



# Policy Learning Forum ON UPSKILLING PATHWAYS

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## BACKGROUND PAPER

### Introduction

Skills are a driving force of economic and social development. When citizens are engaged in the labour market and in education and training, countries prosper not only in terms of growth but also in terms of wellbeing and social cohesion. Empowering low skilled people by means of promoting their upskilling and/or re-skilling is associated with large social and economic benefits not only for individuals, but also for the economy and society as a whole. Research suggests that being low skilled is often associated with a set of negative consequences both at the individual and social level, such as lower earnings and employment rates, lower quality of health, wellbeing and life satisfaction, lower civic and social engagement, higher probability of involvement in criminal activities (Cedefop, 2017a)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, investment in human capital affects economic growth: investment in education leads to a more skilled and competent population, which is able to generate and adopt new ideas that stimulate innovation and technological progress.

While the share of low qualified adults has decreased substantially in recent decades, in 2016 one in four European adults aged 25-64 still had only low qualifications (at ISCED level 1-2)<sup>2</sup>. The OECD Survey of Adult Skills shows that 18% of the EU adult population has low cognitive skills in literacy and 20% in numeracy (<sup>3</sup>) with low achievement in these areas more prevalent among those with low qualifications than those with medium or high qualifications (PIAAC, 2013). Furthermore, adults with low qualifications and/or low cognitive skills are less likely to participate in education and training and lifelong learning, putting them at greater risk of disengagement from the labour market and education and training as well as at greater risk of social exclusion and poverty.

<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2017a). *Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low skilled adults in the EU*. Cedefop research paper; No 60. Luxembourg: Publication office.

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, *Labour Force Survey*

<sup>3</sup> OECD, 2013, *Survey of Adult Skills: PIAAC. Analysis performed for Cedefop's study Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low skilled adults in the EU. For the year in which this analysis was performed PIAAC covers 17 Member States: Belgium (the Flemish Community), Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden and the UK*



## **A policy learning forum on the upskilling pathways**

Cedefop and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) are jointly organising this Policy Learning Forum (PLF) to bring countries together to help one another in designing and implementing measures for improving literacy, numeracy and digital skills of adults with low-level of knowledge, skills and competences, in line with the Council recommendation on 'Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults'. The Recommendation is one of the 10 actions of the "New Skills Agenda for Europe", adopted by the Commission in June 2016. It aims to support Member States in ensuring that every European acquires a minimum level of skills necessary to realise their talent and potential in work and life.

The Upskilling Pathway is built on three interrelated steps. First adults should be able to identify their existing skills and any need they have for upskilling. Secondly, they should be provided with a tailored learning offer, a flexible and quality education that can boost the skills they need the most. Finally, attention should be paid to whether or not the individual's existing skills, acquired learning outcomes or both can be validated and recognised, so that adults can use the outcomes in the labour market or towards acquiring higher qualifications.

The Recommendation invites EU Member States to build on existing national structures and set up arrangements to make Upskilling Pathways a reality. By mid-2018, countries are to outline appropriate measures for the implementation of this Recommendation at national level. This should be achieved in close cooperation with all actors involved in adult learning.

## **Objectives of the PLF**

This PLF is intended to be the first in a series of similar events organised by Cedefop to complement the Commission's on-going initiatives in this area with a view of widening country coverage and providing an opportunity for all Member States to come together and share knowledge and experience. The main aim of this first PLF is to reach a clearer understanding of the main challenges faced in the design and implementation of upskilling pathways. It should assist Member States in their effort to turn their existing structures into the coherent pathways outlined in the Recommendation. In particular, it will examine the contribution of vocational training and work-based learning in Upskilling Pathways.

Three driving questions underpin the event:

- How are strategies for upskilling pathways implemented in each country and adapted to specific contexts? Do the different stakeholders share the same vision and the same priorities?
- What are the main challenges different stakeholders and countries face? Are there common challenges that would benefit from peer learning?
- How can these challenges be addressed and overcome?



## Understanding Low skilled

Low skilled and low qualified individuals frequently lack socio-linguistic skills, opportunities and motivation to participate in education and training. In many cases they reproduce attitudes inherited from their family members, with regard to the value of formal education and of careers. A bad beginning, based on early disengagement from education, tends to be followed by unstable jobs and long spells of unemployment and inactivity. By the time low qualified people reach mid-career, this turbulent pathway may have had permanent effects on careers prospects and created situations of extreme financial duress, contributing to low mental and physical health conditions.

Standard support provided by Member States might, in turn, not include those who need it most. Frequently youth support is focused on prevention of early school leaving for the younger cohorts and adult support tends to be closely associated with activation measures for the unemployed. When young people abandon school and are inactive, they might not have access to the information and support they would need. In the same way adults who have exhausted their benefits or are not registered in employment services also tend to be relegated to a marginalised position, without access to skills development and career information.

Tailored policy interventions towards low-skilled adults call for a clear understanding of who the low skilled are. However, analysis of low-skilled status in the labour market to date has been primarily conducted using the level of educational attainment of the population or alternatively as people working in low-skilled jobs<sup>4</sup>. This definition is widely recognised as oversimplifying the concept, as it does not take into account different types of skills, abilities and factors which can result in low-skilled status:

1. long-term unemployment and/or disengagement from the labour market;
2. skill obsolescence due to ageing, technological change, changes in production processes and/or work organisation;
3. gaps between individual job skills and changing skills demands of the labour market;
4. socioeconomic factors such as migrant background and gender.

A narrow conceptualisation of being low-skilled also fails to capture the role of skills and competences gained outside formal education environments, such as those acquired through in-house training, informal learning and work experience. Low-skilled status must, therefore, be conceptualised as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon which goes beyond educational attainment and considers both its determinants and effects. It should also include a wider typology of people with low skills, such as those with obsolete skills and mismatched workers.

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<sup>4</sup> Working in elementary occupations corresponding to sub-group 9 of the ISCO-88 classification

Recent Cedefop evidence (Cedefop 2017<sup>5</sup>) suggests that the low skilled population is very heterogeneous and comprises different subgroups with specific needs and characteristics. The Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways asks Member States to begin implementation by identifying priority target groups for its delivery, taking into account the gender, diversity and various sub-groups in the targeted population, while paying attention to national circumstances, available resources and existing national strategies. Different stakeholders might have different priorities and ideas with regards to the individuals that should be prioritised for Upskilling Pathways. To this end, the PLF will explore in what way government and social partners approach the upskilling pathways.

### Prevention and early intervention

Irrespective of how low-skilled adults are defined, early interventions and strong learning foundations are well recognised as a first measure to prevent the phenomenon. Actually a big proportion of the low-skilled individuals are low qualified. This means individuals that left education and training early (without achieving upper secondary education) and who have not come back to education or training. Lessons learnt in interventions addressed to early leavers from education and training can be useful and should work together with policies addressed to adults. Evidence shows that individuals that stay in education, and thus have higher educational attainment, are more likely to be employed, to participate in further training and thus, less likely to be low-skilled.

Cedefop analysis (2016a<sup>6</sup>, 2016b<sup>7</sup>) suggests that although some VET programmes have high rates of early leaving (ELET), VET plays an important role in preventing and counteracting early leaving. New evidence shows that most of those who start in general education and switch to VET programmes manage to gain their upper secondary qualification. Thus, VET can act as a safety net for those at-risk learners in general education, offering an alternative pathway and securing their retention in education and training. By offering a more practical, work-oriented route towards a qualification VET can also draw early leavers back to education and training. Data show that over a third of young people who started a programme but did not complete it, managed to achieve an upper-secondary qualification afterwards. Most of them achieved this result by undertaking a VET pathway. Policies and practices to reach early leavers in time and support them adequately to reintegrate through the right learning pathway may therefore represent a valuable source of information also for designing strategies of Upskilling Pathways.

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<sup>5</sup> Cedefop (2017a). *Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low skilled adults in the EU*. Cedefop research paper; No 60. Luxembourg: Publication office.

<sup>6</sup> Cedefop (2016a). *Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage. Volume I: investigating causes and extent*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/893397>

<sup>7</sup> Cedefop (2016b). *Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage. Volume II: evaluating policy impact*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/967263>



## Outreach measures, guidance and skills identification

The Upskilling Pathways initiative clearly acknowledges the role of outreach activities aimed at difficult-to-reach people, in combination with strong career guidance. Outreach raises awareness among at-risk and marginalised individuals about opportunities for up-skilling/re-skilling and their potential benefits, enhancing access to information, advice, mentoring and coaching. These services generally provide a friendly service, which meets people in their contexts and with the possibility of tailoring support adjusting it to individual rhythms and needs.

Partnership between relevant stake-holders involving civil society and local communities is essential to effective outreach policies. To be successful, the implementation of an upskilling pathway requires this social embeddedness and a strong coordination role on behalf of local administration. Best practices must also be consistently evaluated and mainstreamed, when successful. Measures to identify and track individuals in need should be in place, with an adequate mechanism to exchange information between relevant organisations, such as schools, municipalities, public employment services (PES), social security and NGOs. An appropriate network of people in the community is generally needed, which can rely on support of trained peers.

Career guidance and counselling must be integrated with outreach, and can be provided in different ways, by different providers in different contexts. In the context of the Upskilling Pathways, it is important that guidance services help individual assess their needs, aspirations and attitudes. Early identification of skills and skills development needs can originate portfolios to be used in validation processes and to support learning processes. It is also important to support the development of basic and career management skills so that individuals are able to understand what is needed for them to develop to their full potential. As with outreach measures, guidance and counselling and identification of skills needs to be adapted to the specific target groups that want to be reached.

### Questions for parallel session A:

1. What challenges exist to successfully identify and track individuals out of the reach of standard services, such as schools and employment services?  
(e.g. is there an absence of recovery measures? Is there insufficient data about target groups? Are regulations on support entitlements too rigid?)
2. What are the main challenges to enable successful linking of outreach and guidance work to validation and learning activities?
3. What are the right conditions for the identification of skills and skills needs, from an early stage and in line with existing validation processes?

## Tailored training

The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation advocates for tailored training. While formal qualifications are available to young people and adults alike, the organisation of the learning experiences needs to take into account the needs and specificities of the adult as an individual or as part of a target group, in particular their previous learning experiences, family commitments and economic needs, sensitivity to going back to school or being a “student” again, but more importantly their existing skills and competences and skills gaps that need to be filled. Depending on what is the main purpose, the training will take different forms. In some cases, it might be possible to consider on-line courses or open-educational resources.

From a public policy rationale perspective, evidence shows that organisation and introduction of learning opportunities for adults are linked to preventing or avoiding unemployment but also improving the labour market perspective for a vulnerable group (like disabled, migrant, etc.). Most often the promoters are the public employment services. In addition, private actors such as single employers or sector representatives also in co-operation with NGOs organise and provide training opportunities to adults, most often in the form of work-based learning, with the view of re-training and re-skilling employees or strengthening a specific sector in more specialised fields. The potential of work-based learning programmes lies not only in the skills they can foster, but also the mode of delivery and a range of other factors, such as the opportunity to connect with potential employers and support for a gradual transition from training to work<sup>8</sup>.

Work-based learning, in particular apprenticeships, seems to be more “suitable” for the needs and specificities of adults. An adult is less likely to consider himself or herself a student or go back to school. Learning while working in a company mitigates this probably deterring situation. Even the traditional master-apprentice relationship is rarely seen by stakeholders as adequate to describe the learner-educator relationship when adults are involved. However, the reluctance to use this designation can also indicate that when the beneficiaries in an apprenticeship are adults, the relationship between learner and educator needs to be more equal.

Adults, more than young people, need to be economically sustainable, thus they need to earn money while studying otherwise the risk of not studying for a qualification or drop out is high. There is a complex relationship between different social entitlements and participation in the labour market and apprenticeship programs. One of the preliminary findings of a forthcoming Cedefop study<sup>9</sup> indicates that certain welfare measures and entitlements which are higher than an apprenticeship salary or compensation, might get lost if the person becomes an apprentice

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<sup>8</sup>Cedefop (2013). *Return to work: Work-based learning and the reintegration of unemployed adults into the labour market*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop working paper; No 21: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/6121>

<sup>9</sup> Cedefop (2016c). Apprenticeships for adults. AO/DLE/RCDRC/Apprenticeships\_for\_Adults/014/16. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about-cedefop/public-procurement/apprenticeships-adults>



### Questions for parallel session B:

1. What features does “tailored training” need to have to attract adults back into the education and training? Are there certain forms of organisation of education and training more suitable than others in attracting adults back into the education and training?
2. What are the challenges in designing “tailored training”?
3. Who are the promoters of “tailored training” and what are the challenges in co-operating with the training providers, if any?

## Validation and recognition of learning

To assure that the individual has acquired the required learning outcomes during the tailored educational opportunity, it is important that certain standards are met and that all relevant stakeholders accept that the outcomes of the training are valid. Especially when the learning has been acquired outside formal educational institutions, the validation and recognition of the learning acquired would be particularly relevant. Through validation and recognition, the individual will be able to use the outcomes of the learning offer as currency in the labour market or as a credential to access educational programmes. Without that value, the training will not provide the full potential it can deliver. In addition, previous acquired experience could be validated to reduce the training time.

The process of validation has been defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation<sup>10</sup> as a process of confirmation by an authorised body that certain learning outcomes have meet certain standards. Validation includes four stages: (1) identification, (2) documentation and (3) assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning as well as (4) Certification of the results of the assessment in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate. The authorised body, thus, determines the value that the acquired learning will have. It is important, thus, that this authorised body (or bodies) is (are) trusted by all relevant stakeholders.

Member States agreed to have validation arrangements in place by the end of 2018. The evidence collected through the latest update of the inventory in 2016<sup>11</sup> shows that virtually all EU countries have in place some system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, the level of development differs between countries and sectors and there is a large degree of fragmentation of practices, which might not be available in all levels and types of qualifications. More importantly for the

<sup>10</sup> Council of the European Union (2012). Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01). Last retrieved 19/04/2016: URL: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222(01))

<sup>11</sup> Cedefop (2017b) European Inventory on Validation: 2016 Update [www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory)



PLF topic, the evidence shows that existing arrangements are not necessarily targeted to low qualified, and there is little evidence that basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy and digital competences of adults are being validated.

#### Questions for parallel session C:

1. What arrangements exist for the validation of adults' basic skills?
2. To what extent are the outcomes of such a process lead to certification or recognition towards gaining a qualification? What are the main challenges to making this possible?
3. Do we have adequate professionals and tools to carry out the validation of basic skills?

### Bringing it all together for low skilled adults: A vision for the future

There are many countries with services that allow for the identification of skills, training of individuals adapted to their needs or the validation and recognition of prior learning. These services, however, tend to be disconnected and in many cases not used by those that might benefit the most, the low-skilled individuals. They are also provided by a range of stakeholders that might have different objectives and target groups. Outreach measures might not connect with adult education providers or match with training or active labour market policies, or the training provided might not be adequately valued by relevant stakeholders. Guidance practitioners might carry out skill assessments to identify the skills needs of low skilled individuals, but there is no training available which responds to the outcomes of this assessment. Some worthwhile basic skills courses may not be recognised as a first step to further education or training courses, or assessed in order to gain credit towards a qualification. Upskilling Pathways is an attempt to bring the parts together in a way that removes barriers for the learner.

Partnership and cooperation between multiple stakeholders will be necessary to achieve such flexible pathways. Some countries already have coordination bodies or working groups or are in the process of creating them. Relevant agencies might take on such a role, particularly at local or regional level. On the practical level of delivery, shared community based locations, such as one-stop-shops or multidisciplinary teams might help overcome the fragmentation of services and provision, and allows for a continuity of strategic interventions in settings familiar to individuals and families. The use of portfolios might permit better portability of skills and exchange of information between services. E-tools might help to combine information and to make more efficient use of resources and services.

The PLF will provide the opportunity to explore challenges in the implementation of these measures. The different stakeholders will be able to reflect on and discuss how different existing structures and services in



their countries could be combined or integrated, enabling them to work more efficiently with each other in order to make the upskilling pathway a reality. In a nutshell, the PLF provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and learning about what measures are being put in place to address the challenges of designing and implementing Upskilling Pathways.