

# EURASHE Statement on the European Year of Skills

2023



## Summary

EURASHE<sup>1</sup> has strongly welcomed the proposal from the European Commission on a European Year of Skills<sup>2</sup> (EYS) which began on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 – Europe Day and will last for 12 months. A year dedicated to skills equals a year of investment in the education and training sector. We can expect many opportunities and initiatives dedicated to upskilling and reskilling people for fair digital and green transitions. The year is closely aligned with the European Skills Agenda and the European Pillar of Social Rights that place as a first principle the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning. This is the surest way to develop the skills that meet the needs of individuals, as well as economies and societies.

In this paper, EURASHE states its position and vision, concrete actions and priorities to promote the goals of the EYS, fostering the upskilling and reskilling across the Higher Education sector, especially in those institutions that have practice-based applied programmes.

EURASHE's main positions are as follows:

- Welcomes recognition of the need to reinforce the role of education and training in upskilling and reskilling to foster employment and address skills shortages for inclusive green and digital transitions;
- Supports the call to increase the attractiveness and status of VET and dual education<sup>3</sup>;
- Regrets the absence of a specific reference to Higher Education;
- Underlines the role of Professional Higher Education in upskilling and reskilling, including through innovative solutions with multiple stakeholders<sup>4</sup>;
- Applied Universities and Colleges develop skills for specific occupations<sup>5</sup> due to the practical component of the education and research activities carried out.
- Highlights the role of micro-credentials in the EYS and in fostering flexible learning pathways for upskilling and reskilling.
- Commits to supporting the EYS and its legacy through a range of activities, coordinated by its Community of Practice on Skills.

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<sup>1</sup> EURASHE is the European Association for Applied Higher Education Institutions, representing more than 550 institutions in over 31 countries.

<sup>2</sup> Proposal for a DECISION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on a European Year of Skills 2023 - [Link](#)

<sup>3</sup> DECISION (EU) 2023/936 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 10 May 2023 on a European Year of Skills – [Link](#)

<sup>4</sup> E.g.: SMEs, companies and local and regional communities, among other sectors and actors.

<sup>5</sup> As well as so-called transversal skills (see [UNESCO Glossary](#)).

## EURASHE's position towards the European Year of Skills

When the Commission President announced the EYS, she stressed that "we need much more focus in our investment on professional education and upskilling to support the strengthening of European economic growth". For EURASHE and its members<sup>6</sup>, this is a welcome recognition by the European Union of a long-standing goal of applied Higher Education institutions.

The objective of the EYS initiative is to:

- promote effective and inclusive investment into training and upskilling;
- strengthen skills relevance to match the identified gaps;
- match people's aspirations and skills-set with labour market opportunities;
- attract people from third countries with the skills needed by the EU and facilitate the recognition of qualifications.

To meet these objectives, the Commission has proposed several measures at the EU, national, regional and local levels, such as conferences, fora, working groups, technical meetings, information and awareness-raising campaigns, dialogue in stakeholder groups, networks and platforms as well as implementing skills intelligence tools and promoting funding opportunities and projects.

On 7 March, the Council Presidency and European Parliament negotiators reached an agreement on a European Year of Skills entering into force from 9 May 2023 until 8 May 2024. In the Decision, there are more than one hundred references to skills. However, there are only four references to competences, which although may seem too abstract to European citizens, more accurately describe the broader range of attributes that favour the development of human capabilities, including knowledge, behaviour and practical experience.

EURASHE welcomes a reference in the Decision to the importance of fostering the attractiveness of VET and dual education, since professional Higher Education can be described as a form of higher VET and often includes dual education. For example, many EURASHE members are involved in the EU's Centres of Vocational Excellence, and several are part of a recently launched European University Alliance called EU4DUAL. However, EURASHE regrets that Higher Education itself is not mentioned at all in the Decision. All levels of education and training can contribute to upskilling and reskilling, and within the Higher Education sector, there is an increasing

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<sup>6</sup> EURASHE members are national associations of Higher Education institutions and individual institutions, such as Universities, (University) Colleges and Universities of Applied Sciences, as well as other professional associations and stakeholder organizations active in the field of Higher Education.

emphasis on employability (“work-ready graduates”). These institutions have the potential to attract people and investment, driving innovation and skills demand among business and public services through research activities. In addition, the analytical skills that HEIs develop are key to solving societal challenges through innovation. In short, applied HEIs combine the development of skills for particular jobs with ‘skills for life’ and horizontal competences, producing graduates with practical experience as well as intellectual capacities.

Furthermore, and as EURASHE has stated in its statement on Micro-credentials in Professional Higher Education<sup>7</sup>, micro-credentials “are viewed as flexible, less-time consuming, quickly developed, up-to-date and affordable short courses addressing some coherent set of competences and particularly skills embedded in the newest applied sciences environment”. Being aware of the challenges linked to the implementation of micro-credentials<sup>8</sup>, EURASHE supports applied HEIs<sup>9</sup> in delivering those, including the contribution to the harmonisation and coordination of the concept and capacity-building activities. Micro-credentials are relevant in the context of the European Year of Skills while enhancing flexibility and access to HE, and knowledge transfer within other education and training providers. Acknowledging the Applied HEIs’ practical nature, their role in connecting regional and national innovation actors, and their closeness to the job market, these institutions are well-placed to develop micro-credentials which can promote the investment of the development of skills for specific jobs, while fostering lifelong learning.

## **EURASHE's contribution to the European Year of Skills**

Throughout the year, EURASHE plans several activities at the EU level and is supporting its members to become involved in their cities and regions. With the launch of the EURASHE Skills Community of Practice in February<sup>10</sup>, we set the scene by gathering institutions, associations and policymakers working on reskilling, upskilling and future skills, as well as fresh and innovative ideas for optimizing skills ecosystems at national and regional levels. The Community is open to members and non-members and one of its practical objectives is to strengthen the capacity of HEIs in skills development and strategy. The competences required to tackle the

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<sup>7</sup> EURASHE [Position Paper on Microcredentials](#), June 2021

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: Need for better alignment of HE programmes to micro-credentials, and the lack of a legal framework, regulations and standard definition for micro-credentials.

<sup>9</sup> An example is the [Meridies project](#) in which EURASHE supports some of its member institutions in Portugal to invest in skills for regional development through micro-credentials.

<sup>10</sup> The Skills CoP consists of peer learning, sharing of challenges, views, and solutions, organising international scale events, defining a common understanding around the topic, and peer review of policy initiatives and frameworks; and sharing and reflecting on a good practice example in each of our meetings. The community is currently co-led by Mondragon University, and the Future Skills Think Tank NextEducation from Baden-Wurtemberg Cooperative State University (Germany).

Green and Digital transitions as well as current skills gaps in the labour market are the drivers behind the EURASHE Community of Practice on Skills. The launch of such a community was previously on the EURASHE agenda, yet the designation of 2023 as the European Year of Skills by Commission President von der Leyen creates the momentum for prioritizing this crosscutting topic and joining forces to support the upskilling and reskilling in Europe.

The Community was launched at a high-level event in Bilbao this February, providing the impetus for EURASHE to contribute strongly to the European Year of Skills. It brought together a large number of interested participants from the Higher Education sector, mixed with representatives from industry and government. The Mondragon Corporation was showcased as an example of industry and applied Higher Education working closely together to meet the skills needs of the Basque Country. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre illustrated how its different competence frameworks can be combined in HEIs. As part of its work plan, members of the Skills CoP will jointly develop guidance for HEIs to tackle skills' development with partners at regional and national levels. As a community-led group, the Skills CoP is a space to work on specific issues of interest<sup>11</sup>.

EURASHE dedicated its 2023 Annual Conference to "Skills for Europe: Mobilising Higher Education for the Green and Digital Transitions" to reflect how skills can be integrated into all missions, including quality and innovative Higher Education pedagogies, applied research activities, entrepreneurship and external engagement. For example, the CEO of one of EURASHE's strategic partners, the University Industry Innovation Network, provided a keynote presentation on the competences required for 'boundary spanners', linking the worlds of Higher Education and business. Applied HEIs are particularly close to industry, helping them develop the skills demanded by employers. Key players in the EYS were present at the Conference, including the European Commission, European Training Foundation, national and regional governments, and of course a larger number of HEIs committed to their cities and regions.

Finally, at its summer networking event in July, EURASHE welcomed the shadow rapporteur of the EYS Decision, Mr João Albuquerque. He was strongly persuaded by the arguments to involve applied HEIs in regional skills strategies and committed to working with EURASHE to propose policy initiatives that would harness their potential.

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<sup>11</sup> E.g.: Transversal skills (non-formal and informal learning); Micro-credentials; Assessment tools; Teaching and learning experiences; Apprenticeships; Work-based learning; Professional skillsets, among others.

As specific action points and priorities, EURASHE is committed to investing in skills by:

- Strengthening the engagement with its members and the wider Higher Education community to equip learners with the skills and competences for life and the labour market;
- Fostering collaboration between education and training providers and the labour market sector;
- Collaborating with the EU institutions by supporting initiatives during the EYS, including by contributing to public consultations and providing expert input on the perspective of applied HEIs;
- Advocating for the role and position of applied HEIs as relevant agents for upskilling and reskilling of learners and professionals;
- "Making skills visible" by creating opportunities to share good practices, peer-learning activities, capacity-building, and other events dedicated to skills, especially within its dedicated Community of Practice
- Acknowledging and promoting lifelong learning to upskill the adult population, boost the European economy and further develop the capabilities of all Europeans.

