

Skills and education for Europe's competitiveness

Response to the European Commission's Communication on the Union of Skills

April 2025

The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the European Commission's [Communication on the Union of Skills](#), which includes the [STEM Education Strategic Plan](#) and the [Basic Skills Action Plan](#), published on 5 March 2025. This is a timely call for more and better investment in citizens' skills and competencies, as well as dialogue and collaboration involving all stakeholders relevant to Europe's skills and education needs.

Many of the measures that the Communication on the Union of Skills and the STEM Education Strategic Plan propose are sound and necessary. Nonetheless, given the urgency and scale of Europe's present and future skills and education needs, Europe needs a more strategic and enduring approach to enhance its lifelong and continued learning capacities. While the higher education sector's contribution in this area has significantly improved in recent years, its full potential is yet to be fulfilled.

To unlock this potential, the European Commission should consider launching a flagship initiative for lifelong learning. This would align with Europe's economic and societal needs and ongoing transformations, be attractive for European and international talent and send a strong, positive signal towards the EU's global partners and competitors.

In addition, the emphasis that the Communication puts on inclusion, also by referencing related commitments under the Bologna Process, is particularly fitting. Europe's competitiveness is not only a matter of economic strength and resilience, it is also one of democratic participation and social cohesion, which is critical in a time when democratic backsliding has become a growing concern.

Through this paper, EUA offers its proactive contribution to the Union of Skills, through the governance approach proposed in the Communication, and in line with the Association's own recent proposal regarding the EU's Competitiveness Compass for a '[A research, education and innovation partnership for Europe's competitiveness](#)'.

Specifically, EUA calls for the European Union to:

► LEVERAGE THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Europe's skills question is urgent and substantial, with significant potential consequences for economies and societies.

Europe's competitiveness depends equally upon a skilled workforce and well-educated and active citizens. The Communication on the Union of Skills is timely, as Europe needs to step up to innovate and transform its economies, all the while strengthening democracy and social cohesion.

The Union of Skills is a major opportunity for universities. While the European Commission put strong attention on strengthening higher education institutions and their multiple missions during the

2019-2024 mandate, the contribution of education, research and innovation is yet to be built into wider European transformation and innovation agendas. This will be of crucial importance for the implementation and success of both the Union of Skills and the Competitiveness Compass.

This is also an opportunity to further enhance Europe as the most connected higher education area in the world, as well as a model that empowers continuous learning and enhancement, while cherishing and preserving diversity within national, economic, societal and cultural contexts. Nowhere else in the world is higher education and research capacity distributed among as many different types of higher education institutions, within a landscape of diverse innovation ecosystems and in modes of transnational cooperation that are unparalleled. This is a competitive strength, that needs to be embraced and incentivised through EU policies. Therefore, to ensure a critical mass and diversity of missions and approaches, the Union of Skills and the STEM Education Strategic Plan need to appeal to the entire higher education sector, including, but not limited to, the European Universities alliances, to which both documents frequently refer.

The Commission's intention to involve stakeholder representatives in the governance of the Union of Skills is highly welcome. EUA, as the voice of Europe's universities, is ready to contribute. Skills, education and employment are complex matters, and hence need diverse perspectives. EUA also looks forward to a dedicated recommendation on education and skills within the Social Convergence Framework in the European Semester, as this will foster the connection with social and economic growth in individual member states, with due respect for the principle of subsidiarity and the division of competences for education.

► ADDRESS ALL DISCIPLINES AND FIELDS

Due to demographic change and other factors, Europe is facing labour shortages in a wide range of areas. This will impact the economy, but also society. Therefore, to address Europe's skills needs, the Union of Skills should count on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as well as other professional and academic disciplines.

While a skills-oriented perspective is important from the perspective of economic and industrial competitiveness, embracing STEM disciplines in education is not enough. In order to achieve long-term competitiveness and broad societal progress, skills development must be complemented by advances in research – including fundamental and interdisciplinary research.

Moreover, the EU should refrain from overly prescriptive measures in education, as higher education institutions have a responsibility to develop long-term capacity for learners. This includes how learners' acquire and update their knowledge and competencies, including critical thinking, analytical skills, science-driven inquiry and research skills, including through research and professional practice.

While the Communication on the Union of Skills contains many welcome proposals, the measures that it contains should not be limited to STEM disciplines. Moreover, STEM disciplines are themselves diverse and may entail very different skills needs and employment prospects in different parts of Europe. There is no clear evidence of shortages in all STEM disciplines, and predictions about future STEM skills need require further reflection.

For example, the STEM Education Strategic Plan highlights that in 2022 there was already a shortfall of 1.2 million medical professionals across Europe but it provides no suggestions on how this should be addressed. Not least, a broader scope is necessary to continue [longstanding efforts to promote inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinarity, which are of crucial importance for research, education and innovation.](#)

One example of an area where skills policies should be broadened beyond STEM disciplines is found in proposed measures to make teaching professions more attractive.

Similarly, the promotion of accessible and inclusive education needs to go beyond enhancing the participation of disadvantaged students in STEM. Indeed, this aligns with the Communication's overall commitment to inclusion, and the reference it makes to related commitments under the Bologna Process. Nonetheless, although the underrepresentation of women in STEM is already addressed in many national and institutional contexts, it would benefit from further European support.

In addition, enhancing the quality of education and pedagogical staff training is commonly addressed in transdisciplinary approaches. Here, establishing disciplinary approaches for pedagogical enhancement and peer-learning – focused not on STEM, but on specific STEM disciplines – would provide added value. Yet, here again, such an approach should also be considered for other disciplines.

A lack of basic skills could prevent a larger segment of school graduates from entering and succeeding in higher education in STEM, as well as other fields. Beyond existing [OECD Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#) data, the European Commission should consider conducting a study, possibly in the context of the [EUROSTUDENT](#) and [EUROGRADUATE](#) projects, to analyse challenges related to entry and drop-out, exploring the lack of basic skills and other causes.

In this regard, the proposal to develop thematic European Skills Academies also requires further reflection. This carries the risk of compartmentalising and siloing skills initiatives, rather than uniting and synergising efforts, in times of scarcer funding. Instead, to examine these topics and challenges, EUA recommends enhancing existing clusters and building new ones through consortia of established education and training institutions and other relevant partners. This could help to forge collaboration in research, education and training, professional practice and employment.

► PLACE A FLAGSHIP LIFELONG LEARNING INITIATIVE AT THE CENTRE

The Union of Skills, in its present form, does not provide a framework to enable broader and more systematic European collaboration, including member states and education providers, to address Europe's skills needs. In addition, the concrete measures that it proposes risk getting lost if they are not embedded within a holistic and strategic approach to enhancing Europe's lifelong and continuous learning capacities.

Therefore, the EU should place a flagship initiative for lifelong learning at the centre of the Union of Skills. This is needed to enhance policy design and implementation, also at national and institutional level, and enable dialogue and collaboration both across the higher education sector and with other stakeholders. By establishing this initiative, the European Commission can provide truly added value in terms of coordination and support in collaboration with member states, education providers and social partners.

Lifelong learning is more important than ever, given the declining and ageing workforce and job and skills redundancy. This impetus is also due to the green and digital transitions, as well as the prevalence of artificial intelligence, which require people, including recent migrants, to re- and upskill, reorient and change careers. The flagship initiative could address STEM disciplines that are in growing demand, as well as all other areas where change and enhancement is needed, including health care and education.

Similarly to how the European Universities Initiative addresses obstacles to transnational interuniversity cooperation, a European flagship initiative will contribute to raising awareness of lifelong learning, but also to enhancing institutional and national frameworks, eliminating obstacles and identifying concrete goals for collaborative and coordinated action. It should also account for national and regional diversity, thereby turning this strength into a pillar of the EU's approach to competitiveness and allowing for a more prompt response to the skills needs of learners and labour markets. This will enhance the sustainability and resilience of Europe's economies and societies, in particular in regions that are underserved and disadvantaged. Here, it is essential to not only react to existing skills gaps, but to systematically establish education and training capacities that proactively address changes in the workforce. Moreover, a strength-based, future-oriented approach that focuses on capacity building for an innovation-driven workforce will significantly boost the impact of the initiative.

Specifically from a university perspective, the Union of Skills creates significant potential to enhance capacity for the provision of continued education and to better respond to a diverse range of learners. A flagship lifelong learning initiative could enable more transnational exchange and collaboration, through micro-credentials and other flexible learning approaches. It would identify and address national and institutional level obstacles related to regulation, funding models, quality assurance and recognition of skills (as anticipated under the Skills Portability Initiative), which are currently compartmentalised in individual institutions and member states. This will result in a larger and more visible European lifelong learning offer, with major benefits for the European workforce, and also strengthen lifelong learning and continued professional development provision as a higher education mission.

In addition, this initiative would stimulate the enhancement of degree-based education and curricula, in terms of content (informed by professional practice, labour market needs), method and provision (more problem-based, more flexible and better use of digital tools and artificial intelligence). It would enable and promote trans- and multi-disciplinarity and cross-sectoral approaches, shorten the distance from the cutting-edge research lab to the classroom and feed research with input from educational and professional practice. Furthermore, it would contribute to efforts to foster diverse academic careers and boost skills portability. Overall, it would contribute to education, research and innovation that is better connected to the needs of companies.

► INVEST IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Investment in education and research must be a priority of the Union of Skills and Competitiveness Compass, as they contribute to competitiveness, including economic development and innovation. It is imperative that funders join efforts to build an ecosystem conducive to efficiency, so that the value of investment can be maximised in high quality skills, education and research outputs.

However, in many European countries, universities face rising costs while public funding to the sector is not growing sufficiently to enable them to shoulder increasingly diverse missions and policy objectives. These pressures, combined with demographic shifts and major geopolitical uncertainty, have placed the financial sustainability of universities under significant strain. This brings considerable risks to their capacity to respond promptly and adequately to evolving societal and labour market needs.

Failure to step up investment risks undermining universities' ability to fulfil their core missions in education, research and societal engagement, which all contribute to the wider objectives of the Union of Skills. National public authorities, the European Union and private partners can and must support universities' efforts in this area.

A European-level instrument, such as a 'Skills Fund', aimed at leveraging investment from both public and private funders, could provide targeted support through grants, and potentially study loans on agreed priorities, to be awarded under thematic calls.

Such an instrument would underline the importance of skills and education, and raise awareness. It would also allow different parties, including industry, to demonstrate their commitment and interest towards Europe-wide action, at times when this is urgently needed.