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Adult Education as a Policy Priority: An Overview of EU Initiatives and The Case of The Union of Skills

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Introduction

The evolution of adult education and its empirical implications for workers' skills and competences are gaining importance in the current European context for several reasons.

First, as modern economies increasingly rely on knowledge, learning, and innovation, human capital development has become central to competitiveness (Hall, 2022; Lundvall, 1992).

From a historical perspective, after World War II policy emphasis was centered on fostering initial skills formation during early life stages. Today, instead, the challenge extends to lifelong learning, driven by rapid technological advances like automation, digitalization, and artificial intelligence (AI). These innovations are strongly transforming international labor markets by reshaping occupational structures and increasing the demand for new and adaptable skill sets, thereby accelerating the risk of skill obsolescence among workers (OECD, 2021).

The phenomenon of skill obsolescence arises when technological and organizational change alters the demand for task-specific competencies, thereby reducing the value of existing human capital and increasing the risk of labor market disadvantage for affected workers (Allen & De Grip, 2012): in recent years, supporting workers' continuous education and training has become a relevant preventive approach to avoid it. It also brings broader economic benefits, such as enhancing firms' innovative capabilities: innovation, indeed, increasingly depends on the continuous upskilling process across the workforce, rather than solely on formal research and development (R&D) activities (Arundel et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 2007; Lorenz et al., 2016).

Second, demographic shifts, particularly declining fertility rates, are reducing the share of young cohorts entering the labor force (OECD, 2023). This demographic trend challenges traditional labor market adjustment strategies, as the availability of younger workers to substitute the retiring ones is declining (OECD, 2023). Consequently, traditional education policies must adapt to longer working lives by supporting older workers through continuous skill development, serving as a preventive measure to sustain long-term employment and productivity (OECD, 2019; Roodhouse & Mumford, 2010; Walker, 2015).

Third, policies promoting adult education and training are gaining importance as the traditional linear life-course model - characterized by initial education, followed by stable employment and eventual retirement - is no longer applicable for many individuals in high-income economies (OECD, 2019). Contemporary working lives are increasingly characterized by non-linear trajectories: career interruptions, job mobility, part-time employment, and extended participation in later life (Istance, 2020; Kasworm, 2020).

Building on these shifts and the resulting changes in labor market needs, this Research Paper examines the ongoing debate on policies supporting adult education and training - encompassing both direct state interventions and publicly funded indirect initiatives - which specifically target

the category of workers. In this study, these measures are referred to as *adult education policies for workers* (AEPWs).

The paper first presents selected insights from a systematic review of the literature on AEPWs published over the past twenty-five years, which serves as an introductory foundation. It then adopts a European Union-centered perspective to examine recent initiatives shaping adult education policy. More specifically, it begins with a brief overview of relevant measures promoted within the EU, before moving to an in-depth analysis of the Union of Skills, the von der Leyen Commission's flagship policy package in this field.

Drawing on document analysis and interviews (see Annex A), the paper offers an exploratory examination of this initiative, which is treated as a particularly illustrative case for understanding the current configuration of EU action in adult education, its stated objectives, and its main limitations.

1. The Complex Nature of Adult Education Policies for Workers

The field of adult education has often been described as a “grey policy domain”, marked by blurred boundaries, multiple stakeholder claims and persistent tensions between normative aspirations and operational clarity (Field, 2012). Concepts such as lifelong learning, adult education, continuing vocational training, upskilling, and reskilling do not refer to a single policy object; rather, they have historically adapted to changing political, institutional, and economic agendas.

This semantic plasticity has allowed adult learning to remain highly salient across different policy cycles, moving from a humanistic and sometimes radical vision of continuing education beyond employment status to a strategic pillar of economic competitiveness, employability, and social policy.

However, this expansion has not produced definitional convergence. Instead, the field remains characterized by what Field (2012) calls a form of *controlled incoherence*: a strategic vagueness that favors the broad adoption of the lifelong learning paradigm, but makes it more difficult to precisely delimit objects, tools, and beneficiaries of AEPWs.

A conventional starting point for defining the field is the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2017). This tripartite model is widely used in European and international frameworks, but its empirical application remains unstable, since these categories frequently overlap in practice (Lorenz et al., 2016).

Different institutional frameworks have attempted to stabilize this definitional plurality (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2023; OECD, 2010, 2019), although often by expanding rather than narrowing the scope of lifelong learning. UNESCO, for example, defines adult learning through five broad elements: all ages, all education levels, all learning modalities, all learning spaces, and all learning purposes (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). The OECD Skills Outlook further places adult workers' learning at the center of labor-market resilience, digital transformation, demographic ageing, and social equity strategies, explicitly linking it to transversal competences, workplace adaptability and continuous upskilling (OECD, 2021).

In parallel, the literature on continuing professional development and education distinguishes learner-driven professional growth from regulated credential maintenance (Friedman, 2023). These distinctions add analytical precision but also confirm that the AEPWs overarching framework remains porous. Indeed, this definitional elasticity is closely connected to a broader policy challenge: AEPWs operate at the intersection of multiple policy domains -including education and vocational education and training (VET), active labor-market policy, industrial policy, competitiveness, and social inclusion. As a result, their governance is fragmented, involving a wide range of stakeholders, and contributing to the implementation of initiatives that are frequently less effective than anticipated.

Two main theoretical perspectives have explained why and how such policies develop. Human Capital Theory by Becker (1962, 1970), conceptualizes individuals and firms as rational actors investing in knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to increase productivity and earnings.

According to this perspective, training decisions depend on expected returns and opportunity costs. Firms are more likely to invest in firm-specific skills, where the risk of poaching is lower, while general skills tend to generate collective action problems and underinvestment due to externalities, unless public policies or institutional arrangements intervene.

Institutional approaches, by contrast, argue that AEPWs cannot be understood through economic calculation alone, since they are shaped by labor-market regulations, welfare-state arrangements, collective bargaining systems, trade unions, employer associations and education systems (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011; Culpepper & Thelen, 2008; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hall & Thelen, 2008; Iversen & Stephens, 2008; Thelen, 2004).

In a sociological institutionalist perspective, this also means looking at how certain ideas, such as lifelong learning, become established as broadly legitimate policy norms, shaping the vocabulary and objectives through which adult education is discussed across different institutional settings (Barabasch et al., 2021; Jakobi, 2012).

Finally, the literature raises a crucial distributive question: whether AEPWs operate as a *second chance* or reinforce the so-called *Matthew Effects* (Kosyakova & Bills, 2021).

The first view sees adult education as a means to compensate for initial educational disadvantage and promote social mobility (Jarvis, 2007). The second emphasizes *cumulative advantage*, whereby those already endowed with higher education, stronger occupational positions and better resources are more likely to access further learning (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Shavit & Müller, 2003).

Most of the empirical studies analyzed tend to confirm the persistence of *Matthew Effects*, although their manifestations vary across different institutional contexts.

Participation in and access to AEPWs measures are generally higher among workers with more advantaged social backgrounds, higher levels of prior education and skills, higher occupational status, standard employment contracts, and employment in large firms or skill-intensive sectors (Cincinnati et al., 2016; Cruce & Hillman, 2012; Elman & O’Rand, 2007; Hallsten et al., 2011). On the contrary, older workers, low-skilled workers and those in non-standard employment are less likely to participate.

Strong union presence, collective bargaining, works councils, generous welfare arrangements and less stratified education systems can contribute to the mitigation of these inequalities. Moreover, gender effects are usually mediated by sector, employment form, care responsibilities and family-friendly policies (Dämmrich et al., 2015).

1.1. The Evolution of Policy Paradigms in Adult Education Policies for Workers Over Time

The overview of literature allows to identify three major historical phases in the development of AEPWs (Table 1). The first phase emerged in the post-WWII period, when these policies were primarily guided by a paradigm centered on promoting social justice and expanding opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The second phase, unfolding throughout the 1990s and 2000s, reflected a neo-liberal shift in which AEPWs increasingly adopted a paradigm focused on enhancing economic efficiency and national competitiveness. Finally, the most recent phase corresponds to the transition toward a knowledge-based economy and to the emergence of new social and labor-market challenges. During this last period, AEPWs have been reframed around a paradigm emphasizing socio-economic integration, balancing the pursuit of economic competitiveness with the goal of social inclusion.

Table 1. *Table 1. Shifting Paradigms in AEPWs Over Time.*

AEPWs Paradigm	Time	Main target	Goals	Policy actors and Governance	Policy tools
Social Justice	1960s-1980s	Workers / Citizens	Social integration Basic literacy Civic participation Equality Second chance	Government-led and trade unions-driven activities	Publicly funded universal access VET/education institutions
Efficiency and competitiveness	1980s-2000s	Firms	Economic efficiency Companies' competitiveness Competency-based training Skills formation aligned to firms needs	Employer-led training with governments as regulators / facilitators	Marketized and employer-funded models Emphasis on individual responsibility (Individual accounts)
Socio-economic Integration	2010s-2020s	The socio-economic system	'Hybrid' policies mixing social policy, labor market and industrial policy goals	Complex multi-actor models	Continuous training Integrated training

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration.

During these three phases, the specific goals, the design, and the meaning of policy tools have changed.

In most of the countries considered in this review, AEPWs were a laggard if compared to other social, educational, and labor market policies. Apart from the US, where traditions reach back to the nineteenth century (Boeren et al., 2020), most countries started to develop AEPWs only after WWII. The divergence between the US and Western Europe reflected broader welfare state trajectories: as Flora and Heidenheimer (1981) showed, the US invested historically relatively more in education than in social and labor market policies, while Western Europe moved in the opposite direction (Flora & Heidenheimer, 2017).

In the first phase, AEPWs were characterized by a focus on providing basic literacy and numeracy skills and on fostering civic participation. The main goal of these policies was to support the social integration of those groups that risked remaining behind during the post-WWII economic growth period.

For instance, in countries like Sweden, early initiatives such as Olof Palme's advocacy for *recurrent education* emphasized democratizing access, social justice, and the importance of providing working adults who missed out on earlier schooling a second chance to improve their skills through education (Gould, 2003).

From the 1980s onwards, neoliberal reforms led the way for the establishment of the second paradigm: AEPWs were reshaped around market-driven and demand-led approaches (Bowl, 2017; Desjardins, 2017). A global consensus was indeed emerging in which lifelong learning in general and AEPWs were intended as an essential way to respond to intensifying technological advance and to the growing pressures of globalization, including mass production and the demand for greater labor market flexibility (Holford & Milana, 2023).

Since the 2010s, this policy field entered a third phase of development, shaped by the pressures associated with the *twin* – green and digital – and demographic transitions.

These transformations implied that AEPWs increasingly represented a new synthesis between micro goals – such as supporting firms' competitiveness - and macro social integration goals (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2023). An example helps illustrate this paradigmatic shift: during the first and second phases, policies supporting training for older workers were primarily framed as instruments of social integration, aimed at encouraging firms to retain older employees for social inclusion purposes. In recent years, however, the growing impact of demographic change and the declining number of younger cohorts entering the labor market have progressively reframed the goal of the policy initiative. Providing older workers with reskilling opportunities is now viewed not only as a social inclusion objective, but also as a strategic response to persistent shortages of skilled labor and a means of sustaining firms' competitiveness.

The evolution of the AEPWs paradigm in the literature suggests a layering of policy logics, in which corrective measures coexist with existing instruments while pursuing broadly aligned objectives. This dynamic is particularly evident in the current European Union context, especially in light of the latest policy packages advanced by the von der Leyen Commission, which will be further examined in the second section of this work.

2. Adult Education Policies for Workers in the European Union: The Governance Framework for the Policy Mapping

AEPWs have undeniably gained growing research attention and policy significance within the European Union in recent decades (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2015). As outlined in the first section, this resurgence stems from the intersection of multiple pressures: profound transformation in European labor markets, increasing demands for economic competitiveness, and persistent need of promoting social inclusion.

The call to expand learning opportunities for adults, particularly workers facing rapid technological and organizational change, has also been formally embedded in the EU's recent normative agenda. A key milestone in this regard is the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2017). Its Action Plan, endorsed by the Council of the European Union in the 2021 Porto Declaration, established ambitious targets. Notably, the objective of ensuring that at least 60% of adults participate annually in education and training by 2030 (European Commission. Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2021), representing a significant increase compared to the earlier target of 47% by 2025, as set out in the 2021 Council Resolution on the European Education Area (Council of the European Union, 2021).

This objective was framed by policymakers as a strategic effort to reduce disparities in adult learning participation across Member States, aligning overall performance with levels already achieved in the most advanced European adult education systems. Nordic countries, for instance, consistently report the highest participation rates in adult learning in Europe, with figures reaching approximately 66.5% in countries such as Sweden (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2023).

In this context, the approach adopted by the European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen provides a useful lens through which to examine how these priorities were translated into policy initiatives across its two mandates, and how this process has been shaped by overlapping crises and institutional constraints.

Despite the ambitious programme initially set forth in 2019, the von der Leyen Commission faced several constraints that *de facto* reduced its capacity to act in an increasingly polarized political landscape and to broker compromises with other European institutional bodies, with particularly adverse implications for social policies aimed at promoting equality and inclusion (Abels & Mushaben, 2020).

Among the most significant constraints, external disruptions stemming from the global geopolitical context – referred to as *poly-crises*, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to the climate crisis, to the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East – have fostered a revival of

intergovernmentalist perspectives on European integration (Sabato et al., 2025). This led to a recurrent strengthening of the Council's role in EU governance and crisis management, often at the expense of the European Commission and Parliament, which were effectively confined to more limited, consultative, or implementing functions (Capati et al., 2025).

Moreover, geopolitical and economic tensions often oriented their action towards the strengthening of the international competitiveness of the European economy and its alignment with the *twin* transitions – decarbonization and digitalization – (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2025), diverging attention away from the urgent need to strengthen a more cohesive Social Europe (Sabato et al., 2025).

This general reorientation is reflected in the von der Leyen Commission's clearly defined approach to AEPWs, in which workers' human capital is increasingly embedded within a business-oriented and technocratic framework (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2025). At the micro level, adult education and training are viewed as individual investments aimed at enhancing future employability and income prospects (Becker, 1962, 1970); at the macro level, workers' skills are framed as a key driver of the EU's innovation capacity and economic adaptability (Draghi, 2024), emphasizing the productive returns dimension of social investment.

This approach is exemplified by the apparent downgrading of the Social Agenda under the second von der Leyen Commission when compared with the political programme initially envisaged. The initial exclusion of explicit references to social rights from the title of Commission Vice President Roxana Mînzatu raised significant concerns regarding the place of the Social Europe dimension within the broader political vision of the European Commission.

Despite this apparent downgrading, von der Leyen succeeded in preserving its room for manoeuvre in adult education policies. This was possible through the consolidation of an already established hybrid governance model, combining efficient hard and soft policy instruments: a necessity considering that education does not fall within the European Union's exclusive legislative competences (Abels & Mushaben, 2020). An example of this integration is a key component of the von der Leyen agenda: the Union of Skills policy package, which was presented in March 2025 as a catalyst for coordinating education, training, and employment policies across the EU (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2025). The Union of Skills is employed in this work as a case study, whose analysis draws on both documentary sources and interviews with key stakeholders involved in the promotion and implementation of AEPWs (Annex A).

Before turning to the case itself, however, it is necessary to provide a preliminary clarification in order to better situate the governance context within which the analysis is developed. Drawing on relevant literature and selected policy documents, the following section briefly outlines key transformations that have shaped EU approaches to AEPWs over the past twenty-five years. These developments have taken place within a broader governance framework that has also

influenced several other policy areas of non-exclusive EU competence (Alexiadou, 2007; Telling & Serapioni, 2019).

The general process of Europeanization of national policymaking can be understood as the progressive incorporation of EU-level rules, norms, and policy paradigms into domestic political and administrative systems (Radaelli, 2002). It entails a progressive adaptation of national and sub-national systems of governance arrangements to a European political center and European-wide norms (Olsen, 2002).

Europeanization was initially propelled by Member States' legal obligation to align with the *acquis communautaire*, the EU's comprehensive body of law, yet it has never reached a fully consolidated endpoint. Indeed, education policy - and adult education in particular - remains a core component of national political identity and welfare state arrangements (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023), despite the growing convergence in policy preferences among Member State elites regarding common standards and coordination (Hake, 1999).

Within the adult education policy context, also the parallel process of European integration – which can be understood as the increased coordination of national policies, the transfer of authority to the EU level in new policy areas, or the strengthening of the EU authority in existing areas of competence (Mikulec, 2017) – was significantly constrained in its scope for action. Both Europeanisation and European integration processes accelerated in several policy fields after the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, although it remains difficult to speak of a fully consolidated integration process in the area of adult education policy (Alexiadou, 2007; Lange & Alexiadou, 2007). This can be partly explained by the fact that the domain does not fall within the European Union's exclusive legislative competence and only relies on forms of cooperation and consensus-driven policymaking for initiatives' implementation (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007; Walkenhorst, 2008).

Despite their limited possibilities, European bodies retain clearly defined responsibilities and a circumscribed degree of autonomy in guiding Member States' action to achieve coordination and uniformity in adult education standards: their competence is bounded by the guiding principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, originally stated in Article 235 of the Treaty of Rome.

Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the domain of education became one of the most strongly institutionalized within the EU. The most relevant article concerning the definition of the competences of EU institutions in the field of education is Article 165, which legitimizes active engagement by European bodies in the promotion of education policies; it elaborates on their role in contributing to the development of quality education and to the coordination of national education systems. Moreover, it endorses the heterogeneity of national education systems and Member States' faculty to decide teaching contents on a national basis (Hake, 1999).

Clarifying the role of the European Union institutions is essential to understanding their respective margins of action and situating the broader governance framework within which

AEPWs are implemented is pivotal for explaining why the Union of Skills constitutes a particularly suitable case study in this analysis. Indeed, the Union of Skills can be interpreted as a relevant illustration of both Europeanization and European integration processes: it contributes to the internalization of EU-level policy initiatives into national contexts, specifically through the establishment of common benchmarks and shared strategic objectives in skills development.

Moreover, it reflects broader European coordination dynamics, reinforcing functional integration despite the absence of formal harmonization powers (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004; Zeitlin et al., 2005). In this sense, the initiative exemplifies how the EU progressively expands its steering capacity through non-binding but structurally influential governance mechanisms, a pattern widely observed in socio-economic policy areas characterized by shared or supporting competences (Scharpf, 2002).

Turning to key policy initiatives, the formulation of the Lisbon Agenda in 2000 can be seen as the first major turning point in the development of AEPWs during the period under consideration. The Agenda introduced education into the newly established governance framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), marking a significant effort to foster convergence in policy areas where the EU holds non-exclusive competence (Hingel, 2001; Hix, 2008).

With the OMC, the Council provided Member States with a clear incentive to deepen the process of Europeanization by promoting coordination of national legislation in the fields of employment, economic reform, and social policy. This mechanism requires national governments to set up shared objectives and agree on timelines for their achievement.

In particular, each Member State submitted a national action plan to the Council, detailing how it intended to meet the jointly defined targets. The Council, together with the European Commission, reviewed these plans, monitored progress, and issued warnings to countries that failed to comply (Hix, 2008). Given the non-exclusive EU competence in education, the OMC carried no legal sanctions for non-compliance; instead, it relied on flexibility, mutual learning, and benchmarking as core governance principles.

Assessments of its effectiveness have diverged. Some scholars argue that the OMC has strengthened the capacity of the EU to secure political commitments, particularly in countries seeking greater international legitimacy, and has contributed to the emergence of a European space of education (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Hingel, 2001; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).

Others are more critical, contending that the OMC has had limited impact on ensuring compliance, especially when domestic political resistance has impeded reforms or when Member States' interests diverge. According to this perspective, the OMC is seen as not a novel mode of governance but rather a softer variant of existing legal practices (Hix, 2008).

A broadly intermediate assessment of its effectiveness emerged among our interviewees, who argued that the OMC provides a consensus-based mechanism for guiding national reforms, with

its impact ultimately contingent on the willingness of national governments to adopt and implement agreed objectives (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004). They further suggest that sustained governmental commitment to convergence and the pursuit of higher standards is a necessary condition for the implementation of effective AEPWs.

When referring to the limited capacity of EU institutions to directly shape education policy, some of the interviewees argued that greater impact can be achieved by leveraging areas of exclusive competence that indirectly affect the education sector. This indirect policy influence, named spillover effect in literature (Antunes, 2016), occurs when supranational governance, holding a pivotal role in the decision-making process of integrated policy domains, also affects non-integrated policy fields.

This is the case of adult education initiatives within the current European Union context: they are largely designed to ensure a better alignment between labor market demand and supply at the national level (Antunes, 2016). An example in this regard could be the European Commission's Communication of 2012 Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-Economic Outcomes, which called for the development of scalable training models to address challenges of competitiveness and innovation. From a financial perspective, the 2012 Communication promoted an investment-oriented paradigm, encouraging public-private partnerships and cost-sharing mechanisms to expand training provision and align it more closely with labor market needs. This approach is significant since it is a key precursor to the one adopted in Union of Skills, particularly in its emphasis on combining public investment with private-sector co-funding as a central lever for effective policy implementation (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2025).

After 2012, the promotion of apprenticeship programs became prominent in adult education: the European Alliance for Apprenticeships was launched to achieve a deeper commitment of Member States to provide young people with the possibility of being involved in training opportunities in real workplace contexts, leading to both professional and school certification (Antunes, 2016). Once again, this initiative is relevant to our analysis insofar as it can be seen as a precursor to the actions of the European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen in recent years, which has envisaged its renewed funding and strengthening.

Among the other initiatives that underpin the conceptual development of the Union of Skills, the European Commission has more recently introduced the European Education Area (EEA). It was articulated in 2017 at the Gothenburg Social Summit and marked the formulation of a new vision for Europe: the creation of an international space where learning, working, and conducting research would not be constrained anymore by national borders (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2017). As the Union of Skills, this initiative placed mobility for the purposes of education, training, and employment at the core of its strategy, viewing it as a key tool for addressing skills gaps in key sectors of the European economy.

An even more relevant building block antecedent to the Union of Skills policy package was undoubtedly the already mentioned 2017 EPSR. It represented an explicit attempt by the Juncker Commission to redress the imbalance created by the increasingly dominant market-oriented focus of education policy, while integrating key social rights into employment policies (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023). The EPSR functions as the political and communicative foundation for the policy initiatives introduced during the second mandate of the von der Leyen Commission in the field of adult education. It builds on the social rights already enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, integrates them with existing EU competences in social and employment policy, and introduces forward-looking objectives for a future Social Europe that extend beyond currently legally binding rights (Dura, 2024).

3. The Case of Union of Skills

3.1. Objectives and Structure

The Union of Skills was presented by the European Commission on 5 March 2025 during the high-level EU Social Forum in Brussels. This initiative is an effort to address transforming labor market demands, which not only hamper companies in their search for adequately qualified personnel but also place growing pressure on workers to continuously adapt to rapidly evolving job requirements. To address such challenges, the Union of Skills seeks to make the possibility of upskilling and reskilling more accessible.

The structure of the policy package is based on four interrelated priority areas: fostering skills for quality employment and improved living standards; supporting upskilling and reskilling in the context of the digital and green transitions; facilitating the mobility and circulation of skills across the European Union to enhance competitiveness; and attracting, developing, and retaining talent. With the idea of achieving these primary goals, the von der Leyen Commission still has to face a major obstacle to the success of the initiatives proposed within the policy package: that of fragmented governance in the domain of education and skills.

This issue stems from the inherently cross-sectoral nature of non-integrated policy fields: they are often connected to, influenced by and dependent on other - fully integrated - ones. The current result of these stances and governance tendencies is that initiatives in the education domain usually are not well coordinated and too broadly defined; thus, less effective.

Fragmented skills governance sometimes constrained innovative policy design; indeed, some of the initiatives included in the Union of Skills predate its formal presentation and were subsequently re-funded as part of the broader policy package. Among these measures, some are targeted at individuals: the Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) - personal accounts in which

training entitlements can be accumulated and spent on quality assured training (Zhang, 2022) - and the possibility for workers to enhance the labor market value of their micro-credentials. Others, instead, are focused on companies: the allocation of funds, the inter-firm agreements for coordinating training courses and the tax deductions for companies that are committed to organize training for their employees.

However, the Union of Skills also introduced a set of new policy proposals. Some of these focus on strengthening the mutual recognition of qualifications across Member States and skill levels, building on the legal framework established by the Professional Qualifications Directive (2005/36/EC). To address skills gaps at their root within the education system, the initiative also includes measures targeting the higher education sector. In this context, declining student performance - highlighted by recent PISA data (OECD, 2023) - is compounded by shortages of specialist teachers in key subject areas; the Union of Skills incorporates the EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda, specifically targeting teachers and enhancing the attractiveness of teaching careers, with full implementation planned for 2026.

When focusing on the attraction and retention of talent from third countries, the package entails the establishment of new tertiary education programmes, to be implemented across multiple Member States with homogenized contents.

Another interesting proposal of the Union of Skills in this regard is the creation of an EU Talent Pool, or rather a digital platform to facilitate international recruitment of third country jobseekers residing in extra-EU countries. To facilitate their attraction and integration, the Commission will also implement a new Visa Strategy, which will include measures to allow longer-stay residence permits for researchers and students. Finally, considering that the shortage of workers and competencies in certain areas is expected to worsen in the upcoming years, a solution embedded in the Union of Skills to tackle the issue is named European Strategy for VET, not yet elaborated but aimed at reinforcing the role of vocational training in key economic sectors.

The involvement of business and employer representatives in the implementation of the Union of Skills was undeniably central. The von der Leyen Commission relied on their support in advancing social policies that are ultimately designed to improve the functioning of the EU labor market. It is therefore not incidental that several pilot initiatives launched in the first year following the presentation of the Union of Skills targeted strategically important economic sectors undergoing structural transformation, and of particular relevance to Europe's largest economies. A clear example of this close alignment between the Commission and industry stakeholders is the European Skills Guarantee, which aims to facilitate the transition of workers from declining sectors into firms affected by the green and digital transitions, thereby offering access to more attractive employment opportunities.

The first pilot initiative under this framework focused on the automotive sector and allocated an initial budget of €14.5 million to support the transition and upskilling of workers in this sector and its associated supply chains.

The policy package also addresses the *transformation speed gap*, particularly evident among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In this regard, the initiative seeks to support enterprises in training workers with the skills required by rapidly changing labor markets through on-the-job training and apprenticeship programmes.

The Commission has also promoted strategic cooperation between public and private actors operating within the same economic sectors, aiming to combine different sources of funding to develop more effective training programmes. The Pact for Skills and the EU Skills Academies represent some of the most prominent examples of this type of cooperation and closely reflect the priorities outlined in the Competitiveness Compass and the Clean Industrial Deal.

Operating across such diverse fronts, combined with the fragmentation of governance structures and stakeholders involved, has, at least in appearance, repositioned the European Commission at the center of policymaking in this policy domain, following years marked by extensive *trilogues* and a relative overshadowing by the European Council.

The joint action of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) has enabled the programming of funding across multiple domains, with the primary beneficiaries being firms operating in transitional economic sectors with strong representation. The current Multiannual Financial Framework - covering the period 2021-2027 - allocates substantial funding to address the policy goals through a variegated range of instruments: the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which dedicates €42 billion to skills support; the Recovery and Resilience Facility, allocating €67.7 billion for both human capital and infrastructure investments; the European Regional Development Fund (€8.7 billion); Erasmus+ (€26.1 billion); the Just Transition Fund (€2.3 billion); and Invest EU, which is expected to leverage over €1 billion.

3.2. Stakeholders' Views on the Union of Skills

The discussion now turns to the views of the stakeholders interviewed for this study, in order to complement the analysis of the Union of Skills' formal architecture, operational logic, and main challenges with a more situated assessment of the initiative.

All interviewees are based in Brussels and work in fields closely related to education policy. They represent all components of the European social and civil dialogue.

Taken together, their testimonies pointed to a broad consensus that the initiative functioned primarily as an overarching coordination framework, rather than as a policy capable of

introducing substantive innovations or measurable change. Several interviewees described the Union of Skills as a flagship initiative in the Commission's portfolio: highly visible and effectively communicable yet potentially underperforming in terms of its practical impact.

This perception was closely linked to a second, recurrent theme: uncertainty within the Commission itself regarding the design of the package. Interviewees reported that, even during the consultation phase, DG EMPL and DG EAC appeared unsure about how to meaningfully structure and substantiate the initiative. One interviewee affirmed that the Union of Skills "largely repackages previous initiatives already developed by the Commission", complemented only by minor innovations or adjustments in funding arrangements.

The late inclusion of the European Skills Intelligence Observatory in the package was cited as an example of this dynamic, being perceived more as an attempt to give the overall framework an appearance of innovation and coherence than as a decisive step towards a new governance model for skills.

A third area of concern relates to the equal participation of different stakeholders in consultations. Several interviewees noted that the involvement of civil society organizations in the preparatory phase had been relatively marginal when compared with that of business representatives, who were perceived as exerting greater influence on the content of the final package.

The interviews also highlighted tensions surrounding the funding logic of the Union of Skills. On paper, Cabinet Mînzatu sought to move towards a more selective and territorially targeted allocation of resources, focusing on specific regions or entities within Member States to enhance efficiency and facilitate outcome monitoring. Several interviewees considered the shift towards narrower targeting as the only viable way to increase the effectiveness of EU funding in the skills domain. At the same time, they questioned the effective implementation of this strategy within the Union of Skills and its feasibility in a context marked by renewed austerity pressures and competing budgetary priorities. One interviewee emphasized that "the relationship between skills development and economic competitiveness had received insufficient attention before the Pandemic", arguing that this lack of prior strategic reflection had contributed to the Commission's limited preparedness when skills suddenly became a central policy concern.

More broadly, testimonies converged on the idea that the emerging European governance framework for social policies is increasingly aligned with the austerity logic that has shaped welfare reforms since the 2008 crisis. Interviewees pointed to the contraction in public spending on education and social inclusion, combined with the rise of new strategic priorities in the field of defense - as illustrated by initiatives such as the White Paper for European Defense and the ReArm Europe Plan - Readiness 2030. In their view, the significant financial levers made available for defense are limiting the fiscal space for ambitious social policies, thereby widening the gap

between the Commission's rhetorical commitments and the resources effectively available to support them.

A further transversal theme concerned accountability and monitoring. Several stakeholders described a persistent fatigue in advancing social policy initiatives at the European level, partly attributable to longstanding difficulties in tracking how funds are used once they reach national administrations. Evaluation criteria are described as vague or weakly enforced, and the absence of binding requirements for detailed national reporting is said to reduce both efficiency and impact: “In the aftermath of certain allocations to national governments, there is no binding requirement to report on how the Commission's funds are utilized at the domestic level; this often results in reduced efficiency and limited impact”, as one interviewee put it.

Despite this generally critical picture, the interview material also identified several positive counterexamples. In particular, the EU Academy and the Pact for Skills were repeatedly cited as initiatives that had generated tangible outputs and traceable outcomes following support from the Commission. The EU Academy, a digital learning platform operated by the European Union, was seen as a concrete contribution to improving access to knowledge and analytical tools. According to data reported on the Commission's own Joinup platform, by early 2023 it had attracted more than 350,000 learners from over 190 countries and offered more than 1,000 educational items, making it the largest MOODLE-based platform globally. Similarly, the Pact for Skills, launched in 2020 as part of the European Skills Agenda and later reinforced with the Union of Skills, was viewed as a promising model for building large-scale skills partnerships in key industrial ecosystems, mobilizing thousands of members across all Member States around upskilling and reskilling commitments.

Both initiatives were characterized by interviewees as industry-led, sector-specific, and oriented towards financial self-sufficiency within a relatively short time frame. In this sense, they were interpreted as examples of a nascent shift in the Commission's funding practices: away from more diffuse grant-making with limited follow-up, and towards targeted, partnership-based instruments with clearer expectations regarding sustainability, monitoring, and demonstrable outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the Union of Skills appeared, in the eyes of many stakeholders, less as a transformative project in its own right and more as a relatively loose umbrella attempting to bring together these and other pre-existing initiatives under a single, politically visible label.

Conclusion

Adult education and training policies occupy an increasingly central yet still uncertain place in contemporary society. The combination of the literature review and the empirical analysis conducted in this paper suggests that uncertainty is not incidental but reflects the way in which the field has developed conceptually, politically, and institutionally.

At the conceptual level, such policies continue to be defined by blurred boundaries and overlapping labels. As highlighted, the terminology used in the literature and in policy documents - lifelong learning, continuing training, adult learning, skills policies - often refers to partially different phenomena, while being mobilized as if they were interchangeable. This semantic fluidity has allowed adult education policies to be attached to a wide range of agendas, but it has also made it difficult to stabilize what is at stake: whose learning is at issue, for what purposes, and under which conditions.

Across the literature, adult education policies are pulled between at least two broad logics. One is centered on human capital and social investment, and frames adult education primarily to strengthen competitiveness. The other emphasizes social rights and understands adult learning as part of a broader project of democratic participation and redistribution of opportunities. The case of the Union of Skills, examined in the second part of the work, indicates that in the current European context the first logic has become dominant: adult education policies are articulated above all as instruments to address skills shortages, support green and digital transitions and reduce future welfare costs, while more substantive notions of emancipation or civic empowerment remain in the background.

Over time, this imbalance has shaped the evolution of the field. The historical reconstruction conducted showed how earlier visions of adult education, community education or workers' education, have progressively been reinterpreted through the lens of labor-market adjustment and competitiveness. The recent surge of interest in adult education policies, especially after the financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, thus corresponds less to the emergence of a wholly new agenda than to the consolidation of this social-investment reinterpretation.

The European governance framework analyzed in the second part of the work translates these conceptual and political tensions into institutional form: adult education appears as a paradigmatic example of a fragmented and multi-layered policy domain. At EU level, several Directorates-General share responsibilities for adult education, skills, and lifelong learning, each bringing distinct priorities and repertoires of action. In this setting, such policies are often assembled at the intersection of employment, education, and industrial policy rather than emerging from a unified strategy.

The Union of Skills initiative exemplifies this tension: conceived as a flagship framework to organize existing and new measures, it has struggled to move beyond coordination rhetoric and

to generate substantial institutional innovation. At the same time, several more targeted instruments – such as the EU Academy or the Pact for Skills – show that focused, sector-oriented interventions can produce visible outputs and clearer accountability structures, particularly when anchored in robust legal bases and time-bound funding logics.

Adult education emerges as a field shaped by indirect rather than direct forms of EU steering. The Union's direct competences remain limited, and formal authority over education largely resides with Member States. EU institutions therefore pursue integration through soft instruments: open coordination, benchmarking and funding programmes that encourage, rather than compel, convergence in baseline skills, training provision and evaluation practices. At the same time, adult education systems are increasingly affected by spillover dynamics originating in policy areas where integration is stronger, notably economic governance and industrial strategy.

Analytically, the material examined in this work suggests that this policy field should be understood less as a consolidated policy sector and more as a hybrid arena in which different logics, constituencies and instruments intersect. Rather than evolving along a linear trajectory, the field appears as the outcome of successive re-appropriations: adult education for workers is, at once, an education policy, an employment instrument, and an industrial strategy tool. This hybridity sheds light on the persistent ambiguity of definitions, which allows the same programmes to be framed as lifelong learning, skills policies, or activation measures, depending on the audience addressed.

From this perspective, the fragmentation identified in the governance of adult education is not simply a problem of coordination or implementation, but a structural property of a domain that has grown by accretion rather than design. The coexistence of highly visible flagship initiatives, such as the Union of Skills, with more targeted but less prominent instruments, such as the EU Academy or the Pact for Skills, illustrates this pattern: different pieces respond to different logics and stakeholders, and are only loosely assembled under common labels.

Altogether, the analysis suggests that adult education policies have become both indispensable and fragile. They are indispensable because they sit at the crossroads of labor-market transformation, welfare recalibration and industrial restructuring; fragile because their conceptual foundations remain contested, the institutional frameworks that should support them remain dispersed, asymmetrical, and only partially equipped to balance economic and social objectives.

Empirically, there is a need for more comparative research on how different configurations of adult education policies - more employment-led or more education-centered, more centralized, or more decentralized - affect participation and outcomes for diverse groups of workers. In this sense, the future of adult education in Europe will depend less on the multiplication of umbrella

initiatives than on the capacity of policymakers and stakeholders to stabilize priorities, clarify responsibilities and design credible instruments.

Whether adult education for workers will remain a residual adjustment mechanism or evolve into a robust pillar of social citizenship will be determined by how this balance is struck in the years to come.

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Annex A: The Methodological Framework Used for Mapping Initiatives of Adult Education for Workers in the European Union

To analyze the most relevant initiatives of AEPWs of the past twenty-five years in the EU context, a predominantly qualitative approach was adopted. Indeed, the second chapter of this work is based on the analysis of policy documents and elite interviews conducted between January and July 2025.

In this chapter, AEPWs are firstly considered within the broader European integration and Europeanisation contexts. Literature analysing both phenomena was considered; however, the one focusing on European integration resulted to be particularly relevant for understanding current developments in education and training policies within the EU.

The qualitative analysis was also based on text and content analysis of documents published by relevant EU-level institutions and on interviews with key-informants holding privileged positions within the European policymaking context. The sample of interviewees can be considered meaningful insofar as it mirrors a variegated range of perspectives from key informants involved in European social and civil dialogue.

Nine individuals were interviewed; they were affiliated with the following organizations: the European Commission, trade union federations, employers' associations, and civil society organizations. The questions addressed to the interviewees were related to their professional experience, their daily tasks, their relationships with other European actors - both institutional and non-institutional - and, to their opinions on various matters relevant to this research. To ensure privacy and avoid potential conflicts of interest, all interviewees were granted anonymity.

Both the collection of documents and the interviews were conducted during a research stay at the European Social Observatory in Brussels, from January to June 2025. The Observatory's researchers provided invaluable support in accessing relevant materials and identifying key informants.