

## **The legacy of the European Year of Skills: reduced to the Action Plan on Labour and Skills Shortages or forward-looking?**

### **Background**

On 20 March 2024, the European Commission published a [Communication](#) on an **Action Plan on Labour and Skills Shortages in the EU**. The Action Plan is part of the European Year of Skills (EYS) outcomes as well as a direct consequence of the 31 January Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU **Social Partners' Summit in Val Duchesse**. The Action Plan is now available for implementation but the question that all stakeholders at EU level and across the EU should pose themselves is whether **what is being done is sufficient and appropriate for the identified skills crisis**. As the European Year of Skills came to a closure on 9 May, and the Action Plan represents one of the most tangible outcomes of it, the question remains if the Year has changed our perspective on competence development.

### **What do we mean when we ask for skills development?**

The Action Plan is automatically connecting skills and labour shortages, **assessing the lack of skills from the perspective of the employability of learners of all ages**. This further materialises the trend of placing all forms of learning as first and foremost serving the needs of the economy. The labour shortage crisis has been extensively documented in the work of the European Commission and its Agencies as well as across the [supporting documentation in the European Semester](#) process. The dangers of this crisis range from **reduced competitiveness of the EU, to hampering the growth potential of the EU, to compromising the EU's security and to not having enough workers in sectors such as green, digital and security**.

However, the Action Plan does not go further to consider the impact that a lack of skills has on individuals beyond the labour market, nor does it reflect on the issue of engagement in learning. The Action Plan mentions the targets on adult participation in learning from the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#), but omits the current rate of participation, which, based on [latest data](#), is **11% for those recently engaged in training and 37% for those engaged annually in training**. Motivation to participate in and joy for learning are ignored though these are **strong roots to this problem**. The Action Plan tackles many symptoms of skills and labour shortages, but does not reflect on **how to support people to develop a culture for lifelong learning**. Linked to this, the EU is **neglecting the collection of data on participation in informal learning and the stimulation of informal learning in the EU**.

If skills are developed only for the sake of the professions that lack specialists, it is unlikely that the current challenges are addressed. The debate between skills and competences is well-documented in



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[LLLPlatform's Position Paper on Key Competences for All](#), but the main takeaway is that without developing competences, learners lack attitudes and knowledge in a way that prevents engagement in training or openness to adapting to societal challenges, including on the labour market.

Though the Action Plan considers the impact of lack of skills on social cohesion and democracy, it does not refer to the sliding back in civic competences identified by the [ICCS 2022](#), nor does it mention specifically that **44% of Europeans lack basic digital skills**. These gaps erode democracy, make societal trends unintelligible for many Europeans, cause opposition to innovative changes linked to the twin transitions. **The Action Plan doubles down on specialists for IT, AI and cybersecurity, but when almost half of Europeans cannot access basic services online and fall trap to online populism, addiction and scams, should we not reflect on all that are left behind while labour shortages are being closed?** Besides supporting learners in identifying and countering disinformation patterns, which is essential for protecting democratic processes, the EU institutions must ensure that the recent tools such as the Digital Services Act and the Code of Practice on Disinformation are properly communicated and monitored for their implementation. Any learning experience must be backed by the regulatory framework of the EU when combatting large-scale challenges, so as to not let Europeans face themselves the challenges ahead.

### **A call for implementation...but is there something else as well?**

The Action Plan offers a much-needed operationalisation of the EU's work to combat challenges identified in the EYS. To a certain extent, it **manages to do this by ensuring policy coherence and by breaking silos between the EEA and the Skills Agenda**. It represents an exercise of taking stock of the multitude of positive initiatives that emerged in this European Commission's mandate. **Therefore, many of its calls and recommendations are linked to facilitating the implementation of initiatives such as Micro-credentials, Individual Learning Accounts, learning and talent mobility Council Recommendations, Centres for Vocational Excellence, Skills Academies, Pact for Skills, etc.** LLLPlatform welcomes this structural perspective over what was achieved and what needs to come next.

Nevertheless, the references to policy initiatives in lifelong learning remain superficial and seemingly unstructured. Calls are made to achieve the automatic recognition of qualifications, but the Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning is not mentioned. **These processes have been stagnating for a decade, and a renewed commitment towards them will not make their implementation miraculously happen.** Calls for improving the status of traineeships are made, yet **without mentioning the Proposal for a Directive which was launched in March 2024.** The calls to update curricula are not qualified at a moment when curricular adaptation depends mostly on Member



States approaches. **The Action Plan requests the implementation of national skills strategies, which are part of the Skills Agenda and on which a number of Member States are lagging.**

At the end of the EYS, **LLLPlatform wants more radical actions especially in light of a new European Commission mandate.** The siloed approach to learning and the targeting of specific technical skills contributed to a large population of Europeans lacking a desire to learn. LLLPlatform proposes the promotion of [Community Lifelong Learning Centres](#), as hubs which would develop the passion for all Europeans, and especially those most disadvantaged, to engage in learning. Such centres, **together with National and Regional Lifelong Learning Strategies** would better instil a mindset for continuous learning and empower people to discover and follow self-determined learning paths. Moreover, **monitoring of engagement in non-formal and informal learning, recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and incentives for joining learning in a diverse set of environments would boost participation in learning**, which inevitably will also make workers better-rounded.

### **Action Plan and involved stakeholders**

The Action Plan, regardless of LLLPlatform's suggestions for further ambitions, **remains a solid commitment to improve Europeans' skills.** Its strength is derived from the **whole-of-government approach and stakeholder engagement.** The numerous social policies complementing the skills-related policies show a keen understanding that **learning does not happen in a vacuum** and that Europeans must be supported in a myriad of ways to be able to access their basic rights. However, the Plan's conceptualisation of stakeholders is misguided. **Social partners are the only considered partners for EU institutions and Member States**, with the Plan failing to understand the landscape of stakeholders in education and training. **LLLPlatform endorses the much-needed support received by social dialogue this year and across the Action Plan.** Their perspective, being constantly connected to the workplace, is invaluable and where there is a strong social dialogue, there are more opportunities for workers to thrive. **Nevertheless, skills are not only tied to jobs**, and we have made the case for competences, which require a broader involvement of stakeholders. **Europe needs a strong social dialogue, but a robust civil dialogue is equally needed.** The type of learning required for Europe to thrive is one that promotes civic engagement, social inclusion and a just transition. It is a type of learning that is not solely the responsibility of public learning systems, as lifelong learning encompasses informal and non-formal learning venues, just as much as it remains a responsibility of the employers as well.

When referring to responsibility, **one cannot expect only for education and training to solve the labour shortages.** Many of these are caused by jobs with poor working conditions or by instances of brain-drain towards higher-income countries. What, nevertheless, remains in the remit of learning is to **ensure that**



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**all Europeans have access to meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Currently, the structure of the learning journey does not incentivise learners nor does it provide sufficient support to them to continue on this path.**

### **What is our direction on skills in Europe?**

The five-year term of the Commissioners and European Parliament delivered **much action on education and training, which has risen on the agenda at a time when investment in the sector was on a downward trend due to economic crises.** This all occurred during an incredibly tumultuous period marked by a global pandemic and an increase in the number of wars in proximity to the EU. **The Action Plan is signalling that this prioritisation of people’s learning must continue in the coming years.** LLLPlatform is grateful to see this support prior to the EU elections and it encourages decision-makers and civil society to work jointly in two directions to help this commitment to skills. **Firstly, it is time to review the community of stakeholders involved in lifelong learning across the policy fields.** The goal is to boost policy coherence and synergies, ensuring that social partners are not left by themselves to support adult learners’ complex needs or that civil society is shunned from decision-making on the inclusion of more Europeans in learning. **Secondly, with the commitment present, it is time to focus on impactful solutions for those that are not engaged in learning.** The existing models and institutions for learning will continue to support those privileged, but we need community-oriented solutions that can bring back to learning the ever-increasing number of those falling through the cracks.



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