van Damme finalises with the need to enable teachers earlier in their careers to obtain key competences for their professions, and their need for autonomy.



EXCHANGE OF VIEWS BETWEEN POLICY MAKERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

LIFELONG LEARNING POST EU ELECTIONS AND FOR AN EEA POST 2025

The panel included **Stefaan Hermans, Director for Policy Strategy and Evaluation in DG EAC** and **Michèle Mombeek from the Belgian Presidency**. Moderated by Raffaella Kihrer, LLLP General Secretary, Stefaan Hermans and Michèle Mombeek discussed questions on governance and the competencies of the EU for education and training.

The representative of the Belgian Presidency explained this period was a great way for the Belgian communities to learn about one another and to work together. The Presidency focused on lifelong learning and adult learning through the organisation of a stakeholders' conference. Working on adults' motivation is key if there is the will to increase adult learning and should be seen as a priority. In Wallonia, there are new policies on lifelong learning and for upskilling in 2024 and 2025. There was an implementation of an evidence-based approach which was used to reform the curriculum - Pact for Excellence in Teaching - to build bridges between early, primary and secondary education.

However, the challenges for lifelong learning are present, such as the lack of basic skills which jeopardises continuous upskilling and reskilling, as these processes need something to build upon.

The representative of the European Commission strengthened the need for civil society organisations to stay active in the consultation processes and support the Commission to improve processes and stated as a priority to support the Member States in developing consultation processes to reach relevant and diverse stakeholders. The last words were for equity and inclusion, as more participation, collaboration, coordination and coherence (in all levels) is needed to achieve a more equitable and inclusive education and training system.





KEYNOTE II

LIFELONG LEARNING FOR BETTER POLICIES

The second keynote speaker, **Laurence Weerts**, focused on the [Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence](#), implemented by the French-speaking Community Administration.

Weerts started by explaining the pact emerged from key issues felt in 2014. Based on the PISA 2012 results, the French-speaking Community in Belgium performed close to OECD average in knowledge and skills, but below neighbours. Repetition rate was identified as worrying, much higher than the OECD average, and equity considered much below OECD. In terms of expenditures, while it's observed a higher expenditure than neighbours for secondary education, it is lower for pre primary education.

This data analysis and reflections resulted in 3 main issues to be tackled: Efficacy, Equity and Efficiency. On efficacy, the situation is described as the heterogeneity of students' performances, high repetition rate; on equity, there is inequity everywhere in the system (repetition, drop-out, special education, school segregation...), and from the early age and on efficiency, poor results are observed compared to financial resources invested.

These key issues, due to their complexity, can only be tackled through a system reform and a long-term vision, and consider support and ownership of the education system' relevant stakeholders.

Implementation of the pact required 3 phases. The first phase - state of play and vision - was held in 2015 from January to September. 2 working groups (WG) were set by the government, and chaired by civil society. Stakeholders present represented Trade Union (TU) organisations, schools networks, parents associations,

administration and academic and civil society experts, the latter chairing the WG. From this first phase, two deliverables emerged to support the rest of the programme: an in-depth state of play report and a report on a vision for education in the XXI century.

The second phase, from October 2015 to April 2017, focused on the design of the measures and reforms. 15 WG were set, counting with 400 participants, with representatives of the organisations mentioned above. This work resulted in a report including guidelines for reforms up to 2030, a reform planning/agenda and a pluri-annual fiscal framework (investment and savings for financing some of the reforms (e.g. increasing number of teaching staff in pre primary schools)).

The reforms drafting, implementation and monitoring and follow-up processes started in 2017 and expands until 2030. This phase includes the community stakeholders: the 5 Trade Unions (TU) organisations, 5 school networks, 2 Parents Associations Federations, Cabinet & Administration, who meet fairly regularly (twice a month). Civil society and academia were consulted, but not part of the council.

The long-term agenda of the pact includes 5 flagship initiatives and over 20 programmes. The New Curriculum initiative focuses on, for example, fostering the digital transitions and reforming curriculums; Autonomy and Accountability, for example, includes developing a new governance for the system and reforming the Continuing Professional Development (CPD); the Vocational Education and Training (VET) initiative focuses on making vocational education a pathway to excellence; Inclusive school covers inclusion (special needs and special education) or



KEYNOTE II

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developing and implementing a plan to combat school dropout; an School Climate & Well-being aims at strengthening school democracy and well-being at school, including school rhythms.

The Pact relies on structural reforms (transforming curriculums, or free access to pre-primary school), but also on reforms to mobilise the education community which influence practices directly on the ground. Clear ambitions and concrete objectives for 2030 were defined early on in the implementation.

A long-term pact also involves challenges. Its long-term nature brings the first main challenge: sticking to defined goals over the long term. There were elections and 3 changes of Ministers since the beginning of the pact. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the delays and postponements, and four of the 5 TU organisations left the process which led to questions on the veracity of the process. On the reforms timing, it's crucial to understand curriculum changes take time, and often the reforms timing is different from political timing: at political level, the change is the finding the right balance between bottom-up and top-down; and at stakeholder level, it is not always easy to explain the complexity and need for continuous and meaningful compromises.

Three questions from the audience focused on the government having contact with not-state education schools, which was answered negatively as the contact is with network representatives, not directly with single schools; on the role of parents and their consultation (reminding that 2 federations of parents associations are part of the process) and on the evaluation and follow-up. Weerts described the targets are fixed for 2030 (or even 2032) and monitoring and evaluation is already taking place happening: specific evaluations which are already foreseen by the reforms plan, plus an evaluation of the 7 objectives as a systemic evaluation (which should be every year and will be out this year, 2024). COVID-19 pandemic changed and impacted the results. Evaluation reports are done by the administration, but will be discussed with the stakeholders involved.



EXCHANGE OF VIEWS BETWEEN POLICY MAKERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

SIMILARITIES AND SYNERGIES IN THE FLEMISH, FRENCH AND GERMAN SPEAKING COMMUNITIES OF BELGIUM: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The panel included **Bavo Meert from the Belgian Presidency of the EU, Daya Buyle, representing VLOR and Louise Culot from Lire et écrire (EAEA member)**, and was moderated by Monica Verzola, LLLP Vice President.

The panel started with an intervention from each of the speakers.

Bavo Meert started with a reminder of the complexity of the Belgian system. From the Flemish side, there is a focus on participatory measures and based on stakeholders consultation. A Lifelong Learning (LLL) partnership was created a few years ago - including trade unions, educators, among others - to build a culture of LLL and create ideas for implementation, in which it is important to consider a balance in the combination of both approaches: top-down and bottom-up. Meert reflects on the challenges of the implementation versus the design phase, but reiterates the importance of consulting stakeholders. A challenge identified is the priorities mismatched. On education and employment, priorities can be mismatched even at EU level. It was considered that the European Commission could also have a more holistic view on the topics.



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Daya Buyle represents [VLOR](#), which was created in 1991 with collaborative and deliberative roles, issuing advice done by different stakeholders. As independent from the government, and gathering stakeholders representation in a common council, Buyle explained that in the Flemish-speaking community, it is mandatory to consult VLOR, which has 30 days to reach stakeholders and reach consensus. The organisation can also give their opinion and put something in the agenda (proactivity). VLOR and other networks of Education councils have been seeing a trend of difficulties in the co-creation process in other countries and some tension in reaching consensus.

Louise Culot represents [Lire et écrire](#) from the French-speaking community. Lire et écrire is 40 years old, and emerged from the gathering of very diverse stakeholders which were offering literacy courses (normally small and independent organisations). It is publicly funded, and it offers free literacy training in small groups and works on research and advocacy. On advocacy, Culot explains there was no single literacy public policy, but practices emerging from the ground and slowly the sector started to join efforts to advocate for a (common) literacy policy, which can be seen as a great example of bottom-up approach. In 2006, this debate on the (common) literacy policy started which included some of these stakeholders, who

were already organised and with years of field experience.

After some questions from regional and national CSO and stakeholders present, Bavo Meert focused on the importance of an holistic approach to LLL, which is not solely connected to employment. An approach focuses on inclusion and well-being.

Daya Buyle followed by identifying some of the key initiatives from VLOR. The importance of educators as key stakeholders, which, already in 1999, were already discussing teachers shortage and challenges related to this shortage. To fight the teacher shortage, there are multi-year projects. Discussion tables with students and parents and focus groups are organised around 4 clusters: uniqueness of the profession, attractiveness, professionalism and image in society. The group discusses expertise (multifaceted competencies), students' talent, engagement, autonomy (ownership and freedom, shared responsibility) and connection. It calls for the prioritisation, the professionalisation of teachers to improve quality of education, and autonomy by creating the time and space for teachers.

Louise Culot explains literacy is at the crossroads of different policy fields: employment, VET, education, public

health, among others, and reiterates that bottom-up approaches were key for the development of LLL policies in the French-speaking community. Culot further explains that when compulsory school time was implemented, the tendency was to assume LLL was not necessary - and until the 70s was not seen as a "public programme". Only by the late 70s with the complexity of society, it became a public problem. Therefore, literacy training started to be implemented by volunteers in the community centres, VET sector, cultural sector, among others. In the early 2000s, the informal network was already formed to fight for a common literacy and LLL policies, which showcases the importance of different levels, from community and local to national/regional.

Bavo Meert commented that in Belgium, the core work is done at regional level, since regions are represented directly in the EU. There is room for improvement in collaboration within Belgium to create more moments to collaborate.

To finalise the panel, Daya Buyle concluded with a note on education councils, their differences and how this can be capitalised. Gathering professionals from different countries is a key moment to share experiences, for example Morocco does not have teachers shortage, but problems in motivation, and Portugal focuses on professionalisation.

FORWARD-THINKING AND ACTION POINTS

TOWARDS A LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGY: WHY, HOW AND WHAT?

Members of the Steering Committee presented the work done during the break-out room sessions. Arja Krauchenberg, Caridad Alarcón, Jon Harding, Piotr Sadowski and Balázs Németh enumerated the inspiring practices at EU and national levels, some of the key success and transversal factors and concrete steps to implement or expand these practices.



LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM

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