

## **EU Skills Agenda: Political will, synergies and impact!**

*The Lifelong Learning Platform welcomes the European Commission initiative to propose a European Skills Agenda as it rightly addresses the need to increase the relevance of education and training systems to the needs of our societies. The LLL-P welcomes the announced emphasis on the integration of refugees and migrants, the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, the acquisition of “life skills” and the support for quality vocational education and training. The LLL-P would like to stress the need to integrate upcoming Skills Agendas into comprehensive lifelong learning strategies at national/regional level, to implement outreach strategies with concrete action plans, and to build bridges between education, employment and social policies in a reinforced dialogue and cooperation with civil society.*

### **SKILLS AGENDAS: A KEY ELEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGIES**

When modernising education and training systems, it is crucial to adopt a lifelong learning approach and introduce reforms in a holistic manner in order to build truly inclusive and sustainable learning societies. As the 2016 Annual Growth Survey (AGS) shows, lifelong learning has an important role in meeting the socio-economic challenges Europe is experiencing today. The traditional “school, work, retirement” pathway is no longer the norm and most individuals go through several transitions in their lives.

- ▶ Many countries and regions in Europe are implementing lifelong learning strategies aimed at offering comprehensive answers to these challenges. The LLL-P believes that forthcoming skills agendas at European, national and regional level should become an integrated pillar of such strategies in order to reinforce them.
- ▶ Flexible pathways and flexibility in learning, related to location, delivery and learning modes, should be fostered in order to support various life transitions, which can particularly benefit socio-economically vulnerable groups and women, when it comes to work-family conflicts.
- ▶ There is a need for an increased permeability between educational sectors linked to the shift to learning outcomes and increased synergies between existing tools (EQF, ECVET, ESCO, etc.) Learners should be in capacity to have their competences recognised regardless of the context in which they were acquired and to move from one system to another, thus avoiding dead ends. It therefore calls for the rapid implementation of validation mechanisms and for the recognition of study periods abroad, including in general education<sup>1</sup>.

### **A STRONG EMPHASIS ON THE ACQUISITION OF “LIFE SKILLS”**

The role of education is to make sure that individuals find their way through an increasingly uncertain and complex world by equipping them with the necessary competences and life skills<sup>2</sup> (i.e. transversal, transferable or soft skills), such as critical and creative thinking, cultural awareness and expression, entrepreneurial attitudes and civic and social competences<sup>3</sup>. According to a KeyCoNet stakeholder survey, 96% of head teachers and 91% of teachers agree or strongly agree that, even if it is not easy, it is necessary to teach and assess life skills. 85% of parents and 74% of students share the same views<sup>4</sup>. That is why collaborative methodologies, such as project-based and experiential learning, should be further explored.

- ▶ The Skills Agenda should emphasise the need for people to acquire “life skills” for their personal development, employability and social and civic participation in a comprehensive way and not only try to address labour market needs. Indeed alongside challenges linked to high unemployment, globalisation, ageing and digitalisation, we live in more and more diverse societies. Therefore, individuals need a combination of soft and hard skills to take an active part in society.
- ▶ Social, civic and intercultural competences are particularly relevant for learning how to live together and further consolidating social cohesion. These competences are also strongly valued by employers. Their acquisition and assessment, thanks to the reinforced use of active pedagogies in classrooms should be priority areas of EU cooperation (OMC) and be supported by EU programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund.
- ▶ Entrepreneurial attitudes should be perceived in a broad way, as a sense of initiative. This means that they are also very much linked to learning by doing, with project-based initiatives aiming at developing attitudes and skills such as leadership and teamworking.

These can be developed for example through junior enterprises, as well as community projects and volunteering. Non-profit initiatives lead to the acquisition of a comprehensive set of entrepreneurial, social and civic competences. In a similar way it is important to have a more integrated, comprehensive approach to digital skills and competences, and not to leave out media literacy, crucial to tackle potential negative effects of the digital world.

- ▶ The Key Competences Framework is very much appreciated and used by educational actors. It should be updated and further developed in order to have a more far-reaching implementation and to increase its pertinency. Of course, it is important to preserve the relevant work done so far. The importance of all key competences - and of implementing a competence-based approach - should be stressed in curricula and in teacher initial and lifelong professional development.

## **PRIORITY OF REACHING OUT TO DISADVANTAGED GROUPS...**

One of the main challenges in implementing Lifelong Learning Strategies and Skills Agendas is to reach out to the disadvantaged groups they are targeting. Individuals who benefit the most from the educational schemes offered to continue learning - such as validation schemes that are mainly targeted at those with lower skills and/or who dropped out of education without a secondary education diploma - are those who already have stronger educational backgrounds. Therefore, this leads to a rising skills gap in the society. The combination of effective guidance and counselling services and outreach strategies, together with the support of peers and mentors, is proven to be successful in involving not only refugees and immigrants, but disadvantaged groups in general.

- ▶ The LLL-P stresses the need to put more emphasis on targeted measures to reach out to disadvantaged groups. This entails collecting data at the national level to assess the impact of current systems on targeted publics and adopting measures to make sure they are adapted to learners' specific needs in terms of access, duration and delivery. This means working in partnership between decision-makers and organisations and associations on the ground that work directly with potential beneficiaries. Sometimes those associations are very small which prevents them from accessing EU grants and that is why solutions should be found to ease their access to such financial support (e.g. capacity building and grant rules - see the LLL-P Erasmus Survey 2015).

- ▶ It is important to recognise and support the role of non-formal education providers that can offer an alternative to those groups by offering a safe and open environment. Creating a sense of self-worth and self-confidence in order to give genuine opportunities for second chances and to enhance motivation to learn is essential. It can represent a first step in engaging them into a learning (and possibly a validation) process.

- ▶ The LLL-P calls for coordinating and reinforcing lifelong guidance systems (across sectors and between employment and education policies) and implementing mentoring and outreach programmes in the framework of the Skills Agenda as a prerequisite to reach out to those that are further away from learning.

## **AND INTEGRATING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS**

The LLL Platform welcomes the announced focus on refugees and migrants in the upcoming Skills Agenda. The current refugee influx renders this a particularly timely and pressing issue. One of the first steps in ensuring that Europe lives up to its agreements, is that it allows them access to education. Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. The Reception Conditions Directive<sup>5</sup> sets out common minimum standards in the Member States for the reception of people applying for international protection. This Directive should be implemented consistently throughout Europe.

The successful integration of immigrants is equally crucial for Europe in the light of ageing societies. Immigrants are expected to become an important force in European economies and also to contribute to the care and support of the ageing non-immigrant (and immigrant) populations in the following decades[2]. Facilitating their social and economic integration means investing in our common future.

- ▶ The competences and qualifications of migrants/refugees should be acknowledged and recognised with proper validation mechanisms; and if they lack skills, they should benefit from adult education programmes to facilitate their social and economic integration, as provided for in the Directive.
- ▶ Therefore, the aim of developing national mechanisms for validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018 is now more than ever relevant, offering new opportunities and widening access to both education and the labour market.
- ▶ Language classes must be made available to all refugees, as a prerequisite to their social and economic integration in the host country. Support and trainings should be provided to language teachers to be able to teach the language of the host country as a foreign language.

## SETTING UP STRUCTURED MECHANISMS OF DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

More bridges need to be built between education, employment and social departments at EU, national and regional levels. Education is not only crucial for enhancing employability but it is also one of the best means to prevent social exclusion<sup>6</sup>. The only way to achieve policy coherence is to make different fields and sectors work together, as the LLL-HUB project shows. Collaboration between various stakeholders can be achieved through partnerships. This requires public authorities to set up concrete dialogue and consultation mechanisms aimed to analyse the situation, exchange practices/experiences, propose solutions and evaluate their effectiveness. Such a comprehensive approach is the only way to accomplish relevant, accessible, recognised and flexible education.

- ▶ The link between employment and social inclusion is clear, and therefore stepping up cooperation between DG EMPL and DG EAC at European level can result in a mutual reinforcement of the Skills Agenda and the so-called Post-Paris Declaration agenda respectively. The same counts for the national and regional level and it should be paired up with implementing cooperation mechanisms between decision-makers and stakeholders.
- ▶ Such partnerships should be broad and should aim at reaching out the targets set in the national/regional Skills Agendas. Indeed, ensuring that education is relevant to the needs of societies means working with non-formal education providers, employment services, families, NGOs, public libraries, local authorities as well as with companies, especially SMEs and their representative bodies (e.g. Chambers of Commerce).
- ▶ The LLL-P recalls that building learning societies is a shared responsibility between all stakeholders and decision-makers. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness on the importance of lifelong learning thanks to specific awareness raising events (e.g. Lifelong Learning Weeks, Festivals, Employment Weeks, etc.), incentives (e.g. encouraging employers to invest in training programmes) and policy instruments (e.g. training vouchers) that are easily understood by individuals.

**The LLLPlatform calls for a strong European Skills Agenda coming up with national and regional action plans and the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders. It should place a right emphasis on making education relevant to the needs of our societies by increasing synergies between employment, social and educational policies. This means overcoming resistance in public administrations in order to break down silos between actors, policies and instruments and to engage stakeholders, including civil society, in the process (genuine dialogue). Our Platform and its 39 members are ready to support the Commission and the Member States in delivering the Skills Agenda at European, national and regional levels.**

1. [#RecogniseStudyAbroad](#), a campaign supported by EFIL, EEE-YFU, EUROCLIO, EPA and OBESSU;

2. The diverse and often overlapping definitions of skills and competencies, and the multiple ways of categorising them, can create confusion. The LLL-P uses the UNICEF definition of “life skills”, by which they are defined as *psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life*. They are grouped into three broad categories of skills: cognitive skills for analyzing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and inter-personal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others;

3. *Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Executive Officer*, IBM Study, 2010.

According to this study comprising of interviews with over 15,000 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries, creativity was named the most important leadership quality to meet the challenges of increasing complexity and uncertainty in the world;

4. European Analysis of [KeyCoNet's Online Public Consultation of Stakeholders](#), 2014;

5. [Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council](#), 26 June 2013.

The Reception Conditions Directive is a part of the Common European Asylum System, together with the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Qualification Directive, the Dublin III Regulation, and the EURODAC Regulation;

6. Outcome of the 3449th EU Council meeting - Education, Youth, Culture and Sport, Brussels, 24 February 2016.



**Lifelong Learning Platform**

Rue de l'Industrie 10  
1000 Brussels - Belgium  
info@llplatform.eu  
www.eucis-ll.eu