

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since
1982



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ESU's contribution to the public consultation on 2023 – European Year of Skills

The European Students' Union (ESU) welcomes the proposal of the European Commission to designate 2023 as the European Year of Skills (EYS), looking forward to ensuring that the designation would not only increase momentum for the importance of skills and skills sets in a fast-changing society, but would also bring forward key developments in the sector, with a focus on the essential role of education and training.

Based on the Proposal of the European Commission, ESU puts forward the following suggestions:

I. On the consultation process

Even though the public consultation of the Commission is planned to last until the 14th of December, the proposal was already sent to the European Parliament, where the deadline for amendments of the MEPs has passed. The fact that the decision-making process regarding the Decision to designate 2023 as the European Year of Skills, its objectives and overarching framework is already in an advanced stage before the closing of the consultation process raises concerns on the effectiveness and relevance of the public consultation of stakeholders. Ensuring that the consultation is not organised in a tokenistic manner is a precondition of building up the trust and full engagement of stakeholders and ESU believes that irrespective of the current stage of the process, the opinions of the stakeholders must be seriously taken into account.

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

II. On the framework of implementing the European Year of Skills

A lot of hope and expectations were put in the designation of 2022 as the European Year of Youth but, in ESU's opinion, the outcomes were far from matching the hype. ESU suggests, as lessons learned from the constructive feedback on the implementation of the European Year of Youth, that the European institutions do not follow the same mistakes. In our point of view, EYY lacked actions, consultations and a dedicated budget to enhance actions to put youth in the forefront. Moreover, the framing of the follow-up is still unclear and we are afraid that the EYY will have, in the end, little to no impact in terms of youth policy. Our hope is that the EYS will be more productive in terms of policy creation, consultations and financing of opportunities held by stakeholders involved in the topics of Skills. In a more general way, we ask for a dedicated budget for each European Year coming from EU and member states.

In this context, ESU calls for:

- Organising broad consultations and putting the stakeholders, especially the learners and their representatives, in a co-designing role of the framework and activities of the European Year of Skills, both at European and national level.
- Using the European Year of Skills as a vehicle for increasing the outreach of the programmes focusing on skills development and regulation, both at European and national level. This should entail promoting the activities organised under the umbrella of the EYS, as well as the already existing programmes of the EU supporting skills. However, the EYS should also mean speeding up already existing processes or adopting new policies on skills that impact broad target groups.
- Earmarking additional funding to the policies and programmes focusing on skills. So far, no additional funding is foreseen for the EYS, which heavily limits the impact of the Year and shifts the range of possibilities to only already existing policies.
- Ensuring transparency and accountability by realising public National Action Plans on EYS, co-created with stakeholders, and periodically reporting on the results from European and national level. Looking into the outreach and legacy of the Year only after it is finished means there can be no adjustments that would lead the Year on a better path.

III. On the objectives and activities under the European Year of Skills

According to [Cedefop](#), “about 46 % of adults in the EU may potentially need to up-skill and re-skill, as they either present low education and low digital and cognitive skills or are moderately to highly educated and at risk of skills loss and skills obsolescence”. In this sense, the importance the Commission weighs on upskilling and reskilling adult learners is appreciated. In order to protect democracy, ensure a thriving society, promote wellbeing and increase the standard of living, we need skilled individuals that produce added value both in economy and in community.

However, the skills agenda cannot be limited nor to adult upskilling and reskilling, nor to the contribution of skills to the labour market. Albeit important, these issues frame an incomplete picture of the diverse needs of learners and the broad range of skills they need in society.

In terms of the objectives of the European Year of Skills, ESU calls for:

- Changing the narrative and understanding of the role of skills in order to promote a more holistic perspective, with a focus on the individual learner and the diversity of skills demanded. The relevance of skills for the labour market needs to be complemented with the need for transversal skills (critical thinking, learning how to learn, tackling disinformation, climate change mitigation skills, adaptability etc). Skills are needed for democratic competences, for personal development as well as for the labour market, and the line of thought should start from learners, not from the labour market.
- Shaping the EYS in a lifelong learning perspective, that takes into account the role of both formal, non-formal and informal education for the development of skills for all ages.
- Highlighting the role of counselling and guidance as an essential tool for skills development, supporting the synergy between different counselling services (e.g. for students and for young people). We suggest a mapping exercise of different career counselling and guidance services across Member states and their impact on skills development, with an eye to suggest paths for ensuring free and quality counselling services for all.
- Highlighting the essential role of higher education in obtaining highly skilled individuals and supporting the green and digital transitions. As a cornerstone of skills policy, we believe everyone should have access to

higher education as a gateway for ensuring highly skilled individuals. In the complex environment we are currently facing, the need for future proof skills obtained through higher education is acute. Higher education heavily contributes to sustainable growth and innovation, and initiatives supporting these endeavours should be prioritised through the EYS, including ways to support the transition from school education to higher education in an inclusive approach.

- Working on understanding the conditions and support services needed for skills development, including the prerequisite of learner wellbeing both as a distinctive priority and as a systemic lens through which to develop policies, and promoting such policies. We would expect to see more focus on adapted policies that could support a diverse range of learners, including learners with disabilities. Ensuring that all learners have necessary accommodations in place to ensure full accessibility. Furthermore, even though there is a rationale for prioritising access to STEM fields for women, we propose that the gender dimension is expanded more generally.
- Avoiding one-size-fits-all policies, showcasing best practices on flexible teaching and learning methods, such as distance learning, that support skills development in an inclusive way, as well as upscaling them, including through funding.
- While supporting the proposed objective of strengthening learning opportunities and mobility and facilitating the recognition of qualifications, we call for more concrete steps on the integration of migrants and refugee learners, by easing access to and supporting their access to education, through dedicated educational pathways as well as easing the recognition of their qualifications, including by widening the application of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Alongside ensuring parallel educational pathways for persecuted students through Students at Risk schemes.
- Supporting policies that decrease the gap of the skills mismatch with proactive measures and without using the mismatch as a tool to defund study programmes. The gap can be decreased through promoting healthy and productive cooperation between education institutions and businesses/labour market representatives, but in a space that guarantees that the former are not bound by the intentions of the labour market and can decide autonomously, in consultation with all stakeholders.

- Doing the walk in finally ensuring flexible learning paths and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL). Despite all the commitments and action plans, RPL in education is still far from reality for many learners.
- Boosting the efforts to implement already existing agendas in a synergy under the EYS, such as the European Skills Agenda, the European Innovation Agenda, the European Strategy for Universities. Among the already existing tools, we believe the review of the European Qualifications Framework should lead to an improved framework for supporting recognition, comparability, and compatibility, as well as transversal skills, including green and digital skills. However, at least of the same importance is the promotion of the EQF, so as it is used not only by education institutions, but also by learners themselves and the employers. Furthermore, the Diploma Supplement should be universally used for learning outcomes achieved both through formal and non-formal education while studying in higher education, for example recognising the skills developed through student representation.
- Promoting the relevance of using learning outcomes as a lifelong 'currency'. As a precondition, all study programmes in Europe should be able to write and use coherent learning outcomes that are linked to curriculum and assessment. These learning outcomes should be easily understood by learners and recognised by employers. The Commission could push forward the agenda through proposing guidelines and recommendations on taking up the usage of learning outcomes.
- Supporting quality and fair working environments for young people, highlighting their role for skills development. EYS should be the year where the EU commits to fairly paid, quality traineeships. Also acknowledging that forms of working should be a choice, not a matter of necessity for those studying.
- Promoting the EYS as an opportunity for microcredentials to be developed with stakeholders, especially focusing on how they are rolled out by higher education institutions. In the proposal the microcredentials are mentioned only in relation with the European universities, and even though European Universities can provide microcredentials, the two dimensions are not necessarily interlinked. ESU also believes that EYS should be the year to start monitoring the implementation of the Council Recommendation on microcredentials.

Finally, regarding the discussions on the start and end dates of the EYY and the EYS: regardless of the start date of the EYS, it cannot last less than a full year, and there should not be void time between the two years.