



**SOC/629**

**Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills**

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour**

[Exploratory opinion requested by the Croatian Presidency]

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

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Request by the Croatian Presidency of the Council	Letter, 10/09/2019
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Bureau decision	24/09/2019
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	03/03/2020
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	254/1/6

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes **the focus of the mission letter of Commissioner Nicolas Schmit**<sup>1</sup> on implementing and updating the Skills agenda, focusing on identifying and filling skills shortages and supporting reskilling as a part of the just transition, as well as exploring the idea of proposing individual learning accounts as one of the possible ways of enabling adults (both employed and unemployed) to accumulate training entitlements and use them for quality assured training.
- 1.2 The EESC supports the **Council Conclusions on "The key role of LLL policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth"**<sup>2</sup>, adopted on 8 November 2019, which call on the Commission to "update the efficiency, scale and target groups of current lifelong learning policies in order to better respond to learning needs arising from changes in society and the world of work, including by further **developing the European Education Area**"<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.3 The EESC appreciates that one of the priorities of **Croatian Presidency** of the Council of the EU<sup>4</sup> is investment in research and innovation, greater accessibility of high-quality and lifelong learning and developing new skills adjusted to jobs of the future.
- 1.4 The EESC welcomes the fact that, in its communication on "**A Strong social Europe for just transitions**"<sup>5</sup> - which states that skills are key for the future - the European Commission encourages the EU Member States to provide inclusive and high-quality education and training from an early age and to support people in their continuous development throughout their careers.
- 1.5 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 (EPSR)**, to ensure quality and inclusive lifelong learning (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.
- 1.6 The EESC would like to see a particular focus on the **access of the most vulnerable groups in society to lifelong learning opportunities**. Effective support should be provided to workers of all skills and qualification levels and in all sizes of companies and organisations, regardless of the geographical area, while ensuring sustainable financing from public authorities, companies and trade unions, for example through individual training accounts or other schemes and tools according to national practices.

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1 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit_en.pdf)

2 [OJ C 389, 18.11.2019, p. 12](#)

3 [European Education Area](#)

4 <https://eu2020.hr/>

5 [COM\(2020\) 14 final](#)

- 1.7 The EESC suggests that the European Commission be more ambitious in setting indicators and benchmarks for lifelong learning, in particular for the participation of adults - including employees - in education and training, within relevant policy frameworks and the **upcoming ET2030 Strategy Framework**. The Commission should ensure that the EU financial instruments, such as Erasmus+, the European Social Fund (ESF), InvestEU, the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan (SEIP), the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and other relevant EU funds, support the achievement of these benchmarks effectively and in synergy with each other.
- 1.8 In addition, the EESC calls on the EU institutions to agree on a **single inclusive Key Competences framework** going beyond school education, thus addressing the need for adult learning (AL) and acquiring life skills, and emphasising in particular the skill of learning to learn and the skills for democratic citizenship that are essential to support adults in taking an active role in society. The EESC also calls for increased **investment in non-formal and informal learning environments**, which are particularly relevant in terms of acquiring these competences.
- 1.9 The EESC believes that in the context of **the European Semester** it is necessary to create coherence between the European Commission's call for sustainable investment in education and training and the call for optimisation measures, which in some cases damage such an investment. Public investment in lifelong, and particularly adult, learning needs to be increased in every Member State.
- 1.10 The EESC reiterates its call for a greater focus on social investment *inter alia* in education, training and LLL. The EESC suggests discussing whether the "golden rule", i.e. on **excluding future-oriented public investments from the calculation of net public deficits under the European Monetary Union's fiscal rules**, could also be applied to social investment supported by the EU Structural Funds.
- 1.11 The EESC calls on future EU presidencies and the European Commission to continue to enhance cooperation among decision-makers at the highest level following the initiative of the **joint Council meeting of the EU's finance and education ministers**, to discuss how to ensure sustainable public funding for education and training, in particular for adult learning. There is also a need to engage with ministers of employment and social affairs. Such cooperation should also take place at national level.
- 1.12 The EESC calls on the Member States to ensure effective support for the employed and unemployed people who face difficulties in accessing quality and inclusive adult education and training by ensuring **targeted funding for those in need**, such as the unemployed, the non-standard workers, the low-skilled, people with disabilities, older people and people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups, while taking into account the gender dimension.
- 1.13 The EESC suggests that measures such as setting indicators relating to public and private investment in vocational education and training (VET), and the access of workers to paid leave for training purposes should be considered in line with **Employment Guideline 6: Enhancing labour supply and skills**<sup>6</sup> which calls on the Member States to seek to ensure the transfer of

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<sup>6</sup> [OJ C 332, 8.10.2015, p. 68.](#)

training entitlements during professional transitions. This should enable everyone to anticipate and better adapt to labour market needs.

- 1.14 The EESC believes that Member States should support the public sector, as well as non-profit education providers and civil society organisations to sustain funding for the provision of good quality inclusive and more accessible lifelong learning. **The high quality of education and training provision** should be ensured through high-quality assurance mechanisms supported for example by EQAVET and other tools.
- 1.15 The EESC suggests that in order to ensure effective investment in upskilling and reskilling of workers in companies, **further data is needed on investment by companies and financial support by governments. The own contributions of workers, trade unions and other stakeholders** should be properly analysed and feed into policy discussions, with focus on investment in different skills.
- 1.16 The EESC believes that the **democratic governance of LLL policy development and implementation**, including effective social dialogue and consultation with organised civil society, makes investment more effective in terms of achieving policy aims.
- 1.17 The EESC encourages Member States to make the best **use of the opportunities provided by the available EU funds**, which should also be supported by national resources. The forthcoming MFF should in any event counter the limitation of budgetary possibilities for LLL at Member State and EU level. The programmes themselves should be **more inclusive, simpler and more manageable for smaller beneficiaries and smaller projects**.
- 1.18 The EESC points out that it is important to regularly review the effectiveness of **financial and non-financial support measures in reaching specific groups of adults and efficiency in the use of resources**. Robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements need to be in place. The results of evaluations should feed into and inform policymaking in relation to LLL.
- 1.19 The EESC believes that there is a need for financing mechanisms which **mobilise national resources and involve adequate sharing of costs** between public authorities and private entities as well as, individuals and other relevant stakeholders (e.g. social partners, training providers, NGOs).
- 1.20 The EESC calls for a **more nuanced understanding of learning environments' needs to be integrated into education, training and LLL policies**, guided by the overarching principle of supporting learners' individual and unique potential. This means recognising, including through **sustained investment, the value of learning environments beyond formal education** as dynamic hubs of competence development - from which the latter can also draw expertise in adopting more inclusive and innovative approaches to meeting learners' needs.
- 1.21 In order for LLL to be successful, the EESC appeals to all EU and national decision-makers to address the following challenges for LLL environments and to financially support solutions to these issues, in line with the scope of their responsibilities:

- 1.21.1 design and implement long-term strategies for fostering collaborations between formal, non-formal and informal learning providers from a learner-centred perspective;
- 1.21.2 ensure that learners can take an active role in their learning pathways by designing these primarily around their needs;
- 1.21.3 support learners of all ages and backgrounds in accessing, combining and moving between different forms of learning, in line with their personal needs and aptitudes;
- 1.21.4 treat the validation of non-formal and informal learning (as stipulated in the Council Recommendation on Validation<sup>7</sup>) as an urgent priority;
- 1.21.5 enhance the provision of lifelong learning opportunities at local level by making use of existing community and education infrastructures.

## 2. General background

- 2.1 As defined by the Council<sup>8</sup>, lifelong learning covers learning from early childhood education and care to post-retirement, including the entire spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences from a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. LLL considers each individual as the subject of learning and enables all people to acquire the relevant knowledge to take part as active citizens in the knowledge society and the labour market, facilitating free mobility for European citizens. **In this opinion, the focus is put on sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour.**
- 2.2 Learning happens everywhere and constantly, actively and passively, in formal, informal and non-formal settings. Therefore, **a more nuanced understanding of learning environments needs to be integrated into education, training and LLL policies**, guided by the overarching principle of supporting learners' individual and unique potential. Both "life-wide" and "lifelong" education should be supported by sustainable public funding and there should also be a **special focus on older generations**, with resources for providing means that are adapted to their ways of learning. The EESC therefore reiterates<sup>9</sup> that funding at both EU and national level must, among other things, invest in inclusive, high-quality education and training, which should be accessible and affordable for all and geared towards current and future labour market needs. Returns from adult learning can be assessed as being as high as those from initial education and training and even higher education<sup>10</sup>.
- 2.3 The impact of **global trends, such as economic, technological, environmental, social and industrial shifts in line with the digital revolution, is huge** - from the economy, innovation,

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<sup>7</sup> [Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) and [OJ C 13, 15.1.2016, p. 49](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Council conclusions](#) on The key role of lifelong learning policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth.

<sup>9</sup> [OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 165](#).

<sup>10</sup> [Report](#) on European Agenda for Adult Learning.

science and education to health, sustainability and governance - and is rapidly transforming the world of work and the skills profiles of many occupations. The pace of change necessitates continuous skilling, reskilling and upskilling for all citizens throughout their lives, focusing in particular on providing effective support to workers and the unemployed, while ensuring sustainable financing by public authorities, companies, through individual training accounts and other tools.

- 2.4 At the same time, the disruptive nature of these changes is making the task of predicting future skills needs ever more challenging. Skills supply is also evolving but it takes time to adapt to emerging skills needs. Even though employers underline the importance of STEM, digital skills and VET, there is now also a shift towards soft/transversal skills<sup>11</sup>, that enable people to adapt to working environments and different life situations<sup>12</sup>. These skills are usually developed in organisations offering non-formal education (youth organisations etc.) and sustainable financial support to these providers is essential.
- 2.5 Moreover, it is important to **invest now in strategic development of new training programs**. They are key policy tools to respond to skill needs and gaps, and investment in them can take some time to show results, particularly for programmes at higher levels and of longer duration. In order to inform the education and training system far enough ahead, the **systematic anticipation of skills needs is essential** to enable strategic responses and prevent skills mismatches<sup>13</sup>.
- 2.6 The situation with the recent COVID-19 pandemic across the world has shown that learning can adapt quickly to changes in circumstances, if necessary. Learners develop a variety of new approaches, such as independent or project learning, become more curious and enhance their IT skills to engage in remote learning. A number of digital platforms are being used, provided free of charge. Essential transversal skills are helping both learners and teachers adapt to this change. When life returns to "normal", society should draw lessons from this experience and continue to develop these approaches and skills, investing in them sufficiently, in order to enable every learner, whatever their social situation, to get involved and benefit from them.

### 3. **Political context**

- 3.1 The **Commission Communication on "A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions"**<sup>14</sup> highlights that skills are key for the future. Skills allow people to reap the benefits from a rapidly changing pace of workplace. Half of the current workforce will need to update their skills within the next five years, and the digital and green transitions will require new sets of skills. VET, along with apprenticeships can foster the employability of young people and adults alike and meet the changing needs of businesses.

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the World Economic Forum published a [report](#) (2015) that focused on the pressing issue of the 21st-century skills gap and ways to address it through technology, where it highlights the need for competencies (such as critical thinking and collaboration) and character qualities (such as curiosity, initiative and leadership) besides traditionally mentioned foundational literacies.

<sup>12</sup> Opinion [OJ C 14, 15.1.2020, p. 46](#) and [OJ C 237, 6.7.2018, p. 8](#)

<sup>13</sup> World Economic Forum [report](#) - New Vision for Education: Unlocking the Potential of Technology.

<sup>14</sup> [COM\(2020\) 14 final](#)

- 3.2 The EESC recalls that the right to education was enshrined in UNESCO's constitution (1945) under the heading "education for all", and lifelong learning (LLL) has received increasing attention in the context of **the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, featuring prominently in SDG4 on education. SDG4 is envisaged not only as a way to enhance skillsets and boost the economy, but also to further the aims of **cultural diversity and peace**. However, the targets of the SDGs which define the role of LLL do not include any benchmarks in terms of financing<sup>15</sup>.
- 3.3 The EESC emphasises the need to implement the first and fourth principles of **the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)**, by making quality and inclusive education, training and LLL a right for all in Europe and to support the implementation of these principles with sustainable public funding agreed with the social partners and organised civil society. This right needs to become a reality to ensure that all adults **have equal access to quality and inclusive education and training both within workplaces and beyond**. Effective support should be provided to workers of any skills level and in any size of company, regardless of the geographical area they work in.
- 3.4 The EESC stresses that EPSR rights and principles, including the right to quality and inclusive education, training and LLL at the national level, need to be implemented with adequate public investment<sup>16</sup>. Budgetary resources are, however, in some cases still subject to the **strict budgetary constraints** of the internal market and to the fiscal rules set by the **Stability and Growth Pact** and it remains a challenge for governments to find the necessary public resources to achieve social re-balancing. The conflict between the binding **budgetary rules and a set of rights and principles** without the resources to enforce them remains unresolved.
- 3.5 **The ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work report "Work for a Brighter Future"**<sup>17</sup> points out that establishing effective lifelong learning opportunities for all is a joint responsibility, requiring the active engagement and support of governments, employers and workers as well as educational institutions. Governments, in cooperation with social partners need to broaden and reconfigure skills development policies, employment services and training systems to provide workers with the time and financial support they need to learn. The report proposes establishing a system of learning entitlement through a reconfigured "employment insurance" system or "social fund", and introducing "individual learning accounts" that would allow workers to take paid time off to engage in training.
- 3.6 The EESC welcomes the important initiative of the Finnish Presidency of the Council, which organised the first-ever **joint Council meeting between the EU's finance and education ministers**, to discuss the importance of public funding for education and training. The Committee calls on future EU presidencies and the European Commission to continue this initiative to enhance cooperation among decision-makers at the highest level. There is also a

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<sup>15</sup> European association for the education of adults (EAEA) background [paper](#) on Adult education and sustainability.

<sup>16</sup> [OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 1.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Global Commission on the Future of Work [report](#) on Work for a brighter future.



need to engage with ministers of employment and social affairs. The EESC would then like to see this kind of cooperation implemented at national level.

- 3.7 The EESC supports the focus of **the mission letter of Commissioner Nicolas Schmit**<sup>18</sup> on implementing and updating the Skills agenda, identifying and filling skills shortages and supporting reskilling as part of the just transition. Exploring the idea of proposing **individual learning accounts** is one of the possible ways that could lead to enabling people of working age to accumulate training entitlements and use them for quality-assured training. The EESC calls on the Member States to ensure tripartite cooperation and shared responsibility on the allocation of available public resources to employees and workers.
- 3.8 The EESC is pleased to note that the **Council Conclusions on "The key role of LLL policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth"**<sup>19</sup>, adopted on 8 November 2019, call on the Commission to "update the efficiency, scale and target groups of current LLL policies in order to better respond to learning needs arising from changes in society and the world of work, including by further **developing the European Education Area**<sup>20</sup>, by reflecting LLL in the future strategic framework for cooperation in education and training and by using the opportunities provided by Erasmus+, the ESF and other relevant Union instruments".

#### 4. State of play

- 4.1 While the data on overall investment in LLL is lacking, evidence<sup>21</sup> suggests that only around 0.1 to 0.2% of GDP accounts for public expenditure on adult education. The **total expenditure on adult education**, including other financial sources such as funding through employers, learners' fees, varies between 1.1 and less than 0.6% of GDP. At the same time, Cedefop's latest estimates suggest that there are 128 million adults in the EU-28+ with potential for upskilling and reskilling, representing 46% of the adult population of this area<sup>22</sup>. Only 11.1% of adults are involved in adult learning, while the European Union set itself the target of achieving 15% by 2020, on which it failed to deliver.
- 4.2 The **Lisbon European Council conclusions**<sup>23</sup> set clear aims for all concerned to increase the annual *per capita* investment in human resources, while the **Employment Guidelines** (13, 14 and 16)<sup>24</sup> call on Member States to set corresponding targets. The EESC welcomes the fact that the **European Commission's 2019 Country Reports**<sup>25</sup> within the European Semester

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18 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit_en.pdf).

19 [OJ C 389, 18.11.2019, p. 12](#)

20 [European Education Area](#)

21 European Commission [Report](#) - Developing the adult learning sector.

22 [Cedefop](#)

23 Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000 - Presidency [Conclusions](#)

24 [Employment guidelines](#)

25 [Country reports](#)

**process** call for increased investment in education and training in 16 countries<sup>26</sup> and in skills in 24 countries<sup>27</sup>, to counterbalance a decade of budget cuts and underfunding of education systems, with their well-documented detrimental effects on quality education, education personnel and infrastructure<sup>28</sup>.

4.3 The EESC notes that there is a clear lack of coherence between the European Commission's call for sustainable investment in growth-friendly areas, such as all sectors of education, and the call for optimisation measures, which damage them. A Commission's communication on the main findings from the Country Reports<sup>29</sup> of the **European Semester in 2019** depicts a favourable economic scenario, with public finances improving in every Member State. Nevertheless, the communication also warns of global uncertainty and calls on the Member States to **continue boosting productivity**, improving the resilience of their economies and ensuring that economic growth benefits all citizens.

## 5. General comments

5.1 Member States must offer training opportunities to all - **unemployed people and wage-earners, women and men**. To this end, measures such as setting indicators relating to public and private investment in VET and schemes allowing workers to take paid leave for training purposes should be considered and required in **Employment Guideline 6: Enhancing labour supply and skills**<sup>30</sup>. In this connection, the EESC has already pointed out the need to safeguard decent living conditions during training. **EU measures** should be considered and examined with a view to making the good practice instruments used in some EU Member States, such as grants, loans, collective agreements on paid training leave or other provisions standard practice in the other Member States<sup>31</sup>.

5.2 **Social partners and civil society organisations also have a leading role to play** in governance of the education and training system, including anticipating and delivering skills, and the social partners' shared responsibility at company level is essential in terms both of investing in the forward-looking education and training of their employed workforce and also of bearing the necessary retraining costs of any workers they have made redundant. The most vulnerable of these are older people.

5.3 Discussions about an **EU proposal for individual learning accounts (ILAs)** are at a very early stage, but there are a number of considerations that should be further elaborated if such a proposal is to be introduced, for example, whether workers' training is defined by law and/or collective agreement, which must be respected in order to ensure that employers and workers are able to shape the content, venue and time/period of the training. This is therefore a national

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<sup>26</sup> for BG, HR, CZ, EE, FI, DE, GR, IE, IT, LV, LU, PL, RO, SK, ES, and UK.

<sup>27</sup> for AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, GR, HU, IT, LV, LU, MT, NL, PL, RO, SK, SI, ES, SE, and UK.

<sup>28</sup> for BG, EE, GR, IT, PT, RO, and SE.

<sup>29</sup> [COM\(2019\) 500 final](#)

<sup>30</sup> [OJ C 332, 8.10.2015, p. 68.](#)

<sup>31</sup> [OJ C 237, 6.7.2018](#), [OJ C 237, 6.7.2018](#), [OJ C 14, 15.1.2020, p. 60.](#)

competence, and recommendations to the Member States concerning how ILAs should be funded and who should receive the financial support (companies, training institutions, public employment services or workers) must be defined via social dialogue respecting collective agreements and national legislation. It is important that these reflections pay attention to the diversity of national systems and approaches and that the social partners play an important role.

- 5.4 The EESC reiterates its call for a greater focus on **social investment *inter alia* in education, training and LLL**. The EESC has already called for consideration of the principle of the "golden rule", i.e. **excluding future-oriented public investments from the calculation of net public deficits under the EMU's fiscal rules**<sup>32</sup>. The EESC suggests discussing whether the "golden rule" could also be applied to social investment supported by the EU Structural Funds<sup>33</sup>.
- 5.5 The **combination of flexible, adapted learning and personalised support, starting with lifelong career guidance**, also helps to get the inactive and long-term unemployed into work, leading to social and economic gains, as well as long-term welfare savings. An optimal mix of components or features of the approach can create the conditions for consolidating, developing, and implementing the **Council Recommendation on upskilling pathways**<sup>34</sup> in a sustainable way, despite the fact that target groups, skills needs and governments change over time. Training provision must be designed in a way that fosters and supports mobility between and within sectors. Securing these transitions benefits workers' employability and employers' capacity to attract new recruits.
- 5.6 The EESC believes that Member States should support the public sector, as well as non-profit education providers and civil society organisations to sustain funding for **the provision of high-quality lifelong learning opportunities, which should be more accessible**. The high quality of training provision should be ensured through good quality assurance.
- 5.7 Improving investment in adult learning and employee training is linked to a large extent to appropriate **research input** into design, reform, and implementing LLL policies and systems. In order to ensure effective investment in upskilling and reskilling of workers in companies, **further data is needed on investment by companies and financial support by governments**. **The own contributions of workers, trade unions and other stakeholders** should be properly analysed and feed into policy discussions, with a focus on investment in training different skills (professional, company-related, key competences, basic skills, etc.) for workers of different skills levels, both women and men, training within companies and outside, provision by other providers, etc.
- 5.8 Adult education, due to its wide range and vast number of different providers, lacks coordination at both Member State and European level. An integrated approach that ties together multiple policy domains and stakeholders, with special focus on **democratic governance of LLL policy development and implementation**, including **effective social**

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<sup>32</sup> [OJ C 177, 18.5.2016, p. 35](#), [OJ C 268, 14.8.2015, p. 27](#)

<sup>33</sup> [OJ C 226, 16.7.2014, p. 21](#).

<sup>34</sup> [Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on "Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults"](#)

**dialogue with social partners and consultation with civil society**, may improve policy effectiveness of investment, thereby increasing the chances that the highly diverse potential target groups will be reached and that the needs of vulnerable individuals will be addressed.

5.9 In order for the LLL to be successful, the EESC appeals to all EU and national decision-makers to address the following challenges for LLL environments and to financially support solutions to these issues, in line with the scope of their responsibilities:

5.9.1 design and implement long-term strategies for fostering collaborations between formal, non-formal and informal learning providers in order to support learners' learning and training needs; such strategies should be co-created with and encompass support for their representative associations at regional, national and European level in order to be sustainable;

5.9.2 ensure that learners can take an active role in their learning pathways by designing these primarily around their needs, enabling them to become active creators rather than passive consumers of knowledge and innovation;

5.9.3 support learners of all ages and backgrounds in accessing, combining and moving between different forms of learning, in line with their personal needs and aptitudes, through more flexible education and training systems and the provision of high-quality lifelong guidance;

5.9.4 treat the validation of non-formal and informal learning (as stipulated in the Council Recommendation on Validation<sup>35</sup>) as an urgent priority in light of its potential to boost the visibility of all skills, competences and knowledge that may support meaningful participation in society and the labour market, particularly for vulnerable groups<sup>36</sup>;

5.9.5 enhance the provision of lifelong learning opportunities at local level by making use of existing community and education infrastructure to create multifunctional learning spaces open to all; such "Community Lifelong Learning Centres" already exist in various forms across the Member States but should become a mainstream concept for policy-making.

## 6. **Specific comments on European and national funding sources and policies needed to ensure sustainable funding**<sup>37</sup>

### 6.1 **On EU sources of funding**

6.1.1 The European Commission in its 2021-2027 Multi-financial Framework announced several ways to improve the EU Investment Plan by introducing in the **InvestEU framework** the creation of a window dedicated to Social Investment and Skills. This demonstrates a commitment to earmarking social investment and creating the right instruments to allow it to happen.

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<sup>35</sup> [Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#)

<sup>36</sup> [OJ C 13.15.1.2016, p. 49](#)

<sup>37</sup> See also [‘Cedefop analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways for adults’](#).

6.1.2 The Commission and the Member States should use the **opportunities provided by the EU funds** (such as the ESF, Erasmus+, EFSI , and other relevant EU instruments) and make the best use of the available EU financial resources. The upcoming MFF should in any event counter the limitation of budgetary possibilities for LLL at Member State and EU level<sup>38</sup>. However, while EU funds can play an important role in the development of skills/LLL, over-reliance on EU funds may raise concerns about funding sustainability as EU funding is allocated to projects and is temporary by nature.

6.1.3 In order to ensure sustainable national investment in LLL and AL, the European Semester process plays an essential role in highlighting the necessary focus on funding. For national/regional LLL policies to be effectively implemented, an **adequate level of funding needs to be secured**. More sustainability and continuity of funding is key in order to ensure the sustainability of the work of adult education and training provision and the ability of LLL providers to innovate and develop within the field.

## 6.2 On policies supporting proper distribution of funding

6.2.1 Developing an evaluation culture is important. Various factors can contribute to it, such as a **political commitment to evidence-based policymaking (and accountability)**, legal requirements for evaluation, evaluation requirements of European funding and training and education of evaluators to ensure evaluation throughout the policy cycle.

6.2.2 It is important to regularly review the effectiveness of financial and non-financial support measures in reaching target groups of adults and efficiency in the use of resources. **Robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements need to be in place**. The results of evaluations should feed into and inform policymaking in relation to LLL. Based on robust evidence, evaluations can suggest the need to modify (or discontinue) existing measures and/or introduce new ones. They can also **identify effective practices which could be expanded through further or more sustained funding**. Social partners should be involved in monitoring and evaluation of the systems.

6.2.3 There is a need for financing mechanisms which mobilise national resources and involve **adequate sharing of costs between public authorities, employers, individuals and other relevant stakeholders** (e.g. social partners, training providers, NGOs). As set out in Cedefop's database on financing adult learning<sup>39</sup>, there are various financing mechanisms, targeted at individuals and companies/employers and aimed at increasing participation and private investment in education and training. These possibilities have to be properly coordinated by public authorities, while in the case of sectoral training funds it is mainly the social partners that take a coordinating role. The financial instruments for individuals include, for example, individual learning accounts (ILA)/vouchers, (low cost) loans and paid training leave. The financial support for companies might be through training funds (based on company levies), tax-incentives, or grants (funded from general taxation). These kinds of cost-sharing instruments are

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<sup>38</sup> In its opinion [OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 194](#), the EESC called for the Erasmus+ programme's budget to be tripled.

<sup>39</sup> [Cedefop database](#)

also a way of ensuring joint responsibility for developing/implementing LLL policies and investing in skills.

- 6.2.4 **Social dialogue and collective agreements, in particular at sectoral level**, play an important role in the governance of training systems and in creating training opportunities and improving the relevance and provision of employee training. This involves social partners working together to foster transition and career paths between sectors. Training funds have been established in several Member States and can play an important role<sup>40</sup>.
- 6.2.5 Financing instruments might be more effective when **combined with suitable non-financial support measures**. The instruments need to be carefully designed to target effectively the specific/priority vulnerable groups (such as the low-skilled, older unemployed, employees of SMEs). When designing a financing instrument, it is also important to consider its complementarity and synergy with other existing instruments.
- 6.2.5.1 Non-financial measures for individuals also involve the measures generally provided as part of **career guidance or lifelong guidance services and validation opportunities**. These services should also inform learners about the financial support for adult learning available to them and how to access it.
- 6.2.5.2 For companies, non-financial support may be offered through: information and advice in relation to funding opportunities, administrative support in applying for funding, identifying training needs and developing training plans through consulting services, promoting partnerships or company networks (among SMEs or including SMEs) to pool resources and address insufficient training capacity.
- 6.2.6 Any administrative burden for applicants, recipients of funding and the entities managing the funds should be minimised, while proper design/appropriate targeting and effective monitoring of the financing instrument should ensure that deadweight and/or substitution effects are avoided.

Brussels, 7 May 2020

Luca JAHIER

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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<sup>40</sup> European social partners [Report](#) "Promoting social partnership in employee training"