



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 22 December 2022
(OR. en)

16335/22

**Interinstitutional File:
2022/0326(COD)**

**SOC 705
EMPL 481
EDUC 427
JEUN 188
ECOFIN 1376
JAI 1743
CODEC 2115**

COVER NOTE

From:	Secretary-General of the European Commission, signed by Ms Martine DEPREZ, Director
date of receipt:	22 December 2022
To:	Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
Subject:	Proposal for a DECISION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on a European Year of Skills 2023 - Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Delegations will find attached the opinion adopted by the European Economic and Social Committee on the above proposal.

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OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

European Year of Skills 2023

Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a
European Year of Skills 2023
[COM(2022) 526 – final - (2022)0326 (COD)]

SOC/749

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

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EN

Referral	Council of the European Union, 21/10/2022 European Parliament, 01/12/2022
Legal basis	Article 149 & 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted at plenary	15/12/2022
Plenary session No	547
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	155/0/1

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the declaration of 2023 as the European Year of Skills (EYS). The EYS has to provide pathways towards effective solutions and educational benefits for young people and adults, the unemployed and employed irrespective of the contractual situation, level of qualifications or gender, in line with the goal to equip the "workforce with the right skills", stated by President von der Leyen to increase the competitiveness of the European economy, especially that of SMEs. The EESC is looking forward to engaging positively with the EYS 2023 in order to produce concrete outcomes and is therefore ready to contribute as facilitator for networking and debates.
- 1.2 Against the background that in some parts of the EU there is unequal access to educational opportunities, while educational attainment is all too often still passed from one generation to the next. The EYS 2023 should initiate further debates and activities to prevent discrimination in all educational fields and help people obtain skills that will guarantee for them upward career paths and quality life. Special attention has therefore to be given to the socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people as regards accessing quality and inclusive training of re- and upskilling. The **Council recommendation on upskilling pathways** aimed at supporting low skilled and low-qualified adults to be upskilled and integrated to the labour market, needs to be enforced and implemented as an important objective of the EYS.
- 1.3 The EESC believes that there is a need for efficient financing mechanisms, which mobilise European and national resources and involve adequate sharing of costs between public authorities and private entities, as well as individuals and other relevant stakeholders (social partners, training providers, NGOs). Empowering workers to take up training is also key to establish a culture of life-long learning.
- 1.4 The EESC expects that the EYS will issue this question of responsibility to safeguard necessary resources for upskilling and reskilling, which is important to mitigate the risk of social exclusion, including channelling the financing with special attention. This includes the question of social partners' shared responsibility at sectoral and company level in terms of investing in the forward-looking education and training of the employed workforce. This includes also the employers' engagement in making the necessary arrangements to support any workers they have made redundant to benefit from support schemes. The EESC calls on and encourages the social partners to take effective steps to engage in social dialogue to ensure that all workers have equal access to quality and inclusive training in line with the EPSR. Moreover, consultation mechanisms between education institutions, authorities and companies and trade unions should be strengthened as this can contribute in the drafting of realistic and effective education-to-work strategies.
- 1.5 In this view the EESC proposes to finally implement the idea of a skills guarantee to offer the right to access quality and inclusive training for all, and to promote the engagement in collective bargaining and capacity building to lay down the provisions and conditions for paid educational leave, allowing people to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in society and in labour markets. Training in this view should include key competences, basic skills and professional skills development for people of all skills levels.

- 1.6 The Commission calls on Member States to appoint a national coordinator for the EYS to ensure the coordination of relevant activities at national level. The EESC suggests that the national coordination point should work in a transparent and inclusive manner and have relevant competences as well as adequate financial resources provided by EU and national sources. All stakeholders in the field of education and training (notably education and training providers, public and private employment services, social partners, and other relevant civil society organisations) should have voice in the selection of this national coordination point in order to ensure that these stakeholders be part of it and play a leading role both in planning and implementation of activities throughout the year as well as in its evaluation. The same principle on coordination should apply also at EU-level.
- 1.7 The EESC reiterates its recommendations from earlier opinions on previous declarations of European Years that these should go beyond mere promotional activities and instead contribute to the implementation of clear plans and real engagement.
- 1.8 Recalling previous opinions on such thematic years, amongst which calling for appropriate EU funding and significant dialogue with civil society in the development of these years as well as for specific measures to ensure a link between the different thematic years and an enduring outcome, the EESC reminds that it is crucial for the success of the concept of the "European Years" to announce them in a timely manner for allowing a proper preparation and to create robust ownership¹.

2. **The legislative Proposal**

- 2.1 Following the announcement by President Ursula von der Leyen in her 2022 State of the Union address, the Commission has adopted its proposal to make 2023 the European Year of Skills.
- 2.2 With the EYS, in cooperation with the European Parliament, Member States, social partners, public and private employment services, chambers of commerce and industry, education and training providers, and workers and companies all together, the Commission proposes to give a fresh impetus to lifelong learning by:
- Promoting increased more effective and inclusive investment in training and upskilling to harness the full potential of the European workforce, and to support people in changing from one job to another.
 - Making sure that skills are relevant for labour market needs, by also cooperating with social partners and companies.
 - Matching people's aspirations and skill sets with opportunities on the job market, especially for the green and digital transition and the economic recovery.
 - A special focus will be given to activate more people for the labour market, in particular women and young people, especially those not in education, employment or training.

¹ EESC opinion: European Year of Youth 2022, [OJ C 152, 6.4.2022, p. 122](#).

- Attracting people from third countries with the skills needed by the EU, including by strengthening learning opportunities and mobility and facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

2.3 To meet these objectives, the Commission will

- Promote upskilling and reskilling opportunities, for instance by highlighting relevant EU initiatives, including EU funding possibilities, to support their take-up, implementation and delivery on the ground.
- Events and awareness-raising campaigns will also be organised across the EU to support mutual learning of partners in up- and reskilling.
- The proposed Year also aims to help to further develop skills intelligence tools and promote tools and instruments for increased transparency and easier recognition of qualifications, including qualifications awarded outside the EU.

2.4 To ensure the coordination of relevant activities at national level, the Commission calls on Member States to appoint a national coordinator for the European Year of Skills.

3. **General comments**

3.1 The EESC agrees that an engaged citizenry that contains a skilled and qualified workforce is one of the main assets of the European social and economic model and that support for training for people of all ages must be used as a lever to boost societal participation as well as long-term and sustainable growth, since it helps to increase innovation, productivity and competitiveness. It is also key to supporting people in the context of achieving a just transition because moving towards a more sustainable way of living, producing and consuming has become a necessity to tackle climate change and its negative repercussions globally, while ensuring no one is left behind. At the same time, it agrees that the holistic personal development of each learner is crucial for adapting to the transitions and challenges ahead, considering the fast-paced nature of the current societies.

3.2 The shortage of skilled workers, due to demographic challenges and structural change, as well as, due to digitalisation and decarbonisation, is of the decisive factors affecting the European economy. In addition to obtaining new skills, the aim must also be to ensure that qualified workers can carry out a number of qualified tasks and occupations under changing circumstances², while their training leads towards decent employment opportunities and safeguards for preventing precarious employment.

3.3 Additionally, the challenge and anticipation of skills needs is of paramount importance to succeed in reaching the EU headline targets set by the EPSR Action Plan of at least 60% of adults participating in training every year and an employment rate of at least 78% by 2030.

²

LMO study: [The work of the future: ensuring lifelong learning and training of employees | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#)

- 3.4 The EESC welcomes that the European Commission put the focus on skills, with the declaration of the European Year of Skills in 2023, following the Year of Youth in 2022.
- 3.5 This confirms the Committee's view— expressed in numerous opinions – that quality basic education, as well as high-standard and effective training, lifelong learning (LLL) as well as vocational up- and re-skilling will be the necessary tools for successfully adapting to societal changes, boosting active citizenship, as well as grasping the job opportunities of the future and fostering entrepreneurial learning³.
- 3.6 Lifelong learning and skills development is the key to the social and economic progress in our societies. However, in the EESC's view this is not only about imparting knowledge that can be "marketed", but also about competences and skills that enable people to actively participate in social life. Studies show that critical thinking, communication, teamwork, creativity, initiative, and many other transversal skills are increasingly needed for the labour market and for the society. In addition to these, freedom, tolerance, critical spirit, European values and democratic citizenship are essential assets for the future of Europe so as to fight the increasing intolerance and emerging radical movements. Therefore, we ask to include social skills and transversal skills also among the "right skills" during the actions under the EYS 2023 that citizens, including workers and future workers, need to obtain⁴. This is directly in line with the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning while also being consistent with the European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence (LifeComp) and the European sustainability competence framework (GreenComp).
- 3.7 In the EESC view, education begins in infancy and accompanies us throughout our lives. In line with the Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 the EESC underlines that adult education must be more than just the development of employment-relevant skills. It is equally important to promote increased public awareness of the importance and benefits of participation in LLL in a holistic way⁵.
- 3.8 For the EESC, it is therefore clear that all activities in the framework of the EYS 2023 must be aimed at the best possible progress in all fields of education and training (elementary education, initial and advanced vocational, life-long-learning: formal, non-formal and informal). At all levels of education, it is therefore above all a matter of providing equal opportunities for all, free from discrimination. The parents' income or education levels must no longer significantly influence a person's educational career.
- 3.9 Against the background that in some parts of the EU there is unequal access to educational opportunities, while educational attainment is still too often passed from one generation to the

³ EESC opinions: Adult learning, [OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 16](#); Promoting skills for a more just, cohesive, sustainable, digital and resilient society, [OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 27](#); Updated skills agenda, [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 40](#); Learning and employability package, [OJ C 323, 26.8.2022, p. 62](#); Higher education package, [OJ C 290, 29.07.2022, p. 109](#).

⁴ EESC opinion: Updated skills agenda, [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 40](#).

⁵ EESC opinion: Adult learning, [OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 16](#).

next, it should be anywhere imperative to offer chances and possibilities as well as to promote competences and capabilities to the greatest extent.

- 3.10 LLL for all must become a reality in Europe and all Europeans should have access to quality and inclusive learning and training. Equal access to upskilling and reskilling stating that additional up-skilling opportunities need to be provided for all people, regardless of gender, origin and age⁶. This focus on inclusiveness of the skills agenda has furthermore to include in particular all workers regardless of their employment situation, the size of companies and the type of their work contract, including low-qualified/skilled adults and people with a migrant background, vulnerable groups should be offered special attention and policies since they are experiencing more difficulties.
- 3.11 Despite its support for the EYS 2023 and the focus on boosting vocational training and LLL, the EESC is concerned that the agenda and priorities of the year appear to be overcrowded. They contain a very large number of commitments, references to all initiatives, budget lines and policy areas outlined in the European Skills Agenda. This runs the risk that the year will be more about high-profile political announcements, than long-term systematic development.
- 3.12 To prevent the trap that a long list of existing policies areas and shared responsibilities can obscure a clear focus on outcomes, it would be crucial to have clarity and focus on the proposal, by focusing on a number of strategic priorities. The EESC reiterates its demand from existing opinions regarding previous declarations of European Years that it should go beyond mere promotional activities and should contribute towards clear plans and engagement⁷.
- 3.13 Social partners and civil society organisations also have an important role to play in governance of the education and training system, including anticipating and delivering skills. Effective involvement of social partners and relevant civil society organisations at European and national level and effective actions to consolidate efficient governance in all fields of vocational education and training and of adult learning policy, including active labour market policies and on the management of EU and national funds for skills would be key to succeed to provide effective solutions for all.
- 3.14 It is important to take into consideration to increase dialogue in existing stakeholder groups and networks, also via established online platforms, particularly boosting the Strategic Dialogue process over 2023, developing Stakeholder Fora connected to the flagship events of 2023, but also via new processes akin to civil dialogue to ensure that education and training stakeholders can meaningfully take part in policy and decision-making considering their expertise on the ground, their capacity to express learners' needs and their close connection with different national and regional authorities responsible for the implementation of the education and training recommendations.
- 3.15 The EESC expects that the EYS should in this view issue the question of social partners' shared responsibility at sectoral and company level in terms both of investing in the forward-looking

⁶ EESC opinion: Adult learning, [OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 16](#).

⁷ EESC opinion: European Year of Youth 2022, [OJ C 152, 6.4.2022, p. 122](#).

education and training of their employed workforce. This includes also the employers' engagement in making the necessary arrangements to support any worker they have made redundant to benefit from the support schemes. In this view the EESC calls on the social partners to take effective steps to engage in social dialogue to ensure that all workers have equal access to quality and inclusive training in line with the EPSR.

- 3.16 Teachers and trainers play an important role in developing learners' skill sets in line with labour market needs, by teaching and training not only occupational skills but also transversal skills, such as basic and socio-emotional skills. They support the school-to-work transition of students with diverse backgrounds, including adults in need of new, updated, or improved skills. In the face of the unprecedented challenges created by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, their commitment and creativity have been central to sustaining teaching and learning in schools and workplaces.
- 3.17 VET teacher shortages are significant in many EU countries, caused also by factors related to the limited attractiveness of the VET teaching profession, including employment conditions, salaries, and a lack of financial incentives and career support. Attracting industry professionals into the teaching profession should be one of the key strategies for ensuring an adequate supply of VET teachers with relevant skills and knowledge, and this requires providing good and attractive working conditions, decent wages and flexible pathways into the profession and mechanisms to ensure that these professionals have the right mix of skills – including pedagogical skills.

4. **Specific comments**

4.1 The EESC welcomes the approach of discussing training needs from the perspective of socially fair and just green and digital transition of the labour market. However, it appeals for the clear message, that the responsibility of upskilling and reskilling should always be put in a fair way as shared responsibility.

4.2 Shared responsibility

4.2.1 To succeed in ongoing transitions, the individuals shall be supported to get prepared for changes in order to be successful. There is a need for financing mechanisms, which mobilise European and national resources and involve adequate sharing of costs and non-financial contributions (for example time spent on training) between public authorities, employers, individuals and other relevant stakeholders (e.g. social partners, training providers, NGOs). The EESC, in many previous opinions⁸, has emphasised the crucial need for strong commitments from companies as well as from public authorities most notably to safeguard sufficient resources, including sufficient financing for education and training.

4.2.2 The EESC proposes that the EYS should prominently promote social responsibility in the field of comprehensive upskilling and reskilling and in this context, the idea of a Skills Guarantee to

⁸ EESC opinions: Learning and employability package, [OJ C 323, 26.8.2022, p. 62](#); Adult learning, [OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 16](#); Promoting skills for a more just, cohesive, sustainable, digital and resilient society, [OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 27](#).

offer the right to access quality and inclusive training for all, including engagement in collective bargaining and capacity building to lay down the provisions and conditions on paid educational leave in order to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in society and in the labour market.

4.2.3 This also includes the question of social partners' shared responsibility at sectoral and company level in terms of investing in the forward-looking education and training of their employed workforce. Collective bargaining at all levels – in line with national law and practices – and workers' participation mechanisms at firm level are relevant tools in order to address the changes in skills and training needs and in order to help anticipate these changes and increase innovation. It would be useful to start developing during the EYS an EU quality framework for employee training as a social partners' action.

4.3 Boost investment in education and training

4.3.1 The EESC already stressed the need for a qualification offensive to underpin the growing digitalisation of our labour markets, to provide incentives for investing both at company level and in the public sector, to promote public and private investment in vocational education and training. Public investment in lifelong, and particularly adult, learning needs to be increased in every Member State⁹.

4.3.2 The EESC calls on the European Commission and the Member States to take effective action towards the implementation of the first and the fourth principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, to ensure quality and inclusive LLL as a right for all citizens in Europe at workplaces and beyond and to support the implementation of these principles with sustainable public funding agreed with the social partners and civil society.

4.3.3 As Member States bear the main responsibility for sustainable investment to guarantee training, not least to unemployed and low-qualified people but also to obtain certified basic skills, professional skills and key competences leading to qualifications, the EYS should highlight the need for adequate and sufficient public investment in all fields of education and training.

4.3.4 The EESC demands in this view that sustainable investment in adult participation in LLL and employee training should be highlighted as priorities within the European Semester process and get more support of EU funds, in particular of the European structural and investment funds, to upskilling and reskilling provisions.

4.4 Right of access to lifelong learning opportunities irrespective of the level and type (formal, informal and non-formal)

4.4.1 The EESC calls for the full implementation of the first principle of the EPSR to ensure that access to quality and inclusive training and LLL is the right for all VET learners, workers and employees, to enable them to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in

⁹ EESC opinion: Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour [OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, p. 8](#).

the labour market. Such a right must support also the unemployed and the low qualified adults to receive the necessary skills for the labour market. We call on the European Commission to conduct research on how to achieve such a right and introduce a stronger monitoring mechanism, which requests the EU countries to set up national action programmes and to present regular national reports on how this right is being ensured.

4.4.2 In this view the EESC calls on the Commission, Member States and social partners to use the EYS to take effective steps to engage in joint actions to promote work based learning, to boost investment to quality apprenticeship provisions, adult participation in LLL and employee training, by ensuring all workers equal access to quality and inclusive training as a right. The European Quality and Effective Framework for Apprenticeships will celebrate its 5th anniversary in 2023 and needs to be evaluated and re-enforced. It would be high time to ask the apprentices, the young ones and the adults, to what extent the quality conditions in the framework were met in practice in the workplace.

4.5 Stakeholder involvement

4.5.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's explicit commitment to strengthening skills relevance by closely cooperating with social partners, public and private employment services, companies, education and training providers. The EESC considers in this context that it is also crucial

- to stimulate active worker involvement in LLL schemes and in in-work training is an essential condition for the growth and competitiveness of enterprises, for the employability of workers and for securing quality jobs¹⁰.
- to improve the participation of all in LLL and to determine, together with education and training providers, decision-makers the content of learning in a way that will bring benefits to each learner and to the community and society as a whole.
- to support collective bargaining and social dialogue, in line with national industrial relations systems, in order to be able to anticipate and adapt the skills to technological and digital developments and develop on-the-job training, but also to support civil dialogue for a comprehensive view on the needs of each learner.

4.6 Strengthen efficient employment services

4.6.1 For a fair transition and for active labour market policies to work, there is a need for equally efficient employment services, capable not only of managing demand and job supply, but also of offering guidance and counselling to job-seekers. The EESC calls on the Member States to invest more resources in the enhancement of the effectiveness, efficiency but also of the capacity of employment services and their staff, as well as in the design of tools to support those who are not yet in the labour market.

¹⁰ EESC opinion: Future of work – acquiring of appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the future jobs, [OJ C 237, 6.7.2018, p. 8](#).

4.7 Individual learning accounts and micro-credentials

4.7.1 The EESC welcomes the initiative on Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) by the Commission, because the learning providers need financial support for supplying learners. The pressure on qualification is constantly increasing but ILA should not intend to replace existing funding structures, but to supplement them, especially where ILA does not yet exist.

4.7.2 ILA is an important building block for financing continuing education. ILA should be differentiated depending on the target group, and it must in any case be continuously evaluated and, if necessary, adapted. Above all: Working-age people should have direct access to their ILA and be able to decide for themselves for which further training they use it personally.

4.7.3 Within the proposal on the "European approach to lifelong learning and employment" microcredentials should better manage the problems of training and retraining people. This would make it easier and better for people to acquire all the skills needed to cope with the current societal upheavals and transitions in the labour market. At the same time, the approach is also aimed at providers to make their offers more transparent and flexible through microcredentials.

4.7.4 In the view of the EESC, microcredentials for the recognition of informal learners can be quite practicable and reasonable but it is at the same time important that microcredentials should not be aimed to weaken or replace formal initial education, higher education, vocational education and training or traditional skills.

4.8 Attracting non-EU nationals

4.8.1 The focus on attracting non-EU nationals with the skills needed for the EU should be balanced by mitigating the "brain-drain". The EESC advocates for more regular channels for labour migration, but the first priority of skills policies should be to ensure the skills development for European workers, as well as for the unemployed and undocumented migrants already present and working in the EU.

4.8.2 Developing an EU talent pool (available to Ukrainian refugees only) is also to be handled with care. The EESC encourages the Commission to draw up actions ensuring that every single refugee and asylum-seeker be given the same opportunity as citizens to validate their skills and competences and be offered apprenticeships and re- and upskilling, to be integrated into the labour market, in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

4.8.3 Furthermore, a simpler, faster and easier recognition of qualifications of non-EU nationals must in any case be discussed or promoted independently of their recruitment. However, it seems clear that, in the case of regulated professions, only the application of the rules of the EU Qualification Directive to third-country nationals can speed up or facilitate the recognition of their qualifications.

4.9 Coordination of the European Year

4.9.1 The Commission calls on Member States to appoint a national coordinator for the EYS to ensure the coordination of relevant activities at national level. As this appointment of national coordinators and respective meetings is the key of the articles on coordination at national and Union level, this appears very minimalist.

4.9.2 The EESC calls that these national coordination points should have relevant competences as well as adequate financial resources provided by EU and national sources and facilities to effectively involve representatives from a wide network of stakeholders in the field of education, training and skills at national and EU-level. These stakeholders (notably social partners, public and private employment services, education and training providers, and other relevant civil society organisations) should be part of the coordination and play a leading role both in planning and implementation of activities throughout the year as well as in its evaluation. The main focus should be laid on sustainable outcomes that can be reached during the year. For funding amounts the European Year of Development can be taken as good practice.

4.10 Skills mismatch

4.10.1 While some sectors may suffer from a lack of skilled workers, the so-called mismatch is often more linked to bad working conditions (low wages, precarious contracts, disrespect, working time incompatible with work-life balance, lack of employee training and career development) and lack of anticipation tools as an early warning system for forecasting labour market changes. If the EYS does not look at that side of the coin, it will be clear that the burden is unequally placed on workers and society as such, without insisting on the shared responsibility of companies.

4.10.2 Skills strategies in this view cannot be separated from quality job creation and strategies. Indeed, training, reskilling or upskilling programmes will not be of use if people live in an economically deserted area that does not offer alternative job opportunities. Quality jobs, fair wages and decent working conditions are the prerequisite for long-term and sustainable growth, productivity and innovation, and skills development and LLL is one of the tools to achieve these goals. In this view effective social dialogue with the trade unions, respect and enforcement of labour rights, and information and consultation with workers on employee training and apprenticeship in company levels are fundamental.

Brussels, 15 December 2022

Christa Schweng
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee