

SUMMARY REPORT

MAKING LEARNING PROGRESSION A REALITY: POLICY SCENARIOS TOWARDS 2040

Online Conference held 19 February 2025

Introduction

The Cedefop conference, "[Making Learning Progression a Reality: Policy Scenarios Towards 2040](#)," was held online on 19 February 2025. The conference organised in the context of the Cedefop's three-year project, "[Transparency and Transferability of Learning Outcomes](#)" aimed at presenting the results of the project while promoting reflections and discussions on the future of lifelong learning. The first report of the project was [published in November 2024](#) and others will follow in 2025¹.

Cedefop presented the key findings of its recent analysis on the coherence and impact of two decades of European policy initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning opportunities for individuals. The initiatives analysed spanned different policy areas, such as quality assurance, comparability, credit systems, validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as recognition of qualifications. Cedefop's analysis also focused on changes observed at the national level over the past two decades and identified remaining challenges to implement lifelong learning within and across countries. Alternative future policy scenarios towards 2040 were also presented to inform a strategic dialogue on lifelong learning policies.

The conference aimed to encourage reflection and discussions on promoting systems that further encourage entering, re-entering, and accumulating learning across institutions, education and training systems, and countries for all types of learners. The event targeted a diverse group of stakeholders involved in shaping and influencing education and training policies. This included policy-makers at the EU and national levels, as well as academics, social partners, education and training institutions from various sub-sectors and levels of education, plus career and learning advisory services, businesses, and learners.

The following report summarises the discussions that took place during the conference. The report is structured according to the main agenda of the conference.

Opening Remarks

9.30 am – 9.45 am

¹ Publications related to the project are accessible here:
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/transparency-and-transferability-learning-outcomes/publications>

Chair: **George Kostakis**, Coordinator, Department for VET and qualifications (DVQ), Cedefop
Jürgen Siebel, Executive Director, Cedefop
Anna Banczyk, Head of Unit, European Commission

George Kostakis (Expert, Cedefop) opened the conference by noting how the discussion on lifelong learning, portability of qualifications and mobility remains high on the political agenda. He said the conference is a way to gain feedback from participants on priorities for the coming years. Cedefop Executive Director, **Jürgen Siebel** in his opening speech, stressed how the high number of registered participants (approximately 800) demonstrated the relevance of the topic and underscored the importance of the work that Cedefop does. Siebel also stressed that the aim of the conference was to have joint discussions on how to foster flexible pathways and systems that will allow people to accumulate learning across education and training systems as well as countries. This is a key aspect considering recent policy developments such as the Union of Skills.

Anna Banczyk (Head of Unit, European Commission) stressed that the topic of the conference was timely and central to the future of Europe's education and training landscape. The European Commission is moving into a new mandate, as President Ursula von der Leyen has expressed the desire to create a Union of Skills which aligns to Mario Draghi's [report on competitiveness](#). The said report highlighted skills and lifelong learning as key enablers of Europe's future prosperity. To remain competitive, Europe must invest more in human capital, skill improvement, portability, and foster a culture of lifelong learning. To achieve this, Banczyk said the topic of transparency and the transferability of learning outcomes is "crucial." She added that there are several EU initiatives that support that vision, including, for example, the [European Qualifications Framework](#) (EQF), the [European Digital Credentials Infrastructure](#), and the [European recommendation on micro-credentials](#). In her speech, Banczyk also acknowledged that barriers to transparency and transferability exist. These include the uneven implementation of EU tools across the countries, and uneven progress on validation of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, as well as a slow adoption of digital solutions. She also said the full potential of AI and digital credentials to streamline recognition processes has not yet been fully harnessed.

To address this, she said the Commission will soon publish a communication on the union of skills that will lay out a comprehensive vision for strengthening the development of skills across Europe; and initiatives on a strategy for European Vocational Education and Training (VET) and a European Skills Portability initiative are expected in 2026

Session 1. Opening speech

9.45 – 10.00

Transparency of Systems and Qualifications: the Long and Winding Road

Loukas Zahilas, Head of Department for VET and Qualifications, Cedefop

In his speech, Loukas Zahilas (Cedefop) provided an overview of the past three decades, and the lessons he learned during that time due to his work in education; first as a national level representative and then working at Cedefop. He noted that in the 1990s, the EU was smaller, the

world was different, and the technology revolution had just started. The VET landscape was diverse, but there was commitment to create a "bright future" for VET and this required to make this type of learning visible, attractive and a first choice for the students. Europe began to prioritise lifelong learning with programs supporting continuous education and training. The internet began to influence these trends, and digital learning, tools and resources became more common, he said. There were also reforms in VET systems and the development of new qualifications and training programs, in part to reduce unemployment.

European cooperation also increased, including via initiatives like the Leonardo da Vinci Program which promoted partnerships. He said that the European Council meeting held in Lisbon in March 2000, was particularly significant as never before had the European Council acknowledged to this extent the role played by education and training systems in the economic and social strategy and the future of the Union. Another milestone was the Copenhagen Declaration in November 2002, which was an attempt to replicate the Bologna process in the field of VET and initiate cooperation in VET. The foundation of the EU's policy instruments in VET dates back to this declaration, he said, describing it as the "beginning of the EQF." Europe continues to move forward, he noted, as comprehensive national systems around VET have been developed to replace the fragmented systems that predated them. There have also been achievements in enhancing the transparency of VET systems and qualifications.

Looking ahead, Europe needs to maintain consistency across countries, entities, and institutions, said Zahilas. VET programs should align with labor market demands, and the public needs to be educated to see VET as an important educational pathway. Here Cedefop has a role to play by fostering discussions around these specific challenges, Zahilas stressed.

Session 2. Main Findings of Cedefop's Project: 'Transparency and Transferability of Learning Outcomes: Analysis of the Past 20 Years and Policy Scenarios Towards 2040'

10.00 – 11.00

Zelda Azzarà, Expert, DVQ, Cedefop

Vasileios Symeonidis, Expert, DVQ, Cedefop

Giorgia Iacopini, Senior researcher, Tavistock Institut gGmbH

The speakers started providing some background on the project underpinning the conference, and went over some key terms, such as learning outcome, transparency, transferability, and formal and non-formal learning. The project mapped main policy initiatives over the last 20 years, analysed national developments, and then based on information collected it developed a set of policy scenarios. The project included online survey and interviews, as well as country case studies and expert workshops. The information collected will be made available in two more reports to be released in coming months. Azzarà noted that a key question conference organisers hoped to discuss was what drives and what hinders lifelong learning, as well as what needs to be strengthened and changed to support such learning. **Symeonidis** noted that there has been a shift to a more personalized and learner-centered education over the past two decades. At both the national and European level though there have been obstacles, as education, training, and learning systems are diverse and complex. These can be difficult to navigate and can also be

fragmented and siloed. Progress has been made, however, as European cooperation, education, and training has continued to be strengthened. Initiatives such as the Lisbon Strategy, Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, the Bologna and Copenhagen process and other initiatives, such as the Osnabrück Declaration were mentioned as milestones in this evolution.

The speakers highlighted five thematic policy areas identified in the project. These include policies related to encouraging the use of quality assurance mechanisms; encouraging credit accumulation and transfer; promoting the comparability of skills and qualifications; supporting the validation of non-formal and informal learning; and encouraging the neutral recognition of qualifications. Through these policy areas, EU policy initiatives have promoted the transparency and transferability of learning outcomes over the past two decades increasing the focus on a learning outcomes-based approach in various education and training sectors and promoting a shift towards learner-centered systems. These developments have led to greater acceptance of learning outcomes, they have raised awareness of learning experiences outside of formal settings and supported convergence across countries.

The second part of the project on national developments focused on eight countries but its analysis was, whenever possible, extended to include others. The work had been structured into three macro areas, focusing on changes and obstacles in combining formal; combining non-formal and informal learning; and barriers regarding the portability of qualifications across borders. Azzarà reported that in the year 2000 learners faced a more rigid and disconnected education and training system, one in which VET learners had weak opportunities to progress in learning, and VET was considered inferior to general and academic education. Learners also had to grapple with limited opportunities to build on skills gained outside formal education, considering also the limited attention given to learning after initial education and training and faced challenges in recognition of foreign qualifications.

According to the project, learners now have more flexibility in shaping their learning journey, though this varies across countries. Modular learning pathways play an important role, the relevance of non-formal learning is more acknowledged. Other changes that have positively affected transferability of learning outcomes concern the increasing comparability and quality of learning opportunities and the work done in developing frameworks and principles for the recognition of qualifications, although in this last area developments are more advanced for higher education than for VET.

Statistical indicators on participation in learning across different learner groups were also presented.

Finally, the presenters showed the highlighted five alternative policy choice scenarios that had been developed as part of the project. A path dependency approach - meaning that past trends would inform future directions – was adopted. Eight trends over the past two were identified, and Iacopini discussed the data that was collected to develop indicators supporting the scenario creation, all of which was inputted into a second layer, called the scenario matrix. With indicators

and axes in place, researchers were able to construct five different possible futures and plot them. These scenarios were then refined and validated. The five futures described were:

- **Flex Max**, a high permeability and high flexibility scenario where learning is designed to adapt to one's needs regardless of location or age. One has a wide array of stackable units, modules, microcredentials, from a variety of sources and can move easily between higher education, vocational training, and informal learning environments. This places the responsibility of learning mostly on the individual.
- **Rigid Islands**, a low flexibility, low permeability scenario where structures and pathways are well defined, the curriculum is standardised, and learning happens face to face. Qualifications are earned through formal institutions. The Rigid Islands scenario provides reassurance and stability but can also be limiting.
- **Fragmented Flexibility** is a high flexibility, low permeability scenario. With fragmented flexibility, one can shape their education according to needs and interests, choosing from a range of providers and different types of learning. While flexible, these qualifications and credentials often have limited usability due to differing standards and approaches; they are poorly aligned and cannot be stacked across education and training sectors.
- **Rigid But Connected** is the low flexibility and moderate permeability scenario. Learning pathways are mainly structured and standardised, and learners earn qualifications primarily through trusted formal public institutions following a fixed curriculum, with few opportunities to personalize one's learning. Credit transfer and movement between institutions are generally possible within the same education and training system, but much more difficult across different systems. Similarly, transferability across countries tends to work only for qualifications issued by institutions/providers associated to the same education and training system.
- **Gated Communities**, is a scenario that offers moderate permeability and flexibility. One has greater flexibility to build their education, while learning is largely delivered by formal providers, employers, NGOs, and international organizations. Bridging programs exist that link vocational and higher education, but international mobility is more complex. Learning is more likely to be recognized within countries than between them.

Q&A

During the Q&A, a participant asked about the Flex Max scenario, and if the researchers could elaborate more on identifying any drawbacks associated with it. Navigation was cited as a potential issue, as increased flexibility could lead to challenges in making sense of systems. Learners in the Flex Max scenario require support in making decisions on how to construct qualifications. While Flex Max favors those who are comfortable with complexity, it risks excluding others who are less capable. Another issue highlighted was quality assurance, and preventing the overcommercialisation, for example, of micro-credentials.

Session 3. SLIDO and Preparation to the Background Sessions

11.10 – 11.20

Chairs: **Zelda Azzarà** and **Vasileios Symeonidis**, Cedefop

During this session, participants were allowed to respond to two questions. The first was, "Which scenario do you think is the most likely to be realized in the next 10-15 years?"

Multiple-choice poll (Multiple answers)

Which scenarios are most likely to realise in the next 10-15 years?

1 1 2

1 - Flex Max (high flexibility and high permeability)

 12 %

2- Rigid Islands (low flexibility and low permeability)

 6 %

3- Fragmented Flexibility (high flexibility and low permeability)

 13 %

4- Rigid but Connected (low flexibility and moderate permeability)

 23 %

5- Gated Communities (moderate flexibility and moderate permeability)

 53 %

slido

Fifty-three percent of respondents chose the Gated Communities scenario, followed by 21 percent, who chose the Rigid but Connected scenario. Thirteen percent chose Flex Max and another 13 percent chose Fragmented Flexibility. Rigid Islands was the least popular at 6 percent.

The second question asked during the session was, "Which scenario would be most desirable for you?"

Which scenario would be most desirable for you?

102

1 - Flex Max (high flexibility and high permeability)



2- Rigid Islands (low flexibility and low permeability)

1 %

3- Fragmented Flexibility (high flexibility and low permeability)

3 %

4- Rigid but Connected (low flexibility and moderate permeability)

2 %

5- Gated Communities (moderate flexibility and moderate permeability)



slido

Fifty-eight percent of respondents chose the Flex Max scenario as most desirable, followed by 36 percent, who chose Gated Communities. Three percent selected Fragmented Flexibility, 2 percent chose Rigid But Connected, and 1 percent selected Rigid Islands.

Zelda Azzarà introduced the discussion questions for the three parallel breakout rooms and outlined the workshop methodology.

The guiding questions for the breakout sessions were:

1. What is your view on the future policy scenarios presented? To what extent do you think they can stimulate reflections on policy developments and practices in your country?

2. What factors can aid or hinder learners' ability to move easily within and across education and training sectors and countries, building on their skills and qualifications?

3. What key priorities and actions should national and European actors pursue to make learning progression a reality?

Session 4. Parallel Breakout Sessions

11.20 – 12.20

Shaping the Future: Discussions and Reflections on Policy Pathways for Lifelong Learning

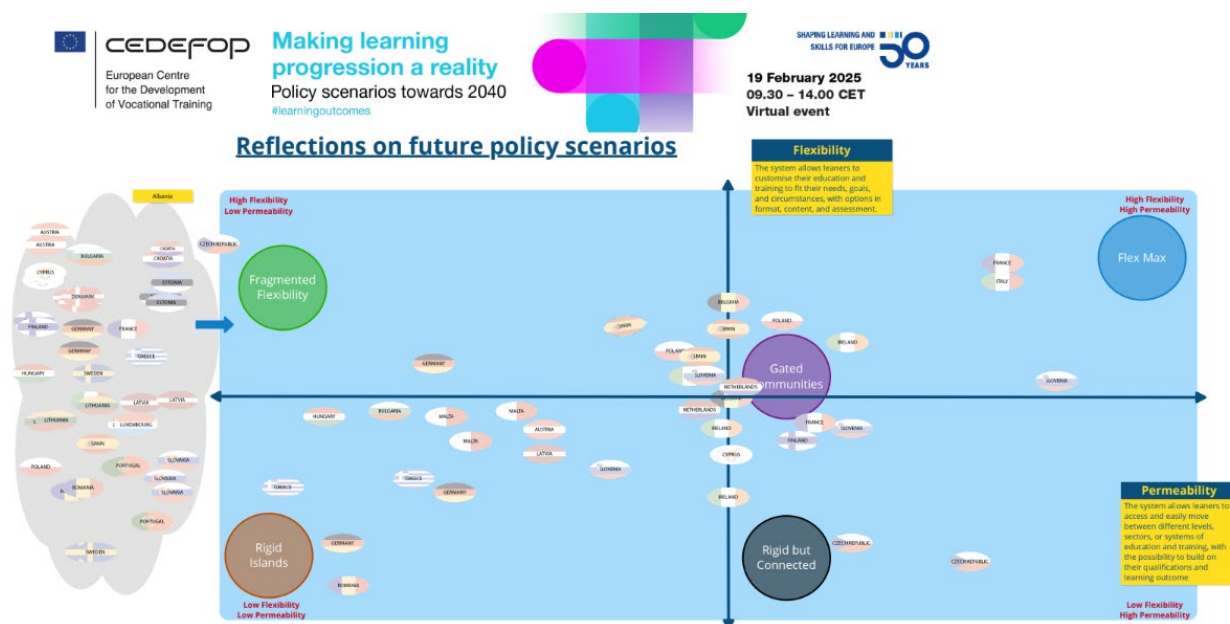
Please note that this summary reflects solely the views and interpretations of the participants and should not be regarded as official national positions. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Cedefop.

Parallel Breakout Session 1

Moderators: **Zelda Azzarà**, Cedefop and **Kerstin Junge**, Tavistock Institut gGmbH

Rapporteur: **Tiina Polo**, European Commission

Summary: **Zelda Azzarà** introduced the session. During the breakout session, participants were asked to plot their countries closest to the scenario that reflects the current state of their learning systems. This allowed for discussion of the situations within different countries.



Participants appreciated the scenario work, as it prompted reflections on their countries' positioning in a wider context, highlighting that if the scenarios are considered in relation to a specific ET sector, this could lead to a different positioning. For example, an Albanian participant stated that, according to their views, Albania currently most aligned with the Rigid Islands scenario but was working on becoming more flexible. A Dutch participant said that, according to their views, the Netherlands is more flexible than the Rigid Islands scenario. The country offers hundreds of microcredentials, and there is the potential to add more. Institutions in the Netherlands, the

participant said, were focused on structure and stability. A participant from Finland remarked that, according to their views, in terms of the vocational education system, Finland tends to be more like the Gated Communities scenario, but slightly more flexible. While the participant would like to see Finland move more toward Flex Max, Finland remains very degree oriented. The addition of microcredentials and short courses should have an impact on working life, she added, as well as salary, otherwise a Flex Max scenario would have less appeal. A French participant remarked that, according to their views, systems should be driven by the needs of the labor markets, as the ultimate goal is to obtain better employment. They placed France somewhere between Gated Communities and Flex Max.

Zelda Azzarà (Cedefop) then asked participants about hindering or enabling factors affecting learner mobility, as well as the key priorities and actions that should be pursued at the EU and national levels to support learning progression.

Cooperation between EU and national governments was seen as an enabler, as it provided a coordinated systemic educational approach, common evaluation tests across countries, and a variety of learning opportunities on offer across domains and types of learning. Other positive aspects of this cooperation included cooperation between education organisers and the creation of digital tools. These include the creation of credentials and microcredentials that could be transferred digitally and the standards and infrastructure to ensure their transferability. The availability of career guidance regarding personal learning skills for adults to ensure equal opportunities, was also cited. It was said that EU funding had the ability to encourage stakeholders to collaborate on a certain topic. Funding could also incentivise cooperation over competition among stakeholders.

It was noted that primary education could be a factor that enables or hinders learning progression. Primary education should be assured and without such standards, a Flex Max scenario would only benefit some learners to get ahead.

Barriers cited included financing schemes that do not encourage cooperation, and limited consistency in how learning is described and organised at the national level. Trust between institutions, or a lack thereof, was also cited as a potential barrier. Some participants cited limitations in Erasmus funding as well as inconsistent guidance across learning systems, and a still present lack of common standards for skill recognition across countries. They also cited low trust in learning outcomes from sources outside of formal learning as a barrier.

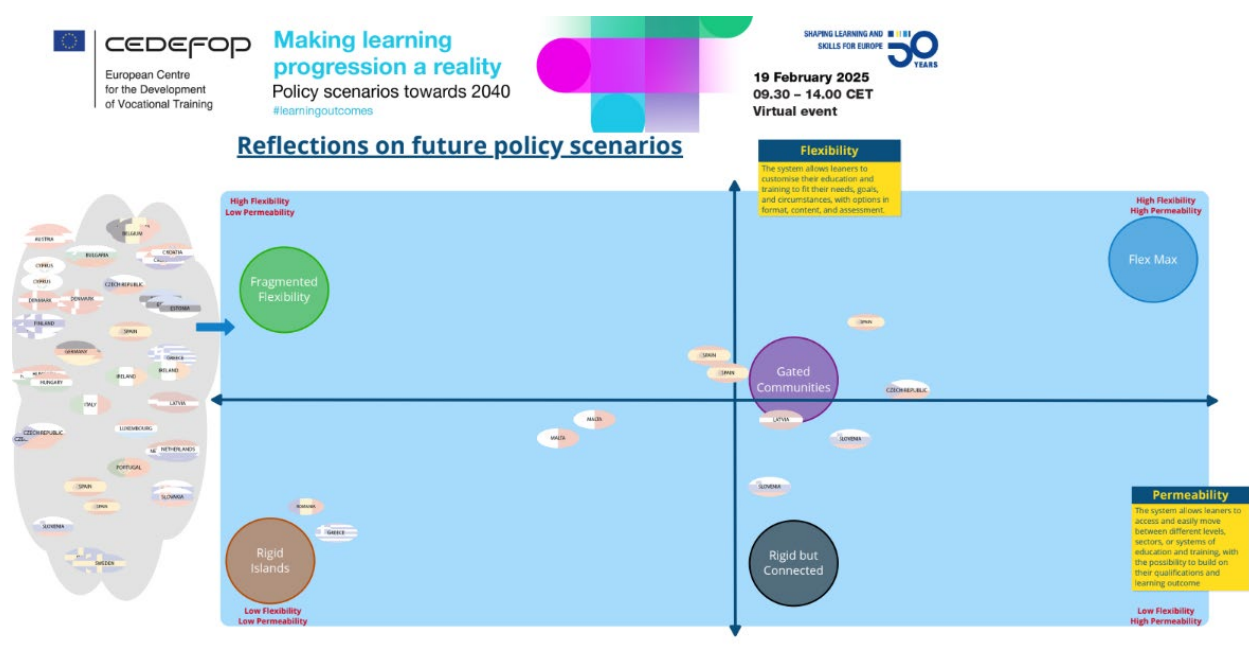
Participants said that at the EU level, it was possible to expand automatic recognition of qualifications within the EQF, as well as to enhance digital credentialing systems. There could also be updates of recommendations related to permeability and flexibility. There could be a greater focus on VET, with support from member states with peer review groups and new European frameworks. There could be a redefinition of the European qualification framework to include microcredentials or other tools and to align the mutual recognition of formal, non-formal and informal achieved skills, participants said.

At the national level, participants said that more national policies were needed that could encourage permeability between general, vocational, and higher education. Policies could also ensure that all obtained skills, including microcredentials, could have an effect on salary. At the national level, more efforts should take place to promote validation for non-formal and informal learning. There could also be agreement among umbrella organizations on microcredentials and their recognition.

Parallel Breakout Session 2

Moderators: **Vasileios Symeonidis**, Cedefop and **Kari Hadjivassiliou**, Tavistock Institut gGmbH
 Rapporteur: **Iraklis Pliakis**, Cedefop

Summary: During this breakout session, participants were asked to place their countries closest to the scenario that reflects the current state of their learning systems. This allowed for discussion of the situations within different countries at the moment.



A German participant noted that Germany has many possibilities in terms of personalising and individualising learning, but said it was cumbersome for individuals to move between VET and higher education. This makes it complicated to connect skills or credentials obtained outside the formal education system to the formal one. Another agreed that there are more partial qualifications but recognition across sectors is still an issue. It was also pointed out that different scenarios might be playing out in different sectors within countries, including Germany.

According to one participant, Greece has been moving toward the Rigid but Connected scenario in terms of flexibility and permeability. The country, like other Southern European countries, is facing a "demographic time bomb" and there is a need to simplify the regulatory framework to promote skills and quality jobs, and to better coordinate policies at the EU and national levels.

In the case of Spain, a participant said that the reality lies between the five scenarios presented, and said that regions like the Basque country will likely adopt hybrid models. Countries will also gravitate toward different scenarios based on existing conditions. As such, they predicted that there will be blended approaches in practice going forward. Another Spanish participant said that Spain will likely support moderate permeability, but will still face barriers because of its differently regulated educational policies.

Participants also discussed enablers and barriers to a learner's ability to move within the education system.

Participants in general saw national education laws and education structures as enablers. They also said that clear information on courses, programs, and European-wide recognition of learning act as enablers. This includes the creation of European digital credentials and qualifications, and access to a portable e-portfolio that stays with the individual.

Other enablers cited included improving the prestige of vocational training and improved certification of qualifications and credit transfer systems. Having the language skills to move abroad and being aware of the importance and feasibility of learning mobility were also seen as enablers. Harmonized quality assurance and standards were cited, as was the alignment of national and international skills taxonomies, flexible learning pathways and cooperation between chambers, business, and education systems.

Various barriers were cited. These included having too many providers, with doubtful quality assurance, as well as a lack of interoperability or recognition. Participants also noted a lack of sufficient information on available offers, a lack of guidance, and technical difficulties connected to digital credentials as issues. Language and cultural differences were also cited as barriers, so was stakeholder resistance to change, and a lack of individual learning-related transversal skills. Limited digital infrastructure was another barrier noted, as well as rigid admission processes, and limited coordination between the education and labor market.

In general, national qualifications frameworks were considered to be enablers, while uneven implementation of qualifications framework was seen as a barrier. It was noted that, while received with high hopes they have not been widely used by end users in some countries, such as Germany. In Sweden, it was reported national qualifications frameworks are seen as a technical instrument, but still not widely known, though this is improving.

Participants considered Flex Max to be a future direction, but said that more permeability, digital tools and better quality assurance is needed to achieve this. For non-formal education it might also require some reinvention in order to link to different education and training subsystems as Flex Max becomes the new default.

Participants noted that language is a factor that can impact learner mobility. Improvements suggested including better cooperation between industry and institutions when it came to

certification, and provision of certificates that better listed skills and competencies. With industry on board, the credentials achieved can be more transferable and moved between contexts. With that possible, Flex Max becomes more achievable, the participants said.

Eurochambres, the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry, was cited as a means to strengthen collaboration between education and training and the labor market. Chambers can operate a bridge, participants said, offering partial qualifications in order to help learners attain professional skills. Such qualifications can then be stacked to create full qualifications. These chambers can promote mobility of learners between countries and regions.

Participants also said there should be more support for transversal skills, such as creativity and collaboration. There could also be improvements in European tools and networks, counseling and guidance provided to learners, and funding for such improvements, participants underlined.

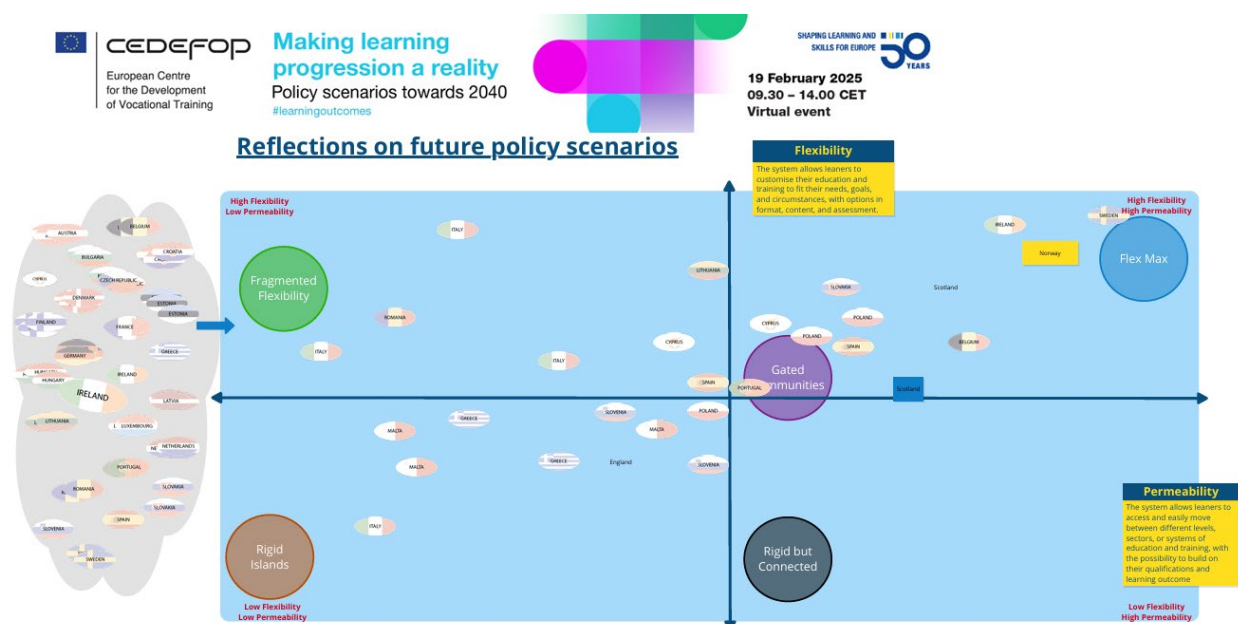
They called for greater investments in research and pilot projects to achieve these aims and to test new lifelong learning models. One specific suggestion was to expand Erasmus+ other mobility programs to facilitate cross-border learning experiences.

Parallel Breakout Session 3

Moderators: **Anastasia Pouliou**, Cedefop and **Giorgia Iacopini**, Tavistock Institut gGmbH

Rapporteur: **Aristos Theocharous**, Cedefop

Summary: During the breakout session, moderator **Anastasia Pouliou** (Cedefop) asked participants to plot their countries on the axis in a way that reflected their flexibility and permeability in allowing learners to customize their education and training.



Participants positioned Cyprus in different places on the axis. Cyprus vocational education was placed above Gated Communities, but one participant positioned Cyprus as a whole near Fragmented Flexibility. This participant said the education system in Cyprus was highly regulated, leading to less permeability.

Commenting on Sweden's position, a participant noted that its system for higher VET had made it more flexible. The European qualifications framework had also enabled this, as did reforms that allow individuals to get financed for a year of studying. In general, it was reported that Sweden has high flexibility and high permeability.

Belgium's different regions fit into different scenarios, according to a Belgian participant. Flanders is closer to the Fragmented Flexibility scenario, while French-speaking Wallonia better fits the Rigid but Connected scenario.

Italy in the meantime best fits the Fragmented Flexibility scenario, with a complex system where many actors and institutions are responsible for vocational training and university education and certification. There is difficulty in creating permeability among these systems in Italy, according to a participant.

Overall, many participants indicated that their country is closer to the third scenario: Fragmented Flexibility, meaning that they observe High Flexibility but due to various constraints such as national arrangements low permeability remains. In addition, Scenario 4 (Rigid but Connected) was not selected by any participant.

Anastasia Pouliou (Cedefop) asked participants about enablers and barriers to learning in Europe, as well as potential priorities for EU and national policy makers going forward.

Enabling factors identified were related to modularised education, microcredentials, systems of credit accumulation and transfer. Participants further indicated that digitalisation (such as the use of digital and artificial intelligence tools to monitor and aid progress), can play an important role in learning.

Barriers cited by participants included bureaucracy, a lack of guidance and coaching, and rigid protectionism of institutional autonomy. There are also different rules for progression in different sectors, and general lack of awareness about learning options and the value of awards. Time constraints and family situations are also barriers that participants highlighted.

What could be done at the European level? Participants said that there could be a common European timetable, where policies are implemented at the same time. There could be more funding in the VET sector and more support for and by CEDEFOP. VET policy domains could also be better integrated across the political and institutional levels. There could be more stress on the importance of qualification systems, and to better understand the differences among member states.

At the national level, there could be more work on qualifications frameworks, participants said, stressing the connection between the assessment of skills and guidance tools for reskilling and upskilling pathways. Participants also said there could be better coordination between stakeholders, as well as within national skills plans and strategies. Participants suggested the introduction of a common credit system across sectors, the introduction of tertiary sector instruments to share member states' recognition procedures, and the ability to add extra hours of non-formal education as part of a full-time education.

There could also be greater adoption of EU competence frameworks — such as DigComp, GreenComp competences, EntreComp, and LifeComp to learn key competences. This would facilitate the creation of a unified approach to skills development.

An Irish participant noted that in Ireland work is underway to resolve issues between national qualification framework level 6 and European level 5 in the shared space between the country's VET and higher education systems, as there are two credit systems operating in Ireland. There is a proposition to introduce a single award at national qualification framework level 6 that can be used across both sectors.

An Italian participant mentioned that in Italy many entrepreneurs are not aware of the educational opportunities available to them, or about mobility schemes and transparency rights. Communication could therefore be improved, using plain, accessible language.

Session 5. Reporting from the Parallel Sessions

12.35 – 12.50

Main Proposals and Considerations from Participants

Chair: **Zelda Azzarà**, Cedefop

Rapporteur 1: **Tiina Polo**, European Commission

Rapporteur 2: **Iraklis Pliakis**, Cedefop

Rapporteur 3: **Aristos Theocharous**, Cedefop

Zelda Azzarà (Cedefop) opened the session and asked for reports from the rapporteurs of each of the breakout rooms.

Tiina Polo (European Commission) reported that most countries represented in Parallel Breakout Session 1 clustered around the Gated Communities scenario. While there was more variety in terms of flexibility, most clustered with less permeability. A few "bold countries" were close to Flex Max. With regards to the second question, inconsistent guidance, trust, and recognition between education and training providers continues to be a barrier. However, more systematic cooperation is also being promoted. There are a variety of learning opportunities, microcredentials, and initiatives. Digital developments can boost synergies across developments. Permeability between systems could be more encouraged at the national level and at the EU level there could be updated recommendations related to permeability and flexibility, for example enlarging the scope of the Recommendation on automatic recognition.

Iraklis Pliakis (Cedefop) reported that the general reaction to the scenarios was positive. It was noted that even within countries, different scenarios discussed might apply. This could also happen within regions, for example in rural regions versus urban regions. In general, there should be efforts to better promote the use of transparency tools going forward. Pliakis also highlighted some barriers, citing quality assurance as an issue, as well as a lack of guidance on learning outcomes, and a need to focus on transversal skills, especially if Europe wants to move towards a Flex Max scenario. There also needs to be a greater focus on international cooperation both between EU member states and between Member States and the EU. Here, the EU could take the initiative in developing digital tools for credential storage and supporting networks that promote the mobility of learners. There could also be investments in pilot projects to test out new lifelong learning models.

Aristos Theocharous (Cedefop) reported that participants in general said that their country was most similar to Fragmented Flexibility. Other popular choices were Gated Communities and Rigid Islands. While Flex Max was seen as an optimal scenario, most did not say that this scenario currently matched their countries though Sweden, Norway, and Ireland did place their countries near Flex Max. In terms of hindering and enabling factors, a lack of awareness and guidance and lack of funding were both cited. Also, time constraints, family situations, and resistance to change were flagged as hindering factors. Participants said that digitalisation, including the use of AI tools, could be an enabling factor, as well as modularised education, microcredentials, systems of credit accumulation and transfer. The establishment of individual learning accounts should be a key priority at the national level going forward. There should also be improvements made in national policies for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This could include improved communication among stakeholders, institutions, employees and others about what kinds of EU tools are available. Institutional cooperation could also be improved between ministries and directorates, and policy domains could be concentrated rather than separated. Additional funding would also help. Support for and by Cedefop was also mentioned.

Session 6. Reflective discussion

12.50 – 13.50

Towards 2040: what is needed to promote flexible and permeable learning systems?

Moderator and discussant: **Jens Bjørnåvold**, Centre for vocational training and work life learning, University of Agder, Norway

Koen Nomden, European Commission

Horacy Debowski, Central Examination Board Poland

Agnes Roman, European Trade Union Confederation

Martin Noack, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Jens Bjørnåvold introduced the reflective discussion session and the panel. He was involved with the subject for the past 20-25 years at the European level, and he noted how there is now a need to get a full overview of the impact of the different initiatives that have taken place, such as the European qualifications framework (EQF). Questions revolve around if the initiatives are working, what impact they are having and if they have had any impact on individual citizens. He

said the session would have two rounds of discussions with short interventions. He posed his first question to Koen Nomden of the European Commission.

To what extent European cooperation on transparency has benefited individual citizens?

Koen Nomden (European Commission) thanked Cedefop for the insightful event, study, and scenarios. He highlighted improvements in learning mobility thanks to European cooperation, naming the Leonardo da Vinci and Erasmus Mundus programs specifically. These and other programs had supported credit transfers, the recognition of learning abroad, and common standards for quality assurance helped to build trust between national education and training systems. Individuals have therefore benefited from a better comparability of qualifications thanks to the EQF, he said. He did say it was necessary to better communicate the EQF to the public, bringing it close to end users, workers, employers, and students. He also said that for validation, there has been improvement in arrangements across countries although more is needed. Europass was also noted as a tool that most directly connects individuals, and it could be expanded to support more learning opportunities and self-assessment for digital skills. Nomden also mentioned quality assurance tools as being important in enhancing trust and common standards. He mentioned that the Commission is working on European digital credentials underpinned by the European learning model, so that individuals can receive credentials, such as diplomas, in a digital format aligning it to international standards that can be accessed from a digital wallet.

Jens Bjørnåvold thanked Nomden and remarked that learning outcomes are the glue that bind things together many of the tool mentioned. He then asked **Horacy Debowski** to provide a Polish perspective on the EQF and NQF. He asked:

How have national and European initiatives on transparency and transferability or qualifications and competences benefited Polish citizens?

Horacy Debowski (CKE, Poland) responded that the transparency movement impacted policy developments in Poland at the macro level, putting emphasis on vocational education. He cited a major 2012 reform that included introducing assessment-based learning outcomes targeted to adults, noting that about 60,000 adults have decided to take this route annually. According to Debowski, about 55 percent of primary school graduates enroll in VET at the upper secondary level. He said that thanks to the EQF, Poland focused on adult learning as a policy tool earlier. He stressed that funding has been impactful, not just the development of qualifications, but the use of funds to modernise VET systems.

Jens Bjørnåvold thanked Horacy Debowski and drew attention to the tension between vocational education and training, and general and academic education. He said this was important as it lies at the core of transferability or parity of esteem. He said many countries were grappling with this, and here national and EU implementation has an important role to play. He noted that discussions around the EQF had brought up valuable discussions within countries. He next asked Agnes Roman from the ECTU the following questions:

Why is transparency and transferability, or qualifications and competences, a priority for trade unions? How do you consider the impact of European policy initiatives in the last decades? What do employees think?

Agnes Roman (ETUC) said that trade unions have an essential role and interest in defining learning outcomes and that trade unions, together with employers, shape vocational and qualification policies. In many countries there are tripartite councils and institutions focused on updating qualification and occupational profiles.

These are priorities for trade unions as they aim to support quality jobs and just transition of workers between jobs and sectors. Given changes related to green and digital transitions of industries, trade unions need to have a clearer understanding of learning outcomes, skills, and qualifications, Roman said. Indeed, skills is a focus, especially with the Union of Skills initiative. Looking ahead, there should be a more holistic approach to education and training. There is also room for improvement with Europass, she said, as only 44 percent of public sector employees use it, and that it is mainly used by people under age 35. She also said that acquiring qualifications for validation is possible in 18 countries in the EU, and that a national public budget for validation only exists in seven EU countries. All of this could be improved upon, Roman said.

Jens Bjørnåvold thanked Agnes Roman, stressing that in many countries, such tripartite arrangements are common, and should be taken into account when discussing transparency and transferability. He then posed a similar question to Martin Noack, asking:

Have national and EU policy initiatives in the area of transparency and transferability actually had an impact on individual citizens?

Martin Noack (Bertelsmann Stiftung - Germany) specifically cited Europass as the most used end user tool to come out of the past few decades, but said that it has not covered all kinds of users, and that it could be improved as it is mainly for educated people. He mentioned Leonardo da Vinci and Erasmus as other important programs. He also said that ESCO is a useful tool for labor market analysis. Still, disadvantaged people do not always benefit from these tools and programs, and validation has not been used enough. There are shortages in the labor market, and the opportunities need to be made more visible, he said. There are issues around funding and communication, but also a lack of buy-in from stakeholders. More bridges therefore need to be built between skills and a qualifications first approach. Ineffective legislation is also a barrier. Noack also called the 2012 recommendation on validation as groundbreaking, and said that combined with the European inventory on validation it had led to innovative new methods as well as projects, such as Innoval and Transval.

Jens Bjørnåvold agreed that validation is important, adding that much depends on national implementation. Another issue is culture, he said, as some countries are more formal and others more flexible in regards to learning. Bjørnåvold then asked the panel the following question.

About 2040. What are the kind of initiatives that should be taken, from your perspective?

Horacy Debowski (CKE, Poland) responded first. He said that there must be a better system for monitoring what is happening in the adult learning market, both in private and public institutions. Such an integrated analysis could provide detail on practices, numbers, professions and more. This could also be mirrored by better integration within governments in monitoring learning. An interesting development could be an agency that would coordinate across silos or ministries, creating synergies between the public and private sectors, he said, with learning outcomes set as the common denominator. The idea of a Center of Excellence that marries the private and public educational sectors has potential. This is particularly important in relation to industrial policy and strategy at the EU and national levels, he said.

Jens Bjørnåvold responded that Poland was an interesting case study where synergies had been created at the European and national level, agreeing that better integrated policies are needed going forward.

Agnes Roman (ETUC) said in response to the question that it is important to think about how to redesign policy approaches going forward, especially with regards to adult learning and lifelong learning in formal and informal settings. She noted that in some countries this was well organised, but that others had suffered from budget cuts. There should also be more focus on employee learning, she said. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the fragmentation of policies and policy governance, she added. Roman also mentioned that there should be greater guidance available to young people to obtain information about what is needed in the labor market. Another issue raised was talent. While there is a focus on talent, there is a shortage of professionals with low and medium skill levels who have difficulty navigating validation systems. If they could have breaks from these learning paths, it could benefit them. She said that the Union of Skills would cover basic skills and transversal skills, helping to address this issue. Roman added that there needed to be better education around countering propaganda, supporting democratic values, and improving citizenship.

Martin Noack (Bertelsmann Stiftung - Germany) started out by saying that adult learning and adult professional learning are different. He agreed that culture is a strong factor. He also said that a Flex Max scenario will require more guidance as more resources are needed for certification. There are questions around cost, certification, and credibility. More flexible pathways are also needed in VET. He said that there could be a greater focus on skills bundles that can be acquired over months in a step by step procedure. Such an approach could be included more in European initiatives like [ESCO](#) (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations). He also said there should be a greater focus on transversal skills, saying that an inability to focus on these skills will make the European labor market less adaptable.

Koen Nomden (European Commission) said there needed to be a fuller implementation of EU tools, including transparency and accessibility to information on all types of levels of qualifications. There should be a full embrace of technology and digital credentials should become the norm for learning achievements, formal qualifications and other learning achievements. All learning should

be valued, he stressed, and upskilling and reskilling incentives are necessary, as is more validation and guidance. He noted the Commission is working toward achieving these goals through its planned VET Strategy and Union of Skills initiative. He also said that EU agencies, such as Cedefop, can continue to support this work.

Jens Bjørnåvold concluded the discussion by referencing the 2000 Lisbon Declaration and its focus on lifelong and lifewide learning. He said the declaration should serve as a reference point when considering practical challenges involved in realising lifelong learning.

13.50 – 14.00 Session 7.

Concluding remarks

Loukas Zahilas and Zeldà Azzarà, Cedefop

Zeldà Azzarà (Cedefop) thanked the conference participants and underscored the importance of the event, citing the different topics covered. She said the Cedefop has received feedback on future scenarios and that it will publish a report on them soon. In the future, Cedefop will also focus more on digitalisation and topics related to digital credentials and the recognition of qualifications. She thanked both Loukas Zahilas, for whom this was the last official event before his retirement, and Jens Bjørnåvold, who has already retired from Cedefop, recognising them as key figures within and beyond the agency for their longstanding contributions to advancing transparency principles and tools that promote the portability of qualifications and their learning outcomes.

She closed by reiterating her thanks to the participants and stressing the importance of sustaining collaboration, continuing to contribute to collective reflection and forward-looking thinking in the evolving landscape of skills and qualifications.

Loukas Zahilas (Cedefop) thanked the meeting organisers and described the event as a success, highlighting the depth of discussions and result, which, he said, gave him confidence in the way forward