

## Social Europe

# Making the most of the European Year of Skills

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Sofia Fernandes

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In the early 1990s, Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission, **championed** lifelong learning as the 'catalyst of a changing society'. Individuals, he believed, should not only be given opportunities to adapt to the transformations of our societies but to lead and drive such changes themselves.

Three decades on, fostering a culture of **lifelong learning** is still a work in progress in the European Union, while it is more important than ever to adopt a holistic, life-cycle approach to learning. The 2023 European Year of Skills represents an opportunity to trigger a shift of mindset to make lifelong learning the new norm. It should not be missed.

## Rapid and deep changes

The world of work is undergoing rapid and deep changes, and these will intensify. Emerging digital technologies and the **transition** to a carbon-neutral economy will transform jobs and skill needs across sectors. Some jobs will disappear or change significantly while new ones will be created.

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The green transition is forecast to generate **2.5 million additional jobs** in the EU by 2030, even though decarbonisation of the economy will lead to job losses in sectors such as fossil fuels and carbon-intensive industries. Automation will meanwhile eat away at jobs disproportionately comprising routine tasks—accounting for **10 to 15 per cent of job losses**, according to recent estimates—although again new jobs will also be created, for developers, data analysts and so on.

These dynamics will have major impacts on the demand for skills. Displaced workers' skills will likely become obsolete—the jobs destroyed and those created requiring different skill sets—and they will need to reskill to ensure

nobody is left behind. Significant skills shortages are in any case emerging: over three-quarters (77 per cent) of companies in the EU **report difficulty** in finding workers with the skills they need.

## Challenges remain

In addition to national reforms, EU leaders co-operate on common principles and joint initiatives for adult learning. Action is framed by the European Skills Agenda and includes the **Pact for Skills**, the **Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition**, Council of the EU recommendations on **individual learning accounts** and **micro-credentials**. There is **funding** too to support skills development—from the European Social Fund Plus, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+.

Yet many challenges remain. Participation in adult learning **is too low** overall, with only 43.7 per cent of European adults taking part in 2016, and patchy, with that statistic ranging from 7 per cent in Romania to 64 per cent in the Netherlands. The EU target for 2030, adopted in 2021 at the **Porto Social Summit**, is that at least 60 per cent of adults train every year.

This weak participation in adult learning is compounded by lack of inclusiveness: those who need training the most—the unemployed, poorly qualified workers and those with non-standard contracts—train the least. The gulf is especially wide for low-educated adults, whose average participation in training is **40 percentage points below** that of their already high-skilled counterparts. Further challenges include underinvestment in adult learning and training of poor quality misaligned with contemporary labour-market needs.

## Major overhaul

Incremental changes may help but only a major overhaul, reflecting the central role of continuous learning in our societies and economies, can embed lifelong learning in the EU. The 2023 European Year of Skills represents an opportunity to develop such a commitment to reskilling and upskilling—as the commission **puts it**, to empower individuals, enlarge their aspirations and improve their employability while addressing labour shortages, boosting the competitiveness of European companies and realising the potential of the digital and green transitions.

The commission intends to take advantage of this year to mobilise all relevant stakeholders, including European institutions and agencies, national governments, the social partners, public employment services, education and training providers and companies. Action should focus on three priorities.

First, awareness must be raised of the importance of skills development, for individuals, companies and society, and the need to embrace a culture of lifelong learning. We have to increase not only companies' and states' willingness to invest in adult learning but also citizens' willingness to enrol in training.

Eighty per cent of non-learners in the EU do not train because they **are unwilling** to do so and, more specifically, do not believe there is a real need for them so to do. We must create an environment that supports lifelong learning and empowers people to have greater control over their own learning.

Awareness-raising campaigns and communications on skills-development opportunities and activities across Europe will be useful. In this however transversal as well as technical skills should be emphasised: adaptability,

'learning to learn' and problem-solving are key to a spirit of lifelong learning and should be promoted from initial education.

Secondly, the quality of training, its alignment with labour-market needs and the recognition and validation of learning outcomes should be strengthened. As some countries perform better than others, the EU should promote the exchange of good practices and insights. Concrete initiatives should include improving skills forecasting and promoting the use of digital tools for skills recognition (such as digital badges).

Thirdly, policy-makers and the social partners need to address the lack of investment in skills development. This includes more EU funding, more effectively used, but that will obviously not be sufficient. The commission should promote the adoption of **individual learning accounts** at the national level—with adequate funding—in accordance with the 2022 council recommendation. Policy-makers should also consider discounting such social investments from the **deficit rules** in the reinforced Stability and Growth Pact, as **proposed** by Anton Hemerijck.

## **Supporting social inclusion**

During the European Year of Skills, skills development should also be promoted as a tool to support social inclusion. Through adult learning, individuals who did not succeed in initial education, or who are returning to the labour market after years of absence through having primary care responsibilities, can be given a second chance. Skilled citizens enjoy not only better job opportunities but also broader possibilities to engage fully in society, being active citizens.

The commission has proposed to prioritise some target groups, such as young people not in employment or education and migrants (for instance,

to facilitate the recognition of qualifications). Particular attention should also be paid to those at risk of poverty or social exclusion—for example, through initiatives to develop their basic digital skills, in light of the 2030 EU **target** that 80 per cent of EU citizens cross this threshold (little over half do now).

As the commission points out, the European Year of Skills should also address the gender gap in science and technology. Only 19 per cent of specialists in information and communication technologies and about **one third** of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are women. New initiatives are needed to tackle this under-representation of women in technology-related professions. If the EU is to reach another 2030 goal, that 20 million ICT specialists be employed (as against just 7.8 million in 2019), increasing women's representation will be key.

Finally, in the context of an ageing European society, lifelong learning plays a vital role in promoting active ageing. Almost all member states have adopted or are negotiating (as in France) **reforms** of their pension systems to raise the retirement age. Longer working lives need to go hand in hand with preventing skills obsolescence and increasing wellbeing at work—upskilling can positively contribute.

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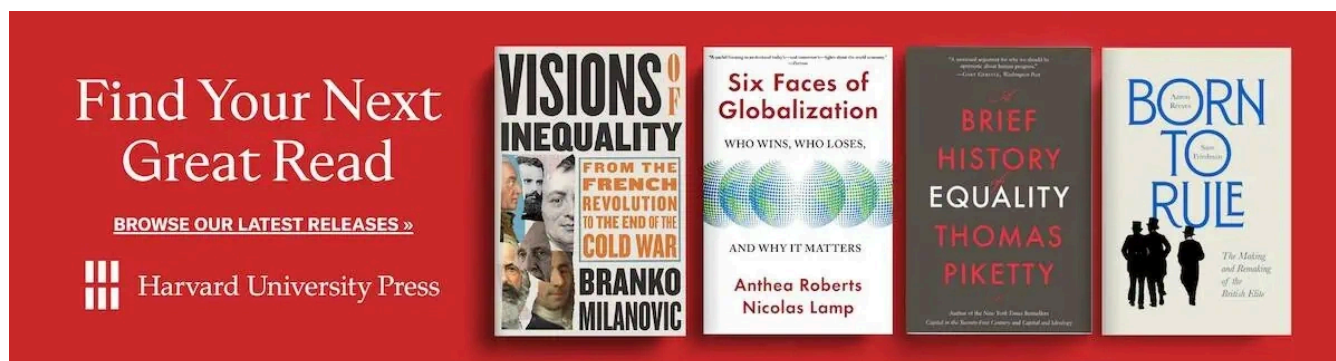
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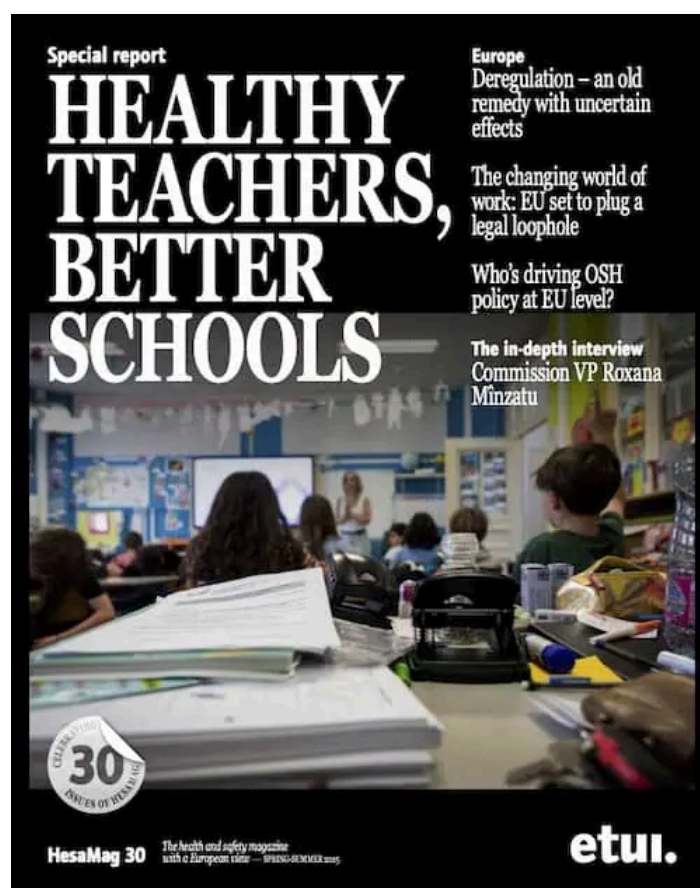


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