

European Skills Agenda: a step further to true Lifelong Learning?

The European Commission launched on July 1st the [revised European Skills Agenda](#), a joint effort of DG EAC and DG EMPL with ambitious objectives for the education and training sector to be achieved by 2025. It will be completed in September with the Communication on the European Education Area. LLLP welcomes such an ambitious Agenda and its alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights first principle on education, training and lifelong learning. This is a move in the right direction from the [first Skills Agenda](#), released in 2016, which was heavily focused on skills development for employability.

SKILLS FOR LIFE

The Agenda still has a prominent focus on “skills for jobs” approach as the guiding principle for lifelong learning policies which is understandable in the current context to a certain extent. However, at LLLP we believe that a **social inclusion approach should be at the forefront of these policies across the EU.**

▶ A step in the right direction has been the commitment to strengthen non-formal adult learning and education by prioritising “non-formal, life-wide learning, intergenerational, intercultural and community learning” and by underlining “skills for life” as a key pillar of Adult Learning and Education (ALE). Although it is encouraging to see life skills as a flagship action¹, this focus should be even stronger by embedding life skills into all sectors of education and training, not only on adult learning.

▶ Lifelong learning is a mindset that has to be cultivated from early childhood onwards and therefore should not only concentrate on policies related to learning after compulsory schooling or workers’ (re)training. We consider that further support and investment is as well needed in the implementation of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning Framework in all sectors of education.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING ACCOUNTS

An initiative that should be approached with care refers to the Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), i.e. state-subsidised individual accounts that citizens can use to access training regardless of their employment status, thus guaranteeing the “portability” of training rights and the autonomy of the individual. However, the success of this initiative will depend on the quality of the education and training offered to citizens, and hence - overall - to the support given to education and training providers.

▶ LLLP considers that **proper attention should be given to the offer and delivery of ILAs ensuring that all age groups are covered** (including young adults). Furthermore, it would be beneficial to align the strategy on ILAs with ILO’s report on the Future of Work² which calls for the recognition of a universal entitlement to Lifelong Learning.

▶ Moreover, the permeability and portability of ILAs is another dimension that deserves further attention. Such initiative can only work if accompanied by progress in recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. We regret that the conclusions of the evaluation report on the VNFIL Council Recommendation are not taken up in the current agenda.

MICROCREDENTIALS

Microcredentials are the proposed system which aims to develop quality standards and to ensure that all learning experiences are properly valued. It is imperative that the implementation of these credentials are done carefully to **avoid the risk of commercialization and privatization of education**: a worrisome and increasing trend around the world.

▶ While we acknowledge the added value such development will bring to Higher Education Institutions’ offer to a wider and diverse learners group, LLLP strongly advises to implement Microcredentials bearing in mind the risk of an uncontrolled tokenism.

▶ In addition, if the idea behind the Microcredentials is to provide opportunities to those that otherwise cannot afford to have a full qualification because of the precarious life conditions and financial instability they live in, then it is likely to have a positive impact in making the education and training offer more inclusive.

¹ Action 8: Skills for Life.

² See ILO (2019): [Work for a brighter future – Global Commission on the Future of Work International Labour Office](#)

▶ A Micro-credential has the benefit of being evaluated from verified sources and we believe it harnesses the positive power of digital education: we would welcome a development to make it a relevant a form of qualification for many migrants, refugees and other students, which is often the only one they can access, particularly if they are in transit between conflict, host or other countries and unsure about their future. We wish that such initiative will be a recognition and valorisation of all the knowledge, skills and competences that would have been acquired by learners outside the formal education system.

The synergies between this initiative and the Council Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal education are clear to us, we hope they are made possible when defining European Microcredentials.

FACT FOR SKILLS

Another positive development of the revised Agenda is the mobilisation of all stakeholders in a concerted effort for quality investment in skills for all working-age people across the Union. Such a partnership, if implemented in a way that brings together education and training providers, civil society, social partners, private sector and public policy and decision makers, has great potential for building cross-sectoral cooperation. LLLP has highlighted the need for cross-sector cooperation in many occasions through its work on Future of Work in collaboration with the EESC³ as well as on the Partnerships for Skills report developed with NESTA UK⁴ and our Feasibility Study on National Lifelong Learning Platforms.

STRENGTHEN THE HOLISTIC VISION

However, the Lifelong Learning Platform strongly believes that **the holistic vision of such an Agenda cannot be achieved without policy coherence from early childhood to adult education and without mechanisms in place for cross-sector fertilisation**. These are cornerstones for a truly lifelong learning approach to any EU policy. Building partnerships across the skills systems is a complex process; however, many successful innovative and inspiring examples exist to pave the way forward. Such partnerships can only work if there is a holistic vision driving it.

ENSURE ITS IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTREACH TO MOST IN NEED

LLLP considers that although the Agenda includes very ambitious measures, **more clarity is needed in terms of implementation** and how the education sector will be involved in this process. It is also crucial to involve civil society to support outreach to groups that social partners do not represent or work with, including those at the margins of society. Furthermore, it remains to be seen how the learner will be able to make its voice heard throughout the process. These aspects are key to develop this process fairly and cohesively, leaving no one behind.

ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA

Although the Commission stresses the importance of EU-level funding for the success of the Agenda, there are concerns regarding the feasibility of implementing the actions and achieving the ambitious objectives set for 2025 if an adequate budget is not assigned to relevant programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. **The current adopted MFF⁶ is, in this regard, a major disappointment.**

▶ What has currently been approved falls short from the commitments made by the Commission and the Parliament in previous years and from the call made by stakeholders working in the sector, from education providers to civil society organisations to raise the level of funding and be able to meet the objectives commonly set.

▶ Consultative bodies such as the EESC have also called⁷ for sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills and stressed the importance of ensuring that EU financial instruments support the realizations of EU level objectives in synergy with each other. We call on EU leaders to hold such informed opinions in greater consideration.

AN INCLUSIVE DIGITAL AND GREEN TRANSITION, WITH PEOPLE AT THE HEART

Overall, LLLP welcomes the ambitious proposal put forth in the Skills Agenda but urges the EU institutions and Member States to back their commitments by adequately funding the budget of key financial instruments. Otherwise, the **Union runs the risk of further exacerbating - instead of closing - the current skill gaps** to the detriment of Europe's societies and economies. Furthermore, the Commission highlighted the importance of the Skills Agenda for resilience in terms of having enough skilled workers to face crises; we invite the Commission to go beyond that objective and address skills and lifelong learning policies from a social inclusion approach in order to build sustainable and resilient education systems which are crucial to face cohesively future crises and to navigate successfully the green and digital transitions. For the latter, LLLP calls for the twin transitions to be approached simultaneously and be supported by comprehensive strategies. Failure to do so might result in a two-speed transition hindering the achievement of the Agenda's objectives. Therefore we invite the Commission to address this by developing a Green Skills Action Plan as a counterpart to the Digital Education Action Plan.

For more information LLLP previous positions and work can be found [here](#).

³ See EESC (2018): *Opinion on Future of work – acquiring of appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the future jobs*

⁴ See NESTA UK (2020): *Partnerships for Skills Report - Learning from Digital Fronrunner countries*

⁵ See LLLP (2018): *Feasibility Study on National Lifelong Learning Platforms*

⁶ See LLLP (2020): *Next EU Budget: Lack of political ambition leads to cut on social Europe*

⁷ See EESC (2020): *Opinion on Sustainable Funding for LLL*

ANNEX: SOME EXISTING PRACTICES AND INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD

- All Digital, *Individual Learning Accounts Report*
- EAEA, *Life skills*
- EAEA, *Reaction to the Update of the New Skills Agenda (2020)*
- EARLALL, Work on lifelong guidance (*Bridge Plus Project*) & validation of transversal competences (*KeyMob Project*)
- EDEN, Work on *Micro-credentials* and *MICROBOL Project*
- EfVET, *Work on digitalisation skills*
- EUCA, *Work on Soft Skills* and *Elene4Work Project*
- EUCEN, *Work on Micro-credentials and SDGs*
- EUF, *Erasmus Skills Project*
- EURASHE, Work on *European Research Area* and on *MicroCredentials*
- EVBB, Projects in Sector Skills Alliance (*DevOps, EldiCare*) and on Vocational Education and Training (*VETTE*)
- EVTA, Work on the development of professionals' skills (*Rec Project*), on employability (*Key2START Project*) and on apprenticeships (*EU TALENT Project*)
- LLLP, *Feasibility study* (Pact for Skills)
- LLLP, *Reaction to the New European Skills Agenda (2016)*
- RICDM, Multi-partnerships for guidance (*Keep InPact Project*)



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