



Chapter 1. **INTRODUCTION**

Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways

Volume 2: Cedefop analytical framework for
developing coordinated and coherent approaches
to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults

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CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

The first volume in this research series (Cedefop, 2020) focused on understanding the magnitude of the low-skilled adult population and identifying which groups of adults are most at risk of low skills, and in which skills. The magnitude and heterogeneity of the adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling (ibid.), as well as the economic and social cost associated with low skills (Cedefop, 2017b) call for a renewed approach to upskilling (low-skilled) adults, both comprehensive and strategic; this should allow the pulling together of various resources and creating synergies from different measures and policies already in place across European countries. A coordinated and coherent approach to upskilling (low-skilled) adults also needs to be able to reach those most at need of upskilling and engage them in the process.

The overall purpose (general aim) of this report is to support the development of coordinated and coherent approaches to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults by putting forward an analytical framework, which can support policy-makers and stakeholders in developing such approaches.

1.1. Background and policy context

Digitalisation and technological changes, as well as challenges such as climate change, ageing societies and social inclusion, are changing the way we work and our societies in general. This is even more relevant now, as our economies and societies are confronted with the unprecedented consequences of the Covid-19 health pandemic outbreak. Measures of social distancing implemented to curb the spread of the virus are deeply affecting labour markets, both in terms of job losses and in terms of re-organisation of work through new technologies and digital means. Initial ILO estimates point to significant consequences in terms of global job losses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, ranging from an increase of 5.3 million jobs lost globally

in a low scenario and 24.7 million in a high scenario ⁽²⁾ (ILO, 2020a). Further, according to an ILO nowcasting model, in the first quarter of 2020 global working hours declined by an estimated 4.5% (equal to 130 million full-time jobs with a 48 hours working week) compared to pre-crisis levels (last quarter of 2019), and are expected to decrease by 10.5% compared to the last quarter of 2019 in the second quarter of 2020, equivalent to 305 million jobs (ILO, 2020b). Preliminary results of a Cedefop analysis on coronavirus social distancing risk (Cov19R) carried out to assess which individuals face a higher risk of coronavirus exposure doing their jobs, and therefore needing greater social distancing, conservatively estimate that about 45 million jobs in the EU-27 labour market (23% of total EU-27 employment) are faced with a very high risk of disruption due to Covid-19 (Pouliakas and Branka, 2020).

Against this background, ensuring that every adult has lifelong opportunities to constantly update and acquire new skills to navigate uncertain times and to thrive in their life and career is ever more important. This is of even more concern as, according to recent Cedefop estimates, there are 128 million adults in the EU-28 Member States, Iceland and Norway (hereafter referred to as EU-28+) with the potential for upskilling and reskilling (46.1% of the adult population). These adults may present low education, low digital skills, low cognitive skills or are medium-high educated at risk of skill loss and obsolescence. The estimates paint an alarming picture and hint to a much larger pool of talent and untapped potential than the 60 million low-educated adults usually referred as low-skilled in the EU-28 (Cedefop, 2020).

At EU policy level, the right to quality and inclusive, education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills enabling every citizen to participate fully in society and in the labour market is the first principle of the European pillar of social rights ⁽³⁾ jointly signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on 17 November 2017 at the *Social summit for fair jobs and growth* in Gothenburg, Sweden (European Commission, 2017). Building on the European pillar of social rights and on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council draft conclusions (2020) call on Members States to promote and implement

⁽²⁾ These estimates are calculated from a base level of 188 million in 2019. https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_738742/lang--en/index.htm

⁽³⁾ See European Commission; Government Offices of Sweden (2017). See also the European pillar for social rights booklet: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf

initiatives of reskilling and upskilling as a basis for increasing sustainability and employability, in the context of supporting economic recovery and social cohesion. Further, the European Commission communication on a strong social Europe for just transitions (European Commission, 2020) stresses the importance of empowering people through quality education, training and skills, and the need to place skills, employability and human capital centre stage through the update of the *New skills agenda* and the proposal for a European vocational education and training (VET) recommendation.

The *New skills agenda* and the *Upskilling pathways* recommendation were adopted at EU level to ensure that every adult in the EU has the chance to realise his/her potential fully.

1.1.1. A New skills agenda for Europe and Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults

The Commission's communication *A new skills agenda for Europe: working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness* of 10 June 2016 (European Commission, 2016a) set out a joint agenda for the EU Member States and stakeholders to work towards a shared vision and commitment regarding the strategic importance of skills for sustaining jobs, growth and competitiveness. The *Skills agenda* was centred on three key work strands:

- (a) improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
- (b) making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable;
- (c) improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices.

The *Upskilling pathways* initiative is one of the 10 actions launched to move the *New skills agenda* forward. The recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2016) was adopted by the European Council on 19 December 2016 to support low-skilled adults in acquiring a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquiring a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent (EQF 3 or 4). *Upskilling pathways* is a progression route along which a low-skilled individual can move to improve basic skills levels in literacy, numeracy and digital skills through:

- (a) a skills assessment: to enable adults to identify their existing skills and any needs for upskilling. This may take the form of a skills audit, a statement of the individual's skills that can be the basis for planning a tailored offer of learning;

- (b) a tailored and flexible learning offer: the beneficiary receives an offer of education and training meeting the needs identified in the skills assessment. The offer should aim to boost literacy, numeracy or digital skills or allow progress towards higher qualifications aligned to labour market needs;
- (c) validation and recognition: the beneficiary has the opportunity to have the skills acquired validated and recognised.

The recommendation recognises that many countries already offer elements of *Upskilling pathways*, so implementation of the initiative should build on existing national arrangements and financial frameworks and it varies across Member States.

Delivery of the initiative is underpinned by:

- (a) coordination and partnerships;
- (b) outreach, guidance and support measures;
- (c) follow-up and evaluation.

1.1.1.1. *Developing Upskilling pathways: progress and challenges*

Upskilling pathways is about a new vision for low-skilled adults' empowerment, embedded in the principle of comprehensive, sustainable, inclusive and flexible learning pathways tailored to the individual learner's needs.

Lack of coordinated and coherent approaches necessarily hinders the full potential of the initiative. Addressing this issue is complex, as the upskilling and reskilling needs of adults are generally treated in a fragmented manner, with insufficient crossover and policy coordination between relevant policy areas. While some cooperation and coordination between authorities and policy fields may exist, this is often structured in siloes, which creates challenges in terms of overlapping areas of responsibility and lack of overall coordination (see Cedefop, 2013; Desjardins, 2017; European Commission and ICF, 2015; European Commission, 2016b).

As reported in the European Commission staff working document tacking stock of implementation of the recommendation (European Commission, 2019), since the adoption of the recommendation, Member States have taken various positive steps. Some countries launched new ambitious agendas to support the upskilling and reskilling of the adult population; generally, most initiatives focus on unemployed adults, though increasing support is also dedicated to low-skilled workers in employment. Many of the actions are related to validation and on provision of digital skills.

Despite progress, the report also highlights remaining challenges:

- (a) scale: the small scale of implemented initiatives compared to the magnitude of the low-skilled adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling.
- (b) basic skills (literacy, numeracy and digital skills): few initiatives explicitly focus on basic skills provision.
- (c) coherent three-step approach: few initiatives adopt a pathway approach encompassing the three steps.
- (d) outreach, guidance and support measures: little emphasis is placed in strengthening guidance services to reach out and support adults effectively.
- (e) coordination and partnerships: many fragmented initiatives exist without evidence of mechanisms for coordination or partnerships between providers and other stakeholders.
- (f) sustainability: few initiatives adopt a long-term systemic approach with appropriate funding resources and mechanisms.

Several of these challenges had been already identified by the European stakeholders participating in the Cedefop and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) *First policy learning forum on upskilling pathways: a vision for the future*, which took place in February 2018 ⁽⁴⁾.

Discussions during the learning event demonstrated that, while many countries are already equipped to provide skills identification, training provision tailored to individuals' needs, and/or validation and recognition of prior learning, much needs to be done in bringing together these policies and services in a coordinated manner and within a coherent strategy. A coordinated and coherent strategy for the upskilling of adults also needs to be embedded in a system recognising the heterogeneity of the low-skilled population, with its different needs and characteristics (Cedefop and EESC, 2018).

⁽⁴⁾ Cedefop and EESC policy learning fora on upskilling pathways are a series of policy learning events on the topic aimed at providing a platform for countries to come together to learn from one another and explore common challenges in upskilling adults with a low level of skills. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/policy-learning-forum-upskilling-pathways-vision-future-0>

1.2. Research methods, aims and objectives, report structure

The overall aim of this report is to support the development of coherent and coordinated approaches to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. The work presented here builds on previous work done in this area.

With this general aim, the objective of this report is to develop an analytical framework for upskilling pathways for adults with low skills, which can support policy-makers and stakeholders in designing and implementing coordinated and coherent approaches for comprehensive, sustainable, inclusive and flexible pathways tailored to the individual needs.

As such, this report illustrates the conceptual development of Cedefop analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults.

1.2.1. Developing the Cedefop analytical framework for upskilling pathways for adults with low skills: methods and tasks

The development of the analytical framework was through an iterative process integrating both qualitative research and stakeholder consultations, carried out during the project period.

It involved:

- (a) scanning of official sources and relevant literature and policy documents to identify potentially good (and promising) practices pertaining to the multidisciplinary policy field of upskilling pathways;
- (b) analysis of good and promising practices aimed at identifying important systemic features for the development of a unique approach to upskilling of low-skilled adults, grounded in lifelong learning and based on the idea of flexible, adaptable and sustainable pathways tailored to individual beneficiary needs;
- (c) stakeholder consultations (European and national level) aimed at gaining important feedback and recommendations on the two draft versions of the analytical framework developed during the research process;
- (d) Continuous organic coordination of the Cedefop Department for learning and employability knowledge, expertise and resources in adult learning, early leaving from education and training, financing, guidance and outreach, validation, and work-based learning.

The first phase of the research (January to August 2018) was aimed at identifying important systemic features for developing a coordinated and coherent approach to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. Identification and analysis of these important features was carried out through analysis of good (and promising) practices in the policy fields pertaining to upskilling pathways.

Good and promising practices were identified through desk research of official sources, relevant literature and policy documents. They were selected according to a set of criteria, particularly relevant to inform the development of the analytical framework. Criteria are discussed in Section 2.1.

Findings from the analysis of identified good and promising practices were complemented with various resources and knowledge generated within the Cedefop Department for learning and employability in the areas of adult learning, early leaving from education and training, financing, guidance and outreach, validation, and work-based learning. Within this second phase (September to December 2018), the research team established the necessary links and bridges across the policy areas, unlocking synergies and complementarities across several Cedefop areas of expertise, creating an organic approach to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. Outcomes of the first two phases of the research informed the development of a first draft of the analytical framework (December 2018).

The analytical framework is conceived as a supporting tool for policy-makers and other stakeholders, and its development relies on stakeholder engagement and feedback. Hence, the third phase of the research (December 2018 to January 2019) involved a pilot test of the first draft version of the analytical framework aimed at gaining preliminary national stakeholder feedback. Selected country stakeholders in Ireland, France, Italy, Romania and Sweden had the opportunity, in two focus groups per country (between December 2018 and January 2019), to provide feedback to the draft analytical framework developed in the first two phases.

Building on the feedback from the country focus groups, a second draft version of the analytical framework was developed ⁽⁵⁾ (February 2019). This was presented and thoroughly discussed with national and European stakeholders participating in the Cedefop and EESC Second policy leaning

⁽⁵⁾ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/cedefop_af_upskilling_pathways_20-21.05.2019.pdf

forum on upskilling pathways: a vision for the future ⁽⁶⁾ which took place in May 2019. Building on stakeholder feedback, the analytical framework was further revised and emerged in its final version presented in Chapter 3 of this report.

To sum up, the timeline of framework development comprised the following procedures, some being carried out in parallel:

- (a) good and promising practice analysis aimed at identifying important systemic features for developing a coordinated and coherent approach to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. (January-August 2018);
- (b) findings from the analysis were complemented with various resources and knowledge generated within Cedefop (September to December 2018);
- (c) outcome of the first two research phases informed the development of the first draft of the analytical framework (December 2018);
- (d) pilot test of the first draft version of the analytical framework (December 2018 - January 2019);
- (e) development of a second draft (February 2019) according to the feedback received in the country stakeholder consultations;
- (f) presentation and in-depth discussion and analysis of the second draft version of the analytical framework (May 2019);
- (g) development of the final Cedefop analytical framework for upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults incorporating policy learning forum stakeholder feedback ⁽⁷⁾ (June to December 2019).

1.3. Outline of the report

The remaining chapters of this report are organised as follows:

- (a) Chapter 2 details the identification of the important systemic features for developing coordinated and coherent approaches to upskilling pathways for adults. It reports findings from the good and promising practices analysis as well as the summary findings from the stakeholder consultation processes;

⁽⁶⁾ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/second-policy-learning-forum-upskilling-pathways-vision-future>

⁽⁷⁾ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/second-policy-learning-forum-upskilling-pathways-vision-future>

- (b) Chapter 3 presents the final version of Cedefop analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults;
- (c) Chapter 4 concludes the report.