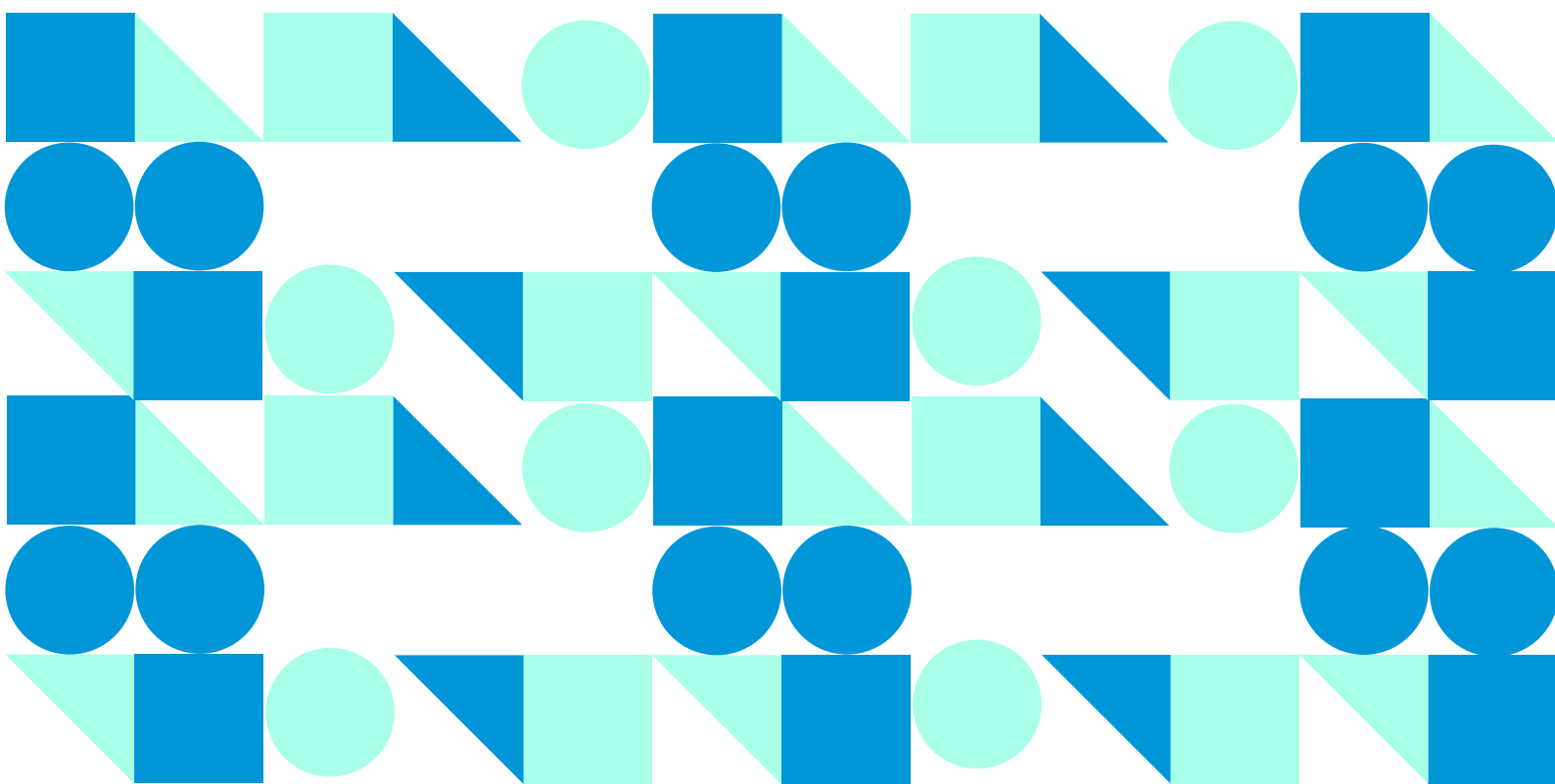




Research paper

Thematic country review on upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults in Croatia

Key findings from three research phases
and suggestions for future action





Thematic country review on upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults in Croatia

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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications. We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policymaking in the EU Member States. Cedefop was originally established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. This decision was repealed in 2019 by Regulation (EU) 2019/128 establishing Cedefop as a European Union Agency with a renewed mandate.

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Foreword

The European Union's vision for a [Union of Skills](#) is founded on the conviction that investing in people is the primary catalyst for a resilient future. In a rapidly shifting global landscape, prioritising lifelong learning is no longer an ambitious ideal, but an economic necessity. While bridging skills gaps enables businesses to remain competitive and individuals to prosper, this vision remains elusive for many. Despite accounting for almost half of the EU population, adults with low skill levels frequently encounter a 'vulnerability trap', having to navigate precarious employment and systemic barriers to the labour market – yet they remain the group least likely to access the upskilling opportunities they need most.

This publication is part of a series of thematic country reviews on upskilling pathways published by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and summarises the first insights into how Croatia has responded to the 2016 [Council recommendation on upskilling pathways](#). The recommendation marked a significant turning point in EU and national policies, placing adults with low skill levels at the forefront and encouraging EU Member States to offer tailored upskilling and reskilling opportunities. The recommendation recognises that developing adults' skills goes beyond training and encompasses a range of services, such as outreach, career guidance, the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the removal of obstacles. These services work together to create individualised pathways that address the unique needs and circumstances of each adult, leading to higher qualifications, better skills and employment.

Croatia's response to the Council recommendation on upskilling pathways is based on the Adult Education Act, which entered into force in January 2022. This thematic country review of Croatia focuses on three key areas, as decided by national stakeholders: governance, financial and non-financial support, and outreach to beneficiaries. By examining these critical areas, this publication provides valuable insights into Croatia's efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for adults with low skill levels, contributing to their empowerment in the labour market and in society.

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Flavia Pesce from the IRS led the team, which was composed of IRS experts Elena Ferrari, Manuela Samek and Sandra D'Agostino and national experts Teo Matković, Tihomir Žiljak and Nikola Buković from the ISRZ.

Special thanks go to the members of the national steering group for leading the review, their valuable expertise and their repeated support with the research. The steering group is composed of representatives of the Ministry of Science, Education; the Agency for VET and Adult Education; the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy; the Croatian Andragogy Society; the Croatian Employers' Association; Public Open University Zagreb; and Public Open University Čakovec.

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Executive summary

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) worked on thematic country reviews (TCRs) on upskilling pathways (UPs) to support EU Member States in developing coordinated and coherent approaches to UPs for adults with low skill levels. The aim of these reviews is to carry out in-depth research on Member States' national approaches to the implementation of the Council recommendation of 19 December 2016 on upskilling pathways (hereinafter the UP recommendation), with the support of key national stakeholders. Croatia was selected for the second round of the TCR exercise, following the successful completion of the first wave in France and Italy. The TCR of Croatia concluded at the end of 2025.

The implementation of the TCRs on UPs is based on close cooperation between Cedefop and the national authorities responsible for the implementation of UPs. The TCRs are carried out interactively and cooperatively, with a steering group of national stakeholders, and supported by a formal mandate. The steering group creates a strategic direction for the TCR, gives feedback on the documentation produced and validates the intermediate and final outputs, including the policy recommendations.

This report summarises the outcomes of these three phases of the TCR on UPs in Croatia.

The national upskilling pathways initiative

The national steering group (NSG) identified the Adult Education Act (AEA) as the Croatian initiative that best matches the principles and spirit of the UP recommendation and Cedefop's analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways for adults with low skill levels. The AEA, which entered into force in January 2022, is a good and sustainable basis for innovation in adult learning in Croatia, in line with the principles expressed in the UP recommendation.

The act aims to facilitate a coordinated and coherent approach to UPs by unlocking synergies and adapting existing structures and resources. It embraces a lifelong learning perspective and prioritises individual needs and interests, recognising that every adult learner has unique goals and aspirations. It is underpinned by the principles of the right to education, freedom of choice in education type and method, inclusiveness and accessibility, ultimately ensuring that all adults have access to quality learning opportunities.

By setting up a multilevel and multistakeholder governance framework, the AEA brings together a diverse range of stakeholders with well-defined roles and

responsibilities, fostering a synergetic environment that leverages their unique perspectives and expertise. This inclusive approach lays the groundwork for sustainable and impactful change, ensuring that decision-making is informed, effective and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders.

By taking the act as a frame of reference, the NSG for Croatia chose to narrow the focus of the TCR to three of the key areas presented in Cedefop's analytical framework, namely: (a) multilevel and multistakeholder governance; (b) financial and non-financial support; and (c) outreach to individuals with low skill levels, with a particular focus on unemployed people with a low level of education, women facing barriers to accessing the labour market, persons with disabilities and third-country nationals (TCNs).

Key findings: multilevel and multistakeholder governance

Croatia's institutional governance of adult learning is well developed, with clear responsibilities distributed across ministries and agencies. Coordination is primarily ensured through the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, in partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the Croatian Employment Service (CES) and the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education.

While the advisory body stipulated by the AEA has not been formally established at the time of writing, coordination is partially ensured through the National Human Resources Development Council and other operational project-based inter-stakeholder arrangements. However, governance remains highly centralised, with most strategic and financial decisions being made at the national level, and vertical coordination between national, regional and local actors remains weak. Local authorities often fund or run adult learning centres, but their involvement in policy design and systematic feedback mechanisms is limited. Similarly, civil-society organisations (CSOs) and social partners play an important role in non-formal learning and outreach, yet remain weakly embedded in governance structures.

Strengthening multilevel cooperation and embedding local partnerships in the governance framework would heighten responsiveness and inclusiveness.

Key findings: financial and non-financial support

Croatia's voucher scheme represents a major innovation because it focuses on individuals and the choices they make about which publicly funded learning courses to study. This innovation is widely regarded as having been successful in opening up new financial opportunities for adult participation in learning. Introduced under the 2021–2027 programme of the National Recovery and

Resilience Plan (NRRP) and continued through the 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme (funded by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)), the scheme provides adults – both employed and unemployed – with free access to accredited training in digital, green and transversal skills.

The voucher scheme has led to several changes, including broader access to adult learning, a stronger emphasis on individual responsibility and increased collaboration between training providers, public agencies and, to a more limited extent, employers in advancing adult learning. However, the sustainability of these changes relies on EU funding, as permanent national co-financing mechanisms are still limited. Design and implementation challenges, including administrative complexity and uneven regional uptake, also constrain the scheme's overall impact.

In parallel, the career guidance and counselling services delivered by the CES have expanded, offering individualised support for training and employability. However, their coverage and intensity remain uneven across regions, and inactive or low-qualified adults are less likely to benefit from guidance services. Linking guidance services to validation and funding opportunities could increase their impact by improving the synergy and efficiency of the resources used.

Key findings: outreach to beneficiaries

Croatia has developed a growing culture of promoting lifelong learning. National initiatives, such as Lifelong Learning Week and communication campaigns coordinated by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education and the CES, have raised awareness among adults and employers. In addition to national campaigns, it is important to develop local synergetic networks between the CES and associations, employers, sports clubs and so on. Stronger cooperation between these actors would probably result in more effective community outreach, particularly for groups facing the risk of social exclusion.

Adults with low skill levels, TCNs and those living in rural areas remain difficult to reach and to engage in existing adult learning measures. Many are unaware of the opportunities available or perceive learning to be inaccessible or irrelevant to their circumstances. While the establishment of regional competence centres (RCCs) and integrated one-stop services – which combine information, counselling and guidance – shows promise, their coverage remains uneven and their coordination lacking.

Future efforts should aim to strengthen the continuity of outreach beyond project cycles, ensuring that awareness raising is linked to tangible learning opportunities and social support services.

Going forward

Overall, the main findings and the suggestions collected during dialogue with stakeholders from the three levels of analysis (micro, meso and macro) resulted in the formulation of six areas for reform and suggestions for action. These aim at improving access, policy implementation and the governance of upskilling pathways, in addition to the better functional integration of skills gap analyses and tailored training. Based on the results of the research, the NSG has made the following suggestions.

Set up a system for the comprehensive evaluation of adult learning measures (recommendation 1)

In the area of governance, it was agreed that regular evaluations should go beyond narrow employability outcomes and also assess quality, inclusion and skill development, in addition to broader impacts on competitiveness and wage growth. While the feasibility of this is constrained by limited administrative capacity, the recommendation was considered achievable as it builds on existing foundations, notably the planned evaluation of the voucher scheme, and could be progressively expanded into a more systematic, multiannual evaluation framework.

Engage RCCs more actively in adult learning, particularly to fill provision gaps, share infrastructure and coordinate retraining during crises (recommendation 2)

While RCCs have so far focused mainly on initial upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET), several have also engaged in adult learning, demonstrating their potential for a stronger role in this field. RCCs should therefore be embedded within broader cooperation mechanisms rather than operate in isolation. Building on existing practices – such as RCCs coordinating Lifelong Learning Week in some Croatian counties – would make this approach feasible, provided it is integrated into a multilevel governance framework supported by sustainable funding.

Adapt voucher scheme to regional contexts and simplify procedures for marginalised learners, while also separating individual and employer allocations where useful (recommendation 3)

In terms of funding and support, stakeholders emphasised the need to adapt voucher schemes, recognising that such schemes are expected to remain useful in the long term. Recommendations focused on simplifying administrative procedures, adjusting voucher formulas to reflect regional labour market conditions and the needs of disadvantaged groups, and incorporating the recognition of prior

learning as an entry pathway. These improvements were also seen as laying the groundwork for a future transition towards individual learning accounts, with pilot initiatives and the closer involvement of regional authorities and employers supporting their gradual implementation.

Refine fiscal/co-financing incentives to spur targeted employer investment in transversal skills (including for small and medium-sized enterprises) (recommendation 4)

The NSG identified limited employer engagement as a key bottleneck, with existing schemes often underused or misaligned with skills needs. This reflects a broader lack of a coordinated mechanism for identifying skills demand: although the CES and projects funded by the ESF+ generate labour market insights, these are not systematically integrated into the planning or funding of adult learning. Targeted financial incentives were therefore seen as a useful complement to broader policy efforts, provided they are linked to non-financial support such as mentoring, guidance and recognition frameworks and piloted in sectors experiencing acute skills shortages. Embedding such incentives within projects funded by the ESF+ and monitoring their uptake through regular evaluations would help ensure their effectiveness, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Embed CSOs, open universities and welfare and guidance services into outreach via dedicated, multiyear funding and capacity building (recommendation 5)

In terms of outreach and participation, stakeholders highlighted the crucial role of CSOs, open universities and welfare and guidance services in engaging groups that are traditionally excluded from formal learning, such as Roma, TCNs and inactive adults. However, their contribution remains constrained by short-term project-based funding. Establishing dedicated, multiyear funding arrangements and capacity-building schemes was therefore identified as a priority to ensure the continuity and sustainability of outreach activities. County-level cooperation protocols could formalise these partnerships, ensuring that CSOs and welfare services are structurally integrated into outreach frameworks, while targeted initiatives to reach specific groups could be piloted.

Run coordinated national–local campaigns on adult education / vouchers with repeated, targeted messaging and hands-on follow-up (recommendation 6)

Stakeholders highlighted that awareness of adult learning and voucher opportunities remains limited, while existing outreach campaigns are fragmented

and short-lived. A coordinated national–local communication framework could ensure consistent messaging at the national level, while enabling local customisation, targeted outreach to specific groups and direct follow-up through guidance services. Repeated, multichannel campaigns, building on established initiatives such as Lifelong Learning Week and linked to local events and counselling, were seen as essential to translate awareness into actual participation.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

This publication is part of a European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) series of thematic country reviews (TCRs) on upskilling pathways (UPs). It presents the outcomes of the TCR on UPs conducted in Croatia ⁽¹⁾. The current report builds on the September 2025 [Cedefop publication](#) (Cedefop, 2025) that focused on the findings from the first round of surveys in this TCR. Within the TCR series, Cedefop has also published findings from TCRs on UPs for [France](#) (Cedefop, 2024a) and for [Italy](#) (Cedefop, 2024b).

This report presents the results from the three fieldwork phases (at the micro, meso and macro levels) envisaged by the TCR and, ultimately, by the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on upskilling pathways ⁽²⁾. The report summarises the key macro-level findings, linking them closely to findings from the micro and meso levels. The report is organised as follows. Chapter 1 presents the policy background and the aims and steps of a TCR on UPs. Chapter 2 discusses the target, scope, objectives and methodology of the TCR on UPs in Croatia. Chapter 3 summarises the fieldwork strategy used. Chapter 4 presents the main findings from the three survey rounds of the TCR, while Chapter 5 outlines areas for reform and suggestions for action. Concluding remarks are presented in Chapter 6.

In December 2016, the European Council adopted the Council Recommendation on upskilling pathways (Council of the European Union, 2016) (hereinafter the UP Recommendation). The UP Recommendation calls on EU Member States to help adults with a low level of skills, knowledge and competence who are not eligible for support under the youth guarantee scheme ‘to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital competence and to progress towards higher European qualifications framework (EQF) levels relevant for the labour market and for active participation in society.’

⁽¹⁾ Upskilling in Croatia has recently gained momentum as a research topic, as evidenced by the growing number of related studies. In addition to this TCR, the World Bank (2025a, 2025b) has published two reports on the subject, each with a different focus. The first examines the barriers youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) face in accessing employment, while the second focuses on women’s experiences in the Croatian labour market.

⁽²⁾ Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on upskilling pathways: New opportunities for adults (OJ C 484, 24.12.2016, p. 1, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2016_484_R_0001).

At the heart of the UP Recommendation is the concept of UPs, which are characterised by the centrality of the individual to the pathway (the individualisation of the pathway) and by a three-step approach: skills assessment; the provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer; and the validation and recognition of skills acquired. The UP Recommendation adds that ‘those steps could be facilitated by guidance and support measures ... and by making best use of the potential of digital technologies, if appropriate’ (Council of the European Union, 2016). Choices and guidance give individuals the means to be actors in their own professional pathways.

In designing and implementing UPs for adults with low skill levels, Member States should consider national circumstances, the resources available and existing national strategies, and identify priority target groups for the delivery of UPs nationally. Member States are not expected to develop anything *ex novo*, but rather are expected to adapt and optimise what is already in place within a new philosophy that acknowledges the heterogeneity of the population of adults with low skill levels and the need for an individualised approach, encompassing more than the provision of education and training.

As Cedefop (2020) argues, UPs are about pulling together resources and creating the right synergies for supporting every adult, including those with low skill levels, towards an individual path to empowerment. This approach should be able to address their needs in a way that promotes cohesion and coordination between actors and services and ensures that individuals have all the tools and support they need to embark on learning pathways that are sustainable and that lead to the realisation of their professional fulfilment.

In response to the implementation of the Recommendation by Member States, Cedefop (2020) has developed an analytical framework aimed at supporting policymakers and stakeholders in designing and implementing sustainable, coordinated and coherent approaches to flexible and inclusive UPs. It is grounded in a lifelong learning perspective and focused on the empowerment of the individual learner/beneficiary.

Key areas of intervention are:

- (a) decision-making:
 - (i) integrated approaches to UPs for adults with low skill levels;
 - (ii) strategies for the identification of target groups;
 - (iii) (multilevel/multistakeholder) governance;
 - (iv) monitoring and evaluation;
- (b) support:
 - (i) financial and non-financial support;
 - (ii) outreach;

- (iii) lifelong guidance;
- (c) implementation:
 - (i) skills assessments
 - (ii) tailored learning offers;
 - (iii) leading to a qualification
 - (iv) work-based learning;
 - (v) validation and recognition of skills and competences.

In TCRs on UPs, Cedefop's analytical framework is used as a guide for data collection, analysis and reporting. It is also the basis for identifying the scope of the TCR, its overall target and specific objectives, and the key areas to be evaluated during the review.

Aims and steps of the TCR on UPs

Cedefop launched the first wave of TCRs in 2021, seeking to support the implementation of the UP Recommendation nationally and to increase the evidence base for adult learning policies, both of which can support policymakers and decision-makers at the European level. TCRs aim to analyse, in depth, national approaches to the implementation of the UP Recommendation to understand their strengths and weaknesses and the challenges they face. The first wave of TCRs involved France and Italy, while the second wave of TCRs (of which this report is a part) was launched in 2023 and focuses on Croatia.

The TCR is country-owned and country-driven, and involves assessing a given country's approach to UPs, based on close cooperation between Cedefop and the ministry/ministries responsible for the implementation of UPs. It is carried out interactively and in cooperation with a steering group of national stakeholders endorsed with a formal mandate. The TCR details country-specific strengths and weaknesses and provides a set of policy recommendations. The national steering group (NSG) brings a strategic direction to the TCR, ensures its relevance and takes ownership of its results: it gives feedback on the documentation produced and validates the intermediate and final outputs, including the policy recommendations.

Preparatory phase

Upon its appointment, the NSG identifies the scope of the TCR, its target (i.e. a national strategy/initiative that could be considered the national functional equivalent of the UP Recommendation within the country in question) and the key

areas for review, which it chooses from among those included in the Cedefop analytical framework (i.e. steering group members choose precisely which aspects of the selected national initiative they consider it important to improve through the TCR exercise).

Fieldwork

The fieldwork phase is made up of three consecutive rounds of research directly involving national stakeholders. The first round (also called the micro phase, or FR1) is aimed at collecting opinions at the implementation level, that is from practitioners and beneficiaries. The meso phase (FR2) builds on the findings from FR1 and collects opinions at the institutional level (e.g. from regional/local government representatives, social partners, sectoral organisations, representatives from local authorities and civil-society organisations (CSOs) acting in the community) on challenges and gaps identified in FR1. In the third, macro, phase (FR3), policymakers, social partners, experts and other system-level actors discuss proposed solutions and recommendations that will allow the country to tackle the challenges identified. By the time the fieldwork was carried out in 2024 and 2025, some legal changes and changes to the set-up of the fieldwork (established during the preparatory phase in 2023) had occurred, which also affected the findings in each round.

Final phase: policy recommendations

The findings from each round of surveys are discussed, contextualised and validated with the NSG. This group steers the findings, ensures their relevance and takes ownership of the results and of the policy recommendations developed as an outcome of the TCR.

Chapter 2.

TCR on UPs in Croatia

This chapter presents the target, scope and objectives of the TCR on UPs in Croatia. It also discusses the political landscape surrounding UPs and their state of play, and the key areas examined in the TCR, as well as its fieldwork strategy and methodological approach.

The first stage of any TCR on UPs includes the formation of an NSG. In the TCR of Croatia, the NSG was coordinated by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (MoSEY) and consisted of representatives from the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (AVETAE), the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (MoL) and the Croatian Employment Service (CES), as well as adult education providers and professional andragogic associations. Over time, the group underwent minor changes, with some representatives from these institutions being either replaced or newly appointed to the group; however, these adjustments did not affect the continuity or relevance of the TCR.

2.1. National strategy equivalent to the UP recommendation

The NSG identified the Adult Education Act (Zakon o obrazovanju odraslih) (2021) as the target of the TCR on UPs in Croatia: this is the national initiative that corresponds the most to the principles and spirit of the UP Recommendation and to the Cedefop analytical framework for developing UPs for adults with low skill levels.

The 2021 Adult Education Act (AEA) represents the legal basis for implementing adult education programmes in Croatia. This law governs the formal adult education system up to level 5 of the Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) (Act on the Croatian qualifications framework, 2013) and contains several elements that are reminiscent of the UP recommendation, namely:

- (a) the centrality of the individual in the choice of learning path;
- (b) a focus on 'lifelong learning' and developing a learning culture;
- (c) various forms of coordination (horizontal and vertical) involving all key stakeholders;
- (d) clearly defined responsibilities and accountabilities for the setting up of institutions;

- (e) a focus on the strategic vision shared by key policy actors;
- (f) a description of national funding (compulsory and optional), and specific targeted financial instruments (e.g. vouchers);
- (g) an implementation plan and by-laws that ensure continuity;
- (h) a defined monitoring and evaluation approach and quality assurance system;
- (i) a description of investing in upskilling as a shared responsibility;
- (j) regulated flexible, adaptable and tailored training pathways that build on prior learning;
- (k) an emphasis on the principle of inclusivity.

These elements of the AEA align with the UP recommendation. As such, investigating upskilling in Croatia through the lens of the AEA is feasible; however, three additional strategic policy frameworks merit mentioning, as they shape the recommendation's domestic application. These three frameworks are detailed below.

- (a) The National plan for the development of the education system (or *Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja*) (2021–2027) (hereinafter the 2023 Education plan), which defines adult learning as a priority area and sets out three goals to be met by its expiration, as follows: (a) increase the rate of monthly participation in education and training (among those aged 25–64) to 5 %; (b) increase annual participation to 45 %; and (c) increase the share of the population aged 16–74 with at least basic digital skills to 73 %.
- (b) The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) programme (2021–2027) (hereinafter the 2021 NRRP programme), which aims at increasing participation in adult learning (see C3.1 in Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2021) by improving the quality and relevance of the courses offered and recognising non-formal and informal learning to increase the number of graduates.
 - (i) The Education, science and technology development strategy (*Zakon o izmjenama i dopuni Zakona o Hrvatskom kvalifikacijskom okviru*) (2014–2021), which served as the guiding framework for developing adult learning. This strategy was closely linked to the implementation of the CROQF (funded by the European Social Fund (ESF+)) ⁽³⁾, the objective of which (among others) was to reduce the skills mismatch in the labour market while pursuing inclusiveness.

⁽³⁾ The ESF was an EU funding instrument active throughout the 2014–2021 programming period. Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 subsequently established the ESF+, which brings together four different funding instruments: the ESF; the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived; the youth employment initiative; and the European programme for employment and social innovation (EU Fi Compass, 2025).

In the next section, this report will set the legal scene, with a specific focus on the AEA. Here, we provide a brief discussion of the legal framework in Croatia, its governance system and mechanisms, relevant stakeholders, modes of training provision and related strategic documents that rely upon the AEA and that are pertinent to the realisation of UPs.

2.2. Policy frameworks and tools

Adult learning in Croatia is based on the concept of lifelong learning. Primary and secondary education for adults takes place within a formal system of adult education. There are various continuous vocational training programmes available leading to full or partial qualifications and/or to microcredentials. Adults can also take part in different types of non-formal learning programmes.

In addition to the AEA, one other piece of legislation and one policy instrument stand out in the Croatian adult learning landscape. These are given below.

- (a) The 2022 June amendments to the Vocational Education Act (*Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama zakona o strukovnom obrazovanju*) (2022), which intend to improve the quality of vocational education and training (VET) by strengthening the dual education model, including by advancing cooperation between vocational schools and employers. The goal of this cooperation is to improve the labour market relevance of learnt skills by ensuring that these align with contemporary occupational requirements (or standards). The June 2022 amendments also stipulate the development of new vocational curricula in line with the CROQF.
- (b) The aforementioned CROQF (*Zakon o hrvatskom kvalifikacijskom okviru*) (2013), which is a policy tool used to facilitate the development of new adult education programmes in line with the occupational and qualification standards set within the framework. The implementation of partial qualifications and learning outcomes (microcredentials) provides a foundation for upskilling initiatives ⁽⁴⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ In 2021, legal changes were implemented that allowed for qualification standards to be more easily developed. These changes saw a significant increase in qualification standards: from 132 formalised qualification standards at EQF levels 1–5 in January 2023 to 492 in October 2025.

During the fieldwork phase, several regulations, by-laws and decisions went into effect ⁽⁵⁾. These legal developments altered the set-up of the legal framework related to adult learning in Croatia.

2.3. Governance, oversight and providers

Several actors are involved in regulating adult learning in Croatia. These actors are either stand-alone agencies (e.g. AVETAE, a public agency that performs analytical, developmental and research activities related to the adult learning system) or affiliated with different ministries.

At the ministerial level, both MoSEY (and its Department for Adult Education) and MoL (and its Directorate for Labour Market and Employment) are key bodies that decide on the regulation of adult learning at the operational level. Within MoSEY, the Department for Adult Education is responsible for both general and vocational pre-tertiary adult education, while MoL's Directorate for Labour Market and Employment coordinates the evaluation of active labour market policies, contributes financially to adult learning programmes and oversees the CROQF.

At the delivery level, formal adult education courses are provided by a variety of public and private institutions. These include open universities, VET schools, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, higher education institutions, language schools and training centres. To qualify as a provider, these institutions need to fulfil the legal requirements established by the AEA (see Articles 4–7 and 9).

Providers may offer adult learning as their core activity or as a complement to their core activities. Providers may also choose to operate within either formal or non-formal adult learning pathways (EQF levels 1–5; see the AEA, 2021, Articles 10–16). Adult learning is covered by the following provisions (Eurydice, 2022):

- (a) programmes for strengthening basic skills, including, for example, primary adult education, and programmes for developing basic adult skills and building up digital, mathematical and reading literacy for different groups;
- (b) programmes for the acquisition of full or partial qualifications and microcredentials and secondary general adult education;

⁽⁵⁾ Namely the by-law on standards for the execution of adult education programmes (*Pravilnik o standardima i normativima za izvođenje programa obrazovanja odraslih*, 2023); the by-law on the means of registering and implementing the recognition of prior learning (*Pravilnik o načinu prijave i provođenju vrednovanja prethodnog učenja*, 2024); the by-law on a common methodology for needs assessment (*Pravilnik o jedinstvenoj metodologiji za procjenu potreba*, 2023); and the conditions and methods for using funds for the acquisition of competences necessary for work through vouchers (several iterations, the most recent of which is HZZ (2025)).

- (c) formal and non-formal programmes facilitating the transition to the labour market;
- (d) non-vocational programmes for personal development, community service and learning foreign languages.

The landscape of Croatian adult learning providers resembles a mosaic. Quantitative insights further substantiate this view: the number of adult learning providers has doubled in recent years, rising from 345 in 2009 to 681 in 2022. By the end of the 2022, a total of 13 944 formal education and training courses had been registered across the country (Žiljak et al., 2023). Most of this total, 56 %, consisted of short adult learning programmes (*programi osposobljavanja*), while 12 % provided full upper-secondary qualifications (Alfirević et al., 2023, p. 22).

2.4. Selected key areas and target groups

The NSG chose to narrow the focus of the TCR by selecting the following three key areas for analysis ⁽⁶⁾:

- (a) key area 3: multilevel and multistakeholder governance (with horizontal and vertical coordination);
- (b) key area 5: financial and non-financial support;
- (c) key area 6: outreach to beneficiaries (informing the target population).

The NSG also decided to focus on individuals with low skill levels, with particular regard to:

- (a) TCNs;
- (b) unemployed persons with a low educational level (up to EQF level 3);
- (c) women experiencing barriers to accessing the labour market;
- (d) persons with disabilities.

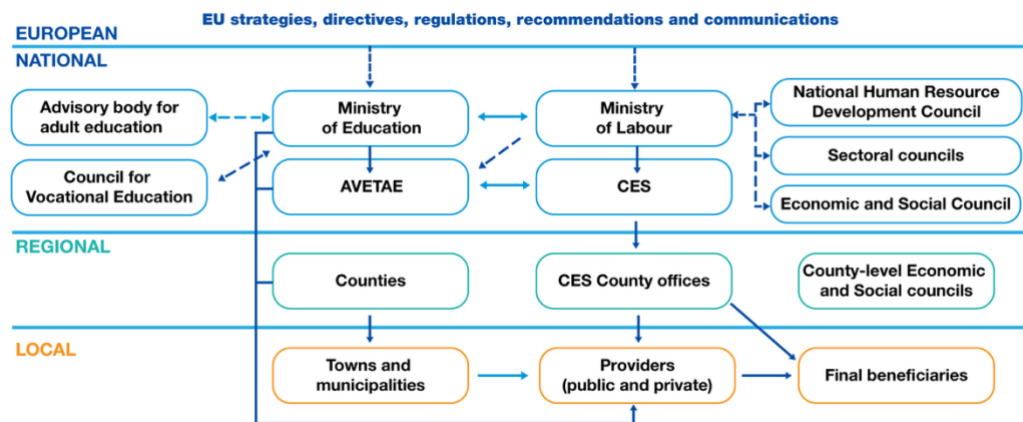
2.5. Key area 3: multilevel and multistakeholder governance

2.5.1. Legal and strategic basis, policy tools and stakeholders

Several actors are involved in the broad governance of adult learning in Croatia. Figure 1 showcases how these different actors operate across all governance levels within the Croatian adult learning system.

⁽⁶⁾ [Cedefop's analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways for adults](#) identifies 10 key areas of the policy process.

Figure 1. **Governance system (simplified) in adult education and continuing VET in the Croatian education system**



NB: Dashed arrows indicate strategic and consultative roles, while solid arrows indicate operational governance roles. Double arrows indicate horizontal governance, dark blue arrows vertical governance.
Source: Project team.

Governance can take several forms; this report concentrates on the horizontal and vertical coordination of the governance of adult learning. In terms of horizontal coordination ⁽⁷⁾, the key actors at the macro level include AVETAE, MoSEY and MoL. These actors are supported by advisory and coordination bodies that are tasked with carrying out evaluations, reviewing outcomes and proposing new measures. These bodies consist of representatives from ministries, national agencies, chambers (of commerce and trades and crafts), trade unions, public employment services (i.e. the CES), professional associations and learning providers. Members are appointed by the government or the minister in charge of education.

Table 1, below, provides a summary of the key stakeholders involved in adult education policy coordination and a list of the members of the following organisations: the advisory body for adult education, the Council for Vocational Education, the National Human Resources Development Council and other sectoral councils.

⁽⁷⁾ Three separate pieces of legislation serve as the framework for horizontal governance. These are the AEA (2021, Article 32); the Vocational Education Act (*Zakon o strukovnom obrazovanju, pročišćeni tekst zakona*) (2022) – especially the role of the Council for Vocational Education; and the CROQF Act (*Zakon o Hrvatskom kvalifikacijskom okviru, pročišćeni tekst zakona*) (2021) (see Subsection 2.1 above).

Table 1. **Key stakeholders in adult education policy coordination, mid 2023**

Advisory or coordination body and their legal basis	Key tasks	Members	Accountability (Competent authority)
National Human Resources Development Council (CROQF Act, Article 10)	Evaluating public policies in the education and employment sectors, on lifelong education guidance and in regional development spheres.	Representatives of the public sector, civil society and employers.	Accountable to the Croatian government.
Advisory body for adult education (AEA, Article 32)	Ensuring horizontal coordination between the key stakeholders in the adult education system.	Representatives of the public sector, civil society and employers.	Members are appointed by the Minister of Science, Education and Youth and the body falls under the jurisdiction of the same ministry and AVETAE.
Council for Vocational Education (Vocational Education Act, Article 14)	• Coordinating the work of stakeholders in VET. • Initiating the adoption of new curricula or amendments to existing curricula. • Proposing measures, activities, and strategies for VET. • Issuing opinions/recommendations on the networking and status of regional competence centres.	Representatives of the public sector, civil society and employers.	Members are appointed by MoSEY.
Sectoral councils (CROQF Act, Article 12; 2021 by-law on the CROQF register (<i>Pravilnik o Registru Hrvatskog kvalifikacijskog okvira</i>))	• Analysing existing and necessary competences within the sector. • Suggesting recommendations for developing the sector's enrolment policy, enrolment quotas and qualifications for financing from public sources.	Representatives of the public sector, civil society and employers.	MoSEY and MoL (setting appointment criteria and programming). Members appointed by education agencies.

Source: Project team.

Before discussing vertical coordination, it is important to clarify what the term encompasses. In this context, vertical coordination has two distinct dimensions:
(a) the relationships between national-level stakeholders and adult education providers;

- (b) the relationships between public authorities at the regional (county) and local (municipal) levels.

An example of (a) is AVETAE and adult education and training providers coordinating the implementation of a programme to which vouchers are assigned. The roles of these actors are precisely determined by the AEA (2021, Article 17). An example of (b) is the coordination between the CES's central office and its county branches (AEA, Article 17) with respect to training vouchers (elaborated on in Section 4.2).

2.5.2. Cooperation patterns in adult learning

Focusing on the upskilling landscape

In Croatia, key learning decisions are made at the national level, while institutions at the national, regional and county levels implement legislation and shape the upskilling landscape.

The 2023 Education plan stressed the importance of regional competence centres (RCCs). This is because RCCs were expected to develop partnerships locally and regionally with VET providers, companies, local and regional authorities, local development agencies and universities. Also, to access European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding applicants (e.g. schools wanting to become RCCs) had to sign a cooperation agreement with entities representing all the abovementioned groups, stipulating the scope and modes of their cooperation.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide (mostly project-based) non-formal education, training and outreach consistent with UP requirements; however, at the moment of the writing of this report, NGOs are yet to be formally included in the local governance structure. A 2022 study (Alfirević et al., 2023) of adult education providers concluded that NGOs frequently cooperate with other stakeholders, both on developing policies/programmes and on promoting them. AVETAE, MoSEY and CES tend to cooperate with NGOs, on both policy/programme development and promotion.

A 2022 study of adult education providers identified widespread collaboration with other stakeholders with respect to both the development of policies and programmes and their promotion (first and second percentages below, respectively). The most common partners are state institutions with adult education competences: AVETAE (36 % and 26 %), MoSEY (22 % and 6 %) and the CES (11 % and 14 %). Yet up to 10 per cent of institutions mentioned horizontal or vertical collaboration with other partners, such as other adult training institutions (9 % and 6 %), local government (4 % and 10 %), MoL (3 % and 2 %), chambers of commerce or trades and crafts (3 % and 5 %), professional organisations (3 %

and 4 %) and local development agencies (1 % and 3 %) (Alfirević et al., 2023, pp. 34–35).

The influence of the local community (municipalities and cities) on adult learning management is clear from the existence of public adult education and training providers (see the Law on Institutions, Article 7, or *Zakon o ustanovama, pročišćeni tekst zakona*, 2023, which regulates the setting up of such institutions and the responsibility of local communities, complementing the AEA, 2021, Article 4). Local and regional authorities engage in the formulation and implementation of regional human resource development plans. Local and regional authorities can also finance these plans (see the AEA, 2021, Article 30).

2.5.3. State of play of governing the selected target subgroups

The target groups of the TCR (identified in Chapter 2.4) are often prioritised in the training measures carried out by various government institutions. This prioritisation leads to ad hoc operational cooperation between stakeholders. Of the four identified target groups, two stand out: persons with disabilities and unemployed persons with a low level of education.

Concerning persons with disabilities, beneficiaries (participants) or associations advocating on their behalf are involved in the preparation and the implementation of adult learning programmes (as set out in the *National plan for the equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities for 2021 to 2027* – or *Nacionalni plan izjednačavanja mogućnosti za osobe s invaliditetom za razdoblje od 2021* – and in supporting instruments in the AEA). Representatives of persons with disabilities are included in some advisory bodies. Persons with disabilities also have their own ombudsman – namely, the Office of Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities (Pravobraniteljica za osobe s invaliditetom).

The CES, providers of adult VET and social welfare services collaborate to engage unemployed persons with low education levels in adult learning. If learning opportunities are subject to ESF+ requirements, then MoL and AVETAE also get involved. The 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme calls for NGOs to be included in encouraging and informing target groups (*Program Učinkoviti Ljudski Potencijali 2021–2027*, 2022, p. 79).

2.6. Key area 5: financial and non-financial support

2.6.1. Setting the scene: funding mechanisms and stakeholders

Adult learners may receive financial support, which may be permanent or occasional, and non-financial support (educational leave, professional guidance).

In the Croatian context, both the AEA and the 2023 Education plan stipulate the basic principles for support, while by-laws and specific operational programmes provide specific details.

MoL, MoSEY and the CES ⁽⁸⁾ are the key actors providing funding and non-financial support for the upskilling and reskilling of adults with low skill levels. Funding comes from the state budget ⁽⁹⁾, local and/or regional authorities, and employers (see the AEA, 2021, Article 28), to name but a few sources.

Employers play a special role in formally funding adult learning. The Labour Act (or *Zakon o radu, pročišćeni tekst zakona*) (Article 54) stipulates that employers have to provide their workforce with education, training and upskilling on a needs basis. In this context, the associated costs are to be borne by employers. Based on data retrieved from the Adult Education Survey (AES), employers actually finance most adult training in Croatia (Matković & Jaklin, 2021); however, their share remains lower than the EU average, and workers with low skill levels are under-represented in training (Matković & Jaklin, 2023).

NGOs play a special role in providing non-formal adult learning programmes. To support this sort of learning arrangement, NGOs have to apply for grants from the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society. Grant proposals are limited to the following topics and targeted populations: democratisation; supporting persons with disabilities and/or war veterans; combating poverty; or supporting environmental protection or local cultural development. These projects usually also have a significant learning dimension, representing an important form of non-formal adult learning (Nacionalna zaklada za razvoj civilnog društva, 2023).

Finally, learning vouchers deserve a special mention. Regulated by the AEA (Article 17) and embedded in both the 2021 NRRP and the National plan for work, occupational safety and employment for 2021 to 2027, vouchers are explicitly mentioned in the UP recommendation. The voucher scheme is based on learners assuming personal responsibility for choosing a programme and seeing it through to completion; if the individual fails to do so, the public funds must be returned. Also, if the cost of the selected education programme is higher than the amount specified on the voucher, the difference – up to the full cost of the education

⁽⁸⁾ It has been reported that the CES is overburdened at times and therefore lacks the capacity to provide guidance comprehensively.

⁽⁹⁾ This may also include targeting their own workforce through continuous VET. For instance, the police school Josip Jovic (MUP, 2023) and the state fire school Adult Education Institution both provide retraining programmes, for police officers and firefighters respectively. These schools provide valuable competences at secondary level, yet both require completed upper-secondary education, as well as good health, and the enrolment procedure is competitive. The Ministry of Agriculture finances short training programmes ('transfer of knowledge') for farmers with the rural development programme (Ministarstvo poljoprivrede, 2023) (with EUR 3.5 million allocated in 2023).

programme – is borne by the voucher's user. Courses financed entirely through public funds (including vouchers) are free of charge, as set out in the AEA. Now, having set the scene of the financial and non-financial landscape, the next subsection turns to quantitative insights.

2.6.2. Quantitative insights into financial support

Education entails costs for both individuals and providers. Active labour market policy training expenditure (European Commission. DG EMPL, 2025) allows for some quantitative insights about Croatia. Between 2012 and 2021, its yearly investments⁽¹⁰⁾ in training were around EUR 100 million. Notably, they experienced a sharp decline between 2016 and 2021 (the years before the voucher scheme's launch).

In the decade prior to the introduction of the voucher scheme (which happened in 2022), upskilling costs were most often borne by participants themselves. According to 2020 data from AVETAE, 90 % of adult participants paid for their own retraining and 87 % paid to acquire secondary education (Eurydice, 2022). AES data indicate that, both in 2007 and in 2016, a large majority (about 93 %) of job-related non-formal training was funded by employers (Matković & Jaklin, 2021, p. 48). The professional training offered by companies is a matter of size and of sector; according to the Continuing Vocational Training Survey, about 85 % of large companies in Croatia provide some form of training for employees, while the same is the case for only half as many (43 %) companies that have between 10 and 49 employees – a difference much larger than the EU average (Matković & Jaklin, 2021).

Most instruments made available for the public funding of adult learning are short- or medium-term (one to five years) in nature. These instruments are legally non-binding and are viewed as an 'add-on'. Examples of such tools include the 2021 NRRP programme and the ESF+ programme. These tools can take different forms: either as a tool for direct use by persons in the form of vouchers or as programmes/projects run by providers.

Funding to address UP priorities tends to be earmarked within the ESF+ and 2021 NRRP frameworks, ensuring mid-term sustainability. The total target number of adult learning attendees for between 2022 and 2026 set out in the 2021 NRRP

⁽¹⁰⁾ The data provided do not include information on fund-based training grants disbursed to NGOs or within local employment partnerships. Further, no data are available on how much money has been spent by local governments on training. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some local governments that have set up educational institutions contribute to shouldering the expenses of running these institutions (e.g. utility bills or administration); as such, local governments indirectly take part in cost sharing.

programme is 30 000; as many as 12 000 of these prospective attendees should be long-term unemployed, inactive, or young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) – that is, people who most often lack some of the foundational skills. In total, EUR 39.8 million were allocated to this programme (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2021, p. 980). Meanwhile, for 2023–2029, the ESF+ has allocated EUR 59.5 million for the training of 37 500 unemployed and employed persons over 30 years of age (Program Učinkoviti Ljudski Potencijali 2021–2027, 2022, pp. 36 and 40).

For non-formal learning programmes implemented by NGOs, the EU (through the ESF+) and state income from the lottery's tax rate are the largest sources of funding for grant awards. In 2022, the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society provided support for CSOs, addressing the needs of the local community by investing in over 700 such organisations.

According to the AEA (Article 22), providers are obliged to ensure a reasonable adaptation of the methods, modes and shapes of learning according to the needs of persons with disabilities. In accordance with the available means, providers may (co)-finance the cost of transportation and equipment needed for this group to take part in the education programme. The April 2025 amendment allows voucher users with disabilities to receive a 25 % larger voucher, provided the education provider meets certain criteria.

The awarding of vouchers for education in sectors relevant to the green and digital transitions is carried out through the 2021 NRRP programme. The financing of adult learning through the voucher system is intended to help in the acquisition of new skills, with an emphasis on digital and green skills in the first cycle (which is active until 2026). The same voucher programme will be implemented after 2026 with the support of ESF+ funds.

The National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society funds projects intended for vulnerable target groups that have a lower skill level (persons with disabilities, unemployed people, persons from marginalised groups). Support for the inclusion of people with fewer learning opportunities is one of the funding priorities of the Erasmus+ programme. A criterion of adult learning programmes is the involvement of a heterogeneous group of adult students, and projects are aimed at strengthening their fundamental skills.

2.6.3. Non-financial support and its evaluation

Non-financial support refers to public support from institutions (information, guidance, motivation) and support provided at the company level (encouraging or allowing participation in learning). The Labour Act (2023, Article 54) stipulates that the training of employees, in addition to being paid for by the employer, has to be

treated as time spent at work (working time) and be organised during this working time; otherwise, employers face an administrative fine (Article 227).

Lifelong professional guidance represents one form of non-financial institutional support. The key institution in charge of career guidance and counselling is the CES, which focuses on students and unemployed persons. It also provides a wide range of services for employers (e.g. counselling, assessments and employee searches).

Another important institution in the field is AVETAE. It promotes and supports the involvement of adults with low skill levels and acts as a key institution in the approval of any programme, providing professional assistance and quality standards. Its work here contributes to removing barriers that individuals may face in engaging with adult learning programmes. The efficiency and effectiveness of the use of public funds is monitored by the ministries and parliament (the consumption of budgetary funds).

Apart from administrative monitoring of the output and results of each design, all interventions are subject to process and impact evaluations. This, for instance, was also the case with ESF-funded active labour market policies such as training (including the initial application of vouchers) for the 2014–2020 cycle (Hrabar et al., 2021; Mousios et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). The plan for national evaluation activities (based on the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and value added) in the next programming period is still being developed at the time of the drafting of this report. Despite the uncertainty around its content, the plan is likely to include non-financial support, as long as it is funded by the ESF+.

The efficiency of the use of vouchers is monitored at the educational level in terms of outcomes and the number of unemployed persons taking part (see the AEA). Vouchers are being awarded to participants from 2022 to 2026, controlled and monitored by advisers from the CES. As part of the 2021 NRRP programme, an independent external evaluation of the voucher scheme was carried out up until the middle of 2024, and its findings were to be used to produce possible improvements to the scheme (*Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, 2021, p. 935).

Table 2, below, provides an overview of all instruments available to support participants in adult education as of mid 2023.

Table 2. **Supporting instruments for participants in adult education in Croatia, mid 2023**

Supporting instruments	Target groups and eligible programmes	Key stakeholders	Source of funding resources	Legal basis (and time limits)
Vouchers	• Employed and unemployed persons • Training programmes for green and digital skills until 2026 • Programmes in line with the CROQF in other sectors (post 2026)	MoSEY, MoL, AVETAE and the CES (first- and second-level national intermediate bodies)	EU	• AEA • NRRP (until 2026) • 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme, and open for future implementation as individual learning accounts
ESF+ grants	Programmes for formal and vocational education and training	MoSEY, MoL and AVETAE	EU	• 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme • National plan for the development of the education system (until 2027)
	Programmes for non-formal and non-vocational education and training	MoSEY, MoL, the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society (first- and second-level national intermediate bodies)	EU, with additional lottery funds	Law on the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society
Educational leave	Employees	Companies	Companies (private and public)	Labour Act, Article 54
Providing and financing professional training in companies	Employees	Companies	Companies (private and public)	Labour Act, Article 54 (it depends on the assessment of the company leadership; no time limits)

Supporting instruments	Target groups and eligible programmes	Key stakeholders	Source of funding resources	Legal basis (and time limits)
Financial support for basic education and basic skills	Persons with education lower than ISCED level 2 and without basic literacy, math and digital skills	MoSEY	State budget	AEA (no time limits, but each year of its implementation is decided on by the ministry)

NB: ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.

Source: Project team.

2.6.4. Support for selected target groups

Data from a 2016 AES study (Matković, 2023) revealed that persons with low skill levels identified costs as the second most frequent barrier to participating in learning (32 %). Costs came second to dispositional and family-related barriers. Since reducing costs – and thereby increasing adult learning enrolment – is a legitimate area for state intervention, many governments have chosen to act.

In Croatia, the following policy tools and laws regulate costs at the intersection of target groups and adult learning. The 2021 NRRP programme and the 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme both clearly advocate for the use of vouchers for persons lacking skills. The 2023 Education plan calls for financial support for priority training programmes covering skill acquisition (measure 4.6). The aim is for adult trainees to acquire fundamental skills (digital, mathematical and reading skills) free of charge, with funds amounting to EUR 200 000 being allocated for this annually. Cost alleviation measures depend on the target group. The points below explain how these differ.

- (a) Persons with disabilities (AEA, 2021, Article 22) are eligible for a reasonable adaptation of the methods, modes and shapes of work. Based on the means available, employers may (co-)finance the cost of the transportation and equipment needed for students to be able to take part in their chosen education or training programme.
- (b) Unemployed persons with a low level of education are eligible to attend workplace training or training in institutions that provide educational programmes for the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills. The costs of teaching and mentoring are fully funded, while trainees are entitled to cash fees and travel expenses during training.
- (c) ESF+ projects most often involve supporting women in education. For example, the Zaželi project relates to the provision of social services to the elderly and involves training women to perform these jobs. These projects include state actors, NGOs, local actors who recognise social needs and educational institutions that train women.

- (d) The Foreigners Act (or Zakon o Strancima) (2020, Articles 108, 138 and 159) stipulates that TCNs with residence and a work permit tied to an employment contract with a Croatian employer are entitled to attend general and vocational education, as well as professional training. The AEA (Article 30) explicitly lists TCNs with permanent residence or residents who are temporarily in Croatia for the purpose of work as eligible for the public financing of their adult education.

2.7. Key area 6: outreach to beneficiaries

2.7.1. Legal and strategic basis, policy tools and stakeholders

Setting the scene: legal background and actors

National learning strategies cannot succeed without outreach activities. In the case of up- and reskilling in Croatia, outreach activities raise awareness of upskilling opportunities and provide information on guidance and available support measures. The target groups here are adults who, for whatever reason, are less likely to engage with such initiatives and adult learning more generally. National strategic documents consistently identify the following as priority target groups for outreach: TCNs; unemployed persons with low education levels; women facing labour market barriers; persons with disabilities; rural residents; the elderly; the long-term unemployed; Roma; and NEET youth.

Several national documents refer explicitly to outreach activities in the Croatian context. These are:

- (a) the 2023 Education plan;
- (b) the AEA;
- (c) the strategic framework for the promotion of lifelong learning (Alfirević et al., 2017), which provides the most detailed plan.

Several actors are also involved in outreach, namely MoSEY, AVETAE and the CES, along with many partner institutions such as NGOs, chambers of commerce, public institutions and private services. Their involvement, however, does not take place at the same level. In Croatia, the central authorities handle financing, technical support and the monitoring of adult learning, while local and regional bodies manage operational implementation. The MoSEY operational programme for 2021–2024 evidences a strong consensus on the importance of lifelong learning. This programme highlights the need for the continuous promotion of lifelong learning and the external validation of adult learning institutions.

Local actors – municipalities, CES offices and regional one-stop shops ⁽¹¹⁾ – play a key role in coordinating stakeholders. A prominent example is the AVETAE-coordinated Lifelong Learning Week. This week-long event, organised by eight regional coordinators, involves a broad range of institutions, companies, associations and cultural organisations taking part in promoting lifelong learning. The event has been happening, at the time of writing, for the past 17 years. The 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme supports developing integrated service models (e.g. single contact points, joint case management and multidisciplinary teams) and strengthening partnerships, including through multisector info-centres that offer several services in one place.

Lifelong learning and promotional activities

The 2023 Education plan stresses the promotion of lifelong learning, with the key goal of increasing adult participation – particularly among under-represented groups. This is because guidance on lifelong learning has been identified as playing a central role in providing information and motivating adults to learn. Guidance services are provided by national authorities in the education and employment sectors. MoSEY and MoL oversee system development, supported by regional and local bodies, while the CES is the main provider of outreach at all administrative levels. The AEA (Article 7) defines andragogical leaders as professionals who offer advisory and career guidance services within learning providers.

Promotional activities covered in the Strategic framework detail the communication goals, tools, partners and stakeholders involved, including policymakers, education providers, teachers, NGOs, media, companies, chambers, guidance offices and professional associations. These goals were repeated in a follow-up document on the promotion of adult learning, published in 2022. Strategic framework activities focus on the main stakeholders: decision-makers in education policy, service providers in lifelong education (with particular emphasis on adult education institutions) and teaching staff at all levels of education. Table 3, below, provides a summary of the different outreach activities in Croatia in mid 2023.

⁽¹¹⁾ RCCs are being developed to improve local access to education and to respond more effectively to community needs. These centres promote cooperation among adult education institutions, local companies, research bodies and regional authorities, particularly in developing new professions and learning models. They were set up under the VET system development programme (2016–2020) and are currently financed through local partnerships supported by the ESF+.

Table 3. **Outreach in adult education in Croatia, mid 2023**

Activity (and implementation dynamics) and legal or strategic basis	Target groups	Key actors
Awareness raising: informing people about the importance of lifelong learning. Integrated national activities, for example Lifelong Learning Week. (once a year). (AEA, National plan for the development of the education system from 2021 to 2027).	General population	AVETAE + regional providers
Individual promotional activities carried out by institutions (e.g. searching for participants). (cyclically, according to the enrolment dates of programmes).. (AEA, Strategic framework for the promotion of lifelong learning and its follow-up documents, and 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme).	A subgroup that meets the criteria for financing or enrolment in programmes (age, education, sex/gender and employment status)	Adult education providers
Public campaigns to promote educational opportunities (e.g. vouchers and microcredentials). (occasionally).. (2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme 2021–2027).	General public	CES
Making contact with individuals who are potential participants. (regular activity). (Strategic framework for the promotion of lifelong learning and its follow-up documents, the AEA and National plan for the development of the education system from 2021 to 2027).	Potential participants from vulnerable groups (priority targets)	CES and social services, in cooperation with NGOs
Promoting education and training within a certain ministry sector. (occasionally). (Laws and regulations regulating educational programmes within specific sectors (e.g. police, firefighting, agriculture)).	Potential participants who meet the inclusion criteria	Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, and other ministries

Activity (and implementation dynamics) and legal or strategic basis	Target groups	Key actors
Development and promotion of new competences and dissemination of information about vocational training opportunities at the regional and local levels. (new regular activity). (2030 Croatian national development strategy (Nacionalna razvojna strategija Republike Hrvatske Do 2030. godine, 2021) and the 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme).	Employers, mentors and adult learners within a certain region (county)	RCCs and adult education providers

Source: Project team.

Outreach depends on the effective promotion of learning opportunities. Activities promoting lifelong learning in Croatia are detailed in the Strategic framework and its follow-up analysis. Guidance strategies are defined in the 2023 Education plan and the National plan for work, occupational safety and employment (2021–2027), with CES as a key actor. Many promotional activities, including the promotion of literacy and reading, police recruitment programmes and agricultural training initiatives, target specific sectors or groups. Projects funded by the ESF+ also include strong promotional components to attract participants. Cooperation across providers, the CES, local authorities and CSOs – especially those supporting adults with low skill levels or other disadvantaged groups – is a key element stressed in the Strategic framework and its follow-up analysis.

2.7.2. Target groups

Having covered the legal basis and outreach activities of national education strategies, as well as the actors involved, consideration now turns to the identified target groups. A 2016 AES-based study (Matković, 2023) showed that adults with low skill levels have significantly poorer access to information about learning opportunities than adults in general; low education reduces access to information from public institutions, employers and education providers. While CES outreach targets unemployed persons, it does so more effectively for those that have a tertiary education. Income also influences access to information from learning providers.

The 2023 Education plan and the 2021–2027 Efficient Human Resources Programme stress the importance of targeted outreach, activities funded by the ESF+ and services for marginalised communities, including Roma and women. The mapping and monitoring of NEETs is highlighted as a tool for identifying service needs and directing educational opportunities towards hard-to-reach groups. The Strategic framework provides detailed guidance for stakeholders, with

special outreach measures for vulnerable groups. Adults with low education levels and low skill levels are identified as the primary target group of this study.

A 2022 study (Alfirević et al., 2023, pp. 30–32) of over 300 adult learning providers found wide variation in outreach practices:

- (a) 25 % had little or no engagement in promotion;
- (b) 48 % invested substantial effort in promotion;
- (c) outreach mostly focused on short training courses and adult secondary education;
- (d) targeting often prioritised ‘general’ unemployed and employed populations, while vulnerable groups (low-qualified workers, women, older adults, disabled persons, migrants) were less frequently targeted or largely ignored.

The implementation analysis shows gaps between policy goals and practice. Many providers struggle with promotional activities, sometimes misinterpreting the promotion of lifelong learning itself. Marketing and public relations are underdeveloped – only about 10 % of providers use such tools, which weakens the interest in adult learning.

Chapter 3.

Fieldwork strategy

The NSG discussed and validated the main strengths, current limitations, opportunities for development and potential challenges related to the implementation of the UP Recommendation in the three selected key areas, using an approach based on the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) to guide the fieldwork. This enabled the identification of specific aspects to be analysed in-depth during the fieldwork ⁽¹²⁾.

The sections that follow detail the methodological approach adopted, the aspects selected for in-depth exploration and the categories of stakeholders involved in the research in each of the three survey rounds.

3.1. Survey round 1 (micro level): methodological approach

The aim of survey round (SR) 1 was to gather actual information on how the functional equivalent of the UP Recommendation has been implemented. This involved engaging with various stakeholders, such as policy practitioners, adult learning providers, companies, local and regional governments and individuals with low skill levels and a low level of education.

Based on the SWOT analysis of the current situation in the three identified key areas, and after deliberations with the NSG, the following topics were identified as the focus of the fieldwork. Specific stakeholders were involved in the fieldwork analysis of each of these topics.

Key area 3: multilevel and multistakeholder governance

- (a) **Topic 1 – effectiveness of coordination.** How well multilevel governance engages adult education providers, CSOs and local governments in upskilling initiatives – investigated with all the providers and stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels.
- (b) **Topic 2 – role of local providers.** The efficiency of local and regional coordination in planning and putting into practice new adult education programmes – investigated with NGOs, CSOs and providers.

⁽¹²⁾ Additional details about the preparatory phase are available in Cedefop (2025).

- (c) **Topic 3 – involvement of employers and civil society.** The participation and motivation of employers and CSOs, particularly those representing vulnerable groups – investigated with providers and stakeholders working with adults with low skill levels (apart from NGOs and CSOs).

Key area 5: financial and non-financial support

- (a) **Topic 1 – securing funding.** Whether appropriate and sustainable funding is available, including the role of EU funds and other financial mechanisms – investigated with providers, stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels and companies.
- (b) **Topic 2 – non-financial support.** The capacity and effectiveness of adult education providers and employers in offering non-financial support for upskilling – investigated with providers, stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels and companies.
- (c) **Topic 3 – targeting support.** How financial and non-financial support is designed to effectively target adults with low skill levels – investigated with providers, stakeholders working directly with the identified target group and adults with low skill levels.

Key area 6: outreach to vulnerable groups

- (a) **Topic 1 – barriers to participation.** Challenges that prevent adults with low skill levels from participating in upskilling initiatives – investigated with providers, stakeholders working directly with the identified target group and beneficiaries.
- (b) **Topic 2 – opportunities and synergies.** The effectiveness of existing outreach measures and potential synergies with other projects and organisations – investigated with providers, stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels and beneficiaries.
- (c) **Topic 3 – resources.** The capacity of education providers and the CES to design and implement effective outreach activities – investigated with providers and stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels.

When carrying out SR1, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. The qualitative approach mostly relied on a combination of individual and group interviews, typically involving one or two participants depending on availability. The interviews involved engaging with providers; other stakeholders working directly with adults with low skill levels, namely institutional/public stakeholders and mixed-ownership (public/private) and CSOs; and beneficiaries.

The quantitative approach consisted of an online survey given to all training providers listed in the AVETAE register. To collect data from beneficiaries, on-site

surveys were carried out with participants enrolled in upskilling programmes delivered by provider organisations, as no comprehensive beneficiary register exists and online survey formats may be unsuitable for this target group. In addition, an online survey was conducted in towns, municipalities and counties to capture the extent of local and regional government involvement at the implementation level.

Stakeholders were selected for the surveys and interviews based on their distinct roles, mandates and perspectives in the implementation of UPs, as well as their capacity to contribute relevant evidence to the analysis. Training providers were included as key operational actors responsible for designing and delivering learning programmes, offering insights into coordination mechanisms, resource allocation, pedagogical practices and learner support. Local government units were included due to their mandate to conduct territorial planning, service coordination and community-level outreach, enabling an assessment of multilevel governance arrangements and local implementation capacities. Beneficiaries were involved to capture first-hand experiences of participation, barriers, motivation and the perceived relevance and accessibility of support measures. CSOs were selected for their intermediary role in engaging vulnerable groups, providing tailored guidance and facilitating trust between institutions and learners, which means they could contribute perspectives on the effectiveness and inclusion of outreach measures. Finally, companies were included to get insights into labour market needs and workplace-based learning opportunities.

During SR1, which took place between 29 April 2024 and 28 June 2024, the research team conducted qualitative interviews with 54 individuals, including providers and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the team carried out three separate surveys, gathering responses from 159 respondents. Overall, 213 individuals took part in six different data collection initiatives, as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. **Number of individuals participating in SR1 data collection initiatives**

Data collection method	Participating persons / respondents
Qualitative interviews with providers	22
Qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (CSOs, public/private organisations)	19
Qualitative interviews with beneficiaries	13
Quantitative survey with providers	69
Quantitative survey with beneficiaries	56
Quantitative survey with local government units: respondents, population and response rate	34
Total	213

Source: Project team.

3.2. Survey round 2 (meso level): methodological approach

The aim of SR2 was to further investigate and analyse, at the intermediate level (meso level, the level between high-level policy design and local-level implementation), the gaps and challenges that emerged when carrying out adult education programmes (as identified in SR1). This included addressing their causes and identifying potential solutions to improve their cooperation, partnerships, vertical and horizontal governance, and support mechanisms. Another aim was to understand stakeholders' capacity-building strategies for more effective outreach and the involvement of groups with low skill levels and other vulnerabilities, particularly those identified in the inception phase (e.g. persons with low education levels, women facing barriers in the labour market, persons with disabilities and migrant workers from non-EU countries).

SR2 used a qualitative approach that was based on a set of semi-structured interviews held with five distinct groups of stakeholders.

Stakeholders interviewed in SR2 were selected based on their institutional roles at the meso level and their capacity to provide explanations and additional insights into the gaps and challenges identified in the first round of the survey. Social partners and chambers of commerce were involved to provide insights into labour market needs, barriers to company engagement and effective models for social partner cooperation in adult education. Local and regional government units (LRGUs) were selected due to their mandate to coordinate and their role in supporting local authorities, enabling an assessment of territorial governance arrangements, resource distribution and intermunicipal cooperation. Government services and agencies, including national bodies such as AVETAE and the CES, were interviewed because of their responsibility for policy implementation, funding management and service delivery, meaning they could contribute evidence on voucher schemes and institutional support mechanisms. Civil-sector umbrella organisations and ombudsmen were included to represent vulnerable groups and defend beneficiaries' rights, offering perspectives on accessibility, equity, the effectiveness of outreach, and systemic barriers. Finally, providers' umbrella associations were included to reflect the collective experience of training institutions, allowing for an analysis of operational constraints, capacity-building needs and cooperation practices across the sector.

By tailoring interview topics to each stakeholder group's mandate and sphere of influence, the research ensured that governance, funding and outreach challenges were examined from complementary institutional, social and operational meso-level viewpoints. The selection of stakeholders for each area and topic was as shown below.

Key area 3: multilevel and multistakeholder governance

- (a) **Topic 1.** Barriers to effective cooperation and strategies for enhancing interinstitutional communication and partnership were investigated by interviewing social partners and chambers of commerce, LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.
- (b) **Topic 2.** The role and effectiveness of local authorities in adult education policy was investigated by interviewing LRGUs and government services and agencies.
- (c) **Topic 3.** Barriers to companies and trade unions' engagement and effective models for cooperation were investigated by interviewing social partners, chambers of commerce and providers' umbrella associations.

Key area 5: financial and non-financial support

- (a) **Topic 1.** Increasing the share of adult education funding and improving allocation mechanisms was investigated by interviewing social partners, chambers of commerce, LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.
- (b) **Topic 2.** Voucher scheme design and implementation challenges were investigated by interviewing social partners, chambers of commerce, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.
- (c) **Topic 3.** The availability and use of non-financial support to aid adult education providers and potential beneficiaries were investigated by interviewing social partners, chambers of commerce, LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.
- (d) **Topic 4.** The affordability of adult education programmes, especially for those more in need, was investigated by interviewing LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations and ombudsmen.

Key area 6: outreach to beneficiaries

- (a) **Topic 1.** Community involvement in informing and engaging individuals about training opportunities was investigated by interviewing social partners, chambers of commerce, LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.

- (b) **Topic 2.** The role of the CES in disseminating information was investigated by interviewing government services and agencies.
- (c) **Topic 3.** Effective cooperation for outreach purposes was investigated by interviewing LRGUs, government services and agencies, civil-sector umbrella organisations, ombudsmen and providers' umbrella associations.

Fieldwork took place between 27 December 2024 and 21 February 2025 and involved a total of 27 interviews with 35 participants from 26 organisations, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5. **Outline of interviews included in SR2**

	Interviews	Organisations involved	Participants involved
Employer organisations and trade union federations	6	6	7
Local and regional government	7	6	7
National authorities in upskilling	4	4	8
Civil-sector umbrella organisations and ombudspersons	6	4	9
Providers' umbrella associations	4	4	4
Total	27	24	35

Source: Project team.

3.3. Survey round 3 (macro level): methodological approach

The specific aim of SR3 was to discuss and consider the proposed solutions that emerged from fieldwork in SR2 to derive specific and tailor-made policy recommendations to support the implementation of the UP Recommendation in Croatia.

While the focus of SR3 remained on the three key areas selected for the TCR outlined above, within each of these three key areas, specific topics were identified for analysis that were in line with the priorities set by the NSG. These topics are listed below.

Key area 3 – multilevel and multistakeholder governance:

- (a) steps towards developing evidence-based policies,
- (b) solutions for increasing the role and effectiveness of local and regional authorities in adult education.

Key area 5 – financial and non-financial support:

- (a) mechanisms for securing an appropriate level of funding and improving allocation mechanisms.

Key area 6 – outreach to beneficiaries:

- (a) effective cooperation for outreach purposes.

Consultations were conducted as individual or group interviews with each stakeholder; stakeholders were provided with the same list of challenges and possible solutions to guide the discussion.

Stakeholders interviewed in SR3 were selected based on their strategic responsibilities, institutional mandates and capacity to influence policy development at the national and system levels.

MoSEY was interviewed due to its leading role in shaping education and training policies, enabling an assessment of how proposed recommendations align with national priorities and regulatory frameworks. MoL was included to provide a labour market and social inclusion perspective, particularly in relation to employment outcomes, vulnerable groups and interministerial coordination. The CES participated as a key public service provider responsible for guidance, placement and outreach, contributing operational insights into the feasibility of the proposed measures and their integration into existing employment services. AVETAE was involved because of its regulatory and quality assurance mandate, allowing it to offer expertise on provider capacity, programme standards and system-level support mechanisms.

Social partner organisations were selected to ensure that labour market stakeholders were actively involved in shaping policy responses. The Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts contributed the perspective of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and guilds, highlighting skills needs, workplace training strategies and barriers to employer engagement. The Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia was included to represent workers' interests, particularly regarding access, working conditions and incentives for lifelong learning. The Association of Cities and the Association of Counties were interviewed to reflect the role of local and regional authorities in territorial governance, service coordination and outreach, enabling an assessment of how national strategies can be effectively implemented at the sub-national level.

In addition, representatives of adult education associations were selected to convey the collective experience of providers, offering system-wide insights into implementation challenges, capacity-building needs and cooperation practices. CSOs were interviewed to ensure the representation of vulnerable and under-

represented groups, contributing their perspectives on accessibility, inclusion and the practical implications of proposed reforms for disadvantaged learners.

Fieldwork took place between 9 June 2025 and 20 July 2025 and involved a total of nine individual/group interviews with 17 participants from 14 organisations, as outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. **Outline of interviews included in SR3**

Stakeholder	Persons interviewed	Highest title held by interviewee
MoSEY	1	Head of Directorate
MoL	1	State Secretary
CES	1	Deputy Director General
AVETAE	2	Director
Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts	2	Vice-President
Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia	1	Executive Secretary
Association of Cities	2	Assistants to the president/mayor
Association of Counties	Written input	County officials
Representatives of adult education associations	4 from 3 associations	n/a
Representatives of CSOs (four CSOs invited)	3 from 2 CSOs	n/a

Source: Project team.

Chapter 4.

Findings from the TCR on UPs in Croatia

4.1. Key area 3: improving effectiveness of horizontal and vertical coordination among various stakeholders

This section analyses the governance and coordination mechanisms underpinning UPs in Croatia in terms of the roles of institutions, evidence-based approaches and multilevel cooperation shaping policy design and implementation. The results and discussions from the three rounds of fieldwork indicate that Croatia has developed an integrated governance approach, which remains only partially operational because its components are unevenly connected across different levels of governance ⁽¹³⁾.

The Croatian approach to adult learning governance is marked by a clear tension between formal progress and persistent functional limitations. Over the past decade, Croatia has built a relatively solid institutional framework, with defined mandates for ministries, agencies and advisory bodies. However, policy planning and implementation at the micro level continue to rely heavily on short-term project-based mechanisms that prevent the consolidation of partnerships, the institutionalisation of coordination and the use of data for policy design and evaluation. Strengths, such as well-defined institutional roles, existing coordination platforms and active civil-society and sectoral actors, are offset by fragmented policy interventions, uneven capacities across regions and a lack of sustainable financing.

At the meso level, the findings show a governance approach that has made progress in setting up formal coordination mechanisms but remains functionally fragmented. Cooperation among ministries, regional bodies, providers and employers is often established on an ad hoc basis, driven by project funding rather than by consolidated interinstitutional arrangements. The connections between different components – central and local authorities, providers and social partners – remain fragile. Strengthening these links through clearer mandates,

⁽¹³⁾ During fieldwork, some changes in the management, quality assurance and financing of adult education occurred. These changes may have affected the consistency of the responses and the opinions expressed on problems and solutions over the course of the TCR.

stable resources and mutual accountability would allow Croatia to move towards a genuinely integrated, multilevel governance model for adult education.

At the macro level, evidence-based policymaking is gaining more and more strategical momentum in readdressing gaps in current institutional settings and the design of future policies for the upskilling of the adult population. Shared frameworks for data collection, evaluation and benchmarking have been designed and agreed with multilevel stakeholders; yet their potential is undermined by limited system interoperability, weak feedback loops and uneven implementation capacity.

4.1.1. Strengths and challenges at the implementation level (micro level)

While Croatia has built a multilevel and multistakeholder framework that, in principle, enables cooperation across ministries, agencies, local authorities and social partners, its practical implementation often remains inconsistent and fragmented.

Croatia has a solid institutional infrastructure for adult learning governance. The roles of MoSEY, MoL and AVETAE are well defined, providing a clear division of responsibilities at the national level. At the implementation level, the CES has also expanded its outreach and activation functions, creating closer connections between training provision, diversified beneficiaries and labour market needs.

However, adult learning governance remains heavily centralised, with most strategic and financial decisions being made at the national level. Local and regional governments play a limited role in shaping adult learning policies or adapting them to local contexts. The absence of a clear legal mandate, combined with scarce administrative capacity and resources, has restricted their contribution to mostly operational activities. Coordination mechanisms such as local employment partnerships (LEPs) or RCCs have occasionally served as platforms for enhanced cooperation at the local level, although their functioning largely depends on ad hoc project funding.

The role of AVETAE emerges as both a strength and a limitation within the framework. The agency is recognised – primarily by training providers – as a technically competent and proactive actor, capable of bridging the learning and labour market policy domains. It has played a key role in introducing quality assurance mechanisms and supporting the implementation of the national voucher scheme (see Section 2.6 on the voucher scheme). Yet, for some providers, its remit remains mainly administrative and project-driven, leaving limited room for strategic steering or sustained capacity building at the local level. Likewise, RCCs represent a significant milestone in regional training infrastructure as they are meant to serve as hubs for adult upskilling, yet their functioning is still limited.

CSOs have strong connections with local target groups and are widely recognised for their capacity to reach beneficiaries that public institutions tend to fail to engage with – such as Roma, TCNs, early school leavers and long-term unemployed adults. In several municipalities, CSOs have set up small-scale, responsive projects that combine outreach, guidance and non-formal learning. Yet these projects remain isolated and fragile due to a lack of stable financing and a lack of structural inclusion in adult education governance, which respectively lead to local-level practices with a limited lifespan and bottlenecks in enhancing national policy planning with local-level experience and expertise.

The role of companies in providing upskilling is also marked by successes and failures; according to training providers, employers, despite supporting in-company training and work-based learning practices, are minimally involved in the design of training programmes. However, some large enterprises have recently started developing in-company training schemes or cooperating with providers to design and deliver short-term courses. This displays the gradual cultural shift towards recognising worker upskilling as a competitiveness boost rather than a financial and organisational burden. Nevertheless, employer engagement remains limited in scope and uneven across sectors and companies. SMEs, which form the backbone of the Croatian economy, often lack the financial and organisational capacity to invest in employee training. Administrative complexity, uncertainty about which schemes are available and short-sighted approaches to workforce planning are preventing upskilling practices from becoming mainstream.

These internal weaknesses are compounded by cross-cutting governance issues. Non-exhaustive and disharmonised data collection and limited information sharing among stakeholders continue to prevent evidence-based decision-making. As a result, policy learning tends to rely on ad hoc project evaluations rather than on recurrent and systematic feedback loops. The absence of integrated data linking national, regional and provider-level information hinders public administration's capacity to identify trends, measure outcomes and allocate resources effectively.

The fragmentation of institutional responsibilities represents another challenge. While MoSEY, MoL and AVETAE each have clearly defined competences, a lack of coordination across education and employment generate inefficiencies and a duplication of work. At the same time, accountability for policy outcomes at the regional and local levels remains weak. Many local actors perceive themselves to be the executors of policies defined at the central level, rather than partners in policy implementation. This limits their motivation and capacity to innovate based on local characteristics and needs, while reinforcing their dependence on top-down initiatives.

Despite these limitations, micro-level findings also point to emerging pockets of good practice that illustrate untapped potential. Some counties have managed to establish coordination structures that exist beyond single projects and to help RCCs integrate adult learning into their portfolio of activities. Similarly, CSOs have successfully implemented, in cooperation with public institutions, outreach and awareness-raising campaigns that address more marginalised and vulnerable target groups. Fieldwork findings show that cooperation is made possible when mutual trust, shared objectives and institutional support are established. However, without stronger political commitment and more predictable funding streams, such practices are unlikely to upscale or prove sustainable over time.

4.1.2. Understanding challenges and gaps at the meso level

The meso-level fieldwork confirmed that Croatia's approach to adult learning governance rests on a solid institutional foundation but continues to face structural coordination problems that limit its responsiveness, effectiveness and capacity to reach all target groups. Meso-level stakeholders acknowledged there had been tangible progress in creating frameworks for cooperation, yet they also pointed to persisting gaps in mandate, resources and continuity. What emerges is a governance landscape in transition: national institutions have become more interconnected, but cooperation with local actors and employers remains spontaneous and heavily dependent on ad hoc project funding rather than on systemic governance mechanisms.

What emerges more prominently at the meso level is a siloed approach to adults upskilling and reskilling. Despite the intent to simplify its administration through the national information system for adult education (NISOO) platform, the lack of harmonised data standards and bureaucratic complexities are still preventing the establishment of a full framework for adult training participation and outcomes and stopping data sharing for effective multistakeholder governance.

Most LRGUs remain marginal actors in adult education policy; the centralised nature of decision-making and scarce resources constrain their involvement. Historically, LEPs have served as coordination platforms, bringing together public institutions, employers, unions and providers. Their discontinuation, caused by the depletion of EU funds, generated a fragmented landscape where cooperation depends on the initiative of individual counties or municipalities. Only a few larger cities and counties have retained active roles in this area, working with open universities or CES offices to design targeted programmes for specific groups (e.g. welfare beneficiaries or migrants). In the absence of a statutory mandate and clear coordination mechanisms, however, these practices remain voluntary and

unevenly distributed, contributing to territorial disparities in access to adult learning.

RCCs are also seeking a novel identity at the meso level of governance. Initially conceived of as hubs bridging education and employment, RCCs' actual contribution to adult learning has been limited. This is because many RCCs continue to prioritise upper-secondary VET over training for adults. At the territorial level, RCCs' engagement with local employers and providers varies widely and is further challenged by a lack of clear policy direction. Although RCCs have started coordinating the implementation of short-term adult education projects in some regions, their role in regional upskilling ecosystems is still not systemic due to a lack of both dedicated funding lines and a clear mandate for adult learning.

EU funds have greatly expanded investment in UPs, but their financing remains fragmented, short-term and project-based. At the meso level, financial and human capacities differ sharply between wealthier urbanised counties and less-developed rural ones. Many regional administrations prioritise compulsory education and social services over the upskilling of the adult population, and open universities usually run with limited public support. However, notable variations across administrations are reported, with a stronger commitment and capacity to support adult education initiatives shown in some areas. Overall, this variation undermines national objectives for balanced regional development and equitable access.

Gaps in knowledge sharing, particularly about target groups' diverse needs, are also preventing the systemic coordination of multistakeholder governance. Local actors, CSOs and providers possess valuable insights into the profiles of beneficiaries and the barriers to meeting their needs, yet this information tends to be neither consolidated nor used to liaise with the government on national policy or local-level implementation. As a result, policy programmes risk being misaligned with actual training demands and needs, especially among vulnerable groups such as Roma, TCNs and persons with disabilities.

Turning to the business sector and social partners, meso-level fieldwork confirmed both a growing awareness of the role of upskilling in competitiveness and persistent structural barriers to companies' active engagement in upskilling. Larger companies in sectors with severe labour shortages (mostly construction and hospitality) are allocating resources to training, but these examples remain exceptions in a landscape characterised by SMEs that lack the organisational capacity and financial resources to invest in strategic training.

Social partners' engagement through economic and social councils rarely extends to adult learning agendas. Trade unions have seen their relevance at the meso-level decline, partly because of changes in workforce composition and the

prevalence of short-term or foreign workers. Nevertheless, isolated examples – such as union-led mentoring schemes in tourism or employer-funded construction training – show that more spontaneous forms of cooperation can be effective when the interests of different stakeholders converge.

To summarise, four different factors inhibiting the functional integration of meso-level governance can be identified:

- (a) fragmented mandates and weak horizontal coordination among stakeholders;
- (b) the insufficient empowerment and funding of regional and local actors;
- (c) a lack of structured mechanisms for companies and social partners' engagement;
- (d) reliance on EU funding cycles without national co-financing ensuring sustainability.

According to the interviewed stakeholders, setting up a permanent national advisory or coordination body for upskilling and reskilling adults that brings together ministries, agencies, social partners and representatives of local authorities would be an effective solution to the gaps and challenges discussed above, ensuring that harmonised policy planning that is also based on evidence from the CES, AVETAE and local actors informs decision-making.

In addition, the revival or redesign of LEPs was seen as essential to provide legally recognised coordination mechanisms at the county level and continuity beyond EU projects. Strengthening the role of RCCs as regional adult education hubs would also require them to have explicit mandates, stable funding and incentives for cooperation with other providers. Employers and trade unions' engagement could be improved through sectoral councils, co-funded training initiatives and the recognition of in-company learning within the CROQF. Finally, simplifying administrative procedures and accelerating the digitalisation of reporting and monitoring – building on the NISOO platform – were also identified as critical steps to reducing administrative burdens and enabling real-time information exchange at different levels and among those with different responsibilities.

4.1.3. High-level (macro-level) policy considerations and suggestions

The discussions surrounding key area 3 highlighted both the progress made and the structural weaknesses that continue to shape Croatia's approach to adult learning governance. The fieldwork underscored that the institutional foundations for evidence-based policymaking are in place, but their potential remains only partially realised. The limited cooperation between the central and local levels results in fragmented planning and the underutilisation of stakeholders' potential at the local and regional levels.

Drawing on findings from the micro and meso levels, macro-level stakeholders agreed that only through regular, interinstitutional assessments and systematic liaison with regional- and local-level government on national policy are they able to anticipate labour market developments and respond to the needs of diverse target groups. However, it was pointed out that without dedicated resources and a formally recognised coordinating authority, responsibility for these tasks risks being dispersed. In particular, in terms of the establishment of an evidence-based monitoring and evaluation system, macro-level stakeholders imagine this could happen through a medium-term reform that could build on existing evaluation exercises – such as those planned for the voucher scheme – and progressively expand their scope.

The operationalisation of the national adult education registry was seen as essential for ensuring standardised and granular monitoring. Ministries, agencies and providers' associations agreed on the need to avoid multiple reporting channels and establish the registry as the sole monitoring instrument. Once completed, it would provide a common reference framework for all stakeholders, facilitating consistent data collection and targeted interventions. The technical feasibility of this is high, but progress has been slowed by divergent institutional priorities and the gradual pace of digital integration.

As a consequence of the lack of a single, integrated monitoring system, there are limited evaluation practices in adult learning policy, which turned out to be another challenge. The suggestion to fund and undertake periodic evaluations of major adult learning measures received strong support from trade unions, CSOs and research institutions, who called for greater transparency in and accessibility of the results. It is a shared belief at the macro level that, while administrative capacity remains a limiting factor, the experience that comes from the evaluation of the voucher scheme offers an immediate opportunity to embed such practices within the ESF+ funding cycle.

Following on from the recommendation above, macro-level stakeholders also agreed on the importance of transforming advisory structures into genuine 'evidence brokers' in the adult upskilling ecosystem. However, it was also specified that this kind of operation would require there to be legal clarity on each stakeholders' role, stable memberships (for both social partners and regional representatives) and the actual use of stakeholders' inputs in policy cycles. This is deemed to be a long-term reform that hinges on cultivating trust, accountability and a shared understanding of the value of evidence-based governance.

Linked to monitoring and evaluation, macro-level stakeholders recommended institutionalising benchmarking routines that combine international and domestic perspectives. Croatia's participation in comparative exercises run by the EU and

the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, including the programme for the international assessment of adult competencies, provides a useful framework for comparatively assessing its progress. The planned appointment of chief data analysts within ministries is expected to promote the benchmarking of national strategies against the international context, signalling a promising step towards more analytical policy attempts.

Beyond the data-collecting and evaluation dimensions, the macro-level discussions also pointed to the need for more balanced multilevel governance. The uneven development of local and regional capacities continues to undermine coherence and equity in adult education provision. While national frameworks have been strengthened, many LRGUs remain under-resourced and lack clear competence in adult learning. Stakeholders agreed that targeted support for weaker regions should combine financial assistance with capacity building, enabling local actors to take part meaningfully in the coordination and delivery of policy. Such support could be channelled through existing structures, such as county offices or the Association of Counties, ensuring that resources reach the areas most affected by skill mismatches and outmigration.

Equally important was the broad consensus on the need to revitalise local coordination mechanisms, including LEPs and economic and social councils. Their discontinuation after EU funding cycles had ended left a gap in territorial cooperation and stakeholder engagement. Reactivating these bodies, this time with secure funding and an explicit mandate for adult learning, could restore a crucial link between national strategy and local enactment. However, mixed experiences from the past highlight the importance of embedding these partnerships in a legally recognised framework and ensuring their inputs feed into higher-level decision-making. For this reason, stakeholders considered this a medium- to long-term measure requiring gradual institutionalisation.

Discussions also examined the role of RCCs, which have strong infrastructure and sectoral expertise but remain primarily oriented towards secondary-level VET. Mixed opinions were identified in the macro-level fieldwork: while RCCs are perceived to be hubs for adult learning, some stakeholders cautioned against overburdening them without adequate mandates and resources. In the medium term, RCCs could become effective regional coordination nodes, sharing infrastructure with adult learning providers and supporting retraining during economic transitions or crises. To achieve this, policy adjustments would be needed to align the activities of RCCs with broader lifelong learning objectives and to lift the administrative restrictions that currently limit their flexibility.

4.2. Key area 5: securing an appropriate degree of funding and non-financial support, with the responsibility shared between key stakeholders, individuals and companies

Discussions and consolidated findings from the three rounds of the survey indicate that Croatia's approach to securing an appropriate degree of funding and non-financial support for adult learning remains fragmented and overly dependent on short-term European funding cycles, making this a situation with persistent operational weaknesses. The country has displayed a clear commitment to expanding access to upskilling and reskilling opportunities and aligning with EU priorities, but both the sustainability and the inclusiveness of its funding model remain uncertain. To build on existing strengths at the implementation level, future efforts will need to focus on stabilising funding streams, simplifying administrative procedures, improving local capacity and embedding comprehensive non-financial support into the system that makes adult learning both accessible and relevant for all learners.

At the meso level, the findings reveal that Croatia's approach to financial and non-financial support is evolving but not yet consolidated. Croatia has succeeded in expanding access to training through innovative tools such as vouchers, which have helped stimulate individual's participation and promote flexibility in learning choices and opportunities. However, as also highlighted at the micro level, these mechanisms remain constrained by short-term funding, administrative complexity and an uneven capacity to establish them in different regions. Limited employer participation and the absence of evaluation mechanisms further reduce the impact of existing schemes.

At the macro level, it was underlined that Croatia's financial and non-financial support for adult education stands at a crossroads. The core instruments are in place and stakeholder consensus on the need for sustainability and equity is strong. Yet national co-financing horizons remain short, negatively affecting long-term strategic planning. According to macro-level stakeholders, the next steps lie in establishing predictable funding from multiple sources, aligning financial and non-financial measures within an integrated policy framework and establishing evaluation mechanisms as routine practices. It is emphasised that this shift will require not only technical adjustments but also political commitment to a vision of adult learning as a shared investment that ensures that no adult is left behind, while also fuelling the competitiveness of businesses.

4.2.1. Strengths and challenges in practice (at the micro level)

The analysis of key area 5 at the micro level revealed a complex landscape shaped by a solid strategic commitment to upskilling and considerable financial inputs, yet constrained by administrative fragmentation and uneven access, reflecting multiple gaps at the implementation level.

At the micro level, Croatia's approach to financial and non-financial support for adult learning is shaped by its access to multiannual EU resources, particularly through the ESF+, which finances the implementation of a number of specific instruments, the most prominent of which is the voucher scheme.

However, stakeholders frequently described funding arrangements as project-dependent and sporadic, with limited mechanisms available for ensuring the continuity of successful initiatives once EU support ends. Furthermore, the uneven availability of resources at the local level exacerbates disparities between urban areas and peripheral or rural regions.

From the perspective of training providers, the voucher scheme has undoubtedly expanded opportunities for participation but also brought with it new operational challenges. At the implementation level, providers welcome the demand that vouchers have created, but they express concern about the adequacy of funding rates and administrative overheads. It was also discussed how the introduction of new qualification requirements for teachers and trainers – particularly mandatory pedagogical and psychological training – may exacerbate labour shortages in an already constrained sector, increasing programme costs and threatening its financial viability for smaller providers. The growing involvement of employers and companies in co-financing training is perceived as a positive signal of improving financial support for workers' upskilling and reskilling. However, the principle of shared responsibility among public administration, employers and individuals remains more aspirational than operational.

In terms of non-financial support, micro-level fieldwork identified significant gaps for training providers, which often operate with limited organisational and human resource capacity, struggling to meet regulatory and reporting requirements. While their relationships with national authorities, such as MoSEY and AVETAE, are generally positive, providers call for more responsive, context-specific support and clearer guidance; many providers lack the internal resources and skills to develop and register new programmes in line with the CROQF. AVETAE's efforts to prepare ready-made programmes are appreciated, yet providers still face barriers when attempting to align curricula with occupational standards or introduce innovative learning formats and content.

Administrative and technical support from local governments also has its gaps and challenging aspects. The CES, while a key partner in implementing the

voucher system, is not always equipped to provide the guidance and follow-up needed to ensure that training opportunities translate into relevant outcomes for learners who are upskilling and reskilling. These weaknesses are compounded by labour shortages within adult learning providers, which are mainly caused by difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified trainers and experts, particularly in fields where private sector salaries and opportunities are more competitive.

For beneficiaries, both financial and non-financial barriers persist. Many low-skilled and vulnerable adults face not only direct costs related to upskilling but also indirect expenses such as transport, childcare and foregone income – costs that existing financial aid mechanisms rarely cover. Fieldwork data indicate that, even when financial support is available, procedures to access it are perceived as overly complex and bureaucratic. Beneficiaries often mention the difficulties of navigating online spheres, collecting many documents and understanding eligibility criteria. This administrative burden disproportionately affects those with low digital or literacy skills, who are precisely the groups most in need of upskilling.

Another recurring theme concerns the interplay between welfare policies and participation in learning. Several interviewees noted that the fear of losing social benefits discourages low-income adults from engaging in adult learning or activation programmes. This unintended disincentive highlights the need for closer coordination between employment, social protection and education policies to ensure that pursuing upskilling opportunities is perceived as a pathway to empowerment rather than a risk. The territorial dimension of inequality in accessing learning is also pronounced. Regional disparities in economic development, transport infrastructure and social services significantly influence participation in adult learning. In remote or less-developed areas, the lack of affordable public transport and limited training provision both exacerbate exclusion.

Non-financial support for learners – such as guidance, mentoring or psychological and motivational assistance – is still at an early stage of development. While some providers, including certain work integration social enterprises (WISEs) ⁽¹⁴⁾, attempt to integrate counselling and personalised support into their services, these are not funded or coordinated.

A further area of concern relates to the appropriateness and targeted nature of adult learning programmes. While the introduction of micro-qualifications and modular training is seen as a promising step, doubts remain about their relevance

⁽¹⁴⁾ WISEs are independent businesses that have two missions: to sell goods or services on the market and to professionally integrate people who face barriers to employment into the workforce. Their primary objective is the social and professional inclusion of disadvantaged groups, which they achieve through creating jobs and providing training and support.

for adults with low skill levels and their translation into concrete labour market outcomes. Participants stressed the importance of aligning training with real job opportunities and ensuring that curricula are adaptable to learners' profiles and constraints. This includes offering flexible schedules, combining theoretical and practical components and strengthening the link between training providers and employers.

Overall, the evidence points to significant financial progress but limited structural consolidation. The expansion of voucher-based schemes and the steady inflow of EU funds represent tangible strengths, but the governance and capacities needed to maximise their impact are still developing. Administrative burdens, uneven local engagement and the absence of integrated non-financial support all create bottlenecks that constrain inclusion and effectiveness. For target groups such as adults with low skill levels, long-term unemployed individuals and other vulnerable learners, these weaknesses translate into uneven access to opportunities. Without consistent local support, tailored guidance or accessible information, those who would benefit the most from adult education are often the least able to navigate the support available.

4.2.2. Understanding challenges and gaps at the meso level

The analysis of funding mechanisms, voucher design and complementary non-financial measures underscores that there is a fundamental tension between expanding opportunities and ensuring long-term sustainability. Meso-level stakeholders from ministries, agencies, employers, trade unions, local governments and CSOs generally confirmed that financial support for adult education has grown in recent years, but its structure remains heavily reliant on EU funding and lacks stable national co-financing.

A major strength in Croatia's approach lies in the existence of several functioning initiatives that directly support learners. The voucher scheme, in particular, represents a significant step towards a more individual-centred funding model and has widened access to upskilling opportunities, especially in sectors affected by labour shortages. The scheme allows learners to choose training that is aligned with their needs, thereby encouraging a culture of personal responsibility for lifelong learning. The recent broadening of the vouchers' scope beyond green and digital skills, towards a wider range of occupational and transversal competences, was positively received by both providers and the labour market. In addition, local authorities have developed some innovative practices, offering fee exemptions or complementary social services for specific vulnerable groups, and several cities have piloted schemes that link financial and social support – for instance, by combining free training with housing or self-employment support.

Despite the positive outcomes stemming from the implementation of the voucher scheme, employers' participation in financing adult learning remains limited, particularly among SMEs. Although labour shortages have prompted some firms to invest in training, most of them are limited by the lack of both tax incentives and a stable framework for cost sharing. Also, according to trade unions, without clearer rules and shared financial responsibility, funding for adult learning will continue to depend excessively on the public administration. In this regard, stakeholders pointed to the need for a more balanced approach that combines contributions from the state, employers and individuals, while ensuring that financial barriers do not exclude vulnerable groups.

The voucher scheme itself, while recognised as an innovative tool, still faces design and set-up issues. The 'one-off' nature of vouchers prevents participants from pursuing progressive learning pathways or accumulating qualifications through modular courses. Their entry requirements also exclude some low-qualified adults who lack prerequisite competences, thereby limiting their inclusiveness. Furthermore, participants who fail to complete their course must reimburse the state, a rule that discourages participation among financially insecure groups. The current voucher allocation mechanism further exacerbates territorial inequalities, as regions with lower take-up receive fewer resources, which also impacts providers, who report difficulties in organising certain courses because enrolment quotas depend on fluctuating voucher demand.

Discussions on transitioning from vouchers to individual learning accounts (ILAs) revealed both potential and uncertainties. Stakeholders recognised that ILAs could provide a more sustainable and flexible funding model by allowing individuals to accumulate learning qualifications over time. However, this shift would need strong career guidance infrastructure, sustained funding and legislative adjustments regarding paid educational leave and employer contributions to be effective. MoL has already set up a working group to explore this transition, yet its work remains at an early stage. At the same time, stakeholders identified persistent gaps in non-financial support that hinder participation. Despite growing recognition of the importance of guidance and counselling, these services remain fragmented and unevenly available across the Member State. Continuing efforts to introduce lifelong career guidance through a project funded by the ESF+ show promise, but the capacity for setting this up is still limited. Transport and childcare were repeatedly cited as major obstacles, especially in rural areas and among single parents. CES reimbursement schemes only partially cover travel costs, and there are no measures to support childcare for learners. Coordination between education, employment and social welfare services remains weak, leaving individuals to navigate a complex bureaucracy

largely on their own. In addition, digital illiteracy continues to prevent many potential beneficiaries from accessing online application procedures. Providers and CSOs argue that alternative, in-person application channels and stronger local outreach are needed to ensure inclusiveness.

From the perspective of employers and trade unions, the absence of structured mentorship and the lack of incentives for providing paid educational leave further limit their participation. Many firms, especially SMEs, struggle to replace workers during training periods, which discourages them from supporting upskilling. Sectoral unions highlight that integration and language courses for TCNs are underfunded, despite being essential for social inclusion and productivity. At the same time, examples from some municipalities show that integrated approaches – combining guidance, transport support and local mentoring – can help overcome these barriers when institutions cooperate effectively.

Affordability remains a transversal issue, cutting across all themes. While free-of-charge programmes increase participation, some stakeholders noted that fee abolition could reduce commitment and lead to higher dropout rates. To balance equity and motivation, alternative models, such as partial cost sharing, payments in instalments or sliding-scale fees⁽¹⁵⁾, were suggested. For certain groups, notably TCNs and persons with disabilities, even part of the costs can be prohibitive, highlighting the need for targeted subsidies. The case of free language courses for migrants in Zagreb, which achieved higher attendance than partially subsidised programmes, illustrates how cost directly affects (at least initial) participation. Another affordability concern relates to low-paid professions, where new qualification requirements may be introduced without corresponding wage incentives – as in the case of teaching assistants. Without financial recognition, such reforms risk remaining symbolic or even becoming punitive in practice.

Overall, stakeholders agreed on several cross-cutting needs. The funding of adult learning should be on a more predictable, multiannual basis that combines national, EU and local sources. Cost-sharing frameworks should be transparent and equitable, encouraging co-investment from employers and individuals, while protecting disadvantaged groups through targeted support. Non-financial assistance – including guidance, transport, childcare and mentoring – must become an integral part of adult learning policy rather than an afterthought. Finally, improving data collection on beneficiaries, linking financial and non-financial

⁽¹⁵⁾ Sliding-scale fees are a pricing mode where the cost of a service varies based on a client's income and ability to pay. This model makes services more accessible by charging lower-income clients less than those with higher incomes.

measures, and monitoring outcomes across regions are all measures that would improve both efficiency and fairness.

4.2.3. High-level (macro-level) policy considerations and suggestions

Macro-level discussions about key area 5 confirmed the persistent tension between expansion and sustainability in financial and non-financial support for adult learning. Croatia has made significant progress in mobilising resources for upskilling from EU instruments, particularly the Recovery and Resilience Facility and ESF+ programmes. However, its heavy reliance on temporary European funding remains a structural vulnerability.

The proposal to set up a national adult education fund, pooling resources from the state, LRGUs, employers and individuals, received broad conceptual support as a national-level strategy to reduce dependence on EU project cycles and to consolidate resources within a single, transparent framework. Such a fund could allow for clearer planning horizons, equitable allocation and ring-fenced support for disadvantaged groups. However, opinions about its operational design and feasibility quickly diverged. Employer organisations and trade unions voiced concern about potential bureaucratisation and the difficulty of defining contribution rules, particularly for smaller businesses. The idea of using trade union resources to co-finance learning was deemed unrealistic, while employers stressed that incentives, not obligations, would be needed to encourage businesses' participation. The relevant ministries supported a phased approach, suggesting pilot models at the regional or sectoral level before full national transposition. Given its complexity and reliance on political consensus, this reform was considered a long-term endeavour, requiring gradual development and strong governance safeguards.

Stakeholders also focused on the need for improving allocation mechanisms to ensure resources are used efficiently across regions in the short term. While the national voucher scheme was praised as an innovative and inclusive funding tool, many called for its adaptation to regional contexts to address disparities between urban and rural areas.

The discussions also underscored the strategic role of non-financial support measures in enabling widespread participation. Most macro-level stakeholders recognised that financial aid alone is insufficient to reach vulnerable adults facing barriers such as inadequate transport, a lack of childcare or limited access to guidance services. Yet such support measures remain fragmented across different policy domains, with no integrated framework to link them to adult upskilling and reskilling strategies. While some central authorities consider transport and childcare to be primarily local responsibilities, others stressed the need for

multilevel and cross-sectoral coordination. Trade unions and CSOs highlighted paid training leave as an essential issue for workers, while employers' representatives advocated for compensation schemes to mitigate productivity losses for SMEs. In this area, incremental progress was seen as more realistic than immediate reform. Local pilot models – such as the county-level coordination of transport for remote learners or the provision of free childcare during training sessions – were cited as viable short-term options. In the longer term, embedding non-financial measures into the national adult education strategy will be critical to achieving equitable participation.

Employers' engagement in upskilling emerged as both a challenge and a necessary precondition for the creation of sustainable funding. There was a recommendation to introduce targeted fiscal and co-financing incentives aimed at stimulating employer investment in transversal skills, particularly among SMEs. Stakeholders acknowledged that, while existing schemes run under current labour market policies already subsidise some forms of training, these are often underused due to administrative complexity and low awareness. Employer organisations proposed incentives such as tax credits or direct grants for delivering in-company training. Trade unions supported such measures, while at the same time stressing the need to avoid the excessive public subsidy of company-specific training. However, given fiscal constraints and competing policy priorities, stakeholders considered this recommendation a medium-term measure to be piloted in selected sectors with strong labour market demand before wider roll-out.

Throughout the discussions, the need for an evaluation of funding allocation mechanisms emerged as a consistent priority, further confirming the macro-level considerations expressed in when discussing governance (key area 3). Stakeholders agreed that transparent, periodic monitoring and evaluation are necessary to ensure fairness, efficiency and impact. Providers' associations and trade unions, in particular, called for evaluations of the voucher scheme to be made public and followed up by social dialogue on the findings.

In summary, macro-level discussions revealed a deeper challenge: balancing individual empowerment with collective responsibility. Some stakeholders cautioned that increasing personal financial contributions to training might exacerbate inequalities if they were not matched by robust safeguards for low-income groups. Conversely, others argued that partial co-financing promotes ownership and commitment. Finding a sustainable equilibrium will therefore require nuanced policy design that combines incentives for personal and employer engagement with strong public support for those least able to contribute financially. Achieving this balance also depends on aligning the funding of adult learning with

broader social and economic objectives, such as regional development and competitiveness, labour market resilience and social inclusion.

4.3. **Key area 6: improving capacity for outreach to beneficiaries**

This section explores the approaches and coordination mechanisms supporting outreach and engagement in adult learning, examining how institutions, local actors and community organisations identify and motivate adults to take part in upskilling and reskilling opportunities. The results and discussions from the three rounds of fieldwork generally indicated that Croatia has developed solid institutional assets for conducting outreach but lacks the integration and long-term continuity needed to make them effective across territories, target groups and time.

At the implementation (micro) level, the territorial presence of the CES, the expertise of CSOs and the commitment of several adult training providers are all valuable assets. Yet these actors work largely in silos, without a shared framework or sustainable financial support. As a matter of fact, their outreach continues to depend on fragmented, time-limited projects, rather than on a coherent strategy linking national objectives with local-level implementation. The findings across all key area 6 topics discussed converge on the conclusion that effective outreach depends less on creating new structures and more on empowering and integrating existing ones – through stable funding, staff capacity development and coordination mechanisms. Strengthening these dimensions would allow Croatia to transform its outreach from a collection of separated projects into a continuous, inclusive and data-informed programme that genuinely connects adult learning opportunities with those who need them most.

At the meso level, the fieldwork confirmed that, while local and regional administrations, CES branches, welfare services and CSOs have all gained experience in community engagement, their cooperation is often ad hoc and dependent on individual initiatives or project funding. The discontinuation of LEPs and the limited rollout of the social mentoring scheme⁽¹⁶⁾ have weakened coverage, leaving most outreach activities concentrated in larger urban areas. The limited human and technical capacities of the CES, combined with the absence of coordination among social welfare centres, open universities and employers,

⁽¹⁶⁾ The 'social mentoring scheme' refers to social services coordinated by the Institute for Social Work, which aim to provide personalised guidance to vulnerable adults. Upskilling is a natural part of social mentorship. However, up until now there has been little evidence that social mentorship is being effectively coordinated with upskilling initiatives.

further constrains effectiveness of outreach efforts. Nevertheless, promising examples – such as integrated one-stop shops and local partnerships for migrant support – suggest that multi-actor cooperation can succeed when accompanied by stable financing and trust-based coordination.

At the macro level, discussions about key area 6 focused on the need for a coherent, institutionalised approach linking national coordination to the local-level delivery of outreach services and community engagement. The proposed measures – repurposing existing coordination platforms, embedding CSOs, running sustained communication campaigns, increasing the number of one-stop shops, developing migrant-focused outreach and setting up local cooperation protocols – are necessary parts of such an approach. According to macro-level stakeholders, the successful implementation of integrated outreach activities would not only improve participation rates among under-represented groups but also strengthen the legitimacy and visibility of adult learning as a public asset. Achieving this will depend on long-term political commitment, predictable financing and constant dialogue between central and local actors.

4.3.1. Strengths and challenges in practice (at the micro level)

The findings reveal a complex and uneven landscape. On the one hand, Croatia benefits from a growing awareness of the importance of outreach, a network of reasonably capable institutions such as the CES, and many examples of successful cooperation with providers and CSOs. On the other hand, outreach remains fragmented, under-resourced and insufficiently institutionalised, with most efforts concentrated on temporary or project-based initiatives rather than embedded in the core functioning of the adult education system.

The first clear strength lies in the widening recognition of outreach as a policy priority. There is a growing consensus across institutions that the effective engagement of low-skilled and vulnerable adults needs to go beyond traditional activation and employment services. Stakeholders are increasingly acknowledging that upskilling cannot succeed without parallel investment in motivation, guidance and confidence building. This is reflected in several promising practices identified during fieldwork, which aim at identifying and valuing beneficiaries' upskilling/reskilling needs as a first step towards their re-engagement in work. These practices demonstrate an understanding of the psychosocial dimensions of learning participation and point to the need for comprehensive, person-centred approaches.

At the same time, low motivation, trust and self-confidence remain among the most pervasive barriers to participation. Many adults experiencing unemployment or marginalisation express scepticism about the value of learning, often shaped by

previous negative experiences with formal education. This lack of trust is compounded by individual and structural-level obstacles, including poor health conditions, care responsibilities, limited transport infrastructure and limited access to digital services. TCNs and foreign residents face additional hurdles related to language, the recognition of prior learning and social integration. Stakeholders, therefore, stress the importance of addressing these barriers holistically, combining outreach with financial support, social inclusion measures and guidance.

Another structural weakness is the limited focus of providers on outreach. The fieldwork confirmed that many adult learning providers, including public ones, remain primarily market-oriented, offering programmes that are aligned with labour market demand but not necessarily accessible or attractive to disadvantaged adults. Also, because of the absence of a formal mandate, only a minority of providers cooperate with social services, CSOs or local governments to reach out to less visible beneficiaries.

Despite these challenges, Croatia possesses significant institutional assets that support effective outreach. Chief among them is the extensive territorial network of the CES, whose regional and local offices are often the first point of contact for unemployed adults and adults with low skill levels. Survey data confirm that coordination between the CES and training providers, when in place, is widely perceived as effective in reaching out to employees with low skill levels, unemployed adults and persons with disabilities. The CES also plays a central role in informing individuals about available training opportunities and distributing vouchers.

However, the effectiveness of this coordination remains uneven. Access to training is still underdeveloped for certain target groups – for instance, persons with disabilities or migrants – and cooperation between the CES and companies or CSOs varies widely across regions. The quality of counselling and referral services also depends heavily on the capacity and workload of local CES staff. Experts recognise the need for the creation of dedicated units or job profiles focused on outreach and guidance while reducing the administrative burdens for applicants. The ESF+ could serve as a potential source of funding for developing the necessary capacity-building measures to be able to offer integrated outreach, counselling and guidance services within the CES.

The role of CSOs and social partners is also an area with both strengths and underexploited potential. CSOs are particularly effective in working with marginalised communities (e.g. Roma, TCNs and persons with disabilities) because of their trust-based approaches and peer networks. Many CSOs act as intermediaries between institutions and beneficiaries, offering flexible, informal

learning opportunities that build confidence and pave the way for more structured and ambitious training measures. Nonetheless, their contribution remains limited by unstable financing, a lack of permanent staff and weak institutional recognition. CSOs often depend on project-based EU funding, and their involvement in policy design processes is sporadic. This lack of structural support not only undermines their sustainability but also represents a missed opportunity to capitalise on their outreach capacity.

The analysis of resources confirms that financial and human resource constraints are among the main obstacles to achieving effective outreach. Outreach programmes are labour-intensive and need dedicated, well-trained staff who understand the barriers faced by different groups. However, many CES counsellors and adult training practitioners, especially in smaller communities and rural areas, are already overburdened with administrative tasks, leaving little time for proactive engagement. Talent recruitment and retention are hampered by low wages, temporary contracts and limited professional development opportunities. These conditions discourage long-term commitment and hinder the development of institutional expertise in outreach and guidance.

Financially, outreach is seldom treated as a core activity deserving of dedicated funding. Most initiatives are financed through short-term projects or as add-ons to broader programmes. CSOs repeatedly stress that the territorial consistency of outreach programmes – particularly their proximity to communities – is crucial for success, but it is rarely factored into funding decisions. Organisations working with migrants or persons with disabilities cited the importance of maintaining local offices or networks of ‘community influencers’ to reach hard-to-access populations; however, such efforts depend almost entirely on donor support. The fragility of these resources undermines continuity and limits the accumulation of experience and trust at the community level.

Another recurring issue is the limited use of existing institutional frameworks for outreach coordination. National institutions such as MoSEY, MoL and AVETAE have an important role to play in promoting adult learning and in lending credibility to outreach campaigns, but their involvement remains sporadic. Some outreach efforts, such as the annual Lifelong Learning Week organised by AVETAE, have been praised as effective vehicles for raising awareness and putting adult learning under the spotlight. However, stakeholders stressed that one-off events cannot act as a substitute for constant efforts at the local level. What is needed, according to local-level actors, is a permanent, multichannel outreach strategy that integrates local structures, such as open universities, RCCs and CSOs, into coordinated frameworks.

Despite these constraints, examples of synergy and good practice can be found. Providers and local governments reported having cooperation initiatives with other services and stakeholders to improve the participation of vulnerable groups, particularly partnerships with open universities, companies and social services. Also, the presence of WISEs and rehabilitation centres in this area shows how outreach and learning can be combined with social enterprise approaches to support the labour market integration of persons with disabilities.

4.3.2. Understanding challenges and gaps (at the meso level)

Meso-level findings also included issues related to weak coordination, fragmented responsibilities and a lack of sustainable resources. While many promising practices exist – from municipal one-stop shops to partnerships between the CES and CSOs – these initiatives remain isolated and depend largely on short-term funding rather than being embedded in permanent structures.

The interviewed stakeholders identified several strengths that provide a foundation for more inclusive outreach. The primary strength is that Croatia benefits from existing national initiatives such as AVETAE's Lifelong Learning Week, which runs as a recurring awareness-raising campaign and has progressively expanded due to the work of regional coordinators. This initiative shows the value of consistent, recognisable communication on adult learning and provides a model for how national institutions can support local engagement. Equally, local examples of 'one-stop-shop' models for employment and upskilling services show how outreach can be streamlined to serve multiple needs, particularly for different target groups, such as TCNs, single parents and long-term unemployed individuals.

However, the same examples also expose weaknesses. As also observed by micro-level actors, most outreach initiatives fail to continue once project funding expires. The absence of long-term funding and institutional mandates undermines their sustainability and erodes beneficiaries' trust – a particularly serious issue for vulnerable adults who rely on stable reference points and personalised guidance. Adult learning providers, meanwhile, are constrained by limited resources and tend to prioritise market-driven programmes that are easier to implement, thereby limiting their capacity for proactive outreach or engagement with disadvantaged learners.

The analysis also underscored the underutilisation of CSOs and welfare institutions, with the former, which maintain close links with marginalised groups such as migrants, Roma and persons with disabilities, frequently being excluded from formal coordination mechanisms and dependant on unstable project-based funding. Local branches of the Institute for Social Work were repeatedly mentioned

as potential hubs for identifying and motivating vulnerable adults, yet their image as enforcement institutions, rather than as supportive ones, often deters engagement. Transforming these centres into genuine community partners will require both capacity building and a cultural shift towards preventative, supportive outreach.

Companies are also expected to play a more substantial role, especially in reaching TCNs, as employers are often well positioned to support participation in workplace-based training. However, the cost-sharing requirements currently imposed on large companies – such as covering half of the course fees – discourage them from sponsoring the upskilling of migrant employees. Cooperation between employers and adult learning providers, which could deliver tailored on-site courses, remains rare. Similarly, social enterprises and WISEs represent an untapped resource for community-based outreach, although they too face chronic funding uncertainties and limited institutional recognition.

The limited human and financial capacities of the CES emerged as another critical factor. On the one hand, it was acknowledged that the CES maintains the most extensive territorial presence in Croatia and has, in some localities, set up fruitful partnerships with welfare centres and NGOs. It was also reported that the CES recognises the potential of disaggregated data to improve outreach planning by identifying geographic concentrations of vulnerable groups and allocating resources more strategically, hence significantly improving the efficiency and effectiveness of outreach measures.

However, the CES's outreach efforts are severely constrained by its limited human and technical capacities. Many regional counselling centres are understaffed, in some cases relying on a single counsellor who is responsible for both guidance and administrative tasks, leaving little space for individualised counselling or proactive outreach. Staff shortages also undermine the CES's ability to maintain consistent relationships with local actors and beneficiaries. It follows that its campaigns are not sufficiently differentiated across target groups or territories, and hard-to-reach individuals – including those with low literacy, low digital skills and limited access to digital technologies, or a distrust of institutions – often remain off the radar.

These weaknesses are compounded by fragmented cooperation across sectors. Although the CES has signed over 500 cooperation agreements with various community organisations, their implementation is rarely monitored and the outcomes remain uncertain. Coordination with other key actors – such as health services, schools or law enforcement – is sporadic, even though these institutions could play a vital role in identifying and referring individuals at risk of exclusion.

The lack of integrated data collection and sharing among social, training and employment services further prevents early detection and timely intervention.

Against this backdrop, the meso-level fieldwork identified some takeaways for responding to the need for structured cooperation and shared accountability among different actors. The experience of CSOs working with TCNs and asylum seekers shows that outreach is most effective when conducted by organisations that beneficiaries already trust. These organisations combine cultural mediation with practical support, bridging gaps that formal institutions cannot easily fill. For persons with disabilities, outreach remains limited by both physical and policy barriers, including the fear of losing welfare benefits upon participating in training. Some positive practices, such as the targeted use of the national disability registry for outreach and public visibility campaigns featuring success stories, show promise but need greater institutionalisation. Stakeholders also pointed out that there is potential in expanding their outreach through mainstream media and in involving health professionals and rehabilitation centres more actively in the referral and motivation of learners.

To summarise, several avenues for improvement emerged from the meso-level discussions. Stakeholders consistently stressed the need for long-term funding mechanisms for outreach initiatives, ensuring the continuity of successful instruments such as social mentoring and LEPs. Improving interinstitutional coordination between the CES, social services and adult training providers was also seen as crucial for building a structured and sustainable outreach framework. Strengthening partnerships between the government and CSOs – particularly in policy areas like migrant integration and disability inclusion – would allow the government to leverage trust-based networks that already exist at the community level. Tailoring outreach strategies to specific groups and contexts, such as delivering language training in workplaces, expanding career guidance fairs and using career information and counselling centres⁽¹⁷⁾ as regional hubs for upskilling, was also identified as a promising operational approach.

More broadly, stakeholders underlined that effective outreach must move beyond temporary campaigns towards institutionalised and constant multistakeholder cooperation. Reviving LEPs, integrating CSOs into policy planning and ensuring stable public funding for outreach programmes would create the conditions for sustainable engagement. Combining data-driven targeting with local-level trust networks offers a viable path towards greater inclusiveness and

⁽¹⁷⁾ Career information and counselling centres in Croatia are public, nationwide centres that provide free, lifelong career guidance to all citizens, but particularly young people, unemployed individuals and those considering a career change. They are a service provided by the CES and are financed through the national budget and EU funds.

impact. Ultimately, the meso-level findings show that Croatia has already developed many of the ingredients for effective outreach – strong institutional networks (the CES and Institute for Social Work), committed professionals and a growing propensity towards cooperation – but it has yet to assemble them into a coherent, enduring programme capable of reaching those most distant from learning and work.

4.3.3. High-level (macro-level) policy considerations and suggestions

Macro-level discussions about key area 6 underscored the strategic centrality of effective outreach and engagement, which is a precondition for achieving equitable participation in adult education and training. However, stakeholders confirmed that outreach programmes in Croatia are fragmented, unevenly distributed across regions and insufficiently integrated within broader active labour market and education strategies. While the CES maintains an extensive institutional presence and is formally responsible for outreach to jobseekers, its human and organisational capacities are insufficient to address the needs of inactive adults, migrants or workers with low skill levels. Parallel initiatives carried out by CSOs, welfare institutions and open universities provide valuable experience but remain project-based and short-term. The result is an ecosystem characterised by good practices but limited consistency, where successful local experiences rarely scale up to sustainable, nationwide policies.

Stakeholders agreed that a more coordinated and sustainable outreach framework needs to be built on existing structures rather than creating new ones. One recommendation was to upgrade local coordination platforms, networks and experiences, such as LEPs, in order to reduce institutional duplication while capitalising on existing mutual trust and shared practices. However, this would require clear mandates for each body, dedicated resources from central authorities and political commitment to long-term support. The feasibility of this was considered relatively high, provided that pilot initiatives are launched at the county level and that economic and geographic diversity is taken into account when selecting participating regions. Involving representatives from both the regional level and the local level in designing these pilots was seen as essential for ensuring a sense of ownership and alignment with local realities.

Another relevant theme discussed at the macro level was the strategic role of CSOs, open universities and welfare services in reaching those most disconnected from formal learning pathways. CSOs working with Roma, TCNs or inactive women were repeatedly cited as the most effective intermediaries for building trust and motivating participation. However, the high-level stakeholders acknowledged that the reliance of these actors on short-term projects severely limits their ability to

maintain continuity and strongly endorsed a proposal to embed CSOs and similar actors into outreach frameworks through stable, multiyear funding and capacity-building schemes. While politically sensitive – given competition for limited public resources – this measure was considered technically feasible in the short term, if integrated into existing national or EU-supported funding mechanisms. It also offers an opportunity to strengthen the interface between national institutions and communities, thereby improving the inclusiveness of outreach efforts.

Closely related to the proposal above is the need for a coordinated communication strategy that bridges the national and local levels. Stakeholders unanimously acknowledged that an awareness of adult learning and voucher opportunities remains low across the population and current communication efforts are fragmented and episodic. Providers' associations, AVETAE, the CES and representatives of CSOs agreed that a coordinated, multichannel approach to communication is essential to reach potential learners effectively. Such campaigns should be designed at the national level to ensure consistency in the messaging but be locally adapted in content and delivery to reflect regional contexts and target audiences. Given the existing infrastructure and the communication tools already in place, this recommendation was deemed feasible in the short term – conditional upon the allocation of dedicated resources and the setting up of partnerships with local actors for a hands-on follow-up. Sustained, repeatable campaigns that include success stories and testimonials from learners could also help normalise participation and counteract negative opinions of adult education.

Discussions further highlighted the value of multifunctional one-stop shops as a practical and inclusive approach to outreach. The Zagreb model was frequently cited as a positive example, where individuals initially seeking legal assistance were subsequently encouraged to engage in adult training opportunities. Stakeholders agreed that replicating this model across counties could significantly improve access to adult education, particularly for hard-to-reach groups such as migrants and long-term unemployed adults. However, they also noted institutional overlaps, with representatives of MoL pointing out that similar services already exist within the CES. The consensus, therefore, favoured scaling up locally initiated, bottom-up, 'one-stop-shop' models to ensure local ownership, while providing them with national co-funding. Because these models build on existing infrastructure and partnerships, such pilots are considered achievable in the short term, with nationwide scaling a medium-term objective.

The issue of the inclusion of TCNs generated substantial discussion. Migrants were seen as a group facing particularly acute barriers to language acquisition and social integration, with limited access to upskilling measures. Stakeholders supported the proposal to develop targeted outreach measures for migrants,

including pre-arrival and early post-arrival language and cultural orientation modules and employer-supported language training. These measures would allow migrants to begin to integrate before or immediately after their arrival, reducing delays in accessing training. While innovative, the proposal's feasibility depends on strong cross-ministry cooperation – particularly between the Ministries of Labour, the Interior, and Foreign and European Affairs – and on the engagement of employers. Pilot initiatives were considered realistic in the short term, but the proposal's full implementation would need to be aligned with migration and integration policies and have stable funding streams, making it a medium- to long-term goal.

Finally, stakeholders stressed the need for a structured procedural framework for outreach to guide cooperation among local actors. Many referred to existing anti-bullying protocols in schools as a model for defining clear steps, responsibilities and handovers. These 'local cooperation protocols' would provide practical guidance for engaging and supporting adults with low skill levels identified as likely to benefit from upskilling. They would also reduce inconsistencies in outreach practices across municipalities by formalising referral pathways and feedback loops. Because this recommendation builds on well-established administrative models and needs coordination, rather than new structures, it was seen as feasible in the short term. Over time, these protocols could evolve into standard operating procedures within local outreach frameworks, ensuring continuity and accountability in outreach.

4.4. **Synthesis of findings from all levels of analysis**

The evidence emerging from the three levels of analysis and the key issues identified for each key area have been synthesised and summarised in Table 7. This outline provides a basis for highlighting where issues converge or diverge across levels and prepares the ground for the suggestions presented in Chapter 5.

Table 7. **Issues emerging in each key area and at each level of analysis**

Key area	Level	Issues identified
3 – Multilevel and multistakeholder governance	Micro	Limited cooperation between the CES, providers, CSOs and LRGUs; variations in local coordination; fragmented or discontinued cooperation structures (e.g. LEPs); inconsistent employer / social partner involvement; weak implementation of coordination mandates; insufficient evidence-based planning.
	Meso	Lack of interministerial cooperation; overcentralisation; discontinued LEPs; underutilised RCCs; weak regional capacities; insufficient use of evidence-based planning, monitoring and evaluation; limited employer engagement.
	Macro	Need for systematic needs assessment; fragmented data; weak evaluation culture; partial use of advisory bodies; need to operationalise the adult education registry; uneven multilevel capacities; need for systematic benchmarking.
5 – Financial and non-financial support	Micro	Large reliance on EU funds; lack of long-term national financing; administrative burdens for providers; uneven support from LRGUs; CES capacity constraints; staff shortages for providers; fragmented non-financial support (transport, childcare, guidance).
	Meso	Short-term nature of voucher scheme; insufficient co-financing; limited employer investment; lack of early-stage guidance; barriers to access for vulnerable groups; territorial disparities in provision of support.
	Macro	Dependence on temporary EU instruments; need for predictable funding from multiple sources; risk of discontinuity after EU cycles end; limited skills and human resources (in providers); need for regionally adapted vouchers; lack of integrated non-financial support; need for systematic monitoring and evaluation.

Key area	Level	Issues identified
6 – Outreach to beneficiaries	Micro	Beneficiaries' low motivation and trust; structural and psychosocial barriers; limited provider outreach; uneven coordination by the CES; large workloads for CES counsellors; reliance on project-based outreach; underutilisation of CSOs' potential.
	Meso	Fragmented outreach ecosystem; discontinued LEPs; reduced presence of mentoring-type roles; weak cooperation among the CES, welfare services, CSOs and providers; uneven use of one-stop shops; limited employer involvement, especially for the upskilling of TCNs.
	Macro	Need to: scale up existing coordination structures; involve CSOs better; coordinate communication campaigns better; expand one-stop shops; develop targeted outreach for TCNs (overcoming language and integration barriers); design and implement local cooperation protocols.

Source: Project team.

Across all three key areas, the findings reveal a consistent set of structural issues that recur at the micro, meso and macro levels. Fragmentation, short-term planning and uneven territorial capacity appear as cross-cutting themes, affecting coordination, funding and support, and outreach. Institutions often work in parallel rather than in a coordinated manner, and cooperation – when it does occur – is frequently tied to operational problem-solving or temporary project funding rather than the result of stable governance or financing mechanisms. This is particularly evident in the discontinuation and underuse of local coordination structures such as LEPs, the uneven involvement of LRGUs and the limited integration of CSOs and welfare institutions, despite their operational relevance.

The second key pattern concerns the gap between formal frameworks and their operationalisation. Croatia has developed several strategic, legislative and institutional tools that should support adult education coordination, evidence-based planning, regional implementation and outreach. However, many of these mechanisms remain only partially carried out. Needs assessments are inconsistent, data are fragmented, advisory bodies have limited influence and evaluations are sporadic. Similarly, funding instruments such as vouchers are well established but work without long-term certainty or complementary non-financial support. This disconnection between design and implementation limits the

government's ability to respond to learners' needs – especially in disadvantaged or remote regions – while also constraining the capacity of providers and intermediaries to develop stable, long-term outreach and training services.

The final cross-cutting theme concerns vulnerable groups, who are consistently disadvantaged across all key areas and levels. The combination of weak coordination, fragmented funding and ineffective outreach disproportionately affects adults facing multiple barriers – such as workers with low skill levels, long-term unemployed people, older adults and TCNs. From the findings, it is clear that improving data collection and use, strengthening regional coordination, stabilising funding and embedding CSOs and welfare institutions into multilevel and multi-stakeholder governance would directly contribute to more equitable participation patterns and effective training outcomes.

Chapter 5.

Areas for reform and suggestions for actions

Building on the cross-level synthesis presented in Section 4.7, this chapter reviews the priorities and suggestions identified across the three key areas under discussion. Consistent with the TCR methodology, these insights emerged through dialogue with stakeholders at the micro, meso and macro levels, reflecting their diverse perspectives but broadly converging on common priorities for strengthening the implementation of UPs in Croatia. The consolidated set of suggestions was subsequently discussed with the NSG, which agreed to focus on a smaller number of priority areas to support a more targeted follow-up. The NSG selected two suggestions per key area to be further elaborated into policy recommendations. The following discussion summarises these selected priorities and outlines possible pathways for their practical realisation.

In the area of governance (key area 3), the NSG underlined the importance of setting up a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system for adult learning measures (recommendation 1). They agreed that regular evaluations need to look beyond simple employability outcomes and also include quality, inclusion and skill development assessments. MoL representatives also stressed the importance of understanding the impacts of adult learning on competitiveness and wage growth. Although the feasibility of these evaluations is constrained by limited administrative capacity and uneven political commitment to evidence-based policymaking, this recommendation was considered achievable because it builds on existing foundations (e.g. the planned evaluation of the voucher scheme). In the future, a coordination framework should be set up around this practice to identify the main focus and develop multiannual evaluation plans that cover adult education measures more broadly. A review of available funding opportunities under the ESF+, Erasmus+ and from national sources could help identify resources that are available to support periodic evaluations, and the results of this screening could be integrated into a formally approved evaluation protocol, disaggregated by measure.

In the same key area, the NSG also discussed how to engage RCCs more actively in adult learning, particularly to fill provision gaps, share infrastructure and coordinate retraining during economic and financial shifts (recommendation 2). Although RCCs have so far focused primarily on initial upper-secondary VET, several have already engaged in adult learning, showing that there is potential for them to assume a more prominent and active role in this area. Continuous

curricular reform and the gradual improvement of data collection were seen as important for expanding RCCs' expertise in adult learning. Concerns were, however, raised about weak regional-level governance, the risk of competition (often perceived as unfair by dedicated adult learning providers) and the need to embed RCCs within broader cooperation mechanisms rather than have them work in isolation. Building on existing practices – such as RCCs coordinating Lifelong Learning Week in some counties – this recommendation was considered feasible if integrated within a multilevel governance approach supported by sustainable funding. Frameworks for cooperation between RCCs and adult education providers could be formalised through clear protocols, avoiding overlaps or unfair competition. Pilot RCC-led adult learning programmes could be developed to address specific provision gaps, such as upskilling in information and communications technology or green skills, and supported by ESF+ or national funds. Embedding RCCs into county- and regional-level partnership structures would further strengthen their contribution and ensure alignment with local needs.

In term of funding and support (key area 5), the NSG highlighted the importance of adapting voucher formulas to regional contexts and simplifying procedures for marginalised learners, while separating individual and employer contributions where relevant (recommendation 3). Since these schemes are expected to remain in place in the long term, investing in their improvement was seen as both timely and necessary. To improve their accessibility and inclusiveness, stakeholders stressed the importance of simplifying administrative procedures and adjusting formulas in light of both regional labour markets and the needs of disadvantaged groups. It was also suggested that this recommendation should incorporate the recognition of prior learning, which exists in legislation but is not yet being implemented. Looking ahead, the planned transition from vouchers to ILAs was viewed as relevant. A national working group on this topic has already been set up, and concrete progress is expected by 2027. Getting this model off the ground could begin with pilot initiatives that simplify voucher application procedures for disadvantaged learners, helping them receive support from local outreach and guidance staff. Making the recognition of prior learning an entry pathway to upskilling would enable learners to access tailored training opportunities. The regional adaptation of voucher formulas could be linked to local labour market analyses and cooperation with county-level authorities, while forthcoming ILA guidelines could incorporate a clear role for employers in co-designing and carrying out ILAs.

Another priority in the key area of funding concerned refining targeted fiscal/co-financing incentives to spur employer investment in transversal skills (including for SMEs) (recommendation 4). The NSG recognised that employers'

limited involvement remains a major bottleneck and that existing schemes are often underused or perceived as poorly aligned with companies' skills needs. This perceived misalignment reflects the broader challenge: that skills needs are not identified through a single, coordinated mechanism. While the CES collects labour-market information and projects funded by the ESF+ have at times produced needs assessments, these insights are not necessarily integrated into decisions about adult learning planning or funding. Introducing targeted financial incentives was, therefore, seen as a useful complement to broader policy efforts, provided these incentives are linked to non-financial measures such as mentoring, guidance and recognition frameworks. This measure could be piloted in sectors experiencing acute skills shortages, drawing inspiration from approaches used in other Member States. For instance, France's *Compte Personnel de Formation* and Austria's tax relief mechanisms for professional training illustrate how incentives can be aligned with workforce needs. Similarly, Germany's dual training partnerships show how sectoral agreements can ensure that employer-supported training is recognised and rewarded. Embedding these sorts of employer incentives within projects funded by the ESF+ and monitoring their uptake through regular evaluations would help promote participation, particularly among SMEs and disadvantaged workers.

In the area of outreach and participation in training (key area 6), the NSG underscored the importance of embedding CSOs, open universities and welfare and guidance services into outreach activities via dedicated, multiyear funding and capacity building (recommendation 5). These actors often have strong community roots and experience in engaging with Roma, TCNs and inactive adults, but their contributions are constrained by short-term project-based funding. Setting up stable, multiyear funding arrangements and capacity-building schemes was, therefore, identified as a priority to ensure their continuity and sustainability. Drawing inspiration from initiatives such as Ireland's Community Education Network, which provides consistent support to grassroots organisations, Croatia could introduce similar multiyear funding agreements for actors involved in outreach. Joint training and capacity-building programmes for CSOs, open universities and guidance providers could be developed further, building on AVETAE initiatives. Slovenia's adult learning guidance centres offer an inspiring reference point, demonstrating how local outreach capacity can be strengthened through cooperation. County-level cooperation protocols could formalise partnerships, ensuring that CSOs and welfare services are structurally embedded in outreach frameworks. Targeted initiatives to reach specific groups, such as Roma or TCNs, could also be piloted, following the example of Spain's *aula* mentor programme.

Finally, the NSG identified the need to run coordinated national–local campaigns on adult learning opportunities (including vouchers) with repeated, targeted messaging and hands-on follow-up (recommendation 6). Awareness of adult learning and voucher opportunities remains limited, and existing outreach campaigns are fragmented and short-lived. A coordinated national–local communication framework could ensure consistent messaging, while allowing for local customisation and follow-up. Estonia’s *Koolituse otsing* platform provides a useful example of how centralised information can be combined with local promotion. Repeatable, multichannel awareness campaigns could build on successful national initiatives such as Lifelong Learning Week and be complemented by community-level events and targeted digital communication. Portugal’s ‘get back to learning’ campaign and Finland’s *Ohjaamo* youth guidance centres illustrate how sustained communication linked directly to local guidance services can turn awareness into participation. Croatia could also develop tailored outreach modules for specific target groups, such as TCNs and adults with low skill levels, sharing information on language learning and the recognition of prior learning within campaign materials to ensure that information effectively translates into enrolment.

Chapter 6.

Concluding remarks

Through an in-depth, multilevel investigation – combining documentary analysis, interviews and dialogue with key stakeholders – the TCR explored the functioning of Croatia’s adult learning ecosystem across three interconnected areas: governance, funding and outreach.

Overall, the analysis confirmed that there has been significant progress, but also persistent challenges in the functional coordination of, equitable access to and the long-term sustainability of the policies and interventions supporting the implementation of the UP recommendation. Croatian adult learning stands at an important crossroads. Over the past few decades, major steps have been taken to strengthen its strategic and institutional foundations. The establishment of AVETAE, the expansion of the CROQF and the growing use of digital tools, such as the NISOO platform, are all clear signs of this evolution. These developments have improved transparency, monitoring and alignment with EU standards. Nevertheless, adult learning in Croatia remains characterised by a tension between formal maturity and operational fragility. Mechanisms for coordination, evaluation and outreach exist, but they are not yet fully institutionalised or interconnected. Short-term project-based funding continues to predominate, often preventing the consolidation of practices and the accumulation of institutional learning.

Across the three key areas analysed, the TCR findings highlight a shared structural challenge: Croatia has moved from fragmentation towards more formalised organisation, but full integration and cruising speed operation have yet to be achieved. The task ahead is less about creating new institutions and more about empowering and connecting those already in place – transforming cooperation, evidence use and outreach into systematic and systemic features of adult learning governance.

Governance: from structures to coordination mechanisms

Croatia benefits from a clear institutional framework for its governance of adult education and a developing culture of evidence-based approaches to policy. MoSEY, MoL and AVETAE have clear complementary mandates, while the CES and regional authorities play a growing role in coordinating different stakeholders. Advisory bodies and social partners are also increasingly involved in policy

discussions. However, the adult learning system continues to rely on fragmented coordination and weak feedback loops between evidence and decision-making.

The fieldwork revealed widespread agreement that virtuous cycles of data collection, monitoring, evaluation and policy planning are essential for strengthening the effectiveness of governance. Stakeholders acknowledged the existence of valuable data sources but pointed out their limited interoperability and insufficient use in policymaking. A regular and mandated needs assessment cycle, combined with an evaluation framework covering quality, inclusion and outcomes, would allow Croatia to move from a reactive to a proactive governance model. Such mechanisms could build on existing initiatives – for example, the evaluation of the voucher scheme – and be embedded in a broader evidence-to-policy chain, linking the national and local levels.

This transformation would bring Croatia closer to the objectives of the UP recommendation, which calls for coherent, data-informed approaches to skills development, and in line with European policy priorities on skills intelligence. The challenge is not technical but institutional: to ensure that data collection, policy evaluation and benchmarking become integral to the governance cycle.

Financial and non-financial support: ensuring sustainability and inclusiveness

The analysis of funding mechanisms also revealed a mixed landscape: Croatia has shown a strong commitment to financing adult learning, but the systemic sustainability and inclusiveness of that funding remain uncertain. EU-funded instruments – particularly the ESF+ and the national voucher scheme – have been crucial in expanding access and piloting innovative practices and approaches. However, dependence on time-limited funding undermines long-term planning and the continuity of successful programmes.

A more sustainable approach would include the setting up of funding frameworks that combine EU funds and national budgets using a cost-sharing mechanism, while also monitoring cost-effectiveness and equity. Tailoring formulas for access to vouchers to different regions, sectors and beneficiaries could make financial support more responsive to local labour market realities, while simplifying the administrative procedures involved would increase the participation of marginalised groups.

In parallel, the transition from vouchers to ILAs offers decision-makers an opportunity to reconfigure financial support for adult learning around the learner, ensuring the portability and transparency of learning outcomes. Embedding a recognition of prior learning within this framework would make access more inclusive and allow adults to build on existing skills and experiences. At the same

time, targeted fiscal or co-financing incentives could encourage employers – particularly SMEs – to invest in transversal skills. Evidence from other Member States suggests that combining financial and non-financial forms of support, such as the recognition of employer-provided training in collective agreements, can significantly increase employer participation in upskilling.

Ultimately, Croatia's funding model needs to balance innovation with predictability, individual choice with national priorities, and flexibility with inclusion. Moving from project-dependent funding to stable funding streams would not only strengthen Croatia's institutional capacity but also signal a political commitment to adult learning as a shared societal investment.

Outreach and participation: from projects to continuity

The third key area – outreach – remains both the most challenging and the most promising. Croatia has strong institutional assets for outreach, including the territorial presence of the CES, the engagement of open universities and the experience of CSOs in community-based learning. Yet these assets work largely in isolation, without a coherent framework or sustained financial backing. Outreach initiatives remain fragmented, short-lived and overly dependent on project-based funding.

Stakeholders highlighted that effective outreach depends less on creating new structures and more on empowering existing ones. Stable, multiyear funding agreements for CSOs, open universities and welfare services could transform outreach from a series of projects into one uninterrupted, inclusive project. Joint training and capacity-building programmes – such as those pioneered by AVETAE – could strengthen local outreach capabilities, while cooperation protocols at the county level could formalise partnerships among providers, CSOs and local administrations.

Equally important is the need for coherent and sustained communication. National awareness campaigns on adult education and vouchers exist but are not yet coordinated or evaluated. Developing a national communication framework that allows for local adaptation and includes direct referrals to guidance services would help convert awareness into participation.

Taken together, the findings reveal that adult learning is being consolidated; its institutional foundations are in place, and now their full and lasting operability needs to be ensured. The priorities emerging from the TCR lead to three interconnected directions for reform:

- (a) institutionalising coordination and evaluation by linking data, analysis and policymaking across levels;
- (b) stabilising and diversifying funding to ensure both sustainability and fairness;

- (c) making outreach a permanent function grounded in cooperation and community engagement.

Making advances in these areas would enable Croatia to move from fragmented initiatives towards a coherent, multilevel, lifelong learning model capable of supporting both economic transformation and social inclusion.

The recommendations formulated by the NSG resonate strongly with the broader European policy agenda. Strengthening governance, improving participation and promoting inclusion are central to the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Skills and education package (2024) and the forthcoming Union of Skills strategy. Croatia's progress in these areas can, thus, contribute directly to the collective European ambition of making lifelong learning a reality for all.

List of abbreviations

AEA	Adult Education Act
AES	Adult Education Survey
AVETAE	Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (<i>Agencija za strukovno obrazovanje i obrazovanje odraslih - ASOO</i>)
CES	Croatian Employment Service (Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje - HZZ)
CROQF	Croatian qualifications framework
CSO	civil-society organisation
EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
ILA	individual learning account
LEP	local employment partnership
LRGUs	local and regional government units
MoL	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (<i>Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike</i>)
MoSEY	Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (<i>Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja</i>)
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NISOO	national information system for adult education
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
NSG	national steering group
RCC	regional competence centre
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
SR	survey round
TCN	third-country national
TCR	thematic country review
UP	upskilling pathway
VET	vocational education and training
WISE	work integration social enterprise

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Adult Education Survey	This European Union study examines participation in learning activities among adults aged 25–64 over the previous 12 months. Conducted every five years, the survey collects data on involvement in formal and non-formal learning, instruction hours, learning characteristics, motivations for and barriers to participation, access to information on learning options, financial support for employers and the costs of learning, and self-reported language skills. Definition based on Eurostat data (2020).
Adult education and training participation	In the EU, this refers to those aged 25 to 64 who participate in learning activities, whether formal or non-formal, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences.
Digital competence / digital skills	Digital competence refers to the confident, critical and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, work and social participation. It encompasses skills such as information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety, digital well-being, cybersecurity awareness, understanding intellectual property, problem solving and critical thinking.
Effectiveness	In education and training, the extent to which the objectives of a policy or an action are achieved, usually without reference to costs.
Efficiency	In education and training, the relationship between the results achieved (outputs) and the resources used (inputs).
Formal learning	Acquisition of knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences in an organised and structured environment in terms of learning objectives, time or resources (e.g. an education or training institution or a company).
Governance	In education and training, the engagement and participation of civil society in formulating, implementing and monitoring strategies for educational development.
Inactive adults	Adults who are not in employment and are not actively looking for a job.
Lifelong learning	Any learning activity undertaken throughout life in a formal, non-formal or informal setting, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and qualifications for personal, social or professional reasons.
Mentoring	Any support provided to a young person or novice (someone joining a new learning community or organisation) by an experienced person who acts as a role model, guide, tutor, coach or confidante.
Microcredential	Record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small unit of learning, and that have been assessed against a predefined standard.
Non-formal learning	Acquisition of knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences in the framework of planned activities – in terms of learning objectives, time or resources – where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student–teacher/trainer relationships).
Green skills	Knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live, work and act in economies and societies seeking to reduce the impact of human activity on the environment.

Term	Definition
SWOT analysis	In education and training, analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities (potential advantages) and threats (potential difficulties) of an organisation.
Third-country nationals	Any person who is not a citizen of the European Union within the meaning of Article 20(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and who is not a person enjoying the EU's right to free movement , as defined in Article 2(5) of Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code) .
Transversal skills and competences	Learned and proven abilities that are commonly seen as necessary or valuable for effective action in virtually any kind of work, learning or life activity.
Upskilling pathways	In 2016, the Council of the European Union established a framework encouraging Member States to provide upskilling pathways for adults with low skill levels, particularly those without upper-secondary education. The framework recommends offering tailored learning opportunities to help individuals acquire basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, as well as broader competences relevant to employment and social participation, with progress towards EQF level 3 or 4 qualifications. It also calls on Member States to identify priority target groups while considering gender and diversity. Upskilling pathways should be designed around three key steps: a skills audit, a flexible and high-quality learning offer, and the validation and recognition of acquired skills.
Work-based learning	Instructional model in which the learner acquires knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences carrying out – and reflecting on – tasks: • at the workplace – also known as workplace learning or in-company training – e.g. through internships/traineeships, apprenticeship, alternance training or company visits, job shadowing, etc.; • in a simulated work environment, e.g. in workshops or laboratories in vocational education and training institutions, inter-company/social partner training centres..

Source: All definitions taken from the Cedefop's online glossary – '[Terminology of European education and training policy](#)' – apart from that for 'third-country nationals'.

Thematic country review on upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults in Croatia

Key findings from three research phases
and suggestions for future action

This report summarises the outcomes of the three phases of the thematic country review on upskilling pathways for (low-skilled) adults in Croatia. It identifies areas for action, complementing the publication on the initial findings of this review (*Thematic country review on upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults in Croatia – Key findings of the first research phase*).

The report examines how to advance upskilling pathways in three areas: multilevel and multistakeholder governance; financial and non-financial support; and outreach to beneficiaries. Three rounds of fieldwork, including surveys and interviews, together with consultation with the national steering group, resulted in six recommendations on how to advance upskilling pathways in Croatia.

The report provides stakeholders in the upskilling pathway landscape with practical guidance on the next steps to strengthen mechanisms and improve upskilling outcomes in Croatia.

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