

Sixth Policy Learning Forum (PLF)

on upskilling pathways for all adults: understanding inequalities in skills development and shaping forward-looking approaches

Venue: European Economic and Social Committee (EESC),
Jacques Delors building, Rue Belliard 99-101, 1040 Brussels

Concept Note

I. Rationale

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) affirms the right of everyone to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, and sets fair working conditions among its core principles. The forthcoming Quality Jobs Act is expected to further strengthen the position of job quality on the EU's social and economic policy agenda. Yet, adult participation in learning and training remains well below the EU's 2030 targets, and the gap is structurally unequal: adults who are low-qualified, older, inactive, migrants, and living in rural areas participate at persistently lower levels.

Statistics typically capture adults' participation in formal and non-formal learning activities, much of it associated with continuing vocational education and training (CVET). However, they leave largely unmeasured the learning that takes place within work itself: learning by doing, through interaction with colleagues, through problem-solving and changing tasks, and through adapting to new technologies, processes and organisational demands. For employed adults this is a large part of how skills develop, and it matters more as the boundaries between learning and working blur and jobs change faster than training programmes can follow.

How much a person can learn at work is determined by how the job is designed and organised: task variety, autonomy, coaching, peer learning and managerial support. Together these make up the learning content of a job: what the job itself gives a person to learn from. Adults in jobs with low learning content have fewer chances to develop their skills at and through work, and are likely to be offered fewer opportunities to participate in formal and non-formal provision. Even where training takes place, for

instance under a statutory training entitlement, newly acquired knowledge fades if the job offers no scope to apply it, consolidate it, and turn it into expertise.

This inequality in exposure to learning at and through work is hidden, runs deeper than the measured gaps, and is plausibly a root cause of unequal participation in training. Participation in training alone is therefore an insufficient measure of whether adults have meaningful opportunities to develop their skills throughout their working lives.

Where work offers few opportunities to learn, workers risk being left behind as occupational requirements change, and employers struggle to build the capabilities they need to adapt and innovate. Jobs that offer room to learn are better jobs and help firms adapt and stay competitive. Artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies make the issue more urgent. They can narrow tasks and make jobs more routine, or widen workers' responsibilities, autonomy and scope for skills development.

With the Quality Jobs Act expected by the end of 2026, this is a timely moment to connect adult learning and skills policy with job quality and work organization and to adopt a broader policy perspective: one that asks not only whether adults participate in training, but whether their circumstances and working environments enable them to learn, apply their skills and progress.

II. Aim and focus

The Forum brings together evidence, policy experience and stakeholder perspectives on why adults take part in learning and training unequally, and on what determines the learning content of jobs. Its objective is to help policy makers and stakeholders identify approaches that widen access to skills development, lower structural barriers rather than reinforce them, and ensure that work itself contributes to lifelong learning, social inclusion and economic resilience.

Discussions will focus on two groups of adults whose learning needs are insufficiently addressed by current policy:

- **inactive adults** who are neither in employment nor looking for work. They appear in the statistics but are hard to reach, because they rarely approach institutions for support. Without a job they generally have no access to learning at and through work, which leaves learning and training provision as the main route open to them. In practice few take it: they are among the adults who participate in learning and training least.



- **employed adults trapped in jobs with low learning content**, whose work offers little exposure to learning: little task variety or autonomy, little exposure to new tasks, little access to colleagues and managers who teach. They are in work and within reach, and their participation in training is recorded. But the statistics show neither how much their job gives them to learn from, nor whether it lets them apply and build on what they learn.

The two groups face different challenges, but both show the limits of equating participation in learning and training provision with effective access to skills development. The Forum will explore how policy can respond through more integrated approaches to adult learning, employment and job quality.

III. Programme structure

Day 1: Understanding inequalities and identifying policy responses

The first day establishes what is known and what is not: it moves from the measured inequalities in participation, to the largely unmeasured inequalities in learning at and through work, to the policy responses that address adult participation in skills development. Participants then work in mixed stakeholder groups to identify promising approaches for the two groups in focus.

Day 2: Shaping the future of learning at and through work

The second day turns forward, testing present choices against four AI-driven scenarios for 2040 and asking European stakeholders what needs to change now, with a specific focus on learning at and through work.

The event is part of the European Skills and VET Week, an initiative from the European Commission, organised by Cedefop. The Week aims to boost the visibility and attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) and adult learning in the EU. It also contributes to the forthcoming VET Strategy, Quality Jobs Act and the Review of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights.