



Contribution to the European Commission's consultation on the European Year of Skills 2023

In our role of stakeholders and partners of the EU institutions, Don Bosco International (DBI), the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) and the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) contribute with this written input to the open consultation on the European Commission's proposal on the *Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023*. Our work in the areas of education and training in Brussels and the local presence of our members in the EU encourages us to contribute to the initiative launched by the President of the European Commission in September 2022. While appreciating this new initiative, especially after the European Year of Youth 2022, we would like to propose our perspective and recommendations to make the European Year of Skills more holistic and inclusive of the various aspects that characterise education and training.

I. Understanding skills today: employability vs integral education and human development

Quality education and training are paramount for European societies: the European Year of Skills, as a means of equipping the EU "workforce with the right skills for the current competitiveness of our social market economy"¹ is an initiative that should aim high. More than ever, the current challenges faced by the European Union, together with the rise of concurrent global powers, require readiness to be economically competitive. However, framing the European Year of Skills solely through a narrative of growth, competitiveness and innovation risks to exclude an **important aspect of education and training: that of the integral development of the person**. Education, in its most original meaning, is what accompanies each human being to his or her full development and growth, addressing all dimensions of the learner. Putting the human person at the centre of the educational progress, in their value and dignity, with their uniqueness and talents, should always be taken into account when addressing a topic as that of skills, training and formation, as suggested by Pope Francis in his [Global Compact on Education](#).² It is, therefore, essential to make use of and put into practice paths of '**integral education**' to avoid reducing the complexity of the term. In the remit given by Member States to EU institutions in the areas of education and training, the EU should always accompany the advancement of young people's employability with the promotion of both their integral human development, crucial to empower mature citizens, and the dignity of each profession.

For the upcoming European Year of Skills, we underline the complementarity of technical

¹ European Commission (2022), Proposal for a *Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023* (Text with EEA relevance)

² COMECE (2022), [Contribution to the European Education Area by the Working Group on Culture and Education of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union](#), p. 2

training and skills system with education, which should become a driving force of fraternity, peace, and justice at the global level.³ To achieve this aim, it is essential to guarantee an accessible and inclusive reskilling and upskilling process, in which civil society organisations can play a key role to reach the most vulnerable part of the society, currently at risk of increased social inequalities and discriminations due to a potential elitist access to this transition. Many European VET providers, for instance, inspired by Don Bosco's educational preventive system, propose to face the challenges of our time and reach the Commission's goals by guaranteeing quality in the educational environment and offer, placing at the centre the person of the young person and his or her integral human development, including the spiritual one, caring for the lifelong training of teachers, promoting an inclusive education of excellence, reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalised young people, developing internationalisation strategies, monitoring the educational success of their beneficiaries and taking care of relations with businesses, students' families, public authorities and all the actors involved in the educational and training process.⁴

II. Crises and challenges: what is the EU context of skills learning and teaching?

As mentioned in the Commission's proposal, 2023 comes with a series of challenges, which ought to be thoroughly assessed before addressing the elements that the European Year of Skills should highlight. The **demographic crisis**, the **educational challenge** and the **migration crisis** permeate the context of skills provision in the EU.

The demographic change mentioned in the initiative proposal⁵ looms over the EU as a silent, yet grievous crisis. With an average fertility rate of 1,6 children per women in 2021, below the replacement level of 2,1 children, the EU population is drastically decreasing and ageing. By 2070, 30.3% of the population is projected to be aged 65 years or older (compared to 20.3% in 2019).⁶ The demographic imbalance comes hand in hand with the shrinking of the available labour force and increased old-age dependency ratio, especially regarding the entry to retirement of the baby boomers generation, with a peak projected in 2050.⁷ At the level of the euro area as a whole, net migration flows are projected to only partially offset the decline in the working-age population. Immigration also causes situations of brain drain of high-skilled workers, both from third countries and within the EU, detrimental to their economic development. It is needed to **invest in demographic and family-friendly policies**, especially family-work life balance policies, to erase the obstacles to natality in Europe.

Besides demographic issues, challenges in education and training also characterise today's Europe. Although the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are yet fully to be seen, higher poverty risk rates⁸ and delays in learners' achievements are already visible. The fragilities of the education sector and the necessity to make it more resilient and adaptable to changes and learners are important elements to factor in the teaching of skills in the EU, even after the completion of formal education paths. In the latest *Education and Training Monitor 2022*, progress in participation in Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as early leavers

³ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for The Launch of The Global Compact on Education, 12th September 2019.

⁴ <http://donboscointernational.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Towards-DB-Tech-Europe-1.pdf>

⁵ European Commission (2022), Proposal for a *Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023* (Text with EEA relevance), p. 2

⁶ European Commission, *Green Paper on Ageing* (2021)

⁷ *ECB Economic Bulletin*, Article "The economic impact of population ageing and pension reforms" (Issue 2 / 2018)

⁸ Numbers according to Eurostat available on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211207-1>

rates in the EU was accompanied by higher numbers in low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science and deep inequalities in access to education for most disadvantaged people.⁹ Being formal education the basis for the reskilling and upskilling of young professionals and adults in active employment, the European Year of Skills should strongly **focus on the connection between education systems, training, and skills teaching providers**, for the sake of a more coordinated, comprehensive and better-functioning European Education Area.

Current social and economic developments are also showing the need for a **shift in the traditional paradigm school-work-retirement**. Through a holistic approach, lifelong learning combines education and training objectives of employability and economic growth with personal development, which represents a key element not only for the personal fulfilment in life but also for the development of a fair and more inclusive society. We invite the Commission to base the upcoming Year of Skills initiatives on a **holistic approach, supporting guidance, recognition, and attention to individual needs and abilities**, especially for those in situations of vulnerability.¹⁰

Last, contextualising the Year of Skills in the current migration crisis is fundamental not to leave anyone behind. Vulnerable communities coming from different regions are exposed to disruption in learning achievements compared to other learners. Depending on age and grade, migrants and refugees coming to Europe struggle to continue their formation at the same level of their peers, risking being excluded from different branches of the labour market and increasing inequalities and social discrimination. Reskilling and up-skilling process must take into account those difficulties in providing an equal and accessible formation.¹¹ Thus, it is desirable to **establish political and financial partnerships between institutions and civil society organisations and faith-based organisations**, to optimise the efforts and resources for those who work in contact with vulnerable learners from migrant backgrounds.

III. Reskilling and upskilling the EU: what skills to respond to today's challenges?

1. Competences and skills for integral human development

While retaining the importance of reskilling and upskilling, especially in the context of the rapidly changing labour market and the digital and green transitions, the European Year of Skills must strive to go beyond providing technical skills and reskill or upskill EU citizens to respond to the “growing demand for both, high and low-skilled workers”.¹² Learners of all ages should always get the opportunity to develop their interpersonal, social and intercultural skills and competences, as mentioned in the [Council Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning in May 2018](#). In the context of the rapidly and ever-changing job market, self-learning is also essential in re-skilling to enhance the resilience of societies and the consequent adaptation to changing realities. **Cultural awareness, interreligious, interpersonal, critical thinking competences and skills** are of importance both in the labour market and in society at large. With growing political and social polarization in the EU, learning how to respectfully live and thrive in culturally diverse societies through care and

⁹ European Commission, *Education and Training Monitor 2022*: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3e54c72b-66f4-11ed-b14f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

¹⁰ <https://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Position-Paper-recommendations-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

¹¹ <http://donboscointernational.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Next-Gen-Edu-ACTS-ENG.pdf>

¹² European Commission (2022), Proposal for a *Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023* (Text with EEA relevance, p. 2)

respect for others should be mainstreamed in formation, training and upskilling. This should be carried out with sound processes of [validation](#) and **investment in non-formal training and skills providers, as well as considering the impact of informal learning in communities and societies**. Such non-formal and informal training modalities in some Member States are likely to come from personal projects or faith-based/Church-related initiatives and must be further developed, especially to allow for personal guidance and talent recognition.¹³ In a spirit of subsidiarity, the EU should foster processes of **cooperation between formal and non-formal institutes of education and training**, in order to achieve the best possible and integral formation of learners of all ages. Paths of professionalisation and information about professional opportunities in the last years of high schools should also be strengthened to raise awareness of job market possibilities that resonate the most with learners' aspirations and vocation.

2. Digital skills: strengthening their provision and ensuring a balanced approach

Digital skills are among the most required ones and their demand covers almost all the labour market sectors. However, the lack of a workforce with adequate digital skills is one of the main issues for employers, especially considering that almost half of the EU population has no or very low level of digital skills.¹⁴ The Covid-19 pandemic gave a significant push to the digital world and showed how crucial digital skills are: without digital skills, it is impossible to get an education and access the labour market.

However, for a large part of society, it is not possible to learn, develop and practice digital skills, due to the fact that they often do not have access to technology, do not have the abilities to use it; therefore, it is very important to have adequate upskilling and reskilling to enable them to adopt the specific knowledge and skills they need. For most disadvantaged people, accessibility is vital. Educational and training programs that provide correct, inclusive and accessible knowledge, regardless of socio-economic status, that will be adapted to all abilities (physical and mental), both for children and adults, are key to the full involvement of society in digitalization processes. For instance, **investment in the digital skills of older persons supports their active ageing and prevents situations of social exclusion**. Moreover, children, although known as "digital native", should be given the **proper training to become responsible users aware of the opportunities and dangers online**. The Digital Education Action Plan should highlight the **dangers related to Internet overuse** on the physical and mental health of children: sleep deprivation, hyperactivity disorder, weaker brain development, lower academic performances, deficit in social inclusion, etc. It should also include a clear prevention programme on the **risks of online child sexual abuse**, exposing the dangers posed by child access to pornography and the self-generation of sexually explicit content, and the related risks of grooming, harassment, and online violence.

3. Technical skills for social inclusion

Global market transformation has also been affected for years by the decisive and increasingly pervasive presence of digital technologies. In this scenario, some points of reference seem to be emerging: the competitive advantage of the competent person, also known as "human capital"; the benefit of an ecosystem conducive to the growth, hybridisation, and innovation of skills; the active management of uncertainty through employment policies, qualified

¹³ In the EU, many Catholic dioceses set up a large amount of projects to involve people of all ages to gain technical and soft skills, aiming to increase knowledge and job competencies, gaining practical experience in a specific sector or gaining communication skills

¹⁴ European Commission, Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)

services and lifelong learning.¹⁵ This evolution has raised a new issue of the relationship between Vocational Education and the Commission's choice to modernise the labour market. VET programmes offer the **flexibility in learning design needed to provide learners with the key competences, both at technical and personal level**, to effectively perform as students, workers, and citizens. Moreover, VET promotes equality of opportunities and social inclusion, through inclusive and accessible curricula intended to integrate in the labour market group in situations of vulnerability and risk of poverty such as people with social-economical disadvantages or migrant background, people with disabilities, minorities.¹⁶ Making VET more attractive and equally worthy to academic studies becomes thus a must for all Member States.

IV. Skills for all: who is involved in skills teaching and who benefits from it?

Upskilling and reskilling affects EU citizens in manifold ways. For instance, the need of upskilling and reskilling increases following a parental leave. As mentioned in the European Commission proposal, "for well-functioning labour markets, skills must be understood and valued, whether acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings". **We propose a better recognition of the "soft skills" acquired during the exercise of care.** Parents, especially mothers, should be given better access to life-long learning, vocational training, and job reconversion to support their possible return to the labour market. Unpaid care work is work, and the **informal care and childcare produced by parents or carers should also be recognised as a category of work** that grant access to pension. Young people with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds also struggle to gain the skills needed to access the job market: ensuring paid experiences of professionalisation, such as paid internships, is essential to make the labour market more inclusive and fair.

The Commission's proposal for a European Year of Skills highlights the need to attract "people from third countries with the skills needed by the Union, including by strengthening learning opportunities and mobility, and by facilitating the recognition of qualifications".¹⁷ Ensuring that third country nationals' skills are recognized in the EU labour market should not come at the expense of better policies for the reskilling and upskilling of NEETs and people in vulnerable situations, especially in countries where the pandemic and the war in Ukraine had a major impact. A positive example is that of Salesian Vocational Education and Training centres:

In Europe, the Salesian VET counts on 196 VET Centres in 19 European countries (including 13 EU Member States), addressing 62.640 learners¹⁸ (90% of whom being vulnerable youth), with holistic education and VET Services in all the main professional sectors and economic areas. This integral educational offer is based on a holistic approach includes, among others, vocational guidance, orientation and counselling services, both initial and higher Vocational Education and Training, as well as adult education and continuous vocational training paths

¹⁵ https://dbtecheurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JSO-Guidelines_FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ In Lithuania, best practices of VET include those run by [Charity Foundation VA Caritas Social Projects](#), such as Caritas Works workshops and small realities of social entrepreneurship that allow the most disadvantaged to integrate into the labour market and gain valuable skills

¹⁷ European Commission (2022), Proposal for a *Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023* (Text with EEA relevance), p. 4

¹⁸ In 2021 the Salesian VET national platforms of Italy, Spain, Belgium, Germany, France and Hungary lead a thorough assessment of the European Salesian VET. <http://donboscointernational.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Towards-DB-Tech-Europe-1.pdf>

tailored on the needs of industries and of actors of the private sector, building up partnerships with them. The Salesian system is an example of success.¹⁹ However, Europeans are not the only beneficiaries of this methodology. The [SAAM](#) project is a virtuous example of the positive impact of regional fruitful cooperation through T-VET²⁰ mobilities between Europe and Africa. Funded under the [AU-EU Skills for Youth Employment Programme](#) and modelled after the Erasmus Plus programme, it provides mobility of European Teachers coming to Africa, then Teachers from Africa moving to Europe and finally students from Africa moving to Europe. Following the SDGs framework, especially numbers 4, 1 and 8, that promote Quality Education, No Poverty and Decent work and economic growth, we suggest **investing in an equal migration cycle to build long-lasting partnerships with third countries.**

V. Recommendations

- **Frame the European Year of Skills in a holistic and integral manner**, avoiding portraying education, training and reskilling or upskilling as a mean to competitiveness and employability alone
- Focus on the **connection between education systems, training, and skills teaching providers**, investing both in basic and advanced skills, for the sake of a more coordinated, comprehensive and better-functioning learning system in the EU
- Foster processes of **cooperation between formal and non-formal education and training providers**, in order to achieve the best possible and integral formation of learners of all ages
- Invest both in the **digital upskilling of older persons to support active ageing** and in the **digital education of children, thoughtful of the online risks** of Internet overuse and of the vulnerability of child users to violence and abuse
- **Recognise the “soft skills” acquired during the exercise of care** as a category of work that grant access to life-long learning, vocational training, job reconversion and pension
- **Invest in family-friendly policies**, especially when it comes to the family-work life balance of parents, to erase the obstacles to natality and prevent further demographic imbalance
- **Establish political and financial partnerships between institutions and civil society organisations**, to optimise the efforts and resources for those who work in contact with vulnerable learners from migrant backgrounds
- **Invest in an equal and inclusive migration cycle in cooperation with VET providers** to build long-lasting partnerships with third countries.
- Have a special attention on the **prevention of the brain drain of high-skilled workers in third countries and within Europe**, to avoid creating inequalities of development between European regions

¹⁹ According to the assessment done in 2021 on all the European VET Centres, the average of the Salesian students' formative success in Europe is remarkable: almost 90% of these young people, one year after completing this training, are continuing their studies towards higher qualifications or working with a stable contract. The average of the Salesian students' formative success in Europe is 88.5%: after one year from their qualification/diploma, the 34,46% of qualified students have a stable occupation/job, the 54% is continuing their studies towards a diploma or a higher VET path, while only the 7,3% is still unemployed. (The assessment has been done on a statistic samples of 5032 European young people who got their qualification diploma in 2020 and have been interviewed in 2021 in Italy, Spain, Germany, Belgium, France and Hungary)

²⁰ Technical and Vocational Skills Development

Brussels, 14.12.2022