

Similar responses to chronic problems

How should the European Semester leverage available data for impactful education and training reforms

Background

On 3 June, the European Commission published its [European Semester](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)¹ and Country Reports (CRs), as part of the ‘[Spring Package](#)’. The Semester is the EU mechanism used to ensure coordination across Member States’ economic and social policies, with the CSRs representing the corrective course prescribed by the Commission for Member States to meet annual economic and social priorities. The 2026 Semester comes with a novelty: the [Council Recommendation on Human Capital](#). [LLLPlatform already reacted to the Council Recommendation](#), which aims to map the challenges in education and training and propose long-term plans on redressing the situation. The Council Recommendation is informing the CSRs received by the Member States, with each Member State receiving CSRs on education and training this year.

The Myth of Sisyphus: Is struggling to achieve CSRs enough or should we push for results?

The LLLPlatform [2025 Reaction to the Spring Package](#) already highlighted the lack of novelty across CSRs and that many of the challenges experienced were present in CSRs since 2012, yet Member States are not only failing to make progress, but even regressing, especially if we considering basic skills compared to previous years².

Underachievement in basic skills was flagged in 2026 for all EU Member States, anticipating the decline captured by the [PISA 2025 results](#). Even if for some countries the overall numbers might have improved, they still experienced achievement gaps among learners with fewer opportunities and their peers. The EU targets for basic skills are further away than ever, with underachievement around 30% of pupils aged 15, and with learners with a migrant background being three times likelier to underperform in countries like Italy and Spain. Furthermore, while better school outcomes are essential, they will not address the learning needs of the millions of adults who already left initial education with low basic skills, as illustrated by the latest [PIAAC results](#). Every diagnosis of weak basic skills should include an assessment of adult basic education, outreach, guidance and second-chance provision. **Yet the most common**

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

² European Commission (2025). Mapping evidence of decline in basic skills and potential contributing factors. Available [here](#).



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recommendation has been to ‘improve educational achievement’ or ‘improve basic skills acquisition’³ which provides no guidelines to Member States on how to achieve this or how to collaborate jointly towards achieving this. Education and training policies are Member State competences, yet the Commission can provide tailored advice to each Member State to support them in achieving beneficial policy change. More clear advice on the type of reforms would be a more constructive approach rather than imposing a Council Recommendation on Human Capital which bypasses Education Ministries in favour of Employment Ministries. **LLP always supported a greater role for the European Semester in aiding policy changes in education and training at national level in Member States, but only if this is done in collaboration with the relevant ministers, respecting subsidiarity.** By framing education and training as a tool to address labour market solutions, and establishing priorities with Employment Ministers, there is a risk of conflating education and training with the competitiveness agenda, and more specifically with labour mobility, and opening up the opportunity for future decisions on education and training which are decided top-down by the Commission.

It is evident that Member States neglected commitments to education and training CSRs, yet the **European Commission’s fiscal rules have always been flagged as a huge limitation on education and training in particular**⁴. Therefore, the Semester’s objective should be to constructively identify how investment can be most effectively leveraged to target pressure points in each education and training system, rather than wrestling away competences from Member States only to provide generic commitments to education and training. **Even better, focusing on a national escape clause for education and training, as for the defence sector, is what can really boost investment in the sector.**

Conflating labour market and education and training diagnostics in the European Semester

The Semester is meant to provide an in-depth analysis of each Member State to assess how various sectors of activities are performing and identify any kind of challenges that can affect Member States’ fiscal stability or contribute to larger challenges that affect the EU. The Semester’s predictive power can sometimes go beyond EU priorities, identifying challenges that can become future priorities. However, the Council Recommendation on Human Capital inhibits that approach by directing the analysis Semester’s analysis of in education and training only towards labour shortages, industries lacking skilled employees, and sectors experiencing bottlenecks. **Those challenges, even if legitimate, must not be addressed by using education and training as a tool, deprioritising the focus on learners’ holistic**

³ All countries.

⁴ Howard Stevenson (2019). The European Semester: A literature Review. ETUCE. Available [here](#).; Sebastian Mang and Dominic Caddick (2024). Navigating Constraints for Progress: Examining the Impact of EU Fiscal Rules on Social and Green Investments. ETUC. Available [here](#).



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development and leading to a type of social engineering that will back-fire given that we cannot predict future developments in the long-term in a way that would justify labour planning through education and training. A narrow focus of education towards employability, prepares excellent technicians, with specific skill sets, but with limited competences to relate to others, to society, and to be resilient in the face of greater risks.

A series of examples from this year's CSRs explain the shortcomings mentioned above. Firstly, there was reduced reference to **higher education** across all Member States with the sector being approached mostly from two perspectives: the lack of STEM graduates (especially women, with no counterpart of engaging men in care sectors)⁵ and the insufficient links between academia and business which stunt the possibility of patenting marketable innovations⁶. Is the higher education sector experiencing no challenge in terms of equity? Have they fully leveraged partnerships with adult education and VET to ensure flexible learning pathways for those that have not followed traditional paths in learning? The assumption that solving the STEM graduates crisis rests solely on the education and training sector is misguided, as we might need to assess the quality of jobs in STEM sectors and the learners' motivation when choosing a career. It might also be a matter of insufficient lifelong guidance being provided, yet only Czechia, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands have a reference to career guidance, and only in recitals⁷. Solely focusing on career guidance flattens the support learners need, ensuring only that they follow career paths, serving employers' demands. Considering the partnership foreseen for higher education institutions and businesses, it must be established without making higher education institutions into product providers for business interests. Academia is an equal partner that retains responsibility for investigating knowledge and shaping the next generation of citizens. Though references to VET increased compared to previous years, the CSRs continue to propose theoretical solutions, without considering the need for increased collaboration between Member States on this topic since they confront similar challenges. The CSRs could have better identified which countries struggle on the attractiveness of VET, which with early school leaving rates in VET, which with skills intelligence, and so forth, providing specific suggestions and considering how Member States could work together.

Secondly, for many years, analyses of **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** led to CSRs on ECEC used only so that mothers can participate in the labour market. Yet again, the focus was placed less on learners and more on labour market needs. Investing in ECEC is one of the most effective ways to reduce

⁵ BE, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, PL, MT, LT, SI. Though CSRs only for FR.

⁶ BG, HR, DK, FI, FR, IT, LV, LT, MT, ES. Though CSRs only for FI, FR, LV, LT, MT, ES.

⁷ Country Specific Recommendations [2026](#).



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inequalities from the very start and strengthen children's acquisition of basic skills. It generates long-term economic benefits, as high-quality ECEC reduces the likelihood of young people becoming NEETs later in life. However, only the CSRs for Malta discussed the impact that lack of access to ECEC has on future development, and how this contributes to equity gaps and underachievement in basic skills⁸. Nevertheless, in 2026, seven countries received references to the value of ECEC in itself and only Greece, Germany, and Romania considered ECEC as simply a perk to boost labour market participation. Moreover, four countries referred to the shortages of educators and the quality of teaching.

Thirdly, with the upcoming Skills Portability Act, the Commission insisted in the Semester on the recognition of qualifications to facilitate labour mobility, with Austria, Czechia and Slovenia receiving CSRs on this topic, and Germany, Italy and Spain having this challenge underlined. But the recognition of qualifications is not a challenge that exists in a vacuum, it is connected to an insufficient implementation of or even a complete lack of validation and recognition strategies, to insufficient professionals in validation and recognition, and to a lack of culture among learners to engage in these processes. **No reference to validation of non-formal and informal learning was made**, which raises concerns that the Skills Portability Act will not be aimed to leverage the wealth of non-formal and informal learning experience that all Europeans have. **The fragmented and underfunded non-formal learning environment was pointed out only in Poland, though this is a much greater challenge across the entire EU which lacks data on this sector.** While the reports point out "skills gaps" - from a labour market perspective -, they do not systematically assess the capacity, accessibility and sustainability of non-formal learning infrastructures, including for adult learning. This is the data that the European Semester should be collecting. Pursuing quick recognition of qualifications to allow for smoother recruitment on the labour market is not the objective in education and training, but rather ensuring that all stakeholders have a nuanced understanding of available competences and how they were developed.

If the assumption truly is that the EU's competitiveness is hampered by the underperforming education and training sector, then what is required is, firstly, **the application of the cost-benefit analyses⁹ in education and training so that we can understand what has the greatest impact for learners, since the solution to our challenge is a learner that has benefitted from high quality learning and is holistically developed.** These cost-benefit analyses will yield the needed investment in education and training, and this is where **further analyses need to be taken to measure the cost of inaction beyond only labour shortages** but rather in terms of the impact that this has on healthcare, on life expectancy, on welfare

⁸ Country Specific Recommendations [2026](#).

⁹ LLLP (2022). Investment in Education & Training: A public good for all. Available [here](#).



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services, on life satisfaction, on purchasing power of individuals and families, on investment patterns, among other factors. Education and training provides benefits across all sectors, and this must be recognised, so that it can benefit from increased investment and exemptions from fiscal rules.

Teacher shortages worsen and confusion on the needed solutions increases

Teacher shortages and the attractiveness of the profession were mentioned for twenty Member States. For some countries, it is more acute in STEM subjects, or in languages, or among different regions, especially the rural ones. Some discussion was expanded on ECEC educators, as mentioned above, but still there has been little reflection on shortages for VET teachers or adult educators, showing multiple blindspots in viewing the educator profession in its totality. This might be linked, once more, with the fact that the Commission already established the launch of an EU Teachers Agenda that does not look at educators beyond the compulsory years. Therein lies the problem, as the Semester, yet again, responds to initiatives that the Commission is already preparing, rather than identifying for the future and allowing the Commission to gather data on a spin-off of the upcoming Teachers Agenda which would look at other sectors as well.

Among many solutions listed in the recitals, there was no reference made to support personnel in education and training. The entire sector's difficulties are put solely on teachers' shoulders, ignoring ICT personnel, psycho-social specialists, pedagogical assistants, lifelong guidance counsellors, company mentors, institutional heads, and other types of profiles that could create synergies with stakeholders outside of education and training. The next Semester cycle must revise how it looks at the education and training sector, because the workforce is not only formed by teachers, and it would benefit from expanding its analytical lens from teachers to the learning and teaching ecosystem.

Across Member States, suggestions are made for improving working conditions, addressing precarious employment contracts, linking performance and wages more, providing better initial teacher education and continuous professional development, reducing administrative burdens, and providing more autonomy for the profession. Contradictions appear across Member States as well with Austria considering to provide flexibility to enter the profession, whereas France and Italy showing that relying on temporary professionals and lowering professional standards led to a decreased quality of teaching. Amongst the many solutions, the problem is that each education and training system provides a piecemeal approach to treating the crisis, sorting one part of the issue, without assessing the general situation. All solutions presented across recitals must be implemented in synergies, with a better reference across the country analysis on which aspects in each country are functioning properly. This



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should incentivise the Commission to provide more specific CSRs, as the current ones simply task Member States with improving the attractiveness of the profession or the training offer, but each country would benefit from a plan where it would be stated what is missing to achieve attractiveness.

Moreover, **cross-sectoral collaboration in education and training, which could alleviate pressures on teachers, has been considered in a limited way across CSRs.** Many of the challenges are recognised to have impact across other sectors of learning, yet the solutions proposed are aimed solely at the sectors which are diagnosed to be the cause of a problem. There is little reflection on how other education and training stakeholders could support the sector in case. **Member States need to be supported in understanding how to break silos between education and training formats and environments, as learners are no longer bound by such artificial separations within their learning journeys.**

Rising equity gaps

The CSRs' historic impact is ignored when it comes to rising equity gaps. Most challenges identified in this year's CSRs, as in previous years, are experienced more harshly by learners with a migrant background, from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds or with special educational needs. Sixteen countries experience this issue, with nine receiving CSRs for one or all the groups listed above. The [OECD showed](#) that a strong indicator contributing to academic performance and equity is parental engagement. However, the Semester is not collecting data on the practices at Member State-level for incentivising and supporting parental engagement, nor providing CSRs on such aspects. Moreover, most CSRs on equity are connected to school and adult education, showcasing missing efforts to evaluate the situation in higher education and in VET. This is more glaring as the VET sector tends to have a higher percentage of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds across Member States.

In Luxembourg, the underperformance of learners from linguistic minorities has been documented for years in the CSRs especially in the context of a country that uses multiple languages for instruction in compulsory education. Yet, this seems to have now intensified in Germany and Estonia with references towards the lack of educators for the instruction language as a second language or with references towards the need to boost linguistic competences for underperforming learners. The growing classroom diversity was flagged for long, but without meaningful actions we are now seeing an impact on basic skills achievement. This shows Member States' costs of inaction, and the incapacity to anticipate challenges that were seen across the Semester in other EU countries. Educators have not received



training to manage diverse classrooms¹⁰, while the EU's foreign born population increased from 9% in early 2010s to almost 15%¹¹. The expectation is placed on teachers to handle this, but with teacher shortages and increasing classroom sizes, they cannot adapt to different learning processes and needs without neglecting learners and diminishing educational outcomes. **This shows how the Semester assessment across years was rendered useless until the impact of what was predicted was felt.**

The addition of new CSRs on the same topic is not beneficial, as what is needed is a better tracking of existing CSRs from previous years, with constant prioritisation of those previous CSRs that have not been implemented, and stricter sanctions linked to this. Otherwise, we risk identifying every year the issue of equity as if it is completely new and not taking systemic reforms to address it.

How to best leverage the Council Recommendation on Human Capital?

For the Semester to improve its effectiveness, considerations need to be given now to the annual review of the Council Recommendation on Human Capital. This Recommendation must become more targeted, in order to direct the Semester towards providing remedial plans tailored on each Member State, by leveraging data from across Member States to take advantage of good practices. It must refer to past CSRs, and bring them into the spotlight whenever they continue to impact EU priorities. The Council Recommendation cannot focus on the lowest common denominator position, cannot distract discussion from reforms towards negotiations for another EU level document, and must embolden reform implementation rather than duplicate existing processes. We acknowledge the positive outcome of ensuring that each country received a CSR based on this Recommendation, but we are yet unsure of its impact in actually creating benefits for learners and educators.

We recommend to:

- Part ways from an economy-driven approach that sees education shortcomings as market opportunities; design CSRs around the social and rights-based Europe modelled by the EPSR.
- Identify joint challenges among Member States and facilitate cooperation to jointly address challenges. **Preparing future joint CSRs allowing Member States to deepen collaboration.** Rely on Member States' expertise if they confronted the challenge, to avoid replication of issues.
- Expand the analysis of the European Semester, and the focus of the Council Recommendation on Human Capital, in the next editions towards the following topics:

¹⁰ European Commission (2023). Promoting diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe. Eurydice report. Available [here](#).

¹¹ Tommaso Frattini and Camilla Piovesan (2026). The Immigrant Population in the European Union: Growth, Concentration and Dispersion. CReAM Report. Available [here](#).



- **Assess learners' motivation and career choices**, to better map challenges to labour shortages. Declining working conditions in some sectors, reduced financial contribution of employers for in-service training, or simple stigmatisation of certain sectors might be causes which cannot be addressed with education and training reforms.
- When assessing equity, **focus on the Member States' reform to provide an environment conducive to learning**, including looking at reforms linked with parental engagement in education and training.
- **Collect data on the wider educator profession**, going beyond teachers and exploring the diversity of roles in the education and training ecosystem. More data is needed on the availability and needs of support personnel, leaders of education and training institutions, non-formal and informal educators that support teachers, administrative and technical staff in education and training institutions.
- **Assess the state of validation and recognition services across all education and training institutions**, going beyond the recognition of professional qualifications. Need to provide a state-of-the-art analysis of the wider validation and recognition services present in formal, non-formal and informal learning.
- **Develop indicators on governance, capacity, inclusiveness and wellbeing of learning and teaching ecosystems**. Beyond measuring education and training outcomes, the Semester and Council Recommendation should examine if institutional cooperation, multi-professional support, career guidance, employer engagement and local partnerships are sufficiently developed to enable successful learning-to-work transitions.
- **Develop indicators on the financial sustainability of education and training systems**. It is insufficient to look at the proportion of public expenditure allocated to education. This should be coupled with in-depth cost-benefit analyses¹², reflecting on education and training's impact on individuals' welfare, labour market participation, societal engagement. Current analyses track graduates, and mostly for higher education, which provides a superficial assessment of what education and training brings to all Europeans.
- **Collect and analyse data on the collaboration between education and training institutions and other stakeholders, including civil society**. Most of this data analysis is linked to partnerships with industry/business, but it would be more beneficial to assess how education and training institutions work with all partners to provide competence-based learning, innovative and personalised learning methodologies, societal impact, support for educators, etc.

¹² LLLP (2022). Investment in Education & Training: A public good for all. Available [here](#).

