



# Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation

Webinar Background Note

Community for Educational Innovation – CEI

15/09/2026

# BACKGROUND NOTE

## Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation

Thematic Strand 4: Lifelong learning for an innovative workforce

The [Community for Educational Innovation \(CEI\)](#) webinars bring together education, research, industry, civil society and public sector stakeholders to share good practices and discuss innovation in education. These sessions focus on strategic competence development to boost student success and advance education and training systems, aligning with the Communication of the European Commission on the [Union of Skills](#).

This document outlines the background and key questions for the upcoming Webinar [Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation](#) on 15 September 2026.

Europe's labour market faces persistent shortages and changing skills needs. In 2022, the job vacancy rate reached 2.9%, more than twice the 1.3% recorded in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Demand was concentrated in sectors such as healthcare, STEM and construction and was reinforced by the green and digital transitions.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, participation in adult learning activities remains uneven, particularly among adults with low qualifications.<sup>3</sup> The *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*<sup>4</sup> sets the target that at least 60% of adults should participate in training every year by 2030.

**Lifelong learning** supports Europe's innovation and competitiveness by helping people develop future-oriented skills and adapt to technological and labour-market change.<sup>5</sup> **Flexible learning pathways** can help widen access to upskilling and reskilling by allowing learners to "enter, re-enter and combine education, training and learning based on their needs and circumstances".<sup>6</sup> **Flexibility** provides learners with a greater choice in "how, when and where they learn"<sup>7</sup> through modular provision, flexible curricula, different entry points and opportunities to learn at an individual pace. **Permeability**, in contrast, focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. *Employment and social developments in Europe 2023: Addressing labour shortages and skills gaps in the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2023 <https://doi.org/10.2767/089698>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 56

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission. *The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*, 2021 [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

<sup>5</sup> *Union of skills*, [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en)

<sup>6</sup> Cedefop. *Transparency and transferability of learning outcomes: a 20-year journey: Analysis of developments at European and national level*. Cedefop research paper. Publications Office of the European Union, 2024 <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/3413866>

<sup>7</sup> Cedefop. *Shaping the future of lifelong learning: policy scenarios for 2040: Transparency and transferability of learning outcomes*. Cedefop research paper. Publications Office of the European Union, 2026. DOI:10.2801/7206784 <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5619>

“the interconnection between various learning pathways and the seamless recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes”.<sup>8</sup> Qualifications frameworks, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, and stackable micro-credentials help connect flexibility with permeability.

## EU Policy Framework for flexible learning pathways

Flexible learning pathways form part of the EU’s broader approach to lifelong learning. The *strategic framework for the European Education Area 2021–2030*<sup>9</sup> applies an inclusive, holistic and lifelong-learning perspective across all contexts and levels of education and training. The *Union of Skills*<sup>10</sup>, launched in 2025, connects this approach with competitiveness and quality employment. It focuses on regular upskilling and reskilling and on the circulation and portability of skills across the EU.

The *Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021–2030*<sup>11</sup> translates this direction into measures for adult learners. It supports flexible and accessible provision through “evening classes, part-time education, distance and blended learning”<sup>12</sup>, and short courses leading to micro-credentials. The *2020 Council Recommendation on vocational education and training*<sup>13</sup> applies the same principles to Vocational Education and Training (VET). It promotes agile provision that responds to labour-market change, flexible and modular pathways, and progression within VET and between VET, general education and higher education.<sup>14</sup>

Several Council Recommendations translate this policy direction into measures for access, recognition and progression:

- **The 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning**<sup>15</sup> supports the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning acquired outside formal programmes. Validation

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), 2021/C 66/01, 26 February 2021. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj%3AJOC\\_2021\\_066\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj%3AJOC_2021_066_R_0001)

<sup>10</sup> *Union of skills*, [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en)

<sup>11</sup> Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021–2030 2021/C 504/02, ST/14485/2021/INIT, 14 December 2021. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2021\\_504\\_R\\_0002](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2021_504_R_0002)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. Official Journal of the European Union, C 417, OJ C 417, 24 November 2020. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2020\\_417\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2020_417_R_0001)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, OJ C 398, 20 December 2012. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2012\\_398\\_R\\_0001\\_01](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2012_398_R_0001_01)



may support admission, credits, exemptions or qualifications, depending on national and institutional arrangements.<sup>16</sup>

- **The 2016 Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways**<sup>17</sup> sets out a three-stage route for adults with low levels of skills or qualifications. It combines a skills assessment, a tailored learning offer, and validation and recognition.
- **The 2022 Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials**<sup>18</sup> establishes a common definition, standard elements and principles for quality, transparency, recognition, portability and stackability across providers and countries.
- **The 2022 Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation**<sup>19</sup> addresses barriers to joint provision, including joint programmes and micro-credentials offered across institutions and countries.
- **The 2025 Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education**<sup>20</sup> supports simpler quality assurance for transnational provision and stronger recognition of qualifications and learning periods across higher education systems.

## The role of higher education institutions and VET providers

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and VET providers can support flexible learning pathways by offering micro-credentials,<sup>21</sup> recognising prior learning<sup>22</sup> and adapting provision to adults who combine study with work or other responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> HEIs may also offer flexible study modes, such as microdegree programmes and open education,<sup>24</sup> and cross-border learning through *European Universities alliances*.<sup>25</sup> VET providers may organise learning into occupational units and combine it with

<sup>16</sup> Cedefop. *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Publications Office, Luxembourg, 2023a. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/389827>

<sup>17</sup> Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults, OJ C 484, 19 December 2016. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2016_484_R_0001)

<sup>18</sup> Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability 2022/C 243/02, ST/9790/2022/INIT, 16 June 2022. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2022\\_243\\_R\\_0002](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2022_243_R_0002)

<sup>19</sup> Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation 2022/C 160/01, ST/7937/2022/INIT, 5 April 2022. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2022\\_160\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2022_160_R_0001)

<sup>20</sup> Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, ST/8773/2025/INIT, 12 May 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/3006/oj/eng>

<sup>21</sup> Orr, D., Pupinis, M., & Kirdulytė, G. *Towards a European approach to micro-credentials*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Cedefop, 2023a.

<sup>23</sup> Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021–2030.

<sup>24</sup> Sanchez Barrioluengo, M., *Micro-credentials in higher education*, Biagi, F. and Di Pietro, G. (editors), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/0157920>

<sup>25</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, PPMI, Grumbinaite, I., Colus, F. and Buitrago Carvajal, H., *Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/32313>

apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning.<sup>26</sup> *Centres of Vocational Excellence*<sup>27</sup> can reinforce this role by bringing providers, employers and regional actors together to develop flexible provision that responds to labour-market needs.

HEIs and VET providers require clear rules on how learners can accumulate and transfer learning,<sup>28</sup> use prior learning for admission, credit or exemptions,<sup>29</sup> and gain partial or full qualifications through validated non-formal and informal learning.<sup>30</sup> Cross-border provision also requires arrangements for sharing courses and recognising learning across institutions.<sup>31</sup>

This work requires coordination across academic departments, admissions, learner support and quality assurance.<sup>32</sup> Providers also need transparent learning outcomes<sup>33</sup>, guidance for learners throughout recognition and progression processes,<sup>34</sup> employer cooperation to align provision with workforce needs,<sup>35</sup> and digital systems that record, share and verify learning achievements.<sup>36</sup> The *European Digital Credentials for Learning* can support this by allowing providers to issue verifiable records that learners can store and share, improving the transparency and portability of learning achievements. HEIs can also draw on ECTS<sup>37</sup> to support credit accumulation, transfer and recognition.

### Challenges for higher education and VET

Several obstacles continue to limit the implementation of flexible learning pathways:

- **Recognition and quality assurance remain uneven.** Many arrangements still centre on full programmes and require adaptation for short and stackable

<sup>26</sup> Orr et al. (2020).

<sup>27</sup> *Centres of Vocational Excellence*. [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/centres-vocational-excellence_en)

<sup>28</sup> Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.

<sup>29</sup> Cedefop, 2023a.

<sup>30</sup> Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

<sup>31</sup> Orr et al. (2020)

<sup>32</sup> Cedefop, 2023a.

<sup>33</sup> Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability 2022/C 243/02

<sup>34</sup> Cedefop, 2023a.

<sup>35</sup> Sánchez Barrioluengo et al., 2025

<sup>36</sup> Cedefop, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system>



learning.<sup>38</sup> Quality-assurance practices also vary across providers and settings, increasing fragmentation.<sup>39</sup>

- **Credential diversity weakens transparency and trust.** Variation in terminology, design, providers and quality-assurance practices makes credentials harder for learners and employers to compare and assess.<sup>40,41</sup>
- **Participation remains unequal.** In 2022, 19.8% of adults with tertiary education participated in learning, compared with 4.7% of adults with low educational attainment.<sup>42</sup> Flexible provision therefore needs targeted guidance, outreach and support to reach groups with lower participation.<sup>43</sup>
- **Institutional capacity is under pressure.** Short-form provision places additional demands on funding, staff capacity, internal procedures and digital systems, which institutions may need to adapt to support micro-credentials.<sup>44</sup>
- **Fragmentation limits access and progression.** Separate arrangements in VET and higher education restrict movement across sectors,<sup>45</sup> while unclear information on recognition and stacking makes pathways harder to navigate.<sup>46</sup>

### Webinar ‘Creating Flexible Pathways for Innovation’

This webinar examines how higher education institutions and VET providers can design flexible learning pathways that respond to diverse learner needs and changing labour-market demands. It will explore practical approaches such as recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials, open studies and cross-institutional provision. Key questions guiding the discussion will include:

- How can national frameworks support consistent recognition of prior learning across institutions and use it to facilitate access, credit and progression?
- How can short and modular learning opportunities be accumulated, transferred or combined into wider learning pathways?

<sup>38</sup> Orr et al. (2020)

<sup>39</sup> Cedefop, *Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users*. Publications Office, Luxembourg, 2023b. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/141643>

<sup>40</sup> Orr et al. (2020)

<sup>41</sup> Cedefop, 2023b.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Cedefop, 2023b.

<sup>44</sup> Orr et al. (2020)

<sup>45</sup> Cedefop. *Permeable education and training systems: Reducing barriers and increasing opportunity* (Briefing note No. 9072). Publications Office of the European Union, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Cedefop, 2023b.

- What institutional arrangements are needed to ensure that flexible provision remains accessible, recognised and trusted across providers, sectors and countries?

This webinar is part of the 'Thematic Strand 4: Lifelong learning for an innovative workforce'. It also includes the webinars [Partnerships for Skills – Building Bridges Across Sectors](#) (October 14, 15:30 CET) and [Empowering Learners for Workforce Transitions](#) (December 02, 10:30 CET).