

## **Sport: a lifelong learning companion**

The Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP) advocates for a holistic understanding of learning that encompasses the entire lifespan and takes place across formal, non-formal and informal environments. Learning does not occur only in classrooms, it emerges thanks to active participation, hands-on experience, and social interactions. In this context, sport represents a formidable yet systematically under-recognised learning environment, despite its proven contribution to key competences, social cohesion and health equity. This blind spot undermines the EU's ambitions on lifelong learning, social inclusion and democracy as set out in the [European Education Area](#), the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [EU Work Plan for Sport](#).

From children's playful learning to community engagement, from recreational activities to volunteering and even to elite careers, sport offers spaces where individuals acquire key competences that help them become more active citizens and better learners in their walks of life. At one point in their life, everyone engages with sport through physical education but the **participation rate reduces significantly after formal education** - and so do the opportunities for informal and non-formal learning and the social connections it provides. Today, almost half of the EU population was reported to never engage in sports or physical activities<sup>1</sup>. Sport can even play a role in reaching out to those who feel left out of the formal education systems<sup>2</sup>, it simply needs the political recognition, policy attention and funding it deserves.

This statement recognises sport and physical activity as meaningful parts of education systems and calls for stronger connections between the sectors of sport, education, training and youth at international, EU, national and local levels.

### **Sports as learning environments**

Even today the classroom continues to monopolise the understanding of a learning environment; yet sports provide additional opportunities for **non-formal and informal learning**, where learning outcomes might be indirect but are oftentimes more impactful on learners' lives. Through participation in and practice of sports, individuals learn by doing, by doing together, by cooperating and by overcoming challenges thus increasing self-esteem and resilience. The learning processes that occur in sports tend to be experiential, learner-centred and inclusive;

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<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer, [Sport and Physical Activities](#), 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Julie Stirrup, Dr Oliver Hooper, Dr Alessio Norrito, Dr Carolynne Mason and Dr Steven Bradbury, [Marginalised youth and organised grassroots sport: Promoting retention and reducing dropout](#), 2023.

they have positive effects on the cognitive functions that underpin learning and can foster motivation to engage in other learning activities. Their educational functions are well documented and recognised by the [current EU Work Plan for Sport](#) - yet most EU policies in the education, training or youth sectors fail to recognise their full potential.

LLL emphasises that sport environments (especially at grassroots and community level) should be recognised as full-on learning spaces, complementing formal education and training where they fall short - i.e. including, but not limited to, experiential learning, social skills, teamwork and inclusion. Besides, in many EU countries, sport centres are required to have explicit educational objectives to secure public funding and/or tax exemptions. **Recognising sport as a learning environment strengthens the coherence of lifelong learning systems** and contributes to more learning pathways tailored to learners' needs. Sport providers are diverse, widespread, and have a significant reach in European countries; they constitute one of the largest operational civil society sectors run by citizens. EU and national policymakers should therefore integrate sport and physical activity into lifelong learning strategies, qualification frameworks and competence tools, ensuring that learning in sport is visible, validated and funded on an equal footing with other sectors.

### Harnessing sport for learning

Sport and the many entities delivering sport activities contribute to the development of many **key competences for lifelong learning**, including teamwork, communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, accountability, resilience, problem-solving, intercultural understanding and respect. Even in current skills forecasts<sup>3</sup>, dominated by labour market concerns, these are essential competences for everyone. In a context marked by green and digital transitions, rising skills shortages and widening inequalities, the transversal competences fostered through sport are indispensable for resilience, employability and democratic participation and must be treated as core components of EU skills and education policies. Participation in sport can support **personal development and mental wellbeing**, building self-esteem, emotional resilience and a sense of purpose. Sport can also foster **active citizenship and community engagement**: through volunteering, leadership roles and collective action, individuals are exposed to - and reproduce - democratic values, responsibility and civic participation. Sport thus contributes not only to individual learning but also to stronger, more engaged communities.

However, these learning outcomes must not be left to chance: without political recognition<sup>4</sup>, adequate funding and trained educators, sport risks being reduced to mere performance and competition, rather than a powerful public good for education, inclusion and wellbeing.

**Learning in and through sport should be consciously supported** by trained coaches, educators and facilitators who are aware of their educational role and capable of fostering such competences. Investing in competence development for sport staff and volunteers is therefore essential to ensure that sport environments are not only active but also educational, inclusive

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<sup>3</sup> Cedefop, [Skills forecast](#)

<sup>4</sup> A good example comes from Italy, with [a law that keeps school gyms open](#) beyond school hours.

and empowering. At the same time, curricula in school and in other settings should be explicitly designed so that sport, physical activity and physical education are fully integrated within a whole-school approach to physical activity and not treated as mere “movement time”<sup>5</sup>.

## Have we lost the child within? The case for playful learning

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence<sup>6</sup> that learning exponentially increases in effectiveness when it happens in a playful, exploratory and socially joyful manner. **Sport, physically active learning and play-based physical activities create ideal conditions for learning**, and especially early learning, supporting children’s cognitive, emotional, physical and social development. Playful learning offers significant, research-backed benefits for holistic development with learner-centred experiences: it has been proven<sup>7</sup> to boost problem-solving, resilience, and language development while improving mental health by reducing anxiety and building confidence. Crucially, such approaches strengthen neural connections and foster a lifelong love for learning. Sports also offer opportunities for learning in challenge-based environments, where motivation is enhanced and learning outcomes are achieved through collaboration and guided practice.

LLL stresses the importance of playful learning, especially in early childhood and primary education, where the focus is not on competition and where joyful, play-based activities can support and enhance curiosity, motivation and self-confidence in an environment made safer by playfulness itself. A narrow focus on standardised testing, early academic pressure and sedentary classroom time runs counter to international evidence on children’s rights and wellbeing, including the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and [WHO guidance on physical activity in schools](#).

## Physical Literacy and Physically Active Learning

Physical literacy, i.e the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to engage in physical activity throughout life, is a core component of lifelong learning. LLLP understands physical literacy as “learning how to interact with others, how to think differently, and how to flourish in our human life. Physical activity, and movement more broadly, is the means by which we learn physical literacy”<sup>8</sup>. Embedding physical literacy within lifelong learning strategies supports healthier, more active and more resilient societies<sup>9</sup>.

LLL recognises sport as a key context for developing physical literacy across all ages. In addition, **physically active learning** demonstrates<sup>10</sup> that movement can physiologically and

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<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, [Whole-of-school approach to the promotion of physical activity: using research, policy and practice to understand system’s needs and structures](#), 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Rice, Louise, ‘[Playful Learning](#)’, Journal for Education in the Built Environment, Vol. 4, Issue 2, December 2009

<sup>7</sup> Federation of American Scientists, [Putting the fun in fundamental: how playful learning improves children’s outcomes](#), 2023.

<sup>8</sup> ISCA, [Physical Literacy](#).

<sup>9</sup> Learning for Well’Being Foundation, [What Makes Me? – Core Capacities for Living and Learning](#)

<sup>10</sup> ISCA, [Physically Active Learning](#).

neurologically enhance learning outcomes<sup>11</sup> in all subjects and in all settings, contributing to improved concentration and wellbeing<sup>12</sup>. But integrating physical literacy and physically active learning into curricula and community programmes requires aligned policies across education, health, sport and social sectors.

## Health Literacy and Active Ageing

Sport also contributes significantly to **health literacy**, i.e. “personal knowledge and competencies that accumulate through daily activities, social interactions and across generations”<sup>13</sup>. Citizens with strong health literacy skills enjoy better health and well-being, whereas those with weaker skills tend to engage in riskier behaviour and have poorer health<sup>14</sup>. **Participation in sport and physical activity supports healthy lifestyles**<sup>15</sup>, prevention of non-communicable diseases<sup>16</sup>, and therefore greatly contributes to the individual and societal well-being. Put bluntly, a lack of (health) education can be lethal. Persistent inequalities in physical and health literacy map onto existing socio-economic divides, contributing to avoidable morbidity and mortality and increasing pressure on already strained health and social protection systems.

To this extent, sport plays a crucial role in active ageing, offering older adults opportunities for continued learning, social interactions, autonomy, and even for keeping brain functions active to counter effects of degenerative conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer's. The health benefits of physical activity at later stages in life are well-documented and have a cascade effect on social policies, care systems and community cohesion. Accessible and age-friendly sport facilities are essential to support continuous engagement and improve mental health and social connections throughout all life stages.

## Sport for social cohesion

### Hubs for inclusion

Sport environments are often **low-threshold, informal and community-based**, making them particularly effective for reaching diverse groups. Informal learning environments are welcoming and non-threatening, and can facilitate integration and inclusion, especially for people facing

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, [EU Guidelines on wellbeing and mental health at school](#).

<sup>12</sup> Jussila JJ, Pulakka A, Halonen JI, Salo P, Allaouat S, Mikkonen S, Lanki T. [Are active school transport and leisure-time physical activity associated with performance and wellbeing at secondary school? A population-based study](#), European Journal of Public Health, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization, [Health Literacy](#).

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organization, [Health Literacy: the solid facts](#), 2013.

<sup>15</sup> World Health Organization, [Promoting physical activity to prevent and control noncommunicable diseases](#), 2015.

<sup>16</sup> World Health Organization, [Avoidable mortality, risk factors and policies for tackling noncommunicable diseases – leveraging data for impact: monitoring commitments in the WHO European Region ahead of the Fourth United Nations High-Level Meeting](#), 2025.

barriers in formal education or training systems<sup>17</sup>. In a context of rising polarisation and discrimination, inclusive sport environments can challenge stereotypes, build bridges between communities and offer safe spaces for those most affected by exclusion, including migrants, refugees, Roma communities, LGBTIQ+ people and persons with disabilities.

LLL highlights that learning and social interaction in sport can foster mutual understanding, trust and belonging. When designed inclusively, sport environments can support migrants, refugees, people with disabilities and marginalised communities, contributing to social cohesion and equal opportunities<sup>18</sup>. This directly supports EU objectives on equality, inclusion and participation, as underscored in the [EU anti-racism strategy](#), the [EU Roma strategic framework](#) and the [EU LGBTIQ equality strategy](#).

The same logic applies to sports facilities and infrastructure. The reality of sports facilities across Europe often reveals structural obstacles: high costs for families, long waiting lists, inaccessible infrastructure and gendered or segregated spaces that exclude many potential learners. Encouraging sport as a learning environment must therefore go hand in hand with measures and investment to make sport facilities and practice accessible to all learners.

## Learning Mobility in Sport

Learning mobility — for grassroots athletes, coaches, volunteers and sport professionals — is an important dimension of lifelong learning. Cross-border mobility in sport supports competence development, intercultural learning and professional growth. A genuine international dimension for all actors involved in sports is what makes the difference between a constellation of Member States and a true European Union, which caters for the competences of its citizens, regardless of the learning sector.

LLL supports policies and frameworks that promote the recognition of learning outcomes acquired through mobility in sport, ensuring that skills and competences gained are visible, valued and transferable across sectors and countries. A renewed and reinforced focus on sport in mobility programmes like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps is quintessential to elevating sport as a true learning environment. This requires dedicated and predictable funding strands for sport mobility, simplified access for grassroots organisations and individuals with fewer opportunities, and clear pathways to validate competences gained abroad.

## Make sports a reality in the EU

The Lifelong Learning Platform calls upon the European Union and its Member States to:

- Fully recognise sport as a strategic learning environment within lifelong learning systems, by integrating sport and physical activity in EU and national strategies, funding

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<sup>17</sup> [SIRIUS Watch 2018 - Role of non-formal education in migrant children inclusion: links with schools across 17 EU Member States](#)

<sup>18</sup> ISCA, [Integration of Refugees Through Sport](#)

programmes and legal frameworks on education, training and youth by the end of the current EU Work Plan for Sport (2024–2027).

- Invest in civil society organisations as core providers of sport activities locally, including through long-term, core predictable funding to ensure sustainability.
- Invest in competence development for sport staff and volunteers, with specific attention to inclusive pedagogy, anti-discrimination, child protection and gender equality.
- Promote accessible and age-friendly sport facilities as public goods; keep sport facilities in schools open to the wider community beyond school hours, embedding a whole-school and whole-community approach to physical activity and wellbeing.
- Design sport curricula in and outside formal education for inclusion, explicitly addressing the needs and voices of marginalised groups and leveraging the potential of sport to mainstream inclusive practices, equality and intercultural dialogue.
- Improve cross-border mobility in sport for competence development, intercultural learning and professional growth of sport staff, athletes and volunteers, especially through reinforced sport strands in Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.
- Set up robust recognition and validation mechanisms within existing EU initiatives to recognise competences acquired in informal learning environments (and related learning mobility), ensuring that skills gained through sport count for further learning and work transitions.

By embracing sport as a learning environment, Europe can move beyond rhetorical commitments and build inclusive, democratic and resilient lifelong learning systems that enable everyone to learn, participate and thrive throughout life.