

The skills we need for the Europe we want

Position Paper on the European Year of Skills

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), represents school students in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all. OBESSU welcomes the initiative of making 2023 the European Year of Skills and sees it as an unique opportunity to **change the paradigm around skills and turn it into a holistic vision of lifelong learning that allows learners to thrive in all aspects of their lives**, benefitting their community, wider society and the economy. Indeed, the narrative of skills has been emerging as a fundamental aspect of recent education and labour reforms, where students and workers alike are expected to meet the needs of the labour market by developing a range of skills. The debate is mostly focused on what these skills should be, and in what ways their acquisition can be promoted by all stakeholders, both in terms of up-skilling and reskilling. That by itself poses a number of challenges to which we want to draw attention.

A prerequisite to increased, more effective and inclusive investment in training and upskilling is having a **more integrated approach to curriculum development and learning objectives at the European level**. Indeed, the current lack of harmonisation of curricula and learning objectives across European Member States, at the level of general secondary education and secondary vocational education and training, is in our opinion a major obstacle in improving quality and equity in education and training. The European Education Area (EEA) could take a more ambitious approach, focusing not only on enhancing performance in basic skills and reducing early leaving from education and training, but also on **building the foundations for cooperation** in the field of curriculum development in secondary education and training with the objective of developing a common framework taking into account current and future challenges faced by learners and educational staff, as well as the eight key competences outlined in the [Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong learning](#). In this sense, the experience of Higher Education Area could be a beneficial starting point to devise similar strategies at lower secondary level, and promote, amongst other initiatives, increased learning mobility for high school and VET students.

In terms of policy coherence, a strong focus on the EEA can also reduce the institutional and political division between general secondary and initial VET. These two often fall under two different institutions respectively, as is the case at European level with a division between DG Employment and DG Education and Culture, but also in many Member States. In practice, this institutional division contributes to creating a divide in policies and political priorities, thus lessening policy coherence in education and training policies. Similarly, more efforts are needed to combine the objectives and aims of the European Year of Skills with other relevant EU-sponsored actions and initiatives, such as the European Skills Agenda, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Digital Education Action Plan. These three latter initiatives in particular put a fundamental emphasis on social fairness while devising strategies to boost employability, up-skilling and reskilling. We would like to see the same **attention to the social dimension of education and training throughout the European Year of Skills**. As highlighted by the CULT Committee, this entails the adoption of a holistic, broad vision and definition of skills that can take into account longer-term needs of learners at all



levels, and not just those of the labour market¹. The EC Recommendation on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning can provide a parallel list of priorities to those of businesses and enterprises, to ensure a checks and balances between the needs of the private sector and that of its workforce. Moreover, a greater attention towards the development of efficient and reliable mechanisms for the recognition and validation of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning must be a priority. The evaluation of the [2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) has shown that many countries did not fully implement it: only seven countries (BE, ES, FR, IT, LU, NL, RO) have allocated specific national budgets for validation which is essential in order to create inclusive and free validation processes accessible to all². The evaluation report highlights that many individuals start the validation process without completing it. The European Year of Skills could address these issues and foster dialogue for the harmonisation of current validation mechanisms and procedures in EU member states.

This is particularly true for the VET sector: **empowering learners and apprentices requires a focus on sustainable growth and on the co-creation of an enabling environment for quality learning**. More attention needs to be paid to apprentices' working conditions, their healthcare coverage, insurance, working hours and compensation, as well as the availability of services such as counselling and guidance, which are essential tools for skills development. The virtuous example of Spain shows how the integration of lifelong learning competencies and objectives in VET curricula benefits and empowers apprentices³. Regarding the integration of migrants in the labour market through VET, EU member states already favour VET over any other type of education for migrants and asylum seekers. This preference, however, does not automatically lead to integration in the labour market, as many EU member states do not grant work permits at completion of their course of study⁴. We argue that promoting access to VET can only enhance migrants' integration in society as part of wider efforts to realise migrants' and migrant children's right to education and employment by making not only VET, but also other forms of education accessible - such as general secondary and higher education.

The ambitions of the European Year of Skills will concretise in the long term only by addressing **education and training as public goods**. Significant, strategic and meaningful public investment should have priority over private investments and sponsorships. We have already witnessed the disastrous effects of favouring private over public investment after the 2008 financial crisis, when drastic austerity measures left the education sector in an unfavourable position, unable to adapt to the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly digitalised society. The quality and equity of education were affected, increasing inequalities and leaving many learners behind. Investment in education and training is paramount if we aim at building inclusive, stronger and resilient education and training systems. Therefore, we demand

¹ Opinion on proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023 (COM(2022)0526 – C9-03442022 – 2022/0326(COD)), 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CULT-AL-739623_EN.pdf

² European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning : final report, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/55823>

³ CEDEFOP, Vocational Education and Training in Europe, Spain, 2021 <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/spain-u2>

⁴ European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Policy Note: the Right to Education for Asylum Seekers in the EU, ECRE Weekly Bulletin 2023, <https://ecre.org/policy-note-accessing-to-education-for-asylum-seekers-in-the-eu/#:~:text=The%20Policy%20Note%20concludes%20with,seeking%20protection%20in%20the%20EU.>

the inclusion of education and training as priority areas in the future EU Economic Governance Framework currently under revision.

We cannot fail to mention the importance of a coordinating governance structure, dialogue and capacity building mechanisms to enhance the link between EU and national public institutions and civil society. We firmly believe that **the education community must be involved in co designing and co implementing the learning process** as pointed out by the Lifelong Learning Platform⁵.

Finally, regarding the decision-making process and development of the European Year of Skills and its connected activities, we see the Year of Skills as an opportunity for the European Institutions to engage with different stakeholders in the field of education and training, bringing their valuable perspectives to the discussion on skills and competences for lifelong learning. We ascertain that there is still a strong need to learn from the European Year of Youth and the feedback received in terms of the quality, timing and nature of stakeholders involvement, in particular of civil society. **More, better, and earlier involvement of other EU institutions, civil society and other stakeholders can ensure meaningful engagement and build trust between stakeholders and institutions.**

We see the Year of Skills also as an opportunity for the European Institutions to engage with different stakeholders in the field of education and training, bringing their valuable perspectives to the discussion on competences for lifelong learning. **We look forward to meaningfully engaging with all European and national institutions to build the skills we need for the Europe we want.**



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⁵ Lifelong Learning Platform, Investment in Education and Training: a Public Good for All, 2022, <https://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Position-Paper-2022-FINAL-1.pdf>