FOURTH
POLICY LEARNING FORUM
on upskilling pathways

16 November 2022
Virtual event

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE
#UpskillingPathways

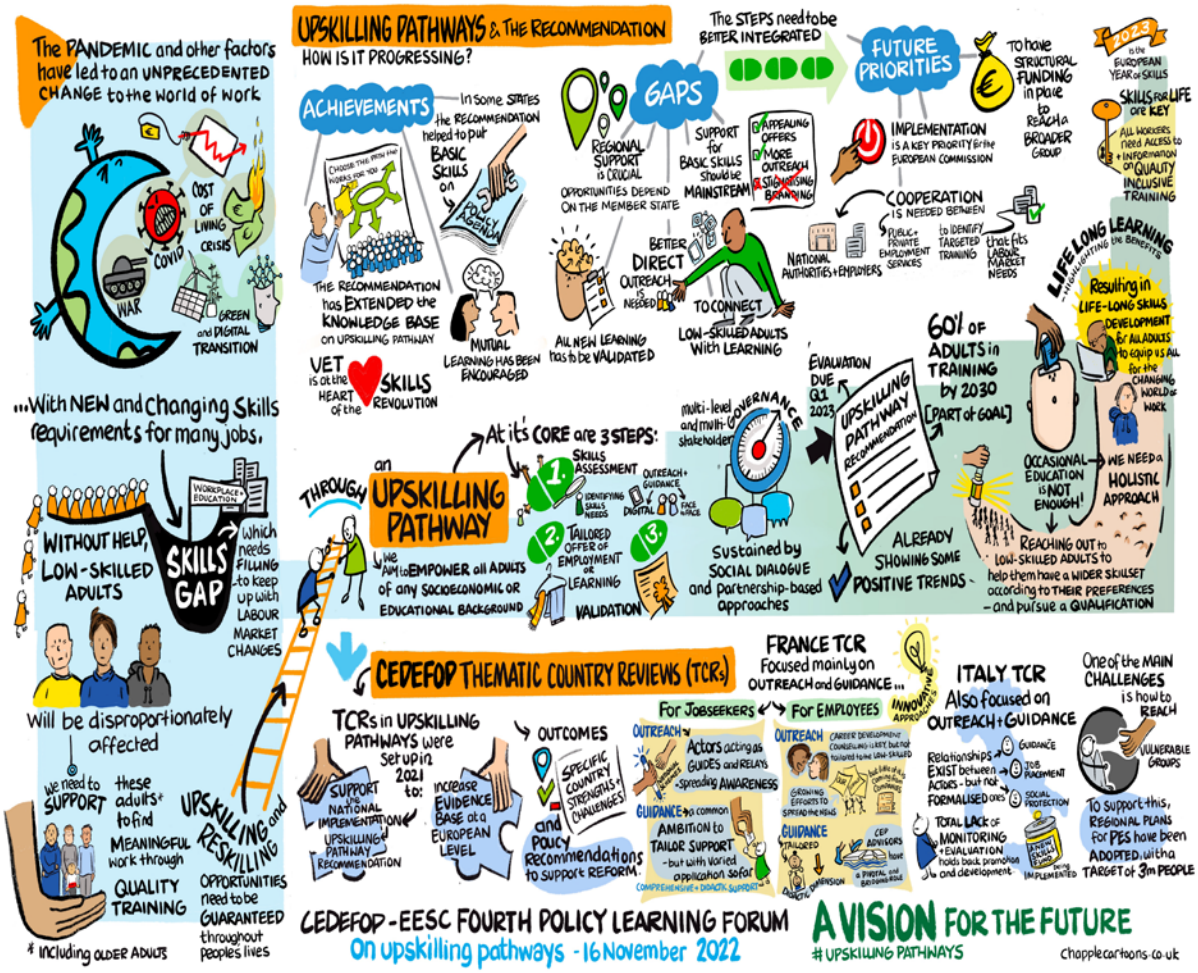
CEDEFOP
European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

European Economic and Social Committee

Summary of outcomes

On 16 November 2022, Cedefop and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) organised the 'Fourth policy learning forum on upskilling pathways: a vision for the future'. Policy learning fora (PLF) 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 low level of skills.

The aim of the Fourth PLF on upskilling pathways was to discuss progress and lessons learned from the implementation of the *Upskilling Pathways Recommendation*, by exploring and discussing the preliminary findings from Cedefop's thematic country reviews on upskilling pathways in France and in Italy.



Participants

The forum was attended by 97 participants, including 89 representatives from the Member States (participation was by invitation only) and eight members of the European Economic and Social Committee. As was the case in previous policy learning fora, (2018, 2019, 2020) priority was given to members of the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT), which is the group responsible for the follow-up of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. The ACVT is composed of representatives from trade unions, employers and governments.

Setting the scene

Antonio Ranieri, Head of Department for VET and skills in Cedefop, and Laurenţiu Plosceanu, President of the EESC Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, welcomed the participants and emphasised the importance of continuous lifelong up- and reskilling of adults. COVID has led to an unprecedented change in the world of work, causing the skills required for many jobs to evolve, accelerating changes that were already occurring. Cedefop estimates that 128 million Europeans ([1]) are in need of upskilling and reskilling; these estimates hint to a large pool of unexplored talent and untapped potential waiting to be unlocked. Equipping people with the skills needed to keep up with the changing world of work is a priority. This poses challenges that can be converted into opportunities, and the future lies in framing upskilling pathways in a comprehensive way that includes all adults, regardless of their socioeconomic background and education level.

Vocational education and training (VET), as the engine of the green and digital transitions, is at the heart of being able to do this. Multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance in upskilling pathways is crucial in establishing a social dialogue involving all relevant actors and encouraging wide and inclusive participation.

Cedefop thematic country reviews (TCRs) on upskilling pathways

Lidia Salvatore, coordinator of Cedefop's work on VET for adults and apprenticeships, introduced Cedefop's thematic country reviews on upskilling pathways (TCRs).

([1]) EU-27 Member States, the UK, Iceland and Norway.

TCRs build on Cedefop's work on supporting the development of systematic and coordinated approaches to lifelong upskilling and reskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. They are in-depth reviews, carried out in close cooperation with Member States, of a country's approach to the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

TCRs have a two-fold objective:

(a) at national level, to support the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation by identifying country-specific strengths and challenges, presenting a set of policy options for ensuring systematic, coherent and coordinated approaches to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults, and supporting reforms at national and/or regional levels.

(b) at European level, to increase the evidence base which can support policy- and decision-makers in European countries, at different levels, in designing and implementing upskilling pathways approaches. TCRs rely on a methodology comprised of three pillars, (1) Cedefop's analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways, (2) an inclusive, participatory, and collaborative approach, and (3) an evolving and iterative approach. Full engagement and cooperation are maintained with the countries throughout the process: TCRs are country-owned and country-driven review processes of the country's approach to upskilling pathways. The ministries in charge of implementing upskilling pathways in the country appoint, with a formal mandate, a steering group of national stakeholders, which is involved in all strategic TCR activities. TCRs result in identification of country-specific strengths and challenges, and a set of policy recommendations to support reform. The first round of TCRs started in 2021 and involves France and Italy. First results of these TCRs will be published in the first half of 2023, while full results will be available in early 2024. A second round of TCRs on upskilling pathways involving Croatia and Spain was launched at the end of 2022.

Lessons from the TCR experience: France and Italy

Preliminary findings

Matteo Sgarzi, team leader of the French TCR national team (Céreq and Iredu in consortium with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini), presented preliminary findings from the French TCR. Among the key areas of Cedefop's analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways, the TCR in France puts the emphasis on outreach, guidance, and on the cross-cutting

dimensions of governance and financial and non-financial support. The objective of the French TCR is to analyse the extent to which the actors who offer financial and non-financial supports, coordinate (or not) with one another, articulate (or not) their services, develop (or not) innovative, concerted and adapted strategies and methods for outreach and guidance for the least qualified adults. In particular, the TCR in France focuses on (a) the least qualified unemployed adults in pathways integrating work-related training activities, and on (b) the least qualified workers at risk of skills obsolescence and job loss.

Looking at the least qualified unemployed adults, results highlight the emergence of several innovative outreach practices, and in particular the key role played by 'individual advisors'. Individual advisors may provide a reference point for a low-qualified adult in an upskilling pathway, and may act as an interface between multiple stakeholders. On guidance, results suggest increasing efforts to tailor support on an individual basis, but with varying degrees of effectiveness and modes of implementation, and embedded in comprehensive and didactic support (holistic and individual-centred support).

Looking at findings for the least qualified workers at risk of skills obsolescence and job loss, career development counselling (CEP) clearly emerges as a key service, but it is not tailored to the low-qualified workers. CEP advisors have a pivotal and bridging role with more or less formalised relationships with other actors.

Overall, the following emerge from preliminary findings from the French TCR:

(a) two separate ecosystems depending on the employment status (jobseekers versus workers) of the least qualified adult. This may impact their access to upskilling pathways, as they may often move back and forth between employment and unemployment;
(b) coordination (more or less formalised) and the types of cooperation (sometimes emerging) between traditional and new actors, as well as between the actors from the training and employment fields and other actors from related fields;
(c) the importance of building individual empowerment supported by tailored, learner-centred and comprehensive support to secure positive engagement.

Claudio Vitali, team leader of the Italian TCR national team (INAPP in consortium with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini) presented preliminary results from the TCR in Italy.

Among the 10 key areas of Cedefop's analytical framework for developing upskilling pathways, the TCR in Italy focuses on the key themes of outreach (with the integration of relevant elements of lifelong guidance) and tailoring of the learning offer (with the integration of relevant elements of skills assessment), which are analysed through the cross-cutting themes of governance and the principles of personalisation of services and centrality of the individual.

The objective of the Italian TCR is to analyse the capacity of the system and/or key actors and services to offer personalised, coordinated, and coherent learning pathways for low-skilled adults, through systematic and holistic outreach and guidance services and personalisation of the learning and training offer. The TCR aims to analyse how the actors articulate their services, and how they develop (or not) innovative and coordinated strategies for coordinated and coherent upskilling pathways aimed at improving adults' levels of skills and competences. The Italian TCR focuses on adults aged 29 to 64 with low educational attainment and/or low level of skills and competences.

Results from the first phase of analysis highlight that outreach is not the responsibility of a specific actor, therefore substantially hindering its potential reach and effectiveness. This also implies that outreach is rarely systematic or structured. Local networks have a key role to play in relation to attracting and engaging the most vulnerable adults. More generally, partnership-based approaches, which bring together several actors providing a wide range of services (outreach, guidance, provision of training/learning opportunities, social support, health services, etc.) are particularly effective in reaching out and engage adults with a low level of skills and competences, especially those most vulnerable. While positive experiences of such partnership-based approaches exist throughout the country, the level of formalisation of these relationships is often very limited, and they often run as ad hoc projects rather than sustainable initiatives.

In terms of personalisation of the learning and training offer, results suggest that lack of systematic certification of learning/training pathways has a negative impact on the attractiveness of these pathways. Making sure that all learning/training is visible and valued (through processes of validation) is essential to ensure take-up of these opportunities. Further, tailored learning is not systematically built on a process of identification of skill needs nor on a process of validation of prior learning, and, as a consequence, skills already owned by adults are rarely taken into account to adapt the duration of training/learning. These issues are particularly critical for low-skilled adults, who generally benefit less from training/learning opportunities and may be particularly discouraged from availing of them.

Finally, lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation prevents clear understanding of achievements and challenges of upskilling pathways, which are essential to improve these approaches further, and prevent further promotion and awareness-raising of the benefits of upskilling pathways.

Panel discussion with representatives of the national steering group

Christine Schmitt from the Ministry of Labour in France and representative of the French TCR national steering group contextualised the results presented. In France, the skills investment plan (PIC) ([2]) launched in 2018 aimed to provide opportunities for low-skilled adults by offering them new skill development paths. The main challenge was reducing the obstacles preventing access to training, often financial. So far, it has been found that training for jobseekers can have positive effects, but ambiguous ones regarding access to employment. The results seem to improve when training is long and leads to certification, but academic formats are not suitable for all learners. When training is part of a short-term action and aims to maintain or integrate into a job, it is only effective if it is linked to employment opportunities.

Moving forward, a key challenge will be ensuring that the least qualified can benefit from the new demands of the labour market, so the government seeks to strengthen the training of jobseekers, particularly long-term ones. Public employment services (PES) are encouraged to emphasise on-the-job training and systematically prescribe immersion in a professional environment. Last, the Ministry of Labour has launched a transformation of PES, aiming to improve support for unemployed people and those furthest from the labour market. A legislative text is planned for 2023, with gradual implementation in 2024. The real novelty concerns the relationship that PES will have to build with local businesses: in addition to promoting employability, PES will also support companies' recruitment ability and capacity to encourage more inclusive hiring.

Angela Grieco from the Ministry of Labour in Italy and representative of the Italian TCR national steering group contextualised the results presented. In Italy, the main feature of the adult learning sector is multi-level governance through the involvement of national, regional, and local stakeholders. This cooperation has led to the adoption of the national strategic plan for the development of adult competences, which is the adult learning policy document that defines approaches and objectives in line with the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

([2]) Plan d'Investissement dans les Compétences a 5-year investment plan (EUR 15 billion) that aims at building 'a society of competences'.

COVID has adversely impacted jobseekers and those with low digital skills who could not access online employment services; in this context, Italy introduced a comprehensive, integrated reform of active labour market policies and vocational training, including increasing the capacity building of PES. A new skills fund will also be implemented to provide resources, support enterprises and workers through the green and digital transitions, guarantee the quality of training paths, and encourage lifelong learning.

One of the main challenges in the future is reaching vulnerable groups. It is crucial to develop outreach strategies and reinforce them with better communication on validation of non-formal and informal learning processes. It is also important to give greater visibility to training and education offers for adults and invest more in basic skills and skills for life. In order to ensure coherence between national regulations and regional implementations, regional plans for public employment services have been adopted, and the final ambitious target is reaching 3 million people.

Evaluation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation

Sofie Doškářová from the European Commission presented preliminary findings from the evaluation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, which will be published in a European Commission's Staff Working Document and a report to the Council, in early 2023.

The preliminary findings of the evaluation show that the Recommendation has so far been moderately successful. There are fairly positive trends in indicators such as the decrease in the number of low-qualified adults. The Recommendation has also acted as a catalyst for a renewed focus on the importance of tackling low-qualified adults' basic skills, and progress is reported in all three steps of the Recommendation.

Implementation costs are seen as proportionate to the benefits and mostly incurred by municipal, regional, and State administrative bodies. EU funds play a dominant role, and stakeholders report strong coherence between the Recommendation and European, national, and regional policies.

However, measures linked to the Recommendation often lack scale and coordination and must improve to target more participants. Funding is often insufficient to support the diverse target groups, and strengthening information and awareness of validation, and integrating it with the rest of the system must be improved. Also, while Member States have made progress on the Recommendation's three steps, these have not been sufficiently integrated into a single

pathway. Further policy attention and resources need to be devoted to basic skills and outreach, and there needs to be sufficient structural funding and infrastructure in place for providing further skills to low-skilled adults. Good practices on the steps of the Recommendation at a smaller scale need to transition towards system-level efforts and reforms, backed by increased domestic funding.

Closing panel with European stakeholders

In the concluding panel, Tatjana Babrauskienė (EESC Member), David Kunst (European Commission), Robert Plummer (BusinessEurope) and Agnes Roman (ETUC) discussed the main achievements of upskilling pathways, and the remaining challenges/gaps to be addressed to ensure full empowerment of low-skilled adults. European stakeholders agreed that the Recommendation has contributed to creating momentum in terms of increased awareness of the importance of upskilling pathways, and has helped to put basic skills on the policy agenda. At Member State level, several policies and initiatives have been implemented and mutual and peer learning activities have contributed to supporting implementation of upskilling pathways at national level.

However, the scale of the implementation policies/initiatives is still limited compared to the number of adults in potential need for upskilling/reskilling. Further, upskilling opportunities for low-skilled adults still depend very much on the Member State they reside in.

Successful implementation also depends on more effective social partner involvement and social dialogue. More efforts are needed to integrate the Recommendation's three steps better within an overarching strategy, which will also support a stable framework for cooperation with social partners, civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

Stakeholders also called for holistic and comprehensive sets of financial and non-financial support to ensure that low-skilled adults are aware of, and supported to avail themselves of quality and fair upskilling opportunities, which are tailored to their needs and aspirations and are relevant on the labour market. This includes outreach and guidance, as well as tackling barriers preventing participation, such as support with childcare, health, housing, etc.

In a second round of discussions, European stakeholders were asked to reflect on the future priorities for upskilling pathways, and in particular whether it would make sense, in light of the rapid and frequent transitions affecting the EU economy and society, to move towards the idea of lifelong upskilling pathways for all adults.

Stakeholders stressed that all adults, in particular low-skilled ones, should have the right to access quality and inclusive training, and should be able to avail themselves of these opportunities (through comprehensive and holistic support).

Support for basic skills should be mainstreamed and the outreach and appeal of tailored learning/training opportunities should be broadened; care should be taken to avoid stigmatising labels which may deter people from upskilling/reskilling. Instead, the benefits of lifelong skill development for all adults should be highlighted, and efforts should be made towards lifelong upskilling pathways for all adults, based on the individual adults' needs.

This objective also calls for system level approaches ensuring that relevant policy domains are systematically coordinated to foster synergies, and that funding is sustainable, i.e. earmarked and secured (including domestic funding).

Systematic and stable investment should be made in partnerships and infrastructure in order to reach, engage and serve the most vulnerable and those hardest to reach. Social partners and civil society organisations play a key role, and social dialogue, partnership-based approaches and cooperation among different stakeholders should be fostered.

In order to identify a targeted training pathway and career support which considers labour market needs as well, stronger cooperation between public employment services and companies is needed, as is better cooperation between public and private employment services.

A new vision of lifelong skill development is also needed, where all people are supported and able to update and upgrade their skills systematically, and where companies become learning-conducive work environments that systematically demand and supply training, act collectively and share responsibility. Cooperation between national authorities and employers is crucial to develop strategies for providing access to training in the national context for people in diverse forms of work.

Concluding remarks

In their concluding remarks, Cedefop Deputy Director Mara Brugia and Lech Pilawski, President of the EESC Labour Market Observatory concluded that while low-skilled adults will continue to deserve special attention, it is essential that all adults have a chance to develop and upgrade their skills, regardless of their labour market status and socioeconomic background. This is a prerequisite for ensuring that they can manage recurring transitions and

succeed in their lives and careers. Both Cedefop and the EESC will continue supporting the development of systematic, coordinated, and coherent approaches to lifelong upskilling pathways for all adults, not only low-skilled adults, and invite participants to the next Cedefop – EESC PLF on upskilling pathways, which will take place in November 2023.

See the press release for the 2022 event.