



# PREVENTING LOW SKILLS THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING

## Flexible learning pathways to keep youth at risk and low-skilled adults in education or work

In 2017, 15.7% of low-qualified young Europeans aged 15 to 29 were not in education, employment or training (NEET), compared to 9.6% of their better educated peers. In the same year, the unemployment rate of low-qualified adults of working age (25 to 64) stood at 13.9% in the EU-28 while that of their highly qualified peers was at 4.2% <sup>(1)</sup> <sup>(2)</sup>.

Low skills, usually associated with low or no qualification credentials, come at a high social and economic cost. They are devastating for the individuals concerned, damaging their social status, earnings, self-confidence, health and ability to engage in civil society <sup>(3)</sup>. This is why policies across Europe have increasingly been focusing on prevention and early intervention, from tracking youth at risk to offering low-skilled people comprehensive counselling and various upskilling measures, especially basic skills training.

### European policy responses

The European Pillar of Social Rights states that 'everyone (in Europe) has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market' <sup>(4)</sup>. However, more than 60 million Europeans aged 25 to 64 only have a lower secondary qualification or lower <sup>(5)</sup>; a similar number struggle with basic tasks such as reading, writing, calculating or using a computer.

To help its Member States to take both preventive and remedial action, the EU has launched a number of measures <sup>(6)</sup>, including two large-scale initiatives:

The **Youth guarantee** helps EU countries ensure that all 'young people up to the age of 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed'. All countries have committed to implementing the Youth guarantee as laid out in a 2013 Council recommendation <sup>(7)</sup>.

### Discover Cedefop's tools

Cedefop's **VET toolkit for tackling early leaving** features VET practices across Europe which have helped young people attain at least an upper secondary qualification. It supports policy-makers and learning providers with guidance, tips, quick wins and tools to design, implement and evaluate policies preventing or remedying early leaving.

Cedefop's **resources for guidance** is a tool for managers of careers services, practitioners and policy-makers working in career development and activation policies. It includes a toolkit on usage of labour market intelligence (LMI); a handbook for transferability of practices; and training on how to use LMI and information technologies in guidance.



<sup>(1)</sup> All data from Eurostat: edat\_ifse\_21 and ifsa\_urgaed.

<sup>(2)</sup> Low-qualified are individuals with lower than upper secondary schooling, corresponding to ISCED levels 0-2. In both examples they are compared to peers of ISCED levels 5-8.

<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop (2017). *Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low-skilled adults in the EU*.

<sup>(4)</sup> *European Pillar of Social Rights*, Chapter 1, Principle 1.

<sup>(5)</sup> Eurostat [edat\_ifs\_9901].

<sup>(6)</sup> E.g. *Council recommendation on the integration of long-term unemployed into the labour market*.

<sup>(7)</sup> *Council recommendation on establishing a Youth guarantee*.

The **Upskilling pathways** initiative is designed to support low-qualified adults who are not eligible for Youth guarantee support. This initiative follows up on European education ministers' conclusions on VET<sup>(8)</sup>: it helps adults have their upskilling needs identified and receive training, strengthen their literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquire a broader set of skills<sup>(9)</sup>.

Cedefop, with its research into learning and employability, informs policy debate on how to tackle low skills and qualifications as well as early leaving from education and training. Its resources on lifelong guidance, validation and early leaving are continuously updated to inform policy-makers, social partners and VET professionals. A forthcoming study looks at the potential of work-based learning in developing upskilling pathways for adults<sup>(10)</sup>. The 2018 update of the European inventory on validation, carried out in cooperation with the European Commission, will be published in mid-2019.

**Box 1: CEDEFOP'S POLICY FORUMS ON UPSKILLING PATHWAYS**

To bring its research to the attention of social partners and other stakeholders, Cedefop has organised a series of policy forums on the Upskilling pathways initiative.

2019 forums:

- 20-21 May: **Policy learning forum on Upskilling pathways** in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee to discuss approaches to upskilling and reflect on countries' policy responses
- 29 May: **Policy forum in cooperation with the Lifelong learning platform** hosted by the Romanian Presidency of the Council in its permanent representation to the EU in Brussels, to explore the potential of community lifelong learning centres as one-stop shops preventing youth at risk and low-skilled adults from disconnecting.

## The upskilling challenge and Member State responses

EU Member States have improved the flexibility and permeability of their education and training systems, helping integrate people with varied learning biographies, at the time and level needed. They have also developed an array of educational and social

<sup>(8)</sup> Riga conclusions endorsed by ministers of EU, candidate and EEA countries in June 2015, see mid-term deliverables 3 and 4.

<sup>(9)</sup> See *Council recommendation on upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults* and *A new skills agenda for Europe*.

<sup>(10)</sup> [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about-cedefop/public-procurement/potential-work-based-learning-developing-upskilling-pathways-adults](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about-cedefop/public-procurement/potential-work-based-learning-developing-upskilling-pathways-adults)

measures for low-skilled young people and adults, including refugees and people with a migration background. Cedefop has examined these measures in recent years<sup>(11)</sup>.

### Helping young people stay in or return to education or work

In some countries, both municipalities and (VET) schools play a crucial role in preventing early leaving from education and training. They have developed outreach strategies based on specific indicators of learning attainment, family environment, health, behaviour and attitudes, financial situation and migration status, to identify early those at risk.

Comprehensive guidance and counselling are essential to these strategies, both to prevent young people from becoming disengaged and to provide support in bringing people back to a safe and inclusive learning or working environment. Measures have shown to be most effective when tailored to individual needs, be they financial, psychological, health-related or educational.

**Box 2: CERTIFICATION PER UNIT (CPU) IN THE FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM**

In the French-speaking Community of Belgium, a highly flexible system of certification of learning units enables VET students to acquire a qualification gradually. This approach acknowledges that students learn best at their own pace and that some, especially those with weak basic skills, may need more time than others. Qualifications are designed in terms of units of learning outcomes. A unit related to a VET course is awarded when a student has reached all required learning outcomes, not when the course/training time is over. This approach helps avoid failure, repetition of a class and dropout. Units are assessed and certified separately and can be accumulated towards a full qualification. [www.cpu.cfwb.be](http://www.cpu.cfwb.be)

### Upskilling adults: a need for life-spanning integrated learning pathways

Adults' learning needs tend to be more diverse and sometimes more difficult to address than those of young people, ranging from serious literacy and numeracy weaknesses to obsolete occupational skills. Some adults may lack awareness of their deficiencies or may be embarrassed to admit them.

While adults may have specific gaps, many possess identifiable skills, including occupational skills acquired at work. Measures to help need to build on

<sup>(11)</sup> Cedefop (2016). *Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage. Volume I: Investigating causes and extent. Volume II: Evaluating policy impact.*

candidates' prior learning, which requires an assessment of their existing knowledge and skills, and an approach tailored to their individual situation.

Many EU Member States now have arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>(12)</sup>. These offer individuals the possibility to have their skills assessed and recognised as a partial or full qualification. Such a skills assessment can open the door to subsequent upskilling measures, result in a reduction in training time or at least deepen self-awareness, which may lead to future learning.

#### Box 3: VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN THE DANISH VET SYSTEM

In Denmark, since 2015, all learners over 25 who consider going back to education and training and enrolling in VET, have to undergo a skills assessment. The same offer is made to younger people, if they do not come straight from school. The assessment is undertaken to identify candidates' existing skills and knowledge. Subsequently, an individual learning plan is elaborated, which ensures tailored training programmes to avoid duplication. The skills assessment is free of charge, and, depending on candidates' education and experience, lasts from half a day to 10 days.

Skills audits: Tools to identify talent. Study for European Commission, DG EMPL, 2018.

The EU and its Member States have developed several integration measures for the increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. Skills validation and recognition of foreign qualifications are crucial for highly skilled migrants, while skills assessment to identify a suitable job or training opportunity works best to integrate the lower-skilled into the labour market.

## Tackling low skills from a lifelong learning perspective

Three years after the (re)launch of the Youth guarantee and the Youth employment initiative, the European Commission presented an evaluation of Member State dropout prevention schemes and re-skilling, upskilling and continued education measures under these two initiatives<sup>(13)</sup>. The following five success factors emerged from this.

<sup>(12)</sup> More information at [www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation).

<sup>(13)</sup> Commission staff working document: *The Youth guarantee and Youth employment initiative three years on*. See also: PES Knowledge Centre, e.g. under 'Services for young people', 'Services for long-term unemployed and vulnerable groups', 'PES partnership working'.

#### Box 4: MySkills IN GERMANY

MySkills is a test that uses pictures and videos to assess foreign job-seekers' skills or work experience which cannot be evidenced by other means. The idea is that job seekers do the test early in the integration and counselling process to allow employment services rapidly to determine further steps, such as occupational and/or language training. MySkills is currently available in six languages including Farsi and Arabic, and for eight occupations including cooks, skilled metal workers, building and object coaters and motor vehicle mechatronics technicians. [www.myskills.de/en/](http://www.myskills.de/en/)

## Stakeholder cooperation and partnerships

People at risk of disconnecting from education and work usually face complex problems. Having to deal with multiple institutions to seek help can be discouraging<sup>(14)</sup>. To remedy the situation, stakeholders in some countries have joined forces to provide integrated, easily accessible services.

#### Box 5: YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES IN GERMANY

The German youth employment agencies are one-stop shops helping young people during their transition from school to work. They offer a range of services (guidance and counselling, education and training, welfare, and job placements), all in one location. Special emphasis is put on preventive measures, such as information for young people while they are still at school, to make sure that school leavers are well prepared to take their first steps into the labour market. These services are addressed to young people, Germans and migrants, under the age of 25. The youth employment agencies cooperate closely with employers' organisations, youth migration services, and juvenile justice courts.

[www.arbeitsagentur.de/institutionen/jugendberufsagentur/en](http://www.arbeitsagentur.de/institutionen/jugendberufsagentur/en)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1206&langId=en>

## Pathway approaches: vertically and horizontally linked services

Pathway approaches recognise that measures are often short-lived and that each transition in a person's life bears risks. Such approaches are designed to ensure well-linked and integrated support, for people to sustain lifelong learning and working careers. This is achieved by linking quality education and training to guidance, and ensuring cooperation and exchange of information between the different actors (public

<sup>(14)</sup> See European Network of Public Employment Services 2018: Position paper – *Proposal for a structured cooperation between public employment services (PES) and the education sector for better school-to-work transitions*.

employment services and education and training providers).

### Preventive action to improve basic skills

Most outreach initiatives, addressed to natives or migrants, to young and older people, focus on initial development of basic skills. Elementary literacy and numeracy gaps are main reasons leading to social exclusion.

For those who want to take up a formal VET course but lack the necessary basic skills, there is a range of pre-enrolment schemes available to bring them up to the skills level required to engage in VET.

Adults with weak basic skills often possess other skills, including occupational, which can be assessed and form the basis of a targeted training measure.

#### Box 6: CERTIFICATION OF HOSPITAL WORKERS' SKILLS (FRANCE)

In 2014, the regional branch Provence-Côte d'Azur of the French organisation for the continuous training of hospital workers ANFH launched skills audits of workers in public hospitals and care homes. These cover 28 occupations with low skills requirements, ranging from cleaners to caretakers. The audits focus on basic skills: proficiency in French, numeracy and literacy. Following the audit, an upskilling pathway is proposed to each worker and assessed by management. Two options are available: improving basic skills or occupational training. All courses lead to a certification/qualification evidencing participants' skills. [www.anfh.fr/l-anfh](http://www.anfh.fr/l-anfh)

### Upskilling helps meet employers' needs

To be of value, qualification measures have to provide real currency on the labour market. This can be any documented learning outcome that may be in demand by employers, including entrepreneurial, digital and language skills<sup>(15)</sup>. Many countries have skills forecasting systems in place, which specifically look at employers' skill needs. Such systems aim to provide intelligence, which, in turn, can guide the design of education and training offers<sup>(16)</sup>.

### Work-based learning: an opportunity including the most disadvantaged

Work-based learning offers young people who are at risk of leaving education and training an education alternative to classroom learning as a way to retain them or bring them back<sup>(17)</sup>. While this is not to be

<sup>(15)</sup> European Commission, 2018: Data collection for monitoring of Youth guarantee schemes: 2016.

<sup>(16)</sup> See Cedefop briefing note *Less brawn, more brain for tomorrow's workers*, June 2018.

<sup>(17)</sup> See Cedefop VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and *Providing work-based learning and close-to-real simulations*.

regarded as a specific measure for the low-skilled, work-based learning has also proven to help disconnected adults back into work.

### Looking ahead

Integrated and well-tailored pathways for people to acquire or upgrade basic skills at different points in life are increasingly used to prevent skill gaps and skill shortages. Considering the vast changes in European labour markets, support to lifelong learning and working careers is vital to ensuring individuals keep up with rapidly evolving skills and qualifications demands; nobody should be left behind. Besides occupational skills training, this includes measures improving basic and career management skills that allow people to make appropriate learning and working choices throughout their lives.

The European initiatives discussed here promote flexible learning pathways and address vulnerable groups, such as early leavers from education and training, adults with low basic skills, and migrants and refugees, while keeping an eye on evolving labour market needs. To ensure seamless services, all actors involved (public employment services, education and training providers, youth and social services) need to work closely together. Policy-makers, including social partners, have to strike a balance between individual and labour market needs.

Cedefop supports European policy with its resources. A new online source of reference on VET policies, practices and tools to support social inclusion and labour market integration will be launched in 2020. It will support policy implementation and policy learning between countries by addressing European policy priorities, from recovering early leavers to upskilling adults.