

## The European year of skills 2023: skills for now and in the future?

Ulrik Brandi , Steven Hodge , Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert , Elizabeth Knight   
and Marcella Milana 

Lifelong education and learning has remained one of the highest prioritised topics for countries, political bodies, and enterprises for several decades while also representing a dynamic and vibrant research field and community. Within the context of lifelong education and learning policy, practice, and research, the notion of ‘skills’ has emerged as a crucial approach and theme that has gathered significant attention in Europe and beyond.

The emphasis on skills has been particularly pronounced within the European Union (EU) since the Lisbon Strategy (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). The EU’s focus on skills development has been reinforced by the Europe 2020 aim and a general, more robust push on skills was observed in the European Social Pillars encompassing skills indicators and benchmarks (European Commission, 2018).

Building on the aforementioned statements, it is noteworthy that on 7 March 2023, a political agreement was reached by the European Parliament and Member States on the European Year of Skills 2023 (European Commission, 2023). The political agreement was signalled by President Ursula von der Leyen in the 2022 State of the Union address highlighting the need for the EU to promote and invest in continuous upskilling and reskilling of all working-age adults (European Commission, 2022a).

We welcome the renewed policy promotion and investment in lifelong education and learning, with its focus on skills and skills development, as evidenced by this European Year of Skills 2023. The hope is that this renewed interest will extend beyond the European Year of Skills in 2023 and constructively address global challenges such as skills gaps, staff shortages, and talent migration. We, however, also advocate for lifelong education and learning to be integrated. Further, to be permanent components of any proactive policy aimed at development, value creation, and adaptation to changes on all levels, rather than being done reactively over a short period in response to changes resulting in narrow solutions.

Consequently, it is essential to ensure that skills and skills development opportunities are approached in an expansive way and that ‘skills’ are more than a matter of immediate job and enterprise productivity improvement alone. In this way, skills in the context of lifelong education and learning research should be seen as a question of the whole person and their career over the long term, as well as addressing societal inequality and disadvantage. This editorial examines the four primary policy levers outlined in the political agreement on the European Year of Skills 2023, drawing on existing research in the field of lifelong education and learning.

The proposal for a European Year of Skills 2023, like the political agreement and the site dedicated to disseminating objectives, background, and skills development opportunities in an EU context, underlines the known explanations and logics for why lifelong education and learning is once again on the top of the EU agenda (European Commission, 2022b). For instance, the green and digital transitions as well as demographic changes resulting in labour mismatches, skills gaps, and shortage of staff highlight the need for solutions to meet the demands of the labour market (ibid.). The strategic areas for the European Year of Skills 2023 are particularly focused on

addressing the shortage of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) workforce noticed by education and on attracting and better deploying skills and talent via migration to address staff shortage in occupations lacking these resources.

The focus on skills and skills development has occupied a prominent place in research, academic debate, practice and policy recommendations of international studies into lifelong education and learning. Over the years, analysis and critical discussion on the topic of lifelong education and learning have predominantly centred on the continuous acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout an individual life. In this context, skills and skills development have come to refer to the specific process of enhancing or improving adults' abilities or expertise in a particular area, related to adapting and performing specific workplace tasks and challenges (Olsen & Tikkanen, 2018; Zanazzi, 2018).

Research shows that engaging in lifelong education and learning activities provides adults with opportunities to develop skills in various areas and types, whether personal or professional, hard or soft skills (Gibb, 2014). However, access and opportunities to develop skills may vary among countries, professions, and adults of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Hovdhaugen & Opheim, 2018; Lee & Desjardins, 2019; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012). Developing skills help adults and workplaces stay relevant and valuable in their chosen fields by staying up to date with changes, such as new knowledge, technologies, and practices. This is one of the reasons for the renewed interest in and rhetoric of skills and skills development by organisations like the EU and other international and transnational bodies (Deloitte Insights, 2019; Eurofound, 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Lifelong education and learning have thus served as a lens for re-prioritising and re-interpreting many related phenomena, such as social cohesion (social capital), production and innovation (human capital), and general education and personal growth to cope with changes of all kinds (Holford et al., 2008; Webb et al., 2022). Historically, the coining of different labels has set in motion a bandwagon of lifelong education and learning policies and practices. This trend is now exemplified in full force in the European Year of Skills 2023.

The hope and aspiration is that this bandwagon will not move in circles but ahead, with all stakeholders being accountable for continuously achieving objectives and declared ideas on all levels. To ensure this happens, we, as members of a research community that study skills and skills development opportunities internationally, argue for the importance of drawing research-based knowledge and insights produced over the years in lifelong education and learning studies. This attention is needed to strengthen the realisation of adults and workplaces skills development opportunities provided, in relation to the *four* general policy levers proposed as solutions to the skills demands and challenges in the European Year of Skills 2023: increased investment in training and skills development; improved cooperation between relevant stakeholders; better skills-and-job match; and attracting talent.

*First*, the European Year of Skills 2023 underlines that more effective and inclusive investment into reskilling and upskilling of adults is needed to meet ongoing technological and socio-economic transformations. Yet, we know that adults do not realise opportunities of reskilling and upskilling equally (Lundvall & Rasmussen, 2016). Research has repeatedly shown that even though low-skilled adults might potentially profit from lifelong education and learning opportunities, they are less likely to seek out and pursue such opportunities (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018; Karger et al., 2022; Tuparevska et al., 2020; Weedon & Tett, 2013). Lifelong education and learning research have firmly established that lower levels of attainment within formal education predicts less favourable positions in work life and limited career perspectives and skills development opportunities – what has been termed the 'low-skill trap' (Burdett & Smith, 2002; Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013; Karger et al., 2022).

The 'low-skill trap' still represents a major challenge for lifelong education and learning practice, policy, and research. The European Year of Skills 2023 and beyond must address this challenge, as all adults need access to the workforce and research shows that low-skilled adults

are facing certain barriers for skills development investment to become effective. These barriers include institutional, organisational and workplace, and individual dimensions to explain differences in adults' realisation of skills development opportunities (Kalenda & Kočvarová, 2020; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017).

*Second*, improving skills development relevance by closely cooperating with all stakeholders in the ecosystem of lifelong education and learning is a sensible and coherent ambition. Interpreting this key message, the European Year of Skills 2023 seems, nonetheless, to align the theme of skills with human capital development and increased employability placing the responsibility solely on individual adults with such methods as by individual learning accounts, micro-credentials, and employability enhancement. The impact of a human capital-focused approach to lifelong education and learning has been ubiquitous in the sense that the political, and even some theoretical discourses, have been overtaken by an outlook onto the individual as an entrepreneur and as the central agent of change.

Within this framework, skills become synonymous with 'goods' that can be bought and sold by individual agents, reducing, as Hodge et al. (2018) termed it, educators to rent-seeking merchants and lifelong education and learning to a marketplace. However, as shown by Mikelatou and Arvanitis (2018), the need to widen our perspective beyond a human capital fuelled lifelong education and learning discourse has become urgent. The current context of complex and dynamic changes calls for collaborative solutions – and responsibilities – beyond those afforded by the goal of individual agency, or an uncritical conviction in human capital salvation. Thus, it is important to use knowledge-based understanding of adult learning to reinvent educational models, so they are practice-based, participant-engaging, and sustainable to strengthen the collaborative nature and concrete value of solutions as underlined by Edwards et al. (2002) in their influential theory of lifelong learning and later by e.g. Brown and Bimrose (2018). Solutions should not be for the stakeholders to identify needed skills for enterprises and institutions followed by putting the responsibility for skills acquisition on the shoulders of the individual's decision-making alone.

A better match between adult's skill sets and labour market opportunities is being underlined as a *third* general goal for the European Year of Skills 2023. This goal touches upon the pressing need for more diversified access to lifelong education and skills development opportunities, particularly for underrepresented groups such as women in STEM and young adults not in education, employment, or training (European Commission, 2022b). We agree that this theme is important – but also more complex than merely activating someone to do something – for the full employment of adults' skills in a rewarding sustainable and productive way. This challenge is tied to the theme of diversity in lifelong education and learning studies that goes beyond gender and age dimensions.

Diversity represents an essential consideration in lifelong education and learning, and it draws attention to the need to ensure that education is inclusive and accessible to all adult learners independent of e.g. backgrounds, cultures, and learning experiences. International approaches to lifelong education and learning have addressed diversity in various ways (Palumbo & Pandolfini, 2020; Thongmak, 2021), including more inclusive and diversity-sensitive strategies by institutions, workplaces, or education and training providers to incorporate a wide range of perspectives, themes, and materials in their educational and learning designs (Rambla et al., 2020). This is done to provide a broad range of experiences and perspectives for adult learners. Research has also shown that it is important that lifelong education institutions, workplaces and education and training providers focus on creating supportive learning environments that are explicitly respectful of diversity and promote social inclusion (Tuparevska et al., 2020). A theoretical reflection on diversity suggests that all stakeholders would benefit from an awareness of structural or cultural dimensions that may impede the alignment of adult learner's aspirations and skill levels with the skill needs of the labour market. In this way, matching and activating the 'right' skills throughout the workforce should also involve reflection by labour market stakeholders via how workplace learning systems and opportunities for skills development are afforded and activated in practice as suggested by Jarvis (2006) and Billett (2014).

The *fourth* ambition of the European Year of Skills 2023 is to address the shortage of skills faced by enterprises and institutions in the EU by promoting the migration of adults from non-EU countries. The theme of migration holds a prominent place in international lifelong education and learning research and practice. In a special issue on this topic (Volume 29, Issue 2), Guo (2010, p. 144) argued that due to ‘globalization several countries are becoming increasingly ethno-culturally diverse’. Yet, as evidenced by Guo’s (2010) and other contributions in that special issue, national lifelong education and learning initiatives often struggle to design coherent and supportive system that can integrate cultural differences and recognise competencies and skills acquired in different contexts.

As also emphasised in the European Year of Skills 2023, there is a need for momentum in validating and recognition of prior learning of immigrants (Diedrich, 2013). Recognition, however, reflects both the valuation of practice-based learned skills and competences as well as a system’s capacity to adapt to new modes of evaluation and validation, which currently still emphasise formal learning as well as professional know-how in informal settings (Diedrich, 2017; Guo & Shan, 2013; Villalba-garcía, 2021). As underlined by Webb et al. (2016), the recognition and adaption of learning systems to support mobility and integration of migrants and refugees competences and skills are needed but practice also varies in their concrete solutions. Thus, while this fourth policy lever is important, there is still a need to seek for better systems and practices about how to advance lifelong education and learning to support integration of skills via migration.

To summarise, we welcome the renewed policy promotion and investment in lifelong education and learning, with a special focus on skills and skills development, articulated in the European Year of Skills 2023. Today’s context for lifelong education and learning is characterised as one that is highly complex and dynamic emphasising the contemporary conditions for change needed towards skills development to benefit all in an expansive way. From simpler, delineated problem areas that, for example, require narrow and simple upskilling and reskilling, to a context that is multifaceted from the outset, where incremental adaptations, for instance via skills, are one part of any solution. We therefore urge careful consideration of how research shapes and informs lifelong education and learning objectives and practices as outlined above, as we continue to tackle the challenges of skills development in 2023 and beyond. Our editorial emphasises the criticality of prioritising lifelong education and learning research as the fundamental basis for strengthening how skills can enrich the cultural, social, and material aspects of the lives of adults, workplaces, and society as a whole.

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## ORCID

Ulrik Brandi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7361-8432>  
 Steven Hodge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1194-5208>  
 Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3316-6491>  
 Elizabeth Knight  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6596-6525>  
 Marcella Milana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3068-3530>

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