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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL

**EVALUATION of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling
Pathways: New Opportunities for adults**



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1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating digital and green transitions mean that the skills acquired during initial education and training are no longer sufficient to meet the evolving demands of the labour market, and adults need to develop their skills throughout their lives. Moreover, demographic trends leading to a shrinking workforce are expected to accelerate in the coming decade, increasing the pressure to use the full potential of the skills of everyone on the labour market. This is why the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan sets the target that at least 60% of adults should participate in training every year by 2030. EU leaders welcomed this ambitious target at the 2021 Porto Social Summit and Member States have translated them into national targets¹.

The European Skills Agenda provides for a strategy to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills. It delivers on the European Pillar of Social Rights and notably its first principle spelling out the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning and inter-links with other policy initiatives that support the lifelong learning approach. **Basic skills – literacy, numeracy and digital – are the foundation for full participation in society and the labour market.** However, far too many adults in the EU do not possess a functional level of these skills² and they risk getting stuck in a “low skills-poor jobs trap”³. This calls for policy action to support basic skills acquisition.

The objective of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways⁴ is to respond to this risk and provide adults with a low level of skills, knowledge or competence, for instance adults with a qualification below the secondary level, with opportunities to develop basic skills and/or acquire a wider set of skills, relevant for active participation in society and the labour market.

The mismatch between labour market demands and the supply of skilled labour also motivated the decision on the European Year of Skills which emphasises the need to upskill and reskill people as well as activate more for the labour market.⁵ In her State of the European Union address announcing the proposal, President von der Leyen highlighted that “*we need everyone on board*” as Europe lacks not only high-end professionals but also “*truck drivers, waiters and airport workers*”.⁶ The recent Green Deal Industrial Plan⁷, further

¹ Cf. IP 22 3782

² The [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#) includes an EU target of at least 80% of people aged 16-74 having basic digital skills by 2030. According to [Eurostat Digital Skills Indicator](#), in 2021, only 54% of individuals aged 16-74 in EU27 had at least basic digital skills. To ensure that this objective will be met, the Commission set up the Digital Compass to translate the EU’s digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete targets. [Europe’s Digital Decade: digital targets for 2030 \(europa.eu\)](#)

³ Cf. Burdett and Smith (2002), [The low skill trap](#), European Economic Review.

⁴ [EUR-Lex - 32016H1224\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵ [Decision of the European Parliament and the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023.](#)

⁶ [State of the Union address 2022.](#)

emphasises the need to address today's wide-spread skills shortages that hold back the EU's investment and growth.

To reach the objectives of the Recommendation, Member States were invited to provide adults with a low level of skills with personalised support via an integrated pathway consisting of three steps.



1) Skills assessment – identifying the existing skills of adults and any gaps in the skills set that need to be filled.



2) Provision of a tailored and flexible learning offer – providing a learning offer which fills the specific skills gaps identified through the skills assessment.



3) Validation and recognition – assessing and certifying the skills acquired and encouraging their certification towards a formal qualification

Member States were recommended to identify priority target groups, ensure effective coordination and partnership among stakeholders, and implement outreach, guidance and support measures to make potential beneficiaries aware of the existing opportunities and guide them through all steps of the process. The Recommendation asks the Commission to report to the Council on the implementation in Member States and at EU level. This report draws on the evaluation staff working document⁸.

2. MAIN EVALUATION FINDINGS

This chapter presents the extent to which the Recommendation is **effective, efficient and coherent, provides EU added value** and remains **relevant** to tackle present needs, bearing in mind that a Council Recommendation is of a non-binding nature.

⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, A Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age, [COM\(2023\) 62 final](#)

⁸ See SWD(2023) 460 final. The SWD was supported by an external study by Ecorys and 3S, [Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults](#).

Effectiveness

The available evidence paints a picture of **overall moderate effectiveness of the Recommendation**.

Relevant indicators show **moderate positive trends** and implementation has been uneven across the Member States with measures often **lacking scale and coordination**. Whilst some stakeholders view the Recommendation as a **catalyst for renewed focus on support for adults to acquire basic skills**⁹ and consider the three step-approach as a useful reference point, the evaluation finds improvements in **implementing the three steps of the Recommendation** in only 14 Member States.¹⁰

Skills assessment opportunities are now wide-spread across Member States, but require further staff professionalisation and a non-stigmatising social perception. This means that skills assessment can be communicated in a more positive and motivating way by emphasising existing skills to build upon. Several Member States have taken steps to improve the provision of tailored and flexible learning offers to low-skilled adults¹¹, but challenges remain due to insufficient funding – often only EU project-based funding as opposed to domestic structural funding – to support the diverse target groups and barriers to access and take-up. Similarly, **skills validation** and **recognition** have **improved** in some Member States, but **often with limited integration** in the education and training system and low awareness and take-up among adults.¹²

The **share of low qualified adults**¹³ aged 25-64 **decreased** from 23.4% in 2016 (56.1 million) to 20.7% in 2021¹⁴ (48.7 million). However, **external factors** other than this Recommendation, notably **demographic changes**, may have contributed to these trends.¹⁵

National implementation measures identify a **large number of priority target groups**¹⁶, but stakeholders report that **challenges remain in effectively reaching them**.¹⁷

⁹ For instance, according to the position paper by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), “*Upskilling Pathways has prompted national strategies to focus on basic skills and validation of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, moving the attention of learning programmes on learners with low(er) basic skills*”.

¹⁰ BE, BG, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, HR, IT, LV, MT, PL and SK. This mapping of policy measures is based on the external study supporting the evaluation. See Section 3.1 of the evaluation SWD for details.

¹¹ BE, BG, DK, EE, MT and PL. For further analysis of the barriers to access and take-up, also see the impact assessment accompanying the Commission proposal on individual learning accounts, [SWD\(2021\) 369 final](#).

¹² BE, BG, CY, DE, EL, IT, LV and SK as per the supporting study. These conclusions are in line with the 2020 evaluation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, [SWD\(2020\) 121 final](#).

¹³ Adults with low level of educational attainment (i.e. ISCED levels 0-2).

¹⁴ See Eurostat: online data code [EDAT LFSE 03](#) and [EDAT LFS 9901](#).

¹⁵ Larger and older cohorts are increasingly outside of the relevant age bracket (25-64 years) and younger cohorts becoming part of this age bracket, though smaller in number, tend to have higher educational attainments.

¹⁶ The situation across Member States is varied, and the group of low-skilled adults may be comprised of different subgroups (such as - but not limited to - employed, unemployed, economically inactive, migrants, disadvantaged groups, persons in rural areas) depending on national circumstances.

Stakeholders also report that the impact of digitalisation has greatly increased the target group of the Recommendation. Nowadays, with the increasing move to digital environments, all individuals need at least basic digital skills. Additionally, they also highlighted the specific responsibility of public support for adult's basic skills development, emphasising that such skills are often taken for granted by employers¹⁸.

Career guidance by the public employment services is widely available, but suffers from **low levels of awareness**, may be perceived as **intimidating**¹⁹, and is **not always available** to low-skilled who are not unemployed.²⁰

Member States have delivered implementation measures in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, in particular public employment services, social partners, NGOs and local actors including public libraries²¹. However, **sometimes roles and responsibilities are not clear enough and coordination is not effective**, for instance between the ministries of education and labour, and between national and regional authorities²².

A joined-up strategic approach between all three steps ²³ **is crucial** to ensure that adult learners feel supported and stay committed to their upskilling pathway, **but it is not common**²⁴. Some stakeholders note that to assist the low-skilled adults furthest away from learning, support concerning **the three steps should be integrated with social services and labour market programmes**.²⁵

¹⁷ The position paper by “Literacy 100” underlines that “*Education in adulthood can be a daunting prospect for adults who have low levels of personal resilience and self-esteem*”.

¹⁸ Cf. position paper by the European Basic Skills Network: “*To build individual and social resilience it is imperative that all adults have access to quality provision of a dynamic set of skills. Basic Skills continue to be the core focus, but they need to be acquired in a context that acknowledges and develops Life Skills.*”

¹⁹ Cf. position paper by Eurodiaconia, which states that “*our members stress, many times these services are seen as intimidating or untrustworthy by some people. To be accessible and inclusive, PES need to be provided in a safe space for everyone to feel protected from bias and any form of discrimination*”.

²⁰ Cf. position paper by EAEA, noting that “*guidance measures are not sufficiently available everywhere; however, they would be in a central position to address target groups with low skills*”.

²¹ The position paper by “Public libraries 2030” points out that “*public libraries play an important role in the non-formal education sector as they are often the first organisations providing assistance and support to vulnerable groups with low literacy skills*”.

²² Cf. e.g. the ILO position paper, emphasising the importance of “*a whole-of-government approach to effective governance*”.

²³ The EAEA position paper highlights the importance of embedding the measures into a broader strategic framework: “*What emerges is that those countries that have integrated Upskilling Pathways into a broader lifelong learning strategy are most likely to reach the target groups and build innovative upskilling programmes, for instance Slovakia, Finland and Austria.*”

²⁴ Positive examples concerning the integration of the three steps identified by the supporting study include PT, DK, SE (already at the start of the evaluation period) and –at a project level- PL.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. position papers by Eurodiaconia and “Literacy 100”.

Efficiency

Whilst **stakeholders consider the implementation costs as proportionate**²⁶ to the benefits, independently of the starting point of a Member State, **no strong conclusions on efficiency** can be drawn since Member States have not systematically collected data on the costs and benefits of implementation measures. This reflects low overall implementation costs in most Member States and comparatively large benefits in terms of direct upskilling measures, but also in the form of increased awareness and more attention to adults' basic skills in the national debate.

EU funds have co-funded many of the implementation measures during the evaluation period, in particular, the European Social Fund (ESF)²⁷. Efficiency of implementation is perceived to vary with the degree of presence of different features: i.e. clear responsibilities assigned between actors, processes in place to select quality training providers and involvement of specifically trained staff and cooperation with employers, as well as monitoring and evaluation used to improve delivery.

Coherence

Stakeholders consulted at both EU and national level consider the Recommendation to be internally coherent, with consistent objectives, recommendations and expected impacts. The measures proposed in the Recommendation are perceived to provide a **comprehensive policy framework** to guide implementation actions at national level. Stakeholders also report a high level of coherence between the Recommendation and relevant policies and strategies at national and regional level. However, **insufficient integration of the three steps into a single pathway** and a lack of strategic coordination between implementation measures and other parts of the adult learning system challenge the coherent implementation at national level.

The Recommendation is also perceived to be **coherent** with and complementary to **other relevant EU initiatives** related to skills and employment.²⁸

Almost all stakeholders consulted at both EU and national level considered that there was good policy coherence between the Recommendation and **relevant EU funding mechanisms**.²⁹

²⁶ Several surveys have been conducted to collect evidence. This particular survey has been carried out among the national and regional institutions and organisations in charge at operational level of upskilling pathways and organisations involved in the implementation of upskilling pathways (survey of coordinating and implementing organisations).

²⁷ Other funds were also mentioned, such as: Erasmus+, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) (now called Technical Support Instrument (TSI)) and the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), as well as the more recent Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

²⁸ Notably the Council Recommendations on the [validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) (2012), [establishing a Youth Guarantee](#) (2013) and [A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee](#) (2020), the [integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market](#) (2016), [key competences for lifelong learning](#) (2018), [micro-credentials](#) (2022) and [individual learning accounts](#) (2022).

EU added value

Given that the Recommendation is non-binding, the **EU added value** materialised mostly in the form of **increased policy attention** on low basic skills among adults in several Member States. Moreover, the Recommendation provided a **common framework for national policy action, fostered stakeholder collaboration** within and across Member States, and/or mobilised **funding and technical support** for policy experimentation. In some Member States, the Recommendation served as an **inspiration for reforms of the adult learning system**.³⁰ In others, it served as a **benchmark against which to compare the existing support systems**, and pilot or introduce targeted provisions concerning one of the three steps.

Stakeholders appreciated the Recommendation's role in **fostering knowledge sharing across Member States**³¹. Technical assistance was provided via the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) or its successor, the Technical Support Instrument (TSI)³², as well as indirectly by supporting the OECD in developing national skills strategies and diagnostic reports in several Member States.³³ Finally, stakeholders highlighted that the **Recommendation helped to direct EU funds** from the various funding streams towards basic skills development projects for diverse target groups.

Relevance

Stakeholders are nearly unanimous in their view that **the Recommendation's objectives are still relevant**³⁴, which is reflected also in the **recent high-level EU targets**. Similarly, stakeholders consider the **measures defined in the Recommendation to be still relevant** to meet its objectives: they highlighted the continued need for supporting the low-skilled with specifically tailored measures and the continued relevance of the Recommendation's "system building" approach.

Stakeholders also perceive that the **EU level attention to implementation continues to be relevant**³⁵ as it has made a difference over the evaluation period by increasing policy attention for adult basic skills development, and fostering national reform and policy experimentation.

²⁹ E.g. for the 2021-2027 programming period, the ESF+ has a budget of €99.3 billion.

³⁰ Including HR, EL and SK.

³¹ Mutual learning took place via dedicated events, but also through the national coordinators for adult learning, the adult learning working group and –in a more informal and “bottom up” manner- via the European Platform for Adult Learning and Education (EPALE). Cedefop supported Member State reforms by producing comparative research on their upskilling systems, and by organising Policy learning fora on the Recommendation.

³² To BE, HR, CY, HU, IT, NL, PT and ES.

³³ Including BE, IT, LV, LT, NL, PL, PT, SK, SI, ES; [National Skills Strategies - OECD](#).

³⁴ 87% of respondents to public consultation agreed to this statement.

³⁵ 87% of respondents to the public consultation agreed that EU policy guidance is still required to a fairly large or very large extent. Cf. also the position paper by the World Employment Confederation Europe, which states that “EU guidance is required to a fairly large extent to promote the exchange of good practices and promote mutual learning and bench-learning”.

3. WAYS FORWARD TO STRENGTHEN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the progress made, significant implementation challenges still remain:

- The **first main challenge** is **uneven implementation progress** among Member States, with large discrepancies in upskilling opportunities available for low-skilled adults.
- The **second main challenge** is the **often still small scale and insufficient effective outreach**³⁶ of implementation measures taken by the Member States
- The **third main challenge** is the **dominant role of project-based EU funding** as opposed to structural domestic funding.
- A **fourth main challenge** is the often **insufficient integration of the three steps** of the Recommendation into a **comprehensive pathway**, reflecting an insufficient degree of strategic coordination. The joined-up approach of the Recommendation is often not reflected in Member States' implementation measures. This limits the scope for monitoring and evaluation, and the capacity to draw lessons from the evidence.

As labour shortages and skills mismatches are increasing, the Commission considers that more should be done to improve the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways. This is necessary to provide everyone with opportunities on the labour market and in society and **avoid the “low skills-poor jobs trap”**. This is equally necessary to fill the skills gaps on the labour market and drive forward the EU's competitiveness and the green and digital transitions. It also recognises that skills development throughout life is **an individual right** as spelled out in the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union**, the **European Pillar of Social Rights**³⁷ and translated into **its Action Plan**³⁸.

To strengthen implementation, Member States, supported by the Commission, should be invited to:

- Strengthen **strategic cooperation at national level** to **create integrated upskilling pathways and open up learning communities**, including by developing and reviewing whole-of-government national skills strategies in close partnership with social partners, public employment services and other relevant stakeholders.

³⁶ Understood here in terms of the share of adults in need of basic skills development who receive support. Effective outreach may be insufficient either because of low formal coverage of/eligibility for support measures, or because of low awareness and take-up.

³⁷ [European Pillar of Social Rights](#).

³⁸ [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#)

- Encourage **collective action and a broad partnership approach** on basic skills among private and public stakeholders, including through the Pact for Skills³⁹, with a focus on the workplace as a learning environment.
- **Better define the beneficiaries** of upskilling to reflect trends such as digitalisation and greening of the economy, making sure no one is left behind, while adapting the support measures accordingly and tailoring them to specific needs on an individual basis.
- **Broaden communicative outreach notably to the “hardest to reach”** whilst avoiding stigmatisation through an emphasis on future upskilling benefits as opposed to current skills deficits.
- Use the significant EU resources under the national **Recovery and Resilience Plans**⁴⁰ and the **European Social Fund Plus programmes** to drive investment in skills, infrastructure and domestic reforms and sustain them through domestic funding in the medium to long-term to lead to structural improvements.
- Use the **implementation of the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts**⁴¹ to scale up the provision of non-stigmatising tailored, flexible and quality training opportunities, and facilitate their user-friendly integration with skills assessment, validation and career guidance supported by adequate domestic funding.
- Use the **implementation of the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials**⁴² to increase transparency and recognition of the outcomes of short training courses.

³⁹ [Homepage of Pact for skills \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/pages/press-communication-14177.aspx)

⁴⁰ [Recovery and Resilience Facility \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/pages/press-communication-14177.aspx)

⁴¹ The [Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/pages/press-communication-14177.aspx) outlines how Member States can combine financial and non-financial support in an effective way to empower all adults to develop their skills throughout working life, and progress towards the Porto adult learning targets.

⁴² The [Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/pages/press-communication-14177.aspx) defines a common definition of and a standard format for describing the outcomes of short courses, in order to increase transparency and facilitate the communication of skills acquired during training throughout the working life.