

Deepening problems for education and training: European Semester Country Specific Recommendations 2025

Background

On 4 June, 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 Member States meet its annual economic and social priorities. The 2025 Semester guides Member States' investment and reforming of education and training, and it also launched the implementation of the Social Convergence Framework. Based on the [Joint Employment Report](#), a first analysis of labour market, skills and social policies was performed, leading to an [in-depth analysis](#) for countries which experienced a risk to upward social convergence². This informed the Spring Package assessment of structural reforms. This moment presents an opportunity to shift the Semester from a cycle of recurring diagnoses to one that enables systemic, well-resourced, and equitable reforms in education and training

Delivering on promises: for whom and by whom?

The second mandate of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was launched with a series of [big promises](#) embodied by flagship initiatives; as a result, [the Union of Skills](#) had a significant influence over the current European Semester cycle. As was anticipated by the [Communication](#), **each EU Member State received at least one recommendation on education and skills**. Ireland is the only country not receiving a specific CSR for education, but did so on skills, while the rest had at least one recommendation for education and one for skills.

The question that needs to be asked is if this makes any difference. Based on a [database of CSRs](#) as of 2019, EU Member States have around 200 CSRs (or subparts of CSRs) on education while over 200 on skills. If one tracks back to 2011, the number grows exponentially. These CSRs have seen a wide range of progress, with some being met, but the majority still being far from implemented. **The recent additions of CSRs adds little substantive innovation to existing policy discourse.** To move beyond repetition, CSRs should build on the previous cycle by integrating lessons-learned, establishing accountability mechanisms, and linking funding more explicitly to long-term reform plans. A global look at the CSRs

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

² BG, EE, EL, ES, HR, IT, LT, LU, HU, RO. Country codes will be used according to the [EU Glossary](#).



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reveals that the most covered topics are **underachievement in basic skills, low participation of adults in learning, skills shortages which cause labour market bottlenecks, challenges for teachers, and equity in education and training**³. None are newly identified, but rather long-standing challenges, previously captured by CSRs which still lack solutions. **While targets will be ticked off as achieved when evaluating the impact of the Union of Skills on the European Semester, Member States will be faced with one additional vague CSR which mostly repeats content from all the CSRs since 2011 which are still a long way from successful implementation.**

Member States continue to avoid making the needed reforms in the sectors that reap rewards only in the long-run or in sectors that focus on social cohesion. **The return of the fiscal framework regulations post-COVID-19 exacerbates this situation as the current debate sees Member States pressured to invest more in defence at the expense of other sectors.** It must be highlighted that an **escape clause for defence funding** is considered, given the chronic underinvestment in the sector. However, the long-called for education and training escape clause, justified by chronic underinvestment documented during and after COVID-19⁴ remains elusive. To rebalance priorities, the EU should consider introducing an **‘investment clause’ for education and training within the fiscal framework**, acknowledging their role in long-term resilience, innovation, and social cohesion.

Skills mismatch dominate the agenda

Out of all EU Member States, 23⁵ had references in their CSRs (recitals or recommendations) linked to **skills mismatches leading to labour shortages**. This is by far the most burning issue of this year’s Spring Package. The most referenced sectors are ICT, healthcare, construction, and green transition. The LLLPlatform’s analyses of Spring Packages previously reported on the short-termism of the European Semester⁶. This list of sectors is slightly different from previous years, yet it seems that each year another sector will be impacted by the same challenge. Moreover, with the increasing pace of technological breakthroughs, more professions will disappear or will be replaced causing further labour shortages to be experienced and a need for quicker adaptations of existing skill sets. If challenges in technical skills are so rapidly-arising that not even the industry can anticipate them, how can our chronically underfunded education and training systems rise above it? **A more effective approach would embed skills foresight and transversal competences into national CSR frameworks, allowing Member States to**

³ Find [here](#) LLLP’s mapping of the CSRs for each Member State.

⁴ European Commission (2024). Investing in Education, [here](#); LLLPlatform (2022). Investment in Education & Training: A public good for all, [here](#).

⁵ BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, DE, EL, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, NL, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES, SE.

⁶ LLLPlatform (2024). Reaction to European Semester 2024 Country Specific Recommendations, [here](#).



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future-proof their labour markets and reduce reactive policy cycles. Retraining without any clear horizon for training needs will continue to elevate challenges. Relying predominantly on market feedback regarding skills mismatches places too much trust into the capacity of labour market players to understand future needs or adapt to changing societies.

BG and EL received specific CSRs to improve the **implementation of competence-based models in education and training.** This kind of CSR actually contributes to labour shortages, as it ensures that the learning model available develops all learners holistically and ensures that they can adapt to different challenges while leveraging opportunities around them. The problem is that this competence-oriented and learner-centred perspective⁷ is missing from most **CSRs which focus narrowly on skills that might become obsolete by the time the next cycle of the Semester will be concluded.**

Teachers and staff shortages: a structural crisis ignored

Eight EU Member States⁸ are reporting challenges with teacher shortages, with Croatia reporting them for STEM teachers. Previous challenges regarding the attractiveness of their profession have not been yet addressed. Nevertheless, this Spring Package is tying basic skills results with the quality of teaching, with such references being made for Bulgaria, France, Greece and Malta. Though it is perfectly natural to assess the quality of education based on the quality of teaching, there is inadequate attention provided to the fact that the teaching profession is insufficiently valued and supported, which has been a long-standing issue at EU level, as reported by the Education and Training Monitor in [2019](#) and [2023](#).

The Semester should systematically map and address shortages across the education workforce, **including other educational professionals to enable whole institution approaches and ensure sustainable staffing models.** While staff shortages are pointed out in ECEC in Austria, no other professionals are mentioned across the EU. **Adult education participation is rightfully mentioned as in need of a boost and targeted support for the most disadvantaged, but there is no consideration if there are sufficient educators and trainers available.** Similarly, the **support personnel** (IT technicians, guidance counsellors, medical staff for mental and physical wellbeing, specific coordination roles beyond teaching, etc) are not mentioned. The whole-institution approach cannot be implemented without diverse professionals. **The upcoming EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda should have already activated the European Semester to collect better data on all professionals in the sector.** Teacher shortages are monitored, but this is not the case for other types of educators or support personnel, causing blindspots

⁷ LLLPlatform (2023). Key competences for all: a lifelong learning approach, [here](#).

⁸ AT, BE, FR, HU, LT, NL, SI and SK.



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for the needed reforms in improving education and training systems and improving the attractiveness of the teaching profession.

Rising equity gaps

The challenge of inequity, broadly referred to in the [previous cycle](#), returns. Basic skills underachievement, early leaving, teacher shortages, and lack of access to training are all **experienced more prominently by learners from a disadvantaged background or from a minority background**.

The issue is maintained at the top of the political agenda, which is appreciated, as CSRs for boosting inclusion and supporting disadvantaged learners were made for 13 EU Member States⁹. Nevertheless, only 3¹⁰ refer to equity for adult learners. Considering that the need to increase upskilling and reskilling is repeated frequently, it is glaring that the Semester did not assess the fact that disadvantaged learners participate in learning later in life at a lower rate than other peers. Equity strategies must extend to lifelong learning and adult education beyond compulsory education, with targeted support and indicators to ensure disadvantaged groups are engaged throughout life, not just during formal schooling years.

Education and training institutions or service providers?

The higher education sector received attention on two matters. Firstly, the **low rate of graduates from STEM subjects**, which was pointed out in 14 EU Member States¹¹. Secondly, **public-private partnerships in research** and the valorisation of higher education institutions' research outcomes appeared for 13 EU Member States¹². What becomes immediately apparent is that the independence of higher education as a sector is completely forgotten. To restore balance, the Semester should recognise higher education institutions as autonomous actors contributing to democratic, civic and social innovation, not solely as talent pipelines and innovation service providers for the private sector.

This short-sighted perspective warranted a narrow analysis of the sector's needs, making **higher education institutions service providers that train staff for innovation in the private sector**. This instrumentalisation of a sector rather than an objective analysis of its situation feeds into the narrative that competitiveness comes at any costs. The pressures on higher education staff with regard to how

⁹ BE, BG, CZ, FR, DE, HU, IT, LT, LU, MT, NL, RO, SK, SI.

¹⁰ LT, NL, SE.

¹¹ BE, BG, CY, CZ, FI, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, SK, SI.

¹² BG, HR, CY, CZ, FR, EE, FI, HU, IT, LT, LV, PL, ES.



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much they need to publish and the balance between research and teaching are disregarded as they are pressured to meet private sector needs at the cost of academic freedom.

The way forward; a call to action for education and skills

The current Semester cycle exposes a disconnect between political ambition and systemic reform. To ensure education and training fulfill their transformative potential, the European Semester must adopt a more coherent, inclusive, and future-oriented approach. The following proposals offer tangible steps to align CSRs with the real needs of learners, educators, and societies..

- Review all existing CSRs on education and training, link them better with each other and pursue their implementation more actively. In this regard, **the existing EU CSRs Database** should be revised to allow linking CSRs within one sector and see joint progress on multiple targets, to allow for policy coherence and comprehensive reforms instead of piece-meal approaches to interconnected challenges. The tool also needs to be made more user-friendly for Member States to take better advantage of it.
- Provide an in-depth analysis of the wider staff working in education and training across all sectors of learning and determine the existing shortages for educators, trainers and support personnel. Provide a holistic perspective of employment needs in education and training that matches existing objectives for education and training at EU level and at national level. **An EU-wide benchmark for educator profession investment**, covering not just teachers but also counsellors, ECEC professionals, adult educators, general educational professionals, and any relevant staff as defined within the LLLPlatform 2024 Position Paper on the 21st Century Challenges for the Educator Profession.
- **Adopt an ecosystem approach in the Semester analysis, examining education as a social, civic, and economic system**, not only through the lens of employability. We need to evaluate each policy sector to understand its internal challenges, rather than assess it through the perspective of its contribution to a particular objective of the European Semester. Though each cycle of the Semester requires a thematic focus, the sectors should be broadly understood so as to establish how their challenges impact the thematic focus rather than demand for a sector to be completely subservient to the thematic focus of the European Semester.
- Provide an in-depth analysis into skills and labour shortages, to be able to provide long-term recommendations rather than sector-specific short-termism. This requires an assessment of transversal competences and how they are being fostered in each EU Member States. **An embedded skills foresight and transition strategies into national CSRs**, supported by EU guidance on transversal and green/digital competence integration.



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