EPR Briefing
The Union of Skills Strategy

Introduction

This Briefing aims to help readers navigate the European Commission's Communication on the Union of Skills[1] (hereafter referred to as the Union of Skills), and its subsequent policy deliverables. This document, published in March 2025 by the European Commission, presents an EU-level strategy "to support the development of quality, inclusive and adaptable education, training and skills systems to increase the EU's competitiveness".

This Briefing firstly presents the context under which the Union of Skills was developed and published. Then, it provides an analysis of its four components, and each component's key deliverables. Finally, the Briefing describes the next steps in the delivery of the strategy.

Context: The Union of Skills

The Union of Skills is a strategy that stems from the **Commission Communication "A Competitiveness Compass for the EU"**[2] (hereafter referred to as the Competitiveness Compass). The Competitiveness Compass was the European Commission's first major initiative of the mandate[3], drafted to steer the Commission's work throughout 2024-2029, and it positions competitiveness at the heart of EU policy for this period. The Competitiveness Compass underlines that a key enabler to foster EU Competitiveness is **promoting skills and quality jobs while ensuring social fairness** and proposes the Union of Skills as one of the flagship initiatives to achieve this.

The Union of Skills builds on existing actions such as the **European Education Area**[4], the **European Skills Agenda**[5] and the **European Research Area**[6]. Moreover, it is interlinked with other Competitiveness Compass flagship initiatives, such as the **Quality Jobs Roadmap**[7], which aims to foster quality jobs in a competitive economy.

The Union of Skills is aligned with the **European Pillar of Social Rights**[8], in particular with Principle 1 on education, training and life-long learning. Additionally, the Union of Skills is built on the basis of

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[1] European Commission, *Communication "The Union of Skills",* 2025, available here.

[2] European Commission, *Communication "A Competitiveness Compass for the EU"*, 2025, available here.

[3] The Competitiveness Compass aimed to propose actions to implement the recommendations set by the Draghi Report, drafted upon the request of European Commission President, Ursula Von der Leyen, and which underlined the challenges of EU industry and the EU Single Market face. More information about the Draghi Report is available here.

[4] Council of the European Union, Council Resolution on the governance structure of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–2030), Official Journal of the European Union C 497, 2021, available here.

[5] European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *European Skills Agenda*, 2020, available here.

[6] European Commission, *European Research Area*, n.d., available here.

[7] European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *Quality Jobs Roadmap Communication*, 2025, available here.

[8] European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan,* 2021, available here.

Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union[9], underlining that, when it comes to education and Vocational Education and Training (VET), the EU must respect the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and VET and the organisation of education and VET systems.

Notably, the Union of Skills acknowledges **several gaps in the EU**, which it aims to tackle:

- Europe does not produce enough skilled graduates from higher education and vocational education and training. This problem starts at school, with Europeans lagging behind in basic skills (i.e. literacy, mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship)
- Europe does not support enough people to upskill or reskill throughout their working lives.
- In the global competition for talent, Europe struggles to be an attractive destination.
- Skills shortages are often exacerbated in less developed, remote and outermost regions.
- Moreover, **persons with disabilities or with a migrant background often encounter additional obstacles in developing their skills, resulting in untapped potential in the EU labour force.**
- Training systems in Europe are staying behind within the rapid technological transformations and changing skills needed for the decarbonization of the economy and to reduce the dependencies in strategic sectors. It also notes that, even with Member States' increased efforts on education and skills, the challenges are too great and urgent to be tackled by Member States alone.

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[9] *Treaty of the functioning of the European Union*, 2012, available here.

The four components of the Union of Skills

To tackle the abovementioned gaps, the Union of Skills sets four components under which initiatives will be developed and implemented.

1. Building skills for quality jobs and lives

The first strand of the Union of skills is **building skills for quality jobs and lives through a strong educational foundation, with an inclusive lifelong learning approach**. It aims to tackle the decline of basic skills, including digital skills, of European young people; address gender disparities, especially in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) sector; and making the teaching profession more attractive and retaining talent. This first strand includes **two sets of key targets**.

Basic Skills: The first set of targets states that **by 2030**, the share of **underachievement** in literacy, mathematics, science and digital skills should be **less than 15%,** whereas the share of **top performance** in literacy, mathematics and science should be **at least 15%.** To achieve the first set of targets, the Union of Skills includes two key deliverables, available in Table 1.

Table 1 – Union of Skills deliverables to strengthen Basic Skills

Estimated date of publication	Deliverable	Description
5 March 2025 (published)	**Action Plan on Basic Skills**	This Action Plains aims to step up the support for basic literacy, mathematics, science, digital skills and citizenship.
2026	**Basic Skills Support Scheme (pilot)**	The Commission will pilot a Basic Skills Support Scheme working with interested Member States on a framework of intervention measures, supported with EU funding, for children and young people struggling to acquire basic skills. Measures may include: early identification mechanisms and regular monitoring of basic skills and offers; the development of basic skills improvement plans at school level; mainstreaming basic literacy and digital skills teaching in initial teacher education; professional development opportunities for teachers in school and vocational education, with focus on pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities; creating specialist roles, such as school mediators and home school liaison officers programmes to support parents in encouraging their children's learning; and partnerships and collaboration between regional and local authorities, educational agencies, professionals, businesses and other stakeholders.

The **Action Plan on Basic Skills**[10] proposes short- to medium-term steps for the EU and Member States to provide solutions to improve basic skills – described as literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship – and promote excellence, from early years to school education and adult learning. It proposes actions in three key areas:

1. **Boosting basic skills teaching and learning**, by piloting a Basic Skills Support Scheme (see information in Table 1), the first European School Alliances, and approaches to use Artificial

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[10] European Commission, *Action Plan on Basic Skills Communication*, 2025, available here.

Intelligence (AI) systems to develop learning pathways in basic skills; and developing guidelines for curriculum development, guidelines and best practices on advancing the assessment of digital skills in 2026, guidelines on enhancing basic skills in VET, and a toolkit for basic skills in apprenticeships.

2. **Supporting educators,** by setting out an EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda (see Table 2), piloting a mentoring system for early career teachers in all subjects, and promoting job shadowing for education policymakers, EU online communities of educators, and high-quality learning material on digital skills.

3. **Enabling supportive environments** by engaging volunteers under the European Solidarity Corps for mentoring tutoring activities for underachieving children and adults, launching an EU literacy coalition, and organising peer-learning activities for Member States on innovative community learning spaces.

➢ <u>EPR perspective:</u> With many EPR members providing Vocational Rehabilitation, and Vocational Education and Training services, EPR will continue monitoring and contributing to the actions within the Action Plan on Basic Skills, to fully make use of these tools to support persons with disabilities enhance their basic skills.

STEM Education: The second strand of key targets is related to the enrolment in STEM, and states that by 2030:

- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields in initial medium-level VET should be at least 45%, with at least 1 out of every 4 students female.
- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields at tertiary level should be at least 32%, with at least 2 out of 5 students female.
- the share of students enrolled in ICT PhD programmes should be at least 5%, with at least 1 out of every 3 students female.

To achieve these targets, the European Commission published on 5 March 2025 the **STEM Education Strategic Plan**[11], which proposes measures in order to:

- **Anchor STEM as a strategic pillar** in the EU's education and skills policy.
- **Build a stronger and more inclusive STEM talent pipeline**, by developing by 2026 a STEM competence framework, piloting STEM education centres, attracting more students from diverse backgrounds to STEM studies in secondary, VET and tertiary education, and addressing employers' needs in VET and tertiary education.
- **Advancing women in STEM** by attracting girls and women to STEM through a new 'Girls go STEM' initiative, launch 'STEM Futures' to identify and share inclusive and successful STEM education practices, and showcasing and exchanges good practices on attracting and supporting women and girls in STEM apprenticeships through the European Alliance for Apprenticeships.

Other key deliverables of the first strand of the Union of Skills can be found in Table 2.

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[11] European Commission, *STEM Education Strategic Plan Communication*, 2025, available here.

Table 2 – Other key deliverables of the Union of Skill's first strand

Estimated date of publication	Deliverable	Description
Q4 2025 (published)	**Update of Digital Competence Framework**	The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)[12] has been updated with the publication of DigComp 3.0[13], the fifth Edition of the framework taking into account new technological developments since 2022, including AI.
Q3 2026	**2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills**	Based on a review of the Digital Education Action Plan[14], the Commission will present a 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills to promote equal access to digital education for all.
2026	**AI in education initiative**	This initiative will lay down an AI literacy framework and support the integration of AI in education and training provision, addressing the need for online safety and digital well-being, tackling disinformation and misinformation, while promoting innovation in education.
2026	**EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda**	It will support Member States tackle teaching shortages, improving teachers' working conditions, and improving career prospects.
2026	**European Strategy for vocational education and training (VET)**	The VET Strategy will focus on addressing skills shortages and mismatches by enhancing the attractiveness, quality and labour market relevance of VET and supporting mobility and internationalisation. It will also address gender and other stereotypes in making study choices and build on benefits and labour market outcomes of VET so that VET becomes an equally valued learning pathway as higher education, including for women.
2027	**Initiative increasing accessibility of higher education**	The initiative aims to increase accessibility of higher education to a wider range of learners and ages – to meet the increasing demand for higher education graduates in the labour market, a trend that is forecasted to sharply accentuate with future jobs – and promote support services for students.

➢ <u>EPR Perspective:</u> The first three deliverables on Table 2 will be important reference documents for services supporting persons with disabilities acquire digital skills, and to increase their AI literacy. EPR will track progress of the 2030 digital education and skills roadmap and AI in education initiative, to identify their applicability for EPR members. EPR will also closely follow developments related to the remaining three initiatives, also key for vocational rehabilitation and VET services, and which present promising potential to increase the accessibility and inclusion in VET and higher education.

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[12] The Digital Competence Framework is a model developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre that defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be digitally competent for daily life, participation in society, working and learning.

[13] European Commission: Joint Research Centre, *DigComp 3.0 – European Digital Competence Framework*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, available here.

[14] More information about the Digital Education Action Plan is available here.

2. Regular upskilling and re-skilling

The second strand of the Union of Skills focuses on ensuring the upskilling and re-skilling of EU citizens in view of constant transformations of the labour market, thus facilitating job-to-job transitions.

Table 3 – Key deliverables of the Union of Skill's second strand

Estimated date of publication	Deliverable	Description
2025	**Pilot of a Skills Guarantee for workers**	The Skills Guarantee for workers aims to ensure that workers in sectors undergoing restructuring or at risk of unemployment, have the opportunity to further develop their careers in other sectors and/or companies. By promoting their upskilling and reskilling, in line with relevant national, regional and/or sectoral transition strategies, the Skills Guarantee will support their employment prospects and job security.
Q4 2026	**Review of General Block Exemption Regulation**	The European Commission will consider if state aid rules applicable to training need to be updated to provide better incentives for industry, including the social economy, to invest in upskilling and reskilling of workers.
2026	**Review and roll-out of targeted EU Skills Academies**	A review will be made of existing EU Skills Academies to assess their success factors. Based on this analysis, a targeted number of academies will be rolled out, building on the most successful models, to deliver the skills needed by industry for the green and digital transition and the Clean Industrial Deal.
2030	**Expand the European Alliance for Apprenticeships**	The European Commission has set the goal of reaching 700 pledges to the European Alliance for Apprenticeships by 2030, including people outside the labour market and apprenticeships for adults to upskill and reskill.

➢ <u>EPR Perspective:</u> As the deliverables in Table 3 are developed, it will be key to analyse how they may apply to support the upskilling of workers with disabilities, and any potential synergies that may be found with service providers.

3. Enhancing the free movement of workers

The third strand of the Union of Skills aims to foster the circulation and free movement of workers and their skills and proposes initiatives such as:

- A **Skills Portability Initiative** by Q3 2026 to open up more opportunities for workers and businesses to fully capture the potential of the single market. First, the European Commission will explore the need for a potential legislative proposal to address barriers to the mobility of workers, including in unregulated professions. Secondly, it will develop actions to further facilitate, expand and modernise recognition processes for regulated professions, in particular by leveraging digital tools, building on the Implementation Report of the Professional Qualifications Directive.
- ➢ <u>EPR Perspective:</u> During the development of this initiative, it will be important evaluate in which ways this initiative may support the mobility of workers with disabilities and their skills.

- Between 2025 and 2026, the European Commission will **pilot a European VET Diploma**, supported by Erasmus+. The diploma could cover initial VET at upper-secondary and post-secondary level.

➢ EPR Perspective: EPR will track the result of this pilot, to understand the potential practical application for EPR members of such a European VET diploma.

- Develop a **common European framework for the automatic recognition of study qualifications and learning periods abroad** in school, VET and higher education, exploring the possibility of EU accession to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention)[15].

➢ EPR Perspective: This initiative will be of particular interest for EPR members organising exchanges abroad for their clients and service users, speeding up the process of recognition of learning periods abroad.

4. Attracting, developing and retaining talent

The fourth strand of the union of skills focuses on attracting and retaining skills from third countries to address skill shortages and develop top talent in Europe. Deliverables for this strand include the launch of an **EU Talent Pool**, an EU-wide platform to facilitate international recruitment of third-country jobseekers residing outside the EU; a **new Visa Strategy** including measures to support the arrival of students, researchers and trained workers from third countries; a **revision of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion** to better support integration and family reunification for skilled workers; and the launch of **Multipurpose Legal Gateway Offices**, set up jointly with interested Member States to provide additional support to employers in finding the skills they need, in particular in sectors of shared interest (e.g. construction, care, ICT, transport, bioeconomy, tourism, agriculture or culture).

Investing in education and skills

With regards to funding, it is important to note that the Union of Skills foresees investment in education and skills through public and private investment. For instance, the **current EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027), allocates investment in education and skills** through programmes such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which supports skills with EUR 42 billion, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (EUR 67.7 billion for both human capital investment and infrastructure), European Regional Development Fund (EUR 8.7 billion), Erasmus+ (EUR 26.1 billion), Just Transition Fund (EUR 2.3 billion) and InvestEU (leveraging over EUR 1 billion). It also underlines the importance for **Member States to take advantage of the mid-term review of the cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027** to reinforce their investments on education and skills, in support to ambitious reforms to implement the Union of Skills[16].

It also recalls the need for Member States and the private sector to invest more in education, training, upskilling and re-skilling by fully using the possibilities under InvestEU and a new "EU

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[15] Council of Europe, *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, 1997, available here.

[16] On 1 April 2025, the European Commission published the Communication 'A modernized Cohesion policy: the mid-term review' alongside two legislative proposals that amend : (i) the regulations on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund (JTF), and (ii) the regulation on the European Social Fund+ (Communication available here). The two legislative acts adopted in September 2025 and published in the Official Journal of the European Union are available here, and here.

Invest in Talent platform", setting up reforms and investments in education, training and re-skilling or making appropriate use for financing possibilities for education and training offered by the ESF+.

Union of Skills Governance

The Union of Skills will be aligned to the new **steering mechanism** for competitiveness, the Competitiveness Coordination Tool[17], as outlined in the Competitiveness Compass, which will allow to integrate swiftly and effectively the issues pertaining to skills, including in the concrete sectors identified as critical to European competitiveness.

Through a newly created **European Skills Intelligence Observatory**, the Commission aims to provide strategic data and foresight regarding skills (current and future) stocks, use and needs, in concrete sectors and regions, and the performance of education and training systems. This timely data reporting will allow to have early warning alerts regarding skills shortages in critical or strategic sectors for the EU.

Moreover, a **European Skills High-Level Board** will bring together the key stakeholders, including business leaders, education and training providers, and social partners to provide comprehensive, cross-sectoral insights and guidance on skills to the EU policy makers. The Board will support the work of the Commission towards an **EU-27 Recommendation on human capital[18]** and on the country-specific recommendations[19] on education and skills in the **European Semester** cycle.

Union of Skills upcoming actions

On 21 October 2025, the European Commission published the Commission Work Programme for 2026[20] which specifies the new initiatives that the European Commission will be published during the year 2026.

In this document, the European Commission shares they will work on two packages containing deliverables from the Union of Skill's four strands.

- On the one hand, it proposes an **Education Package**, which includes the development of the **European School Alliances**, to increase pupil and teacher mobility and cross-border cooperation between schools and school authorities; the piloting of the **Basic Skills Support Scheme**; as well as the **2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills**, all by Q3 2026.
- On the other hand, it proposes a **Fair Labour Mobility Package**, which includes, within other proposals, the legislative proposal for a **Skills Portability Initiative** by Q3 2026. On 5 December 2025, the European Commission opened a call for evidence[21] on the Skills Portability Initiative to collect stakeholders' input to draft the initiative.

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[17] The European Commission will propose a Competitiveness Coordination Tool, in order to act together with Member States on common competitiveness priorities in selected key areas and projects deemed of strategic importance and of common European interest. More information available here and here.

[18] The European Commission proposed in November 2025 a Council Recommendation on Human Capital in the European Union, available here. The new Recommendation is addressed to all 27 Member States and calls for urgent actions to tackle human capital-related structural challenges that can damage the EU's competitiveness.

[19] More information on the European Semester's role in education and skills available here.

[20] European Commission, *Commission work programme 2026 – Europe's Independence Moment*, 2025, available here.

[21] European Commission, *Skills portability – facilitating worker mobility across the EU through skills transparency and digitalisation – call for evidence*, 2025, available here.

➢ <u>EPR perspective:</u> EPR will monitor and provide input on the deliverables of the Education and the Labour Mobility Packages, including the Basic Skills Support Scheme, the 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills, and the Skills Portability Initiative.

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