

Policy brief: Future-proof skills for the circular economy, accessible to all

Social enterprises active in reuse, repair, and recycling are acutely aware of the importance of job-related training, which accounted for four out of five adult learners in 2022, as noted in the **2026 Council Recommendation on human capital in the EU**.¹ These actors are uniquely positioned to offer work opportunities that provide circular, digital, and interpersonal skills. Their community-based and supportive work environments are especially important for underrepresented groups.

Our skills report “**Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy**” presents how circular social enterprises are uniquely positioned as inclusive skills providers, offering tailored up/re-skilling, often with psychosocial support and guidance, while preserving manual skills essential to the European circular economy.² Their unique expertise at the intersection of the circular and social economy is conducive to upholding the EU Social Pillar’s right to training, a socially fair circular economy rooted in resource efficiency, as well as competitiveness and social cohesion in promoting skills acquisition and the transition of underrepresented workers into the broader labour market.

Challenges

Yet, our members report numerous challenges in providing training, including a lack of dedicated funding and difficulty in securing qualified instructors, especially for key circular skills like repair. Their recognition as legitimate training providers within Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems is often limited, characterised by overly complex certification procedures and rigid VET structures that struggle to adapt to learner needs or the evolving skill requirements of the circular economy. This situation is worsened by a mismatch between skills supply and demand, due to poor skills intelligence, a lack of incentives, and limitations on the duration of subsidies for work integration programmes, which restrict long-term skill development and work-based training.

The 2026 Council recommendation on human capital

Positively, the 2026 EU Recommendation on human capital recognises many of these challenges and urges national and EU institutions to address them. RREUSE particularly welcomes:

- The emphasis on redirecting training support to reach low-skilled and underrepresented groups such as low-qualified, migrants, persons with disabilities and Roma people.
- The urgent need to develop capacity in core circular tasks, including skills at the level of waste collectors and sorters, especially in light of intensifying skill shortages.
- Linking cohesion policy funds like the European Social Fund Plus, InvestEU, public procurement and state aid rules to support training, upskilling and reskilling.
- Strengthening VET and making it more inclusive for underrepresented groups.
- Very importantly, the Recommendation also calls on national governments and EU institutions to reassess relevant provisions to provide better skills incentives for the social economy, including via the mobilisation of public-private partnerships.

¹ Council of the EU (2026), Recommendation on human capital in the European Union (Available [here](#)).

² RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy (Available [here](#)).

Recommendations

In line with our recent contribution to the future Union of Skills initiatives, specifically the [VET Strategy and Skills Portability initiatives](#), and acknowledging the division of competences where Member States are responsible for the content of their education and training systems, RREUSE puts forth the following recommendations for EU and national policymakers:

- **Strengthen integration between VET systems and social enterprises.**
 - Formally recognise social enterprises as training partners within VET systems.
 - Recognise social enterprises' work-based, learner-centred, inclusive training as uniquely suited to developing circular skills and reaching underrepresented groups.
 - Promote structured cooperation frameworks so VET providers understand the specific skills needed for reuse, repair, and preparation for reuse.
- **Make VET programmes more flexible and accessible.**
 - Adapt training formats to the needs of low-skilled and underrepresented groups (shorter modules, practical learning, flexible schedules).
 - Reduce the rigidity of VET systems to enable them to respond quickly to circular economy skill needs.
- **Recognise and certify the skills acquired in social enterprises.**
 - Allow social enterprises to play a bigger role in certifying skills, especially for labour-market underrepresented groups.
 - Simplify or streamline verification processes for issuing qualifications, which are currently overly complex.
 - Promote partial qualifications, skills passports, and low-level qualifications as tools to validate skills gained on the job.
- **Strengthen skills intelligence for the circular economy.**
 - Invest in better mapping of circular economy skill needs, especially manual skills that have declined over decades (e.g. in the repair sector), which also helps in understanding current EU labour shortages.
- **Promote policies linking training provision with demand for circular skills.**
 - Align VET reforms with measures that increase demand for reuse, repair, and preparation for reuse services.
 - However, training alone is insufficient unless accompanied by complementary job-creating circular policies (e.g. mandatory separate reuse targets and consumer repair incentives).

Please find more information on our network's training programmes in our 2023 research: "Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy" ([here](#)).

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