

The European Year of Skills: an opportunity for Europe to look at skills beyond the labour market?

Background

Eight months ago, President's von der Leyen [announced](#) that 2023 will be the European Year of Skills (EYS). On 9 May, the momentous Europe Day, the starting signal was given for a year in which the EU institutions will focus on skills development across the Union. The Lifelong Learning Platform welcomes this initiative but draws attention to the need to uphold the values of the EU and take decisive action to achieve lifelong learning for the personal and professional development and participation of all in society. The following shortcomings suggest that more needs to be done to achieve this:

- Only 54% of adults aged 16-74 have basic digital skills¹
- Only 10.8% of people aged 25-64 engaged in training²
- Sustainability learning lacks a structural approach across education and training systems³
- Almost 10% of pupils were qualified as early leavers⁴
- Almost 23% of learners underachieve in literacy, mathematics and science⁵

These occur as the climate crisis, the unpredictability of disruptive technology, the commodification of education, the lowering participation in democratic processes, the attacks on civil society threaten the societal fabric. While lifelong learning is a necessity in the face of such challenges, the finalised EYS resolution as well as the Trilogue negotiations⁶ narrowed the Year's focus to labour market needs. Choosing to provide ICT specialists and green sector experts that can support businesses to adapt to the twin transitions represents a small part of what learners and societies need right now to tackle the wide diversity of challenges.

From temporary patches to meaningful solutions: rethinking our economy

Adapting education and training systems to labour market needs does not address the root cause of many of the challenges discussed above. **When reform is not person-centred, in this case learner-centred, but rather labour market-centred, inequity can only fester**, as the few will progress while the many, unequipped to deal with changes, will be left behind. The Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL) advocated towards both the European Commission and Parliament to ensure that the European Year of Skills proposal becomes broader. The initial LLLP reaction to President von der Leyen's

¹ Eurostat 2021, [here](#).

² Eurostat 2021, [here](#).

³ Council of the EU 2022, [here](#).

⁴ Eurostat 2022, [here](#).

⁵ Education and Training Monitor 2022, [here](#).

⁶ Trilogue Negotiations EYS, [here](#).

announcement can be found [here](#) while its analysis of the Commission Proposal from October 2022 is accessible [here](#). In the meantime, LLLP amendments suggested to the European Parliament were partially accepted - a full analysis can be found [here](#). The final EYS decision:

- expanded references to **learners beyond the working-age population**
- expanded references to **transversal, soft, transferable or socio-emotional competences**
- expanded the list of stakeholders that must be engaged, to **include civil society**
- **increased its policy coherence** by being better linked to existing processes such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, European Qualifications Framework, Quality Traineeships Framework.

This might be encouraging, but in essence it is **smoke and mirrors when the EYS' inner logic remains the same**. The EYS remains a missed opportunity as it continues to promote a dichotomy between learning for the labour market and learning for life while even research on labour market needs shows that skills and competences for work cannot be separated from those for life and participation in society⁷. Analytical thinking; creative thinking; self-efficacy skills including resilience, flexibility and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning are all transversal competences and life skills that play a very important role in all aspects of life, not only for the labour market.

All the above references were additions to the remaining sole priority: **equipping learners with the competences needed on the labour market**. In this logic, the labour market is the only stakeholder who decides what content and format of learning is necessary. Alternatively, starting from the needs of learners, and not only in terms of personal development, but also taking into account the learning providers and environment, funding, and structures of education systems, could ensure an approach that involves all views and stakeholders, and meaningfully contributes to changing the current economic system and the way learning is connected to it. Such a learner-centred orientation was missing during the [EYS Festival](#), on 9 May, which presented solely the voice of those Europeans who obtained better jobs through training in some key transforming industries most in need of a skilled workforce. The voice of education and training providers was missing throughout the event; who, when, how and what skills are developed are important aspects that the year of Skills should take into consideration. Europe must empower education and training systems to shape the future we want rather than empowering businesses to shape our lives.

An alternative vision: key competences for lifelong and lifewide learning

LLLp recognises the importance of learners finding fulfilment in jobs and more broadly in the world of work, to be able to live more prosperous lives while contributing to society also through their job.

⁷ World Economic Forum (2023). Future of Jobs Report, [here](#).

However, this is only one side of an active citizen and an active learner that is prepared for the changes ahead. To this end, the LLLP has established *Key Competences for All: a lifelong learning approach to skills* as its [Annual Theme in 2023](#) and provides an overarching vision of what learners, practitioners and education systems require. This takes into consideration the sector specific competences needed for labour market participation but also considers how a broader toolkit of competences is required to boost Europe's economic and social advancement. Key competences, beyond employment needs, will be needed to ensure that all Europeans thrive while contributing to make the EU values a reality.

1. Put the learners at the centre

- a. Prioritise learners' needs and support their access to learning, through actions such as linguistic support, support with impairments and disabilities, financial support etc.
- b. Promote smooth transitions between education sectors and flexible learning pathways
- c. Promote outreach to disadvantaged groups and guidance for lifelong learning

2. Shift the perspective towards key competences for life

- a. Encourage the mainstreaming of sustainability learning in all learning processes in parallel with sector-specific skills for green jobs⁸
- b. Promote digital citizenship competences in parallel with any specific or advanced digital skills and ensure that all learners benefit from this⁹
- c. Achieve the implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning
- d. Develop a strategic framework for the recognition of transversal skills as committed to in the European Skills Agenda¹⁰.

3. Readapt the learning process to foster the development of key competences

- a. Recognise learning in non-formal and informal environments and make the validation of competences gained in such environments a reality¹¹
- b. Promote project-based learning, outdoors learning, cross-curricular approaches
- c. Adapt assessment to foster the development of such competences, and encourage the use and development of self-assessment methods¹²

4. Ensure public funding to deliver learning as a right to all

- a. Make Individual Learning Accounts a reality for learners of all ages¹³

⁸ LLLP Position Paper 2020, [here](#).

⁹ LLLP Position Paper 2017, [here](#).

¹⁰ European Skills Agenda 2020, [here](#). Action Point 7.

¹¹ LLLP Position Paper 2019, [here](#).

¹² LLLP Position Paper 2021, [here](#).

¹³ LLLP Position Paper 2022, [here](#).

- b. Target investment to close any achievement gaps influenced by the background of learners considering that the socio-economic background of learners remains the greatest determinant for educational success¹⁴
 - c. Funding must reflect the high level priority that learning has become to achieve the EU agenda on the twin transitions (and beyond i.e. agenda 2030)¹⁵
- 5. Enlarge collaboration with civil society in learning**
- a. Connect all learning opportunities and environments, delivering a true lifelong and lifewide learning experience to all
 - b. Ensure structured civil dialogue where all stakeholders are part of decision-making in learning
 - c. Consider initiatives such as Community Lifelong Learning Centres as forms through which all stakeholders can support learners to have a truly life-wide and lifelong learning journey¹⁶.

LLLP and its members will promote this vision of the European Year of Skills and welcome any opportunities to engage the EU institutions in co-creating a lifelong learning perspective that serves the interests of all learners following up on 1996 Year of Lifelong Learning. For more information, please reach out to Andrei Frank: policy@lllplatform.eu.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ CEDEFOP and Lifelong Learning Platform 2019, [here](#).