

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Adult learning**  
**(Exploratory opinion at the request of the Slovenian Presidency)**

(2021/C 374/04)

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

Request by the Slovenian Presidency of the Council	Letter, 19.3.2021
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Bureau decision	23.3.2021
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	233/3/5

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC appreciates the increased focus on Adult Learning (AL), training and skills development reiterated in the recent European Commission (EC) initiatives, mainly in the European Skills Agenda. The EESC calls for immediate well-targeted policy measures to be designed and implemented, accompanied by incentives to support Member States (MS) as already pointed out in EESC opinion on ‘Supportive education systems to avoid skills mismatches — what transition is needed?’<sup>(1)</sup>.

1.2. The EESC points out that the rapid invention and spread of new technologies need to be accompanied by effective upskilling and reskilling. The EESC underlines that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Europe’s society and economy further highlighted the importance of effective education and training policies and high-quality jobs in supporting a sustainable and just social and economic recovery and resilience, which is crucial in helping Europe overcome the consequences of the pandemic. Investment in AL and skills development can play a crucial role in economic recovery and a social Europe.

1.3. The EESC recommends that the European Commission and the Member States enhance AL policies by taking a holistic view and improving its accessibility, quality and inclusiveness while respecting national competences and the principle of subsidiarity. The EESC calls for AL policies to be improved in a broad sense, taking into consideration effective strategies for meeting the new skills requirements, tailored to local needs. The EESC underlines the importance of improving pedagogy and andragogy in AL with quality initial education, continuous professional development and enhanced, fair working conditions and a supportive working environment for AL educators.

1.4. The EESC stresses that AL is essential for helping adults improve and acquire citizenship skills and take an active role in society. Lifelong learning should become a lifestyle for all to overcome disparities and inequalities in society and it should also become a reality at the workplace. In this respect, the use of ‘skills’ is more than important in its broader meaning and understanding concerning the workplace with social and personal life as a holistic perception of the skills development process.

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<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 228, 5.7.2019, p. 16.

1.5. The EESC underlines the importance of AL and regrets that the EU institutions and several Member States do not consider it a political priority while AL is essential for tapping the full potential of employment and social inclusion and to enable adults to actively participate in the labour market and be democratic citizens. The EESC recommends that MS strengthen the policy, governance and funding to adult learning according to the principles of Unesco's Four Pillars of Education <sup>(2)</sup> as: learning to know, to do, to be and to live together. In order to implement SDG 4, there needs to be effective support for civil society to build a partnership on AL provision in informal and non-formal settings and to ensure effective outreach to people.

1.6. The EESC suggests that the European Commission and the MS set achievable long-term goals and establish a continuous monitoring system for AL participation and high-quality and accessible lifelong learning, including employee training, for each MS, taking into consideration regional differences. This system should aim to ensure that everyone has the knowledge, skills, competencies and attitude needed for Europe to establish a just, cohesive, sustainable, digital and wealthy society. It is also important to improve research and skills intelligence at sectoral and national level on skills needs and skills forecasts to update AL for adults facing transitions and to improve data on Member States' investment in AL and to ensure frequent monitoring and data collection on learning and training courses obtained by employees. Social partners and civil society should be actively involved in improving national skills intelligence, including analysing, forecasting and anticipating skills needs.

1.7. Member States need to step up implementation of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults <sup>(3)</sup> to ensure that all low-skilled and low-qualified adults develop their basic skills and be guided and motivated to participate in training to improve their life and employability. To ensure that 80 % of adults have basic digital skills, the EESC calls on the European Commission and the MS to support adults in the acquisition of a minimum of basic digital skills for free to support their skills acquisition for work and in daily life.

1.8. The EESC points out that all adults, irrespective of their qualifications and socioeconomic background, need support to access quality and inclusive lifelong learning and to have their skills and competencies validated. Public employment services should increase and facilitate better access to fair and free guidance and counselling and should ensure that all adults are informed about lifelong learning possibilities and that workers are made aware of how jobs will change and the skills needed for new jobs and tasks.

1.9. The EESC asks the European Commission and the MS to launch information and awareness campaigns with the social partners for adults and workers affected by the green and digital transition to help the workforce acquire the skills needed. The EC should organise yearly events following the example of the VET Skills Week to inform and motivate adults about adult and further learning and to assist national policies.

1.10. The EESC underlines the importance of subsidiarity concerning AL policies to respect the role of national and sectoral social partners in identifying skills requirements and in managing national systems to finance and ensure access to AL and employee training. The EESC notes that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) should ensure that all companies have the right and the ability to set up skills strategies for innovation needs and to support the just transition of workers and quality apprenticeships for young people and adults in the context of the green and digital transition. The Council's Employment Guidelines <sup>(4)</sup> (2020) make a clear distinction between ensuring rights/entitlements to training and providing individual learning accounts as one of the possible tools, allowing the countries to decide how to ensure such entitlements. Individual learning accounts are tools that could ensure the right/entitlement to training. All adults and workers should have the right — in accordance with collective agreements and national legislations — to access quality employee training, paid educational leave, qualifications, validation of informal and non-formal learning, and

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<sup>(2)</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education/research-foresight/revisiting-learning>

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 484, 24.12.2016, p. 1.

<sup>(4)</sup> Employment Guidelines.

quality-assured and flexible guidance and counselling. The EU Member States need to set up financial mechanisms and tools to facilitate adults' access — in particular, that of workers — to learning and training, with the involvement of the social partners.

1.11. The EESC reminds the MS to ensure that all adults, especially those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, have equal access to lifelong learning that will serve their personal or career development interests. Targeted support needs to be provided to NEETs (not in education, employment or training), migrants and refugees, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, as well as to older people to ensure active and healthy ageing. The EESC calls on the European Commission to ensure that the new EU Disability Rights Strategy's focus on education extends to learners of all ages and focuses on making AL accessible and free for all learners with disabilities and learning difficulties in physically accessible settings, and ensure that training is provided for teachers about how to adapt their lessons and how to make online learning accessible too.

1.12. The EESC underlines that democratic governance is key for education and training systems, including effective social dialogue and meaningful consultation with civil society organisations, to support skills development in all adults, in particular workers and unemployed people, while meeting the EU targets on participation in AL as defined by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, the Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabrück Declaration, and to contribute to the upcoming Council Resolution on an agenda for AL. The EESC points out that social dialogue and interaction between trade unions and employers is instrumental in increasing access to adult learning for all, promoting flexibility and guidance, aligning training with labour market needs, ensuring training quality and financing training.

1.13. The EESC highlights that all adults, especially workers, must have better access to updated information on recognition and validation procedures. This can be achieved by effectively implementing the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>(5)</sup> and by ensuring that validation systems receive sufficient public funding in every EU country. By ensuring that training is recognised, employers and unions can support the increase of the workers' qualification levels and can contribute to their career development and a just transition in the labour market. Social partners' involvement in the governance of AL, employee training and paid educational leave systems is essential, including promoting joint actions among the social partners.

1.14. The EESC underlines that upskilling and reskilling are of the utmost importance in supporting the green and digital transitions of industries and they need to be seen as a social and economic responsibility to ensure inclusive training for quality jobs, and a just transition for all. Forward-looking industrial strategies, including effective skills policies, are needed to support upskilling and reskilling of the workforce. These can help ensure a just and socially fair transition to a climate-neutral economy through balancing the labour market that contributes to inclusive digitalisation and high-quality jobs. Companies need effective support to strengthen and finance their strategies for upskilling and reskilling their workforces to encourage innovation. At the same time, the overall economic and social interest should be respected. Collective agreements should determine access to different types of paid education leave for workers' personal and professional needs. The EESC reminds the EU Member States to align workers' access to paid educational leave with ILO Convention 140 on Paid Education Leave as soon as possible through national actions and collective agreements and to ensure, with the support of social partners, that its use is effective.

1.15. The EESC advocates sustainable national financing for AL, complemented by the effective use of EU funds, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), to support economic growth and resilient society in the context of the digital and green transitions of the economy, by ensuring quality and inclusive AL for all, including the unemployed and other people outside of the labour market, paying special attention to making training available and accessible for all workers. This requires a clear commitment at the European and national levels to devote an appropriate share of the available resources to promote the development of systematic and coordinated AL systems as a key part of the national plans.

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<sup>(5)</sup> OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

1.16. The EESC underlines the importance of ensuring quality, relevance, effectiveness and inclusiveness in AL and training. The EESC suggests encouraging the Member States to ensure that all educational learning and employee training programmes and curricula clearly define the learning outcomes and key competences, and the European Commission should further work on implementing the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning <sup>(6)</sup> and supporting joint actions among social partners. It is important to improve AL quality assurance systems and further develop the European Commission's EQAVET Network to apply to adult learning, continuous VET, apprenticeships and employee training. This should take into consideration translating the needs of the economy, employers and workers into AL programmes and curricula.

1.17. The EESC urges the Member States to involve companies and trade unions to the fullest extent in setting up strategies for skills development for the digital and green transitions of industries. The EESC suggests connecting environmental policies to education policies and setting up national green skills and competency strategies to make every adult aware of climate change, environmental responsibility and sustainable development as part of lifelong learning by appointing national coordinators.

1.18. The EESC calls on the European Commission and the Member States to strengthen AL policies to make quality and inclusive AL for life skills a right for all adults and to meet and increase the target of 60 % of AL participation per year by addressing skills mismatches and enhancing governance and financing for AL, including employee training. The EESC calls on the European Commission to reinstate open methods of coordination between the relevant ministries dealing with AL in the EU Member States, the social partners and civil society as part of a working group and to ensure that the fruitful work done by previous AL working groups is continued. The EESC also calls for a platform to be set up for national AL coordinators, social partners and stakeholders, separate from EPALE <sup>(7)</sup>, and for these various players to meet regularly as a network.

## 2. Background

2.1. The COVID-19 crisis, demographic changes, the digitalisation of the labour market and the decarbonisation of the economy are triggering enormous changes in jobs and tasks. Even before the pandemic, it was predicted that in 2 out of 5 jobs some tasks would change and that 14 % of jobs would change due to digitalisation (Cedefop). By 2030, up to 20 million jobs could be created worldwide due to the green transition of industries (OECD). Approximately 128 million adults <sup>(8)</sup> — 46,1 % of Europe's adult population — need upskilling and reskilling. The effect of digitalisation, robotisation, new economic models such as Industry 4.0 and the circular and sharing economy on new skill requirements call for concerted action to stimulate further adult learning in Europe.

2.2. The leaders of the EU countries met at the Porto Social Summit on 7 May 2021 to reinforce the EPSR. The measures proposed in the EPSR Action Plan aim to: create 'more and better jobs', promote 'qualifications and equality', and improve 'social protection and inclusion'. The leaders set targets for 2030, e.g. at least 60 % of adults should participate in AL every year and 80 % of adults should have at least basic digital skills. These targets relate to the first principle of the EPSR, which stipulates that 'everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market', as well as to the rights mentioned in the fourth principle, including support for training and requalification, especially young people's access to continued education, apprenticeships and traineeships.

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<sup>(6)</sup> OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-key-competences-for-lifelong-learning\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-key-competences-for-lifelong-learning_en)

<sup>(7)</sup> <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en>

<sup>(8)</sup> Cedefop: Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways. Volume 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling, February 2020.

2.3. The implementation of recent European Commission policy initiatives <sup>(9)</sup> relating to lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling need to help meet the EPSR's targets for AL through effective social dialogue with the social partners and consultation with civil society. Following the Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/402 <sup>(10)</sup>, AL systems need to be complemented by setting up effective lifelong guidance systems, and advisory and awareness-raising activities, integrating vulnerable groups and introducing effective systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning for all.

### 3. General comments

3.1. Strengthened democratic European and national level governance and tapping social partners' potential to identify skills needs and contribute to improving labour market inclusion is essential for designing and implementing more accessible and quality AL systems to improve life and social skills for all adults, including raising awareness of sustainable development, environmental responsibility, democratic citizenship, tolerance and European values. It is important to strengthen AL policies in a broad sense and to take into consideration effective strategies for meeting the new skills requirements.

3.2. Effective social dialogue with the social partners and consultation with civil society is key to ensuring that AL policies are successfully designed and implemented. Social partners play a vital role in defining skills needs and updating qualification profiles as companies and workers experience the evolution of jobs and tasks on a daily basis. Companies and workers must be fully involved in setting up strategies for developing skills for the digital and green transitions of industries.

3.3. Making AL systems more accessible for all requires strong national strategies and further policy cooperation among the EU countries, in particular among ministries, education social partners and the relevant stakeholders in civil society. It is important to link together EU and national, regional and local policies in order to achieve effective access to AL and employee training and to link together various policy areas so that social, environmental, digitalisation and financial policies can improve AL.

3.4. The ambitious AL participation target set by the EPSR Action Plan can be achieved if an EU initiative backed by a Council Recommendation encourages governments to ensure better access and sufficient funding for AL and employee training through various financial tools. The EESC refers to its opinion on Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour <sup>(11)</sup> and underlines that sustainable public investment in AL and effective private investment in employee training are prerequisites for the success of policy measures for the social and economic inclusion of learners of all ages and support for companies. Therefore, the Recovery Plan, Next Generation EU and other EU funds (e.g. ESF+, Just Transition Funds) must be used efficiently and consistently to support education and training policies within the European Semester.

3.5. The EESC notes <sup>(12)</sup> the importance of improving the skills, competencies and attitudes of everyone in Europe in relation to the environment and to address skills needs. The EU Member States need to connect environmental policies to education policies and set up national green skills and competency strategies to make every adult aware of climate change, environmental responsibility and sustainable development as part of lifelong learning and to ensure that workers are also equipped with the green skills and competencies needed for the just transitions of industries.

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<sup>(9)</sup> These initiatives are the Communication on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, the Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on Vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1), the Communication on Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation, the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs — Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee, and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27.

<sup>(10)</sup> Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/402 of 4 March 2021 on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE) (OJ L 80, 8.3.2021, p. 1).

<sup>(11)</sup> OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, p. 8.

<sup>(12)</sup> OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1.

3.6. Training support needs to be available to those who are most in need of them, such as low-skilled and atypical workers. Employee training and training outside but financed by companies need to support skills development to meet the needs of companies and workers. To ensure that all workers, regardless of their skill level and contractual situation, have access to upskilling and reskilling, sectoral, national and company-level agreements need to be made to determine training needs and training provisions. Collective agreements need to be concluded to ensure that workers have through various incentives access to AL and to paid educational leave.

3.7. The EESC refers to Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning<sup>(13)</sup> and stresses that Member States need to do more to improve the quality of teaching in the adult education sector by enhancing initial education and continuous professional development with the involvement of teachers, by facilitating the mobility of teachers, trainers and other adult education staff, and by ensuring good working conditions and a supportive working environment for AL staff. Effective social dialogue with their trade unions is required so that measures can be agreed on to make the profession more attractive and to improve recruitment and retention.

3.8. Setting up a European exchange platform for digital materials and courses within the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 and European standards on micro-credentials can be useful for enhancing access to and trust in AL courses. Learners need comprehensive information on whether courses lead to full or partial qualifications or to micro-credentials, who validates and ensures the quality of the courses, whether and how they are recognised, and how they could be converted to full qualifications.

Brussels, 8 July 2021.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Christa SCHWENG

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<sup>(13)</sup> OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 1.