

## Putting the human in ‘human capital’? A lifelong learning vision that responds to people’s needs

### Background

On 25 November, the usual Autumn package of documents for the [European Semester](#), brought a new addition: the European Commission’s recommendation for a [Council Recommendation on Human Capital](#). The Recommendation, announced in the [Union of Skills Communication](#), is intended to motivate Member States to effectively combine public and private funding for targeted reforms. **LLLPlatform welcomes the ambition to boost financial commitments in education and training.** This is overdue for the heavily pressured education and training systems. The recent economic, social and environmental changes are increasing the pressure on education and training while funding is either decreasing or stagnating. **However, the LLLPlatform questions the added value of such a proposal and its framing.** We are concerned with a number of aspects that are addressed in this reaction, which are all underpinned by our [Renewed Lifelong Learning Manifesto](#). It is clear that key and transversal competences are what learners all over the EU need, which require cross-sectoral cooperation models in lifelong learning (involving formal, non-formal and informal learning). However, the Commission seems to be stuck in traditional ways of viewing learning. **As this Recommendation is approved with a fast-track procedure, we provide this Reaction as a blueprint for the next iteration of the Recommendation, as every year, a different angle on Human Capital will be considered under the European Semester.**

### 1. A call to mobilise investment

The LLLPlatform welcomes the European Commission’s renewed interest to invest in education and training. The status quo never recovered after the 2008 economic crisis. Between **2008-2015**, expenditure on education and training at the EU level **decreased from 5.2% to 4.8% of GDP and from 11% to 10.3% of total government expenditure.** Between **2016-2020**, a stagnation was felt, with further decreases to **4.6% of GDP, followed by a raise to 5% of GDP**<sup>1</sup>. When COVID-19 hit, the declining underinvestment was felt in the education and training systems’ lack of preparedness. Learners across the EU missed out on 0.3-0.9 years of learning with catastrophic impact on learning outcomes<sup>2</sup>. This situation was exacerbated by 67% of teachers in the EU specifying they had never taught online, and the number one related challenge being lack of digital tools/technology. In some EU Member States, 20% of the most

<sup>1</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2022). Public investment on education and training in the EU: Trends, challenges and future prospects. Available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> NESET (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on student learning outcomes across Europe: the challenges of distance education for all. Available [here](#).



disadvantaged pupils lacked access to digital tools/technology<sup>3</sup>. **Being prepared for such a crisis required investment in equipment, in training, and in time for professionals to adapt to structural changes. Time is one of the resources educators lack most, if we look at the reports of increased administrative burdens<sup>4</sup>.** Remedial solutions were proposed post-COVID-19, which inevitably would have required a significant increase of investment in the sector. While NextGeneration EU brought a bump, in 2023, Member States were spending 4.7% of their GDP on education and training, and 9.6% as part of total public expenditure<sup>5</sup>. **The numbers are lower than both pre-pandemic and pre-2008 levels of investment. This occurred on the backdrop of historic levels of inflation, hitting over 10% in 2023<sup>6</sup>.**

All this accounts only for formal education, with significant gaps in data from non-formal and informal learning. Though well known that 90% of investment in adult training is provided by private companies, the Council Recommendation points out that this investment is covered by only around two thirds of all companies. The remaining third of companies do not invest at all in adult training. These 90% levels cover a very low share of adults involved in education and training (less than 40%<sup>7</sup>). Therefore, if we are committed to increasing the amount of adults participating in learning, then we require more adult educators, spaces for learning, time for learning, and resources for outreach. **We cannot work with a narrative of doing more with less.** As a result, private companies need to raise their levels of investment, directly into training, but also in terms of mentoring costs, replacement staff, ensuring adult educators are well-trained to provide high-quality learning programmes, administrative burdens and general organisational capacity for fostering learning. Some of the challenges employers need to address could be done in partnership with civil society in adult learning, which operates already based on adult learning principles. As shown in LLLPlatform's [2022 Position Paper on Investment in Education and Training](#), the societal returns for investment in education and training for all will reap benefits for all stakeholders. **If education and training is not approached as a public good, the competition for talent will cause too much in-fighting within the EU to allow it to become competitive.**

With **over 60 Country-Specific Recommendations** of the European Semester mandating Member States to increase investment in formal and higher education or in VET and adult education between the period 2019-2025<sup>8</sup>, it becomes apparent that the **European Semester is not enforced in a way that protects social investment in the sector.** Moreover, the new Council Recommendation reiterates similar claims for investment, while intensifying the narrative of strategic investment for particular industries/sectors and competitiveness. **What is needed is for education and training to be treated as an investment, not a cost, and to be excluded from the debt calculations as part of the European Semester.** In a similar way in which COVID-19 allowed for this, or how such a golden rule is applied on investment in defence, this can help education and training to truly contribute to Europe's competitiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> NESET (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on student learning outcomes across Europe: the challenges of distance education for all. Available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2025). Results from TALIS 2024 - The State of Teaching. Available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2025). Investing in Education 2025. Available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Eurostat (2026). Inflation in the euro area. Available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Eurostat (2024). Adult learning - participants. Available [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2026). Country-specific recommendations database. Available [here](#).

Judging from how Member States approached investment in education and training since 2008, **applying the logic of competitiveness to appeal to them will simply reinforce the austerity arguments which were cloaked under the guise of ‘efficiency’**. This is most visible when considering that the seminal [Mario Draghi Report](#) called for massive increases in investment, including a **five-time increase of the Erasmus+ budget**, yet Member States’ approach to his proposals can be described as lukewarm. We are bound to repeat the same mistakes while adding an additional layer of bureaucracy to monitor the mistakes. **Thus we welcome the intention but question the approach**. The hope is for the next version of the Recommendation to showcase how little we have been investing in education and training.

## 2. The tyranny of numbers: meeting easy targets and obscuring the structural issues that are hard to measure

The Council Recommendation on Human Capital relies on a piecemeal approach to reforming education and training. LLLPlatform asks for more ambition, putting forward a new vision for lifelong learning<sup>9</sup> in the EU, one based on human experience and needs. It represents a short-term response to an ongoing crisis, relying heavily on available data that frame this crisis. This short-sightedness may (or may not) deliver results in the short run, but will most certainly do harm in the longer term. Future versions of the Council Recommendation will need to complement many aspects.

The focus on STEM professions and graduates, and on particular industries and sectors, is owed to available data of shortages and declining numbers based on established benchmarks. Yet the same metrics are spinned positively in other contexts. **Nearly one in three employees in the EU works in jobs that do not match their skills**<sup>10</sup>, yet the EU is priding itself for being at a **record high level of employment rate: 75.8%**<sup>11</sup>. If these numbers are not treated in conjunction, **we risk hiking up some of them to meet certain targets, yet the structural issues are deepening**. Similarly, the Council Recommendation’s suggestions for Member States focus on incentivising people to join STEM subjects or pursue careers in sectors in need. Such short-termism does not address the root causes for which people are not pursuing such professions or studies. **A qualitative analysis of the motivation for learning and career paths is required**, coupled with an **analysis of the work environments which do not suffer from labour shortages to understand why they overperform other labour market sectors**. This can reveal the structural support that ensures one learning path or career path are of high quality. **The objective should be the improvement of both learning and working, instead of simply filling in quotas at the expense of people’s wellbeing, capacity to afford the cost of living, motivation to grow and engage in further learning**. Therefore, the Council Recommendation identifies the need for better impact assessment in education and training, **however, if we bow down to the tyranny of numbers instead of smartly using the data, we end up with quick fixes and not structural solutions**. Quality over quantity is key, ensuring

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<sup>9</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2025). A Renewed Manifesto for Lifelong Learning. Available [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2025). Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on Human Capital. Available [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat (2025). Employment - Annual statistics. Available [here](#).

that measurements are also taken on completion of learning, progression in learning, learner wellbeing, and quality of different learning formats, including work-based learning.

### 3. Planning for the future: a 4-step plan for modern learning environments

#### a. Future-oriented curricula: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

The Council Recommendation advocates for a future-proof curriculum, targeting STEM, ICT, AI, to enhance skills and economic development, and facilitate job transitions and reorientation. Nevertheless, **labour market needs evolve faster than the impact of education and training reforms**. Therefore, **over-tailoring can leave learners with skills that become obsolete** and systems unable to respond to new shortages. Any labour market request for particular skills should be followed by an in-depth analysis of what competences facilitate quick acquisition of required skills. **What is needed is a balanced approach that develops transversal competences without narrowing learning to specific professions**, and ensuring that learners have what is required to adapt to any changes. The gaps in terms of the development of [Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#) should be the main focus of future reforms if we are to become competitive and resilient, as well as prioritising occupational competences that remain transferable across employers and sectors, while integrating transversal competences so learners can adapt as technologies, work organisation, and societal needs change.

Though the Council Recommendation refers to aligning curricula with labour market developments, the examples it uses for discrepancies are related to the fact that 44% adults lack basic digital skills when 90% of jobs require such skills, or the fact that almost 30% of pupils are not equipped to identify disinformation. Therein lies the confusion, **the alignment of the curricula is, therefore, not needed with labour market requirements but rather with societal developments**. It is more crucial to gather data on the return that learners possessing all [Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#) bring, rather than to adapt curricula for struggling industries, convincing Member States to invest for the long-term.

#### b. Flexible learning environments

**21st-century challenges require formal education to modernise their spaces while intensifying collaboration with non-formal and informal learning sectors**. These latter provide flexibility, enriching the formal systems by providing spaces to exercise teamwork, intercultural competences, and civic engagement, while inviting peer learning, volunteering, developing ethical reasoning and social responsibilities in ways that traditional curricula, given their structure and process for adapting, have more difficulties in achieving.

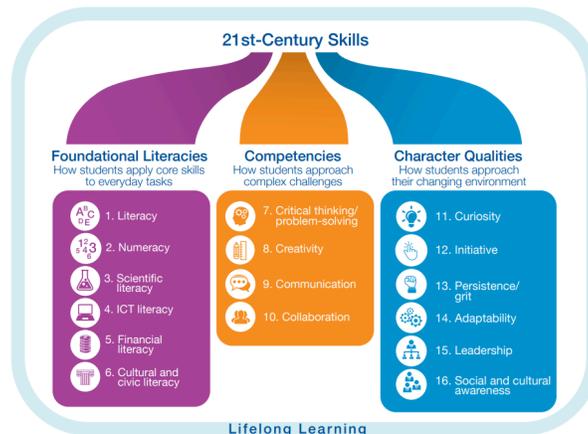
Such environments are particularly relevant for adult learners and young people not in education or employment, giving them **concrete entry points** to engage in their communities and attend training while developing competences on which they can build for future participation in the labour market. However, the **multidisciplinary approach and the practical application of learning** which are common in non-formal and informal learning contribute to a holistic approach which nourishes digital competences, financial literacy, or sustainability competences. These can contribute to Europe's competitiveness in the sense of active citizens that advance the EU's general mission simply through their daily life. Reflecting on the different

entry points to learning tailored for each individual, the Council Recommendation fails to leverage existing initiatives that contribute to reaching out to learners with fewer opportunities. **It was surprising to see no reference in it to the Individual Learning Accounts, the Skills Portability Initiative, Micro-credentials or the whole-school/whole-community approach.** It was surprising to also not see references to enabling conditions such as: paid time to learn, modular programmes that stack towards qualifications, and guidance that supports transitions, not just course selection.

### c. Validation and recognition

This recommendation acknowledges the bureaucracy surrounding recognition procedures creating strong barriers to entry, limiting labour market mobility, and contributing to skills shortage and mismatch, which the LLLPlatform salutes. According to the [Study supporting the evaluation of the Upskilling Pathways Council Recommendation](#), 12 EU Member States have not advanced on the development of validation systems, while 8 others have advanced only slowly. Out of 27 EU Member States, only 7 have developed robust validation and recognition systems, even though the [2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of Nonformal and Informal Learning](#) provided many solutions.

Given the impact that recognition has to ease labour mobility, the connection made by the Council Recommendation between the two topics was appreciated. However, more **focus should be placed on enhancing the recognition of competences acquired non-formally and informally that align with the vision for 21st century skills.** Though STEM competences are in the spotlight in the Council Recommendation, the World Economic Forum made clear since 2015 which competences are actually contributing the most in the industries, with further research on employers' needs confirming this<sup>12</sup>.



World Economic Forum (2015) New Vision for Education  
Unlocking the Potential of Technology

Learners might have such competences or building blocks to achieve the above competences, but this remains invisible for the labour market and not leveraged through targeted actions. **A modern approach would be to identify skills acquired by workers in a specific sector, and**

<sup>12</sup> McKinsey (2021). Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work. Available [here](#).

**align with those for further career development, and upskilling.** Thus, the narrative shifts from skills mismatch to recognition and effective usage of existing skills. Such a positive narrative also leverages the value of each European and builds on it, rather than forcing them to engage in a learning/working path which discounts all their previously acquired competences.

#### **d. Interdisciplinary Approach**

The recommendation pushes for the labour needs of many sectors: health, construction, ICT, renewable energy, AI, biotech, space, and (cyber)security. It seems to underline the STEM approach as the solution. The LLLPlatform would advocate for the STEAM approach, which would include arts as well, as this is better suited to increase and unlock creative, imaginative, and innovative potential. However, the limited nature of STEM is not the main problem, but rather the narrow way in which the Council Recommendation perceives it. The interdisciplinary nature of STEM needs to be promoted, even more so than the subject-specific contents. This is what builds transversal competences, a critical mind, and enhances workers' readiness, resilience toward market changes, including the digital and green transitions, and a change of work organisation. We need to move beyond isolated subject performance, and towards valuing and evaluating complex task achievement, where technical skills are combined with communication, ethics, design, sustainability, and much more.

To unlock the potential of interdisciplinarity, it is crucial to implement cross-sectoral collaboration, gaining insights from local professionals on the relevant skills needed. Through that, learners understand which competences are valued across sectors, and they can plan their upskilling and/or reskilling. Such an interdisciplinary approach requires learning spaces built on cross-sectoral collaboration. [Community Lifelong Learning Centres](#) (CLLLCs) embody this logic by bringing together different education and training providers, with different methodologies, under a one-stop-shop that provides holistic support to learners of all ages. The CLLLCs require a change in mindset from all providers contributing to their functioning, welcoming interdisciplinary approaches and collaborative management approaches. This leads to a shift in the education and training systems' culture, suitable for fast paced societal changes. The CLLLCs also serve as composite elements to fully reach the [learning cities and regions formats which UNESCO promotes](#) and which have shown great results across the world.

This interdisciplinary approach needs to extend to how policymaking in education and training will be made from now on. Human capital is one dimension that needs to be considered, but the famous **Community Capitals Framework**<sup>13</sup> is what will ensure a balanced response which can achieve Europe's competitiveness ambitions without creating unintended consequences that would require course correction in the future. The seven community capitals to be considered include: natural, cultural, social, political, financial, and built capital, next to human capital.

#### **4. Who implements this future: the precarity of the profession**

Without adequately staffed education and training, nothing mentioned above can be achieved. The Council Recommendation documents the teaching profession's precarity as one of the most

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<sup>13</sup> Lionel J. "Bo" Beaulieu (2014). Promoting Community Vitality and Sustainability - The Community Capitals Framework. Purdue University. Available [here](#).

persistent weaknesses in EU education systems. Even if the EU implements cross-sectoral or interdisciplinary approaches to education, **without a revaluation of the profession, shortages will be exacerbated.** [Eurydice report](#) illustrates that teachers' well-being is at risk because of the small wages, stress experienced, overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources to reduce gaps in basic skills knowledge. Therefore, **further funding is needed to remove burden from teachers**, and provide them with adequate resources. These represent only a handful of the diverse nature of challenges they experience. Several Member States have attempted to reverse this trend. [Slovakia](#) increased by 7% the teacher wages in September 2025 and again in January 2026. While this represents important steps forward, they remain insufficient when measured against inflation, staff shortages, and further responsibilities faced by teachers. Without measures to tackle mental health, resources, and well-being of teachers, there will still be limited staff retention. **All while teachers' wages remain lower compared to other tertiary educated professions.**

This situation links with the previous point on the tyranny of numbers. We monitor data on teachers because it is accessible. **But the Council Recommendation fails to include educators at large, as well as support personnel.** If the EU wishes to implement the Skills Portability Initiative, for example, it will need a far more robust architecture of staff working in validation and recognition. If the EU wishes to improve educators' professions, beyond raising wages, it needs to have resources for support personnel ranging from nurses, to psychologists, to librarians, to ICT coordinators, to liaison officers, to social workers, and other professions serving the ecosystem. If the EU wishes more than 40% adults to participate in learning, it needs lifelong guidance professionals and adult educators. If the EU is meaningful on flexible learning pathways, it needs to support the volunteers, informal learning providers, and civil society networks connecting learning environments. **This is only a part of the complex ecosystem of learning that needs to be enriched. Instead of shrinking it, and compensating by bringing businesses inside learning, the objective should be to strengthen education and training systems that can be a counterpart for businesses.**

## 5. Recommendations

The Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education views the following actions as crucial to meet the EU's objectives under the Competitiveness Compass. These actions are linked to the Council Recommendation but also go beyond its scope. Therefore, these considerations must enter into the drafting of the future updates to the Council Recommendation, as this will become an annual process.

- **Boost public and private investment** in education and training while ensuring that education and training remains a public good. In this sense, the [UNESCO 2015 commitments](#) to ensure that education and training represents 20% of governmental public expenditure is needed, coupled with employers covering additional training.
- Mandate the European Commission for a **stronger monitoring of existing Country Specific Recommendations and developing Action Plans** for Member States based on existing Recommendations rather than adopting new ones.
- Provide a clause to **exempt education and training investment from the fiscal rules**, akin to the approach taken for defence funding

- Reopen ESF+ for promoting and **developing learning cities** across Europe to improve community learning for resilience, active citizenship, tolerance and solidarity through effective knowledge transfers in urban settings.
- Collect **data on people's motivation to pursue learning and their motivations to enter labour market sectors** that do not confront with shortages
- Collect **data on performance of learners that have achieved the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning** in terms of economic returns to society and social mobility
- **Advance the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning**, especially by **revisiting the Council Recommendation on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning and updating it**
- **Expand the scope of the Council Recommendation** to include all relevant initiatives under the European Education Area and the Union of Skills
- Recognise the **value of non-formal and informal learning environments** and ensure proper funding to support its development
- Provide a **competence framework for the interdisciplinary approach of STEAM** - focusing on how Member States can adapt curricula, educator training, and assessment to promote transversal competence development in an interdisciplinary manner
- Expand **data collection on all professionals working in education and training**
- Provide **better wages, working conditions, support, training, and job quality** teachers, educators, and all other education and training professionals, including support personnel
- Invest in **expanding the staff working in support services** such as validation, recognition, guidance, ICT, community liaising, psycho-social support, among others.

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