

European Semester Country Specific Recommendations shifting from education to skills: Reactive versus Proactive behaviour in 2023

Background

On 24 May, the European Commission published its [European Semester](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)¹ and Country Reports (CRs), known as the '[Spring Package](#)'. The Semester is the EU mechanism used to ensure coordination across economic and social policies amongst Member States, with the CSRs representing the corrective course prescribed by the Commission to ensure convergence on its annual economic and social priorities. Therefore, the 2023 Semester guides Member States' investment and reforming of education and training, and represents its latest iteration that will not be bound by EU fiscal rules since they were frozen during COVID-19. As of 2024, the fiscal rules will return, sparking fears about the return of austerity for public investment in education and training.

A shift from education to skills

Though uneasy, the work at EU level is divided between education and skills development, with the former generally accounting for formal education and training and the latter generally referring to development of skills for adults so that they can join the labour market. The Semester CRs and CSRs have followed the same logic. However, a shift occurred during this year with regards to the balance between education and skills. Past research on the way in which social policy was promoted through the European Semester² and past LLLP mappings of the CSRs³ revealed education and training as a privileged sector that always received great attention in the sense of the amount of CSRs dedicated to it. 2023 marks an abrupt ending to this with only two countries receiving CSRs on the education system⁴, with no specific chapters on education, and references to the sector mostly as subordinated to the employment needs.

This makes past years look like reactive policy-making. Younger learners were hit hard by COVID-19 and this was education policymaking's main focus in recent years. Though crucial to react to crises, our 2022 Position Paper shows how decades of misplanning and funding reduction in the sector made the education and training system severely unprepared for COVID-19⁵. Moreover, the complete exclusion of reflections on reforms in this year's CSRs, while still much needed in COVID-19' aftermath, points towards a lack of foresight and strategic planning. In such an environment, Member States can only be reactionary towards crises. Looming across all CSRs for all Member States are the energy crisis and

¹ Find [here](#) LLLP's mapping of the CSRs for each Member State.

² ETUCE 2017, Education and Training Policy in the European Semester, [here](#).

³ LLLP 2022, [here](#).

⁴ BE and FR.

⁵ LLLP Position Paper 2022, [here](#).

skills-related labour shortages. The European Commission is trying to respond and coordinate on these two serious challenges, but as adult skills were little touched upon in previous Semester iterations and as the current approach is aiming to close labour market gaps, it seems that we are witnessing another reactive approach, following the recipe used on the pandemic.

If education is neglected in the 2023 Semester, skills development receives a privileged spot in the CSRs since every single Member State received the following CSR: *Step up policy efforts aimed at the provision and acquisition of the skills needed for the green transition*⁶. Moreover, at no point is it explained what exactly such skills would be, though across each Member State the exact sectors where vacancies caused by skills mismatches are mentioned. Patterns across the manufacturing sector, the construction sector, energy-intensive industries, and across professions contributing to the retrofitting of the European architecture have formed much of the concerns are identified at each step of the analysis for this year⁷. In this context, one can ask if the green transition simply refers to making sure that all businesses thrive economically with less CO2 emissions? Should the focus of the green transition not be placed on the broader development of people's competences?

The most culpable aspect of the inefficient strategic planning across the Semester is the lack of focus on lifelong learning. Each year, one sector of learning is prioritised, which leads to sectors being almost completely neglected in the CSRs. Each year, a specific set of competences is discussed (digital, or green, or civic, etc). Each year becomes a game of whack-a-mole where learning is seen as disjointed policy fields to be reformed one piece at a time. LLLPlatform proposes for the Semester to consider learning paths, the way in which all types of competences are acquired in formal, informal and non-formal learning environments, and the way in which the different moving pieces collaborate and connect in a learner's journey. Without this, no meaningful policy can be developed to ensure long-term public investment for the resilience of learners of all ages to adapt to any kind of future crisis and thrive in how our societies are developing.

Different contexts, similar problems: the danger of lumping-up countries

The European Semester, just as any robust policy response, functions only inasmuch as it is fed with comprehensive data collected from Member States. It is clear that all EU countries are impacted by skills mismatches, labour market shortages and needs in terms of upskilling and reskilling. However, it is unlikely that each country would suffer from these challenges in the exact same way, with the exact same policy infrastructure to tackle them or with the exact same needs for policy responses. However,

⁶ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hGUj-oSvCqInW_UyhxIH0htTBUTCIAMIt12HF7UJAL80/edit

⁷ Ibid.

one might think that is the case when looking at the CSRs documents for 13 out of 27 countries⁸. Identical paragraphs on labour market shortages show little nuancing in the way skills development systems work in each Member State⁹. Frequently, a two-tier system is established in the Semester with nuanced data coming from countries such as France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Luxembourg¹⁰, whereas other countries lack the same type of in-depth analysis. The problem can be a lack of engagement with the EU process from Member States, it could be an inadequate national data collection system or it could be a lack of involvement of stakeholders in the data collection process. Regardless of the reasoning, it is difficult to take coordination of policies seriously when there are so many gaps across Member States. Repetitive paragraphs that did not provide any national context were exactly those pointing towards untapped labour supply, normalising the labour market-oriented language as the policy solution.

Flashes of inequity: the exclusion of people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or migrant backgrounds from learning

One aspect comes across often and in varied forms: **ensuring equity in the participation in learning**. Luxembourg, Belgium, France and Sweden were highlighted for worrisome academic achievements of learners from disadvantaged socio-economic or migrant backgrounds¹¹, while countries such as NL, SE, HU, BE and AT put the spotlight on disadvantaged adults not participating in labour-market oriented training¹². Inequity remains a wide-spread issue across the EU, reinforcing the findings of the European Education Area (EEA) Progress Report 2022 or the research on adult participation in learning.

The Progress Report placed equity as front and centre, identifying it as the most serious challenge to the EEA's achievement. At EU average, a learner with a disadvantaged socioeconomic background experiences a risk of underperformance that is six times higher compared to a learner with an advantaged socioeconomic background¹³. The most vulnerable adults are the least likely to participate in learning¹⁴ due to numerous barriers. Therefore, proposals to develop specific competences for specific sectors is a far cry from treating inequity's root causes.

Steps forward

During a year where the EU fiscal framework and the Semester are subjected to reform, LLLPlatform proposes a set of actions to address the abovementioned shortcomings.

⁸ Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

⁹ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hGUj-oSvCqInW_UyhxiH0htTBUTCIAMIt12HF7UAL80/edit

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ European Commission, 2019, [here](#).

¹⁴ OECD, 2019, [here](#).

- LLLPlatform urges for the flexibilisation of rules to **exclude investment in essential public services, such as education and training, from the calculation of debts and deficits**. Without encouragement into long-term reforming of the lifelong learning system, Member States cannot dedicate adequate resources to create a path for proactive reforming rather than reactive crisis management.
- LLLPlatform calls for a **Semester that better collects data on Member States, with the involvement of civil society as is defined by the process' regulations**. Without meaningful data, collected from all stakeholders and all participants in the learning system, no reform will be tailored to learners' contextual needs.
- LLLPlatform demands that the **European Commission develops a specific chapter on lifelong learning in the Spring Package and in the CRs, with concrete indicators for its different sectors to be developed in coordination with the relevant stakeholders, in order to propose CSRs that encompass a reform of the whole lifelong learning system, and not only isolated parts in the journey of the learner**.

LLLPlatform will continue monitoring the European Semester and urges all stakeholders to contribute to the [Open Public Consultation for providing feedback on the European Commission for reforming the EU's fiscal framework](#), open until **4 August 2023**.