



## Life-long learning must be accessible at all ages

AGE Platform Europe Policy Statement  
May 2022

**AGE welcomes the European Commission proposal on individual learning accounts in its intention to develop a life-long learning culture through Europe and to give individuals full ownership over their education. However, AGE warns against the risks of reinforcing the exclusion of older people from European policies on life-long learning and education, as it focusses on the working-age population and does not address age-related inequalities in the access to education and training.**

*This European Commission initiative pursues the commitment made by EU leaders to embrace the EU-level target of 60% of all adults taking part in training every year by 2030<sup>1</sup>. They are real contributions towards achieving principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>2</sup> and its [Action Plan](#). However, the EU Council of Ministers, which is about to discuss and adopt this proposal, must take the measure of the exclusion and make the initiative more relevant to older people, both people below retirement age and pensioners, in order to seize the opportunities of demographic change and the potential of older persons for the society as a whole.*

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<sup>1</sup> Porto Social Commitment, Porto, May 7<sup>th</sup> 2021, [Porto Social Commitment \(2021portugal.eu\)](https://2021portugal.eu)

<sup>2</sup> The first principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) is about “Education, training and life-long learning” and states that “Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”





## Life-long learning opportunities at older age should be explicitly encouraged

AGE recognises the potential of this proposal to make education and training better accessible to all workers. AGE however insists on the importance of paying specific attention to older workers.

Despite the fact that trainings and education could help in tackling long-term unemployment and inactivity of older people, the participation rate of 54-64 years old to trainings and education is very low<sup>3</sup>. The initiative proposed by the European Commission will tackle this issue and provide systematic learning rights for older workers. In addition, this individualisation of learning accounts will enable everyone to be the master of his or her own education and improves trainings' accessibility for older workers, thus allowing for career transitions or second training opportunities.

So far, the ubiquity of stereotypes and discrimination against older persons still has been a major obstacle to their participation in learning: the greater discrimination, the more difficult it is for older workers to see training and learning opportunity as a stepping stone to access specific qualifications and employment. To tackle this issue, **AGE recommends that older workers are specifically mentioned in the proposal**. The individual learning accounts and additional training entitlements would then allow to boost the participation of older people in the labour market and trainings, following the objectives announced by ministers at the [Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council \(EPSCO\) on 14 March 2022](#). There is a need to improve older workers' accessibility to strategic areas such as digitalisation, as a large proportion of them have not had the opportunity to acquire basic digital skills or to maintain their digital skills updated. Targeted training could also help older workers to anticipate the transition from work to retirement, and could introduce them to the possibilities of self-entrepreneurship or volunteering activities. To ensure good participation, such training should be accompanied by targeted communication campaigns to make older workers aware of the opportunities available.

## Life-long learning must go beyond labour market age

AGE regrets that the notion of life-long learning is not fully addressed in the proposal. The use of individual learning accounts, **limited to adults of « working age », explicitly excludes many older persons**. In a context where more and more persons continue working beyond retirement age, this restriction seems unjustified and obsolete.

The Commission states in the impact assessment that the requirement to benefit from learning credits before retirement age or the setting of an expiration date should encourage to take-up all along the career. However, this also and often means exclusion from the possibility to redeem ones' rights. We call on the European schemes that fund education and training to look beyond the narrow conception of education as a mean to serve the labour market and to eliminate the implicitly ageist view that working age has a set 'expiration date'.

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<sup>3</sup> Participation (past 4 weeks) has been 4.8% in 2020 for the 55-64 year-olds versus 7.4-16.10% for other age groups. [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)



Today, outside of the labour market, very few training initiatives exist for people past retirement age. As highlighted in the [2021 AGE Barometer](#), it is mainly older persons' organisations themselves that organise informal and non-formal learning opportunities for pensioners. This situation reduces the chances of persons past pension age to stay active and/or involved in the labour market. Furthermore, AGE emphasizes the added value of strengthening older persons' experience and capacities for the society as a whole. Demographic change and the fact that more and more workers stay in employment beyond working age – [5.7% of 65+ in 2021](#) – should all the more encourage policymakers to include pensioners and ensure that life-long learning is part of a retirement pathway. This also lays the foundations for the societal benefits linked to active and healthy ageing, increasing social inclusion and reducing or delaying needs for health and long-term care.

Ultimately, AGE stresses that the right to education is a human right and should be equally accessible by all. We raise the alarm on the fact that setting direct and indirect age limits such as in the proposal of the European Commission, contradicts the [EU Directive 2000/78/EC](#) which prohibits age discrimination in the access to employment and occupation in principle, allowing exemptions for vocational training only in cases 'within the context of national law', 'objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate aim'. However, the proposal for a Council recommendation does not include any justification for this age restriction.

### **Training opportunities must be adapted to embrace the diversity of the European population across generations**

To reach the target of 60% of all adults taking part in training every year by 2030, EU policies must embrace the diversity of the European population from the entire life-course perspective. AGE believes that the individual learning accounts have a role to play in the fight against several forms of discrimination, notably by defining conditions of accessibility but also in becoming a strong tool of individual empowerment. AGE strongly recommends to pay particular attention to the following points:

- **Guided and offline access:** as mentioned before, digitalisation is a major challenge for many potential learners because the rural areas where some live have limited broadband access, or because of the expensive technical equipment required, or even due to the lack of opportunity to acquire the up-to-date digital skills needed to participate. The recommendation should therefore explicitly mention the obligation to provide guided, offline access, for example through public employment services or public libraries, in order to avoid increasing the digital divide.
- **Reasonable accommodation and transport services:** persons with disabilities face higher thresholds to access life-long learning and education. The proposal, while stating that training opportunities should "pay attention to accessibility", does not fulfil the EU's

obligations under the UNCRPD. In order to comply with EU legislation on equal treatment in employment and the EU's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, they must include an obligation to make training accessible and provide reasonable accommodation.

- **Credible quality criteria:** micro-credentials are an opportunity to enhance skills in the labour market and can particularly benefit specific target groups - workers with low levels of education or other vulnerable groups. They are also a good way for certifying skills acquired from non-formal learning, such as long work experience. AGE insists on the need to base quality criteria on the learner's achievements rather than on the form of learning (formal or informal) and to consider micro-credits as vocational qualifications. This will enable people with lower levels of education to confirm their skills in the labour market.
- **Facilitations for informal caregivers:** many older persons, and older women to a large extent, provide care to a relative, while they are often penalised for not being able to attend training courses due to the cumulative professional tasks and care responsibilities. This has a detrimental impact on her/his employment, job search or pension income and reinforces gender employment, pay and pension gaps. The recommendation should address the specific situation of caregivers and encourage flexibility in trainings timetables and access to supporting services, such as respite and day-care services.

Finally, AGE welcomes the fact that the proposal contains a provision on paid educational leave, which is a precondition for many workers to be able to take time off to engage in life-long learning. We call on the Council of Ministers to keep this reference and to put special attention into implementing it in the follow-up to the adoption of the recommendation.

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