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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Learning can happen anytime, anywhere, and the spaces where this learning occurs are incredibly and increasingly diverse. Education systems are undergoing a paradigm shift in the struggle to meet the needs of learners in a world that is rapidly changing from a technological, demographic, societal and environmental perspective. The rich diversity of learning environments, whether within the formal education system or beyond in the local community, workplace or civil society, is more valuable than ever to meet these rapidly evolving needs. Learning takes place across a combination of these environments, hence why we see increasing reference to the term ‘lifewide’ learning - where people engage simultaneously in different forms of learning at the same stage of their lives.

However, these diverse learning opportunities are not equally available to all sections of society and, even when available, the outcomes of learning outside formal settings are often not regarded in the same way as those produced within them. Even the outcomes of formal learning can be difficult to transfer from one system to another, if a robust strategy for the recognition of prior learning is not in place. This clashes with the fact that the sheer pace of change in the 21st century compels us to continue learning throughout and in many different areas of our lives if we truly wish to understand, adapt to and, most importantly, shape the world around us. This demands that we designate equal value to all learning environments - whether categorised as formal, non-formal, informal or combining varying degrees of (in)formality - and reflect on how to build cooperation and seamless transitions between them. Such a shift is a necessary step towards enacting the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, meeting the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030.

This shift is at the heart of the Lifelong Learning Platform’s mission. Our policy paper seeks to encourage a debate and provide recommendations by illustrating the diversity of learning environments, the value of building these around the learner’s needs, the need for robust validation arrangements for the learning outcomes that they produce and, finally, the importance of building cooperation between them.

It should be highlighted that the implementation of the following recommendations demands a robust and holistic investment in education in its wider scope (lifelong learning), which requires both the public and private sector in light of training at the workplace, as well as more systematic and streamlined coordination between different ministries or departments whose policies and initiatives touch on learning environments, which may include culture, employment, health, research, digitalisation and sustainable development, among others.

2. Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. See the full list of 20 principles here.
3. ET2020 Framework
4. Sustainable development goal 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate a more nuanced understanding of learning environments into education, training and lifelong learning policies, guided by the overarching principle to support learners’ individual and unique potential. This means recognising, including through sustained investment, the value of learning environments beyond formal academic 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.

2. Foster flexible learning pathways by supporting people in accessing and moving across learning environments as they progress through life, in accordance with their needs and regardless of age or background. This can be achieved through measures linked to modular or ‘micro-learning’ approaches, shorter study cycles and enhanced arrangements for the validation of prior learning of all types, as well as quality lifelong guidance which empowers individuals in managing their own learning and career paths and better reconciling their personal and professional lives. All this is crucial to boost learning motivation, avoid ‘dead ends’ and ensure that no learners are left behind.

3. Promote the purposeful use of digital and blended learning environments to offer wider and more personalised access to lifelong learning based on the understanding that they cannot replace face-to-face learning, in line with a holistic approach to personal development. This means making use of the diverse range of spaces that may support learning processes, including in the outdoors and local communities.

4. Upscale the concept of ‘Community Lifelong Learning Centres’, building on existing practices, in order to enhance integrated service delivery while catering for the learning needs of local communities. This is particularly relevant for marginalised or minority groups who are least likely to avail of lifelong learning opportunities.

5. Design learning environments based on a needs-centred approach, with the aim to ensure learners’ role as active co-creators of knowledge and their environment. This also means flexibility in the design and arrangement of the physical space where learning occurs and allocating resources from national and EU funds, including the future InvestEU programme, to support this across the full spectrum of education and training providers.

6. Recognise the role of teachers and educators in the 21st century as facilitators, not directors, of learning with the necessary resources, training and policies to support them in managing the rapid changes that they are facing. Recognising the reality of this new role also means integrating into our education and training policies a more contemporary understanding of who an “educator” can be, including trainers and facilitators who work with learners outside the formal environment.

7. Provide concrete support and resources for the integration of participatory pedagogy, including collaborative, peer-to-peer, dialogic and inquiry-based approaches, in order to ensure the active and meaningful participation of learners. More flexibility in adapting curricula and assessment methods is a vital step towards achieving this.

8. Recognise that competences for the 21st century are not only digital or technical in nature but encompass learning to learn as a competence in its own right and other “life skills” which support individuals’ resilience and participation in wider society. The development of such competences should be supported from the beginning of and across the lifelong learning continuum, including through investment in non-formal and informal learning environments which are particularly relevant in terms of acquiring these competences.

9. Prioritise the implementation of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which is imperative to give value and visibility to all learning irrespective of the environment where it takes place, especially for learners with a low level of or an adverse experience with formal education. These arrangements should be universally accessible, inspired by the key guiding principle of social equity as well as the meaningful participation of stakeholders from all sectors affected by validation processes.

10. Systematically build cooperation and partnerships between and across formal, non formal and informal learning environments, at regional, national and European level, including support for their representative associations at these different scales, in order to facilitate innovation transfer and foster coherent lifelong learning approaches that take into account and bring together the different aspects of individuals’ lives.
WHAT IS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

Before dwelling on the learning aspect, it is useful to reflect on what we understand an environment to be. More than just the space around us in any given location, an environment may be considered a multi-modal hybrid phenomena that involves social, cognitive, cultural and biological interacting modalities, as well as “relational” phenomena, i.e. there is no environment unless there are agents who interact and enact its affordances. This is important to consider in a learning context because the learner, as an agent, is confronted with other phenomena (including other agents) and much of the learning occurs through those interactions. This evokes different notions that are discussed throughout the paper from the micro-level, such as elements related to learners’ agency and the shaping and co-creation of their learning environments, to the macro- or system level, namely the policies that shape the everyday reality of learning environments and where they fit in the socio-political order.

The term “learning environment” specifically may be defined or conceptualised in different ways. The Glossary of Educational Reform describes it as follows:

‘Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn. Since students may learn in a wide variety of settings, such as outside-of-school locations and outdoor environments, the term is often used as a more accurate or preferred alternative to classroom, which has more limited and traditional connotations—a room with rows of desks and a chalkboard, for example. The term also encompasses the culture of a school or class—its presiding ethos and characteristics, including how individuals interact with and treat one another—as well as the ways in which teachers may organize an educational setting to facilitate learning....’

Variety in settings and contexts is fundamental because not one type of environment can have a monopoly on learning, even if the formal education system and the policies that shape it may tend to give the opposite impression. In essence, learning is a personal process which forms part of the human experience and, as such, it does not depend on formal education provisions. The above definition also reinforces the notion of learners relating to and interacting with each other, as well as evoking the idea of how the physical space itself is arranged. These are elements analysed below when we consider how to build the learning environment around the individual with a view to maximising her or his learning potential.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also looks at such concepts and principles in its 2017 study on Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs). Here a learning environment is described as one which “includes the activity and outcomes of learning, rather than being just a location where learning takes place.” This calls for reflection on how learners participate in the “activity” and on what they do with the “outcomes” after their experience in any given learning environment. This is crucial when it comes to the question of what support exists at the system level for the recognition and validation of learning outcomes.

2 Ed Glossary, «learning environment»
Across most academic and policy contexts, learning tends to be categorised as ‘formal’, ‘non-formal’ or ‘informal’. Formal education or learning is learning that is organised and structured as part of a clearly defined curriculum and leads to formally recognised qualifications from institutions such as schools and universities. Due to its official character or ‘concreteness’, this is usually the category most privileged by policymakers and wider society. Non-formal learning tends to be understood as voluntary learning which happens outside this formal system but remains intentional and structured to a certain extent within a programme delivered by an organisation (e.g. work-based training). Informal learning, on the other hand, is usually understood as ‘experiential’ in the sense that it is not institutionalised, planned or structured and typically occurs through an individual’s everyday activities and interactions (e.g. learning among family and friends).

Of course, this is a rudimentary overview and the above categorisations are subject to contested debate. Crucially, there is a school of thought which questions the utility of labelling learning in this way and considers it more accurate to speak about the degree of formality or informality in learning, because these are characteristics present in all situations where learning occurs. Indeed, the boundaries between what are perceived as formal, non-formal and informal learning environments are rarely clear-cut. There are cases where non-formal education methods are used in the school classroom, a distinctly formal environment. Another case is at universities where multiple environments may sit closely side-by-side for students who, besides attending a formal course, live in halls of residence which form a “vibrant and diverse all-round living and learning environment” where the learning process “extends beyond the classroom to involve a wide range of (...) activities and programmes on offer as part of university life”. This transition between learning environments not only happens horizontally across different contexts (‘lifewide’) but also vertically through time (‘lifelong’) when we consider, for example, non-traditional students such as experienced workers who enroll in a formal degree programme after developing skills at the workplace. This shows that learning environments of different types are not mutually exclusive but people move between them in an infinite variety of ways.

In many respects, an understanding of this broad nature of learning environments is absent from education and training policies across the EU, or where they acknowledge this they tend to do so only superficially or inconsistently. At the EU level, for instance, although the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning Framework provides a strong basis, inconsistencies arise when other initiatives such as those related to the European Education Area do not address learning beyond the formal sector, or in the case of the 2018 Education and Training Monitor which looked at the acquisition of civic competences through non-formal and informal learning exclusively in terms of youth work, thus neglecting its much broader scope.

All in all, formal (academic) education still remains the main driver of the learning ecosystem, while vocational education and training, non-formal and informal learning remain, to varying degrees, secondary in esteem or recognition. Although formal education still holds an essential role in our societies, and its quality and inclusiveness should be guaranteed, a shift is needed towards a lifelong learning paradigm where supporting the individual’s potential is the key guiding principle. This means equal recognition and value for all learning environments and the possibility to move seamlessly between them.

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10 CARMA project
12 Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.
The rapidly growing use of digital technologies has given rise to new digital and blended learning environments, opening possibilities for wider access to knowledge and more personalised learning processes. A wealth of new opportunities for learning are available thanks to MOOCs, online tutoring and video platforms such as Youtube where one can find tutorials about almost everything. In fact, a 2018 research study in the United States found that 51% of Youtube users say that the website is very important for them to learn how to do new things. Not only has digital technology expanded opportunities for non-formal and informal learning in this way, it has implications for formal environments such as schools because it breaks their monopoly on the transmission of knowledge and challenges how they organise time, space and their internal structure. It opens them to the world beyond their walls. So, although different types of learning environments will always have their own needs and particularities, the digital wave has further loosened the boundaries between them.

This loosening of boundaries equally has a temporal dimension as learners are less and less likely to fit into the linear pattern of school-work-retirement. It is no longer the norm and more needs to be done to support individuals in accessing and moving across learning environments as they progress through life, in accordance with their needs and regardless of age, ableness or socio-economic background. Otherwise, learners with a low level of formal qualifications or low-skilled workers in pursuit of retraining are at a disadvantage. There are various ways to promote flexible learning pathways, including modular or 'micro-learning' approaches, shorter study cycles, enhanced arrangements for the validation of prior learning of all types (more on this below) and indeed the purposeful use of digital tools. This flexibility is key to boost learning motivation and widen access to lifelong learning, so that it can fit easily into people's busy lives. When it comes to adult learning in particular it is difficult to imagine, without such flexibility, how an ambitious target of 25% for participation in adult learning, proposed by the European Commission under the vision for a European Education Area, could be achieved while the current rate stands at a modest 11.1%.

It is a common claim that the future of learning is digital, that this is the defining feature of 21st century learning environments where space and time are rendered flexible thanks to innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence. Despite the many advantages that their carefully planned use can bring such as saving time, selection of the most relevant content, etc., they cannot replace face-to-face learning. A holistic approach to human development that caters for individuals’ well-being and makes use of the full range of learning environments available to us, not only online but also offline, is crucial. Outdoor learning is a concrete example. There is a substantial body of evidence documenting the positive effect that learning in natural environments can have on children's health, well-being, competence development and social skills.
Environmental attitudes in adulthood. In a lifelong learning perspective, this aspect of learning in outdoor environments, either informally or integrated into formal or non-formal education programmes, is important to consider in the face of climate change and other ecological crises as a way to foster connection with the natural world. Therefore, learning in the 21st century should not only be about adapting to digitalisation, or seeking to digitalise all learning environments, but about addressing the full array of societal challenges we are confronted with and using all possible learning spaces to help us find solutions.

**BEST PRACTICE**

**ALL DIGITAL**

Digital Competence Development System (DCDS) aims to establish a framework that provides the low-skilled adult European population with the basic digital and transversal competences for employment, personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship. The project developed an open, innovative multilingual Digital Competences Development System (DCDS) to provide non-formal training to low-skilled adults. Face-to-face training is indispensable for low-skilled adults and that technology can have a supportive role but it cannot replace in person learning.

**ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK (ESN)**

SocialErasmus is an international project by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) that promotes a social attitude among young citizens participating in mobility programmes, to facilitate their integration into the local community while giving them the chance to make a long lasting social change in society through volunteering activities. The project goes under the slogan: Leave your mark!
University of Gent has developed the academic programme Community Service Learning (CSL), a form of experiential learning where students contribute to their community by participating in professor-approved community service placements related to course learning objectives and then produce corresponding reflective assignments.

‘Open Schools for Open Societies’ aims to help a thousand European primary and secondary schools with opening up to their communities. An “open school” is a more engaging environment for students and raises their motivation by connecting student projects with real needs from the community and drawing upon local expertise. The project includes the production of guidelines on designing partnerships with local industries, research organisations, parent associations and policy makers.

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION (EUF)

EUROPEAN SCHOOL HEADS ASSOCIATION (ESHA)

including those from marginalised groups, feel a sense of safety and belonging. This community-centred approach is a crucial element in the vision for 21st century learning environments because it serves to open up lifelong learning opportunities at the local level, particularly for those individuals least likely to participate in formal education programmes.

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BUILD THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THE LEARNER

According to the OECD, the first principle of an innovative learning environment is that its “recognises the learners as its core participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners” (emphasis added). It follows that learners should be at the centre of all considerations when it comes to designing and supporting learning environments, whether at the micro- or macro-level. Attention must be paid to ensuring their role as active co-creators of knowledge and their environment, avoiding the outdated idea of learners as passive listeners who fit into rigid, pre-defined models and spaces. This means that the environment should foster learners’ “agency”, understood broadly as the sense that they are doing or are able to do things, rather than things just happening to them: in other words, a sense of efficacy.

Crucially, to develop agency the learner “needs to be treated as an active subject, not just an object of upbringing or education.” This means looking at the learner’s intrinsic potential and enabling him or her to discover and harness this potential, no matter his or her past or background. This is especially relevant for individuals with adverse prior experience of the formal education system which, in many cases, may have eroded their sense of efficacy by failing to adequately respond to their needs. On the other hand, learning environments beyond the formal sphere tend to be more needs-sensitive, as a general rule. For instance, in the context of children from a migrant background, non-formal educators can better adjust to the needs of individual learners because they are not restricted by national curricula and timetables, claims one study. In general, non-formal education can positively

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influence a learner’s confidence by enhancing self-esteem, self-awareness and motivation to learn. Likewise, informal learning can help to create a more personally meaningful learning experience which is built around individual needs, goals and expectations. Of course, this does not mean all learning environments beyond the formal system are inherently good (and the latter inherently bad) or offer a panacea for meeting learners’ needs, but it highlights the imperative to recognise and take seriously the potential added value they bring to the learner’s experience—either in their own right or by incorporating some of their approaches into the formal domain.

Promoting the learner’s agency may also be achieved through the physical design of her or his environment. For example, it is increasingly accepted that the traditional way of organising the school classroom with the teacher at the front and students seated in rows for a whole lesson is not optimum for supporting innovative pedagogical approaches. Building the environment around the learners’ needs thus calls for more flexible infrastructure. The benefits of this are proven, for example, by the ‘Clever Classrooms’ initiative in the UK which showed that differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms, including air quality, colour and light, can boost the learning progress of primary school pupils by as much as 16% in a single year. Evidently, supporting such flexible learning environments requires targeted resources. However, these resources cannot be directed only towards general schools as other spaces equally stand to benefit from more flexible and innovative infrastructure, including

vocational colleges, adult education centres, community and volunteer-based associations, all of which usually struggle to access this kind of investment. Support for spatial and infrastructural flexibility in all types of learning environment is key to guarantee the diversity of learner-centred, lifelong learning provision. We also see this as a potential area of intervention for the ‘Social investment and skills’ window of the future InvestEU programme.

In the 21st century, the role of teachers and educators is obliged to rapidly evolve, in large part due to the technological changes mentioned above which mean they are no longer the definitive source of knowledge which they were in the past. They are becoming “gatekeepers of the learning process rather than the content.” Moreover, in a flexible environment where learners become active agents it follows that the teacher’s position within that environment, including during interactions with the learners, must be reimagined. To support agency, like the arrangement of the physical space, teachers may adapt how they are positioned vis-à-vis the learners, for example, by sitting among them, allowing one of them be the chair of the lesson and putting up their hands like the others, changing rules about who has the right to move around in class or write on the blackboard or whiteboard, etc. They should adapt their pedagogical approach with the aim to facilitate learning rather than direct it. Again this relates to how they set up and navigate the space of the learning environment as teachers “use space to underscore their learning intentions and personal belief sets.”

At the macro-level, a broader understanding of how we define a teacher or educator should be reflected in education and training policies. Non-formal educators, community or volunteer facilitators, trainers, youth workers, parents, among several others, are equally gatekeepers of the learning process and must be recognised as education stakeholders and for the valuable work that they do in sustaining the diverse range of learning environments in society for people of all ages. In addition, in the 21st century it makes sense to bring the ‘real world’ more into formal learning environments by adopting

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**MEDITERRANEAN UNIVERSITIES UNION (UNIMED)**

The **Upskilling Refugees and Adult Educators (UPGRADE)** project aims to develop innovative training resources for refugee and migrant adults with low skills, as well as educators working with these populations, in order to support their integration in the EU labour market.
the practice of inviting ‘guest teachers’ into the classroom or lecture theatre, for example, experts from civil society, the business sector including SMEs and start-ups, political representatives or even the students’ family members. This shows that, informally, we all have the potential to be an educator.

Such approaches should not be construed as an attempt to undermine the role of teachers or professional educators. They will always play a crucial guiding role and have the right to high-quality working conditions, initial training and continuous professional development in order to adjust the environments that they facilitate to the demands of the modern world and meet learners’ individual needs.

Learning environments are shaped according to the approaches and practices that take place within them. As the above principle outlined by the OECD highlights, innovative learning environments foster the “active engagement” of learners, otherwise they can hardly be expected to participate in a meaningful way. They work with a mix of pedagogical approaches, many of which are based on collaborative work and inquiry-based learning.

Interactions within the environment need to foster learner agency and initiative rather than the acquisition of ready-made contents, which means raising expectations of active participation and taking learners seriously as interlocutors who contribute to meaning creation. Thus, the possibility of creating knowledge on their own and having a say in the choice of contents through dialogic inquiry can enhance learners’ engagement.

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Here mutual interaction is also an important element to consider, recalling the value of peer-to-peer learning as an approach in developing learners’ agency.

There are good practices of such participatory pedagogy across formal, non-formal and informal learning environments and its value has long been championed by researchers and civil society, yet the extent to which it has been integrated at the macro-level as a central tenet of education and training policies, with the necessary support and training for educators, is questionable. The training question is also important when it comes to the use of digital tools which have the potential to support innovative pedagogies. However, there is often a lack of sufficient support from policymakers or, where it does exist, it is rarely guided by a long-term strategy.

In addition, the further integration of these participatory methods would benefit from giving more autonomy to formal education environments to design and apply the curriculum and explore new assessment methods, not only summative but formative or combined, where the acquisition of knowledge is not only evaluated but competences in a wider perspective. The grading system remains the predominant assessment method and,

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**21ST CENTURY TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS**

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besides reinforcing competition among learners from an early age, it is increasingly criticised for the fact that it privileges the agency of (young) learners who are born with a certain cultural capital against those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, hence contributing to early school leaving, inequality of opportunities and limited social mobility. Some countries in Northern Europe are moving away from the grading system but elsewhere in Europe, there is little questioning of grading systems and their impact on learners, including attitudes towards learning in general. We thus consider flexibility in this area as a prerequisite for supporting the shift towards 21st century learning environments.

As outlined above, a learning environment should foster learners’ understanding of their own activity as learners. This evokes the notion of “self-regulated learning”, i.e. the conscious planning, monitoring, evaluation and control of one’s learning in order to maximise it. It also relates to how we approach learning as a competence in its own right. In order to ensure individuals’ resilience and ability to adapt to social, economic and other forms of change, they must learn how to learn - this is a prerequisite for acquiring all other competences, and sets the foundation for lifelong learning. It is the ultimate survival tool for living in the 21st century. Therefore, from early childhood onwards, learning environments should aim to support individuals in identifying, exploring and developing the optimum ways in which they themselves engage in the learning process, in a spirit of self-discovery and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

Learning to learn is not the only competence that learners need in their toolkit for 21st century life. Indeed, “21st century” competences, including creativity, problem-solving, leadership, empathy and communication, to name just a few, are increasingly in demand in the context of rapidly changing societies and labour markets. For instance, a report by the McKinsey Global Institute predicts that...
demand among employers for "social and emotional skills" such as negotiation, leadership and initiative-taking, will rise by 22% by 2030. What they term "higher cognitive skills" will also be highly sought after, with creativity expected to rise in demand by 30%39. Indeed, as the labour market is changing so rapidly, and many young learners are likely to end up working in professions that do not exist yet, it is more sustainable to invest in competences that will help them navigate and adapt to shifting contexts instead of only those related to technical, occupation-specific fields. Beyond employment matters, 21st century competences support learners’ engagement with the wider world, including participation in civic life at the local, national and global level, if we consider competences such as the ability to critically engage with different perspectives or understand and respect social and cultural diversity. This further reveals the broader societal purpose of learning environments next to meeting individuals’ learning needs.

Reflecting on how learning environments promote the development of this full range of competences again requires looking at how is this supported by their diversity. Non-formal and informal learning environments, in light of their flexibility, tendency towards learner-centredness and proximity to ‘real life’, can benefit people of all ages in this respect. For instance, there are studies highlighting the valuable role of non-formal education in the positive socialisation of children, including such competences as communication, self-sufficiency and self-confidence40. Extracurricular activities have demonstrated the ability to help students develop skills such as problem-solving, teamwork and resilience41. Non-formal adult education is also key in supporting older learners to acquire the full range of “life skills”, covering those competences mentioned above as well as basic numeracy and literacy skills, health and financial literacy, etc42. Investing in environments beyond the formal sector can therefore bring added value to lifelong competence development, providing people with the necessary toolkit to navigate the uncertainties and complexities of 21st century life.

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**EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES - YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING (EEE-YFU) AND ORGANISING BUREAU OF EUROPEAN SCHOOL STUDENT UNIONS (OBESSU)**

The project *Coloured Glasses Grow: Expanding Intercultural Education (CGrow)* was developed to expand the “Coloured Glasses” methodology which is based on helping young people acquire intercultural and global citizenship competences through a series of workshops where they examine their attitudes towards their own cultures as well as other cultures and engage with issues related to intercultural communication, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

**EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS (EAEA)**

The *Life Skills for Europe* project seeks to improve basic skills provision in Europe by explaining, further developing and upscaling a “life skills” approach. It has developed an overarching life skills learning framework and modules that are transferable across Europe, with a particular focus on people from a disadvantaged background, refugees and people resistant to intercultural exchange.

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The knowledge and competences that individuals acquire in non-formal and informal learning environments are not always accorded sufficient value or visibility. This is problematic because it deprives people of the opportunity to understand and communicate their learning or use their competences to participate in further learning or the labour market, besides perpetuating a view of formal learning environments as the sole provider of knowledge and competences. Indeed, the fact that learning environments are so diverse means that we need robust systems in place for the validation of competences obtained in such varied contexts in order to give all learning the visibility and value deserved. This becomes particularly true in the digital age where most competences are acquired outside of the compulsory education, and it is true for a lot of other areas on which information has been made much more readily available through communication and information technology. In addition, learners spend much of their time in family, community and outdoor activities, often cultural, sport or volunteering, during which they acquire a number of “soft skills”. So far validation arrangement systems only partially exist. In the EU, the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning brought a new impetus to the issue, yet most Member States lack a strategic vision and have lagged behind in their efforts to implement the Recommendation. The Recommendation allows progress towards a common and shared understanding of validation between EU Member States and between stakeholders. It states that the validation process is composed of four steps: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. If the Council Recommendation specifically targets non-formal and informal learning, it is because validation in formal education is already institutionalised whereas making competences visible in other learning environments remains a key challenge in EU countries. Nevertheless, the recognition of prior learning at higher education level remains yet another challenge for most institutions across the EU.

Most EU countries are still in the process of developing their national qualification frameworks, whereas some already have put in place validation systems to recognise learning from non-formal or informal learning environments, such as volunteering and work-based learning, for instance. In the validation of prior learning, some universities give credit for people to access higher education without necessarily having walked the traditional pathway. Putting in place systems of validation helps make the transition in the labour market more fluid and flexible, and therefore reinforces economic growth and competitiveness. Validation has to be adapted to the characteristics and needs of different target groups and learning situations, especially when it comes to non-traditional learners, such as NEETs, migrants, refugees, individuals with low skills and qualifications, disabilities or from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In order to ensure the

### EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS (EAEA)

The Transnational Peer Review for Quality Assurance in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning is a project aimed at increasing the transparency, market relevance, consistency and transferability of VNFIL across Europe. It supports both Member State VNFIL systems by providing a common framework and tools, as well as transnational use of VNFIL by increasing mutual trust at the European level.
is much more efficient to get them into
again after an adverse school experience,
is shown that giving individuals with a low
encourages lifelong learning
benefits in terms of self-confidence and
learning also brings individuals many
Validation of non-formal and informal
attitude towards learning throughout life  

negatively impacts individuals’ learning
to adverse experience with education, and
from the feeling of incoming failure, leads
developed, shared and transferred across
hence mitigating learner’s anxiety, must be
during the process,
ience during the process.
ne is essential to allow individuals
upskilling, both are policies fostered by
though innovative validation methods are crucial to support
lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world,
knowledge, understanding and recognition
of these are often lacking among formal
learning environments. There is a strong
need for cross-sector cooperation,
between employers, trade unions, public
employment services, guidance services,
civil society and local authorities in order to
build a validation ecosystem that valorises
all learning environments at an equal level
and meets the criteria of all stakeholders.
At the same time, it is essential to maintain
social equity as a guiding principle for all
validation policies and practices, as an
unchecked privatisation of the process
could deprive learners with fewer
resources of the opportunity to validate
their competences. It is important in this
regard that employers contribute too.

Furthermore, validation of the learning
taking place outside the formal education
system is essential to allow individuals
navigate “flexible pathways” and access
upskilling, both are policies fostered by
the EU institutions. Although innovative
validation methods are crucial to support
lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world,
knowledge, understanding and recognition
of these are often lacking among formal
learning environments. There is a strong
need for cross-sector cooperation,
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In terms of European cooperation, the
varying definitions and perceptions of
validation between Member States hinders
the development of policies based on
common understanding of key quality
principles such as validity, reliability,
transparency, trust-worthiness or cost-
efficiency. This limits the transferability of
innovative methods, a situation further
complicated by the fact that good practices
emerging from validation projects, many
funded by the Erasmus+ programme and
a few from the European Social Fund, fail
to inspire policy reform due to limited
dissemination capacity. This under-
exploitation leads to a continuous cycle
of small-scale projects working on similar
topics. Besides enhanced budget within
such projects for dissemination purposes, a
possible remedy would be an EU community
of validation practitioners which could not
only exchange practices on how to give
visibility to learning outcomes from non-
formal and informal environments, but
also synthesise and find links between
the outputs of specific projects
and serve as a reference point for
policymakers.

44 Validation is understood as a process of
certification by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning
outcomes measured against a relevant standard. There are
four steps to this process: identification, documentation,
assessment and accreditation.

45 VINCE project case studies Commentary Report:

46 Generally, to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment
methods and to avoid additional costs, educational institutions
tend to prefer traditional tests like the ones used in formal
education. This rigidity hinders the demand of validation
from learners. Assessment methods can potentially serve any
target groups by presenting different formats and adapting
in any skill level giving a more personalised and satisfactory
experience to the learner.

47 Innovative “Innovative assessment for validation” project,
2016-2018, Erasmus+

48 Needs assessment reports, Innovative “Innovative assessment
for validation” project, 2016-2018, Erasmus+

49 Cedefop (2016). Improving career prospects for the
low-educated: the role of guidance and lifelong learning.
Luxembourg: Publications Office, Cedefop research paper;
No 54.
The Council Recommendation for the EU Key Competences Framework calls on Member States to support the acquisition of these competences through, among other actions, “reinforcing collaboration between education, training and learning settings at all levels, and in different fields, to improve the continuity of learner competence development and the development of innovative learning approaches” 50. The rationale for this is clear, as learning should connect with all of the learner’s life world and ‘funds of knowledge’ which, evidently, surpass the boundaries of the formal environment 51. If the latter fails to connect learning across contexts, there is a risk that it becomes isolated from the rest of the world and separates knowledge from its “actual context of use” 52. This is a daunting scenario because it leaves learners ill-prepared for the growing complexities and challenges of the 21st century world. In addition, non-formal and informal learning environments, for example, in the form of after-school activities for young learners, can serve as a bridge or “border zone” between the culture of the school and peers, families and communities 53. Hence, fostering cooperation between all these different spaces is crucial.

The importance of cooperation not only applies to learning environments of different modalities (formal/non-formal/informal) but also those of the same type. In fact, this is reflected in the basic legislation of the EU as Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU highlights the need for cooperation between educational establishments. This can support active involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of policy reforms in the Member States as well as the exchange of good teaching and learning practices, both within and across different sectors. More networking between learning environments is required considering, for example, that schools, vocational colleges and civil society organisations in remote or disadvantaged regions often find themselves isolated from their peers.

All in all, an alternative perception of learning environments needs to be embedded in the design of education policies as non-formal and informal learning spaces are still often regarded as purely recreational rather than dynamic and strategic hubs of competence development - from which formal environments can also draw expertise in adopting more inclusive and innovative approaches. The EU and the Member States should encourage and support more partnerships between the formal, non-formal and informal sectors. This interconnectedness should be seen as a defining feature of 21st century learning environments.

But how to achieve those partnerships? One possibility is more activities organised at European and national level where policymakers and practitioners learn about good practices in building bridges between different learning environments. For instance, in recent years LLLP, as a pan-European umbrella network of civil society organisations, has collaborated with the European Commission in organising peer learning activities 54 which have showcased the added value of cooperation with civil society. The Act2Gether initiative is a global movement to create partnerships between generations, across all sectors, such as Health, Education, Governance, Art, Sports, Religion, Welfare and Justice. Setting the example of a holistic approach by including the transformative power of children. Act2Gether consists of:

- GetherLand: Gatherings for all ages to play with the serious challenges in our world today
- GetherLearn: Training that helps children and adults to be better partners
- GetherLink: Online Platform for a global community sharing stories of partnership

**Learning for Well-Being Foundation (L4WB-F)**

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- GetherLink: Online Platform for a global community sharing stories of partnership
society for education, both policymaking and practice, bringing new and much appreciated insights for Member State representatives. The future generation of the EU’s Education and Training 2020 framework could further facilitate such exchanges and encourage the Member States to mainstream them into their policies on education, training and lifelong learning. This is echoed by the European Parliament in its explicit call to the Commission to “build closer cooperation and dialogue with representatives of civil society, recognising that their experience on the ground is essential to achieving the ET2020 goals”.

At the national level, the tradition of cooperation between formal, non-formal and informal learning environments varies greatly from one Member State to another and often lacks structure or strategic vision. A possible remedy which LLP has explored and conducted preliminary research on is the establishment of "national lifelong learning platforms”, in other words, cross-sectoral alliances of stakeholders in the field of education, training and skills to support the implementation of national lifelong learning strategies. This resonates with the work carried out by the OECD on developing national initiatives to elaborate skills strategies by involving a wide range of stakeholders, policy-makers, experts, civil society, etc. Depending on the national context, there could also be such platforms at the regional level. Overall, they would serve as a useful focal point for policymakers when conducting consultations, gathering expertise in how to adapt policies and resources to the diversity of learning environments while also, and just as importantly, supporting deeper cooperation and knowledge transfer among them. A pilot scheme could be funded through the European Social Fund or its successor programme.

A further area of cooperation which would bring significant innovation to learning environments concerns coordination at the policy level between different national ministries and Directorate-Generals of the European Commission. Education, training and lifelong learning are not only directly beneficial in themselves for individuals' well-being and personal development but are crucial enablers for social inclusion, culture, health, employment, research, innovation, digital transformation and sustainable development. This transversal value of learning merits a more integrated policy approach where experts and policymakers from different departments regularly communicate with and learn from each other. Such a systems approach is even adopted and recommended by international institutions. They clearly see value in its potential to strengthen education systems through evidence-based policy-making. To support its implementation this integrated policy approach should go hand in hand with a greater flexible allocation of resources to lifelong learning in all its diversity across funding programmes at the national and European level, including in the EU budget for 2021-2027.

LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM (LLLP)
The LLL-HUB project aimed to create a feeling of shared responsibility on EU lifelong learning strategies through a multilateral network and ownership among relevant stakeholders (Europe 2020 headline targets, ET2020, European Semester Country-Specific Recommendations...). This was achieved by fostering national and transnational public spaces for debates and mutual policy learning, involving the grassroots level in a genuine reflection with decision-makers on the design and implementation of coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies.

BEST PRACTICE

Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.
OECD, Nationals SKills Strategies
57  OECD, Nationals SKills Strategies
59 The World Bank developed the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), an initiative to produce comparative data and knowledge on education policies and institutions, with the aim of helping countries systematically strengthen their education systems and the ultimate goal of promoting Learning for All.
Lifelong Learning Platform, MFF Reaction.
55  European Parliament 2016 report on the follow-up of the Common Values and Inclusive Education PLA on cooperation at the national level between different national ministries and Directorate-Generals of the European Commission.
57  OECD, Nationals SKills Strategies
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The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella that gathers 42 European organisations active in the field of education, training and youth. Currently these networks represent more than 50,000 educational institutions and associations covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Their members reach out to several millions of beneficiaries.

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