



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Adult Learning

Findings report PLA on National Skills
Strategies (20-21 October 2022, Brussels)



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1. Background of the PLA on national skills strategies in Europe

1.1. Calls for comprehensive approaches connecting skills to economic and societal challenges

The European Commission published its **New Skills Agenda for Europe** in 2016 containing ten actions aimed at improving the quality and relevance of skills formation; making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices.¹ This skills agenda was renewed in 2020 with the **European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**² containing twelve actions that support harnessing the digital and green transitions, ensuring a prompt and fair recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. This included policy guidance on building strategies and plans at national level that help people build their skills throughout life in an environment where lifelong learning is the norm. The European Commission has played a crucial role in actively supporting the development of skills strategies, in cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).. The OECD published its Skills Strategy in 2012³, providing guidance and policy pointers for countries to develop better skills policies over the following decade, with financial support from the Commission. The OECD renewed the strategy based on its experiences in working on national skills strategies in 2019⁴ and is currently preparing for the Commission a review of the whole skills strategy process. The ILO is in the process of adapting a Skills Strategy, and UNESCO, while not having a specific skills strategy, has Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) strategies from 2022 to 2029 that focus on equipping TVET systems to provide relevant skills and lifelong learning⁵.

Skills strategies provide a powerful tool to bring together a wide group of stakeholders to rethink how the demand and supply of skills are connected with the economic and societal outcomes of skills development. As a result of international level initiatives, countries also feel the need to invest in skills (and skills strategies), not only from a narrow economic perspective, but from a broader societal perspective to address issues around just and fair transitions, greening, sustainable development, well-being and lifelong learning and overcoming crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

¹ European Commission (2016), COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness COM/2016/0381 final

² European Commission (2020), COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience COM/2020/274 final

³ OECD (2012), Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264177338-en> [accessed 30-08-2022]

⁵ UNESCO (2016), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (2016-2021): <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/tvet.pdf> ; UNESCO (2021), UNESCO Strategy for TVET (2022-2029) - Discussion document: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-strategy-for-tvet_2022-2029-discussion-document-en.pdf [accessed 30-08-2022]

1.2. Adult learning and Skills Strategies

In the European context, the **European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**⁶ calls for national skills strategies that involve all stakeholders and that are delivered through a whole-of-government approach, aligning initiatives across different policy fields, such as employment, education, research, industry and regional development policies. While all proposed actions of the Skills Agenda are relevant for developing skills, action 3 in particular focuses on providing EU support for strategic national upskilling action.⁷

While a national skills strategy by definition covers skills development by everybody at any age, particular emphasis is usually given to adult skills development, as learning needs of the young people are addressed mostly through the initial education and training system. The need to upskill the workforce has been recognised at political level. This is the focus of the 2030 'skills target', one of three headline targets for social policy agreed by EU leaders in 2021⁸, aiming for 60% of adults participating in learning every year by 2030.⁹

1.3. Aim of the PLA and guiding questions for the analysis of initiatives

Against this background, the aim of this PLA on National Skills Strategies is to support Member States to discuss more deeply how national skills strategies (NSS) can improve adult learning and lifelong learning systems and bring economic prosperity and social cohesion in their countries. The PLA aimed to reflect on existing and ongoing NSS-related activities (and provide feedback); and to inspire countries that have not (yet) worked on developing a NSS.

The discussion on the initiatives presented by Member State representatives was designed around the following **guiding questions**:

- What **national approach** was taken to develop a skills strategy? Were there specific priority areas; what activities were conducted; which stakeholders were involved?
- What adult learning system' **topics and priorities** were targeted by the skills strategy development? Were there for instance specific skills targeted, specific target groups emphasised?
- What are **results and impact** of skills strategies on adult learning systems (if any already visible)? How and in what way did the skills strategy affect the adult learning systems?
- What **lessons can be drawn** for other Member States? What can be concrete steps to stimulate similar initiatives? What could be the EU role?

The programme of the PLA consisted of introductory presentations setting the scene; country presentations and organisational presentations followed by questions and answers; and break-

⁶ European Commission (2020), COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience COM/2020/274 final: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22832&langId=en> [accessed 30-08-2022] , p. 9

⁷ AT and NL were not supported by the European Commission.

⁸ Proposed in the [Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the three targets were welcomed in the 2021 [Porto Declaration](#), signed by EU leaders, and then by the European Council in its [2021 conclusions](#).

⁹ Expressed in terms of adults participating in learning in the last 12 months, the target of 60% by 2030 looks ambitious, as the latest data available using the same reference period records only 37.4% (2016). On the other hand, given the skills needs and the labour shortages related to the ongoing social changes, the 2030 target should rather be seen as a minimum.

out sessions to discuss together key factors for success and what is needed at EU level. The PLA was finalised with a wrap-up session bringing all the evidence and outcomes of the discussions together.



2. Overview of National skills strategies

2.1. Wider overview of adult learning-related national strategies

The 2019 Synthesis report on adult learning policies and provision in Europe¹⁰ mapped legal frameworks and strategic documents related to adult learning. It differentiated between lifelong learning strategies; specific skill strategies; reform strategies (such as in the area of VET or Higher Education); and generic skills/ competitiveness strategies. In this section, we briefly discuss lifelong learning strategies and the emergence of skills, or competitiveness strategies. This aims to set the scene for discussing in more detail current national skills strategies in Europe in Section 2.2

2.1.1. Lifelong learning strategies in Europe (2000s-2014)

European Union Member States have been encouraged by the European Commission since 2000 to establish lifelong learning strategies. The Memorandum on lifelong learning in 2000 was followed by a Communication on making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a reality (2001). The Council resolution on lifelong learning reconfirmed the importance of implementing lifelong learning strategies in 2002¹¹ and the Action Plan on Adult Learning was released in 2007.¹² Explicit lifelong learning strategies have been adopted by the majority of countries.¹³ Some of the countries did this in response to European policies (Lisbon Strategy and the Memorandum on lifelong learning), for example, Estonia, Latvia, and Bulgaria; others had already developed such a strategy on their own initiative, for example Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium (Flanders and Walloon Region). However, the 2019 synthesis report indicated that not all countries still had these lifelong learning strategies in place or there was otherwise no political guidance in improving lifelong learning policies and provision. Furthermore, 'lifelong learning' was often not more than a label for educational policies in general. In this context, very limited attention was paid to adult learning. Even if national lifelong learning strategies focused on adult learning, these strategies remained rather 'educational', defining what different education sectors could do to stimulate lifelong learning, and does only to a limited extent address the coherence between formal education policies and continuous education policies. The role of employers, the labour market and workbased learning related skills development, but also volunteering, leisure (e.g. sports, hobbies), or informal learning contributing to personal development and active citizenship, remained often underdeveloped.

2.1.2. Overarching competitiveness strategies focusing on skills and adult learning (2010 onwards)

Besides lifelong learning strategies, countries also developed overarching competitiveness strategies. These strategies were not always directly linked with 'adult learning', but related to human resource/ capital development and generally aimed to better align the education sector

¹⁰ Ecorys (2019), Adult Learning policy and provision in the Member States of the EU A synthesis of reports by country experts

¹¹ Council of the European Union (2002), COUNCIL RESOLUTION of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning (2002/C163/01)

¹² European Commission (2007), Communication from the Commission of 27 September 2007 presenting the Action Plan on Adult learning - It is always a good time to learn [COM(2007) 558 final.

¹³ European Commission (2009), Key competences for a changing world, Draft 2010 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "Education & Training 2010 work programme", COM(2009)640 final

to the needs of the economy. Some examples of broader competitiveness strategies are briefly presented below¹⁴:

- In **Belgium**, both the Flemish Region and Walloon Region had a main social and economic strategic plan: the Vision 2050 and the Marshall 4.0 plan respectively. Both plans started from the vision that the Belgian regions needed to evolve towards being competitive players in Europe and that the focus on human capital generation should increase. While the plans were not focusing on adult learning exclusively, it is clear that it played an important role in both plans. The Flemish Vision 2050 strategy in particular focused on a long-term vision in which the region aimed to become a lifelong learning society by the middle of this century.
- **UK (Scotland)**: Skills for Scotland 2010 outlined plans to simplify the skills systems and strengthen partnerships. This led to a programme of reorganisation in the adult learning provider base with a stronger focus on jobs and economic growth. A Nation with Ambition: The Government's plan for Scotland 2017–18¹⁵ established a Strategic Board to focus enterprise and skills agencies on supporting the growth of key sectors and ensuring that adult learning providers produced the skills that businesses and individuals needed. It included a commitment to empower communities to take more decisions themselves, placing greater control of budgets in the hands of local people.

These competitiveness or skills-related strategies emerged from the 2010s onwards, seemingly taking over momentum from developing lifelong learning strategies. For adult learning policies, it seemed not to be a negative development as skills strategies tended to be less educational and therefore less focused on what the formal education sectors did in terms of developing young people's skills. The skills strategies tended to focus more on the labour market and how adult workers could obtain relevant skills, i.e. not only occupation-specific technical skills, but also so-called 'Skills for Life'¹⁶.

2.2. Current generation of National Skills Strategies

2.2.1. Developing National Skills Strategies

Encouraged by emerging international skills strategies and support initiatives and taking on board earlier overarching strategic documents, from 2012 onwards countries started to develop NSSs. Up until 2020, the European Commission supported Member States to prepare National Skills Strategies through Erasmus+ but it now does it through the Technical Support Instrument 2021-2027. Some countries (partly) conducted this work on their own, others made use of provided support. A number of NSSs have been developed in the context of the OECD Skills Strategy framework, through which the OECD has worked alongside countries (Figure 1).¹⁷

¹⁴ As described in Ecorys (2019), Adult Learning policy and provision in the Member States of the EU A synthesis of reports by country experts.

¹⁵ Scottish Government. (2017). A Nation with Ambition: The Government's plan for Scotland 2017–18. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/nation-ambition-governments-programme-scotland-2017-18/pages/2/> [accessed 30-08-2022]

¹⁶ With Skills for Life, the focus is on a broad set of skills, competences, attitudes individuals might need to counter the current and future challenges in navigating life. See documentation around the PLA on Skills for Life, such as: European Commission (2022), Adult Learning Working Group Peer Learning Activity on Skills for Life: bringing learning closer to vulnerable learners 9-10 March 2022, online Concept note.

¹⁷ <http://www.oecd.org/skills/nationalskillsstrategies/buildingeffectiveskillsstrategiesatnationalandlocallevels.htm>

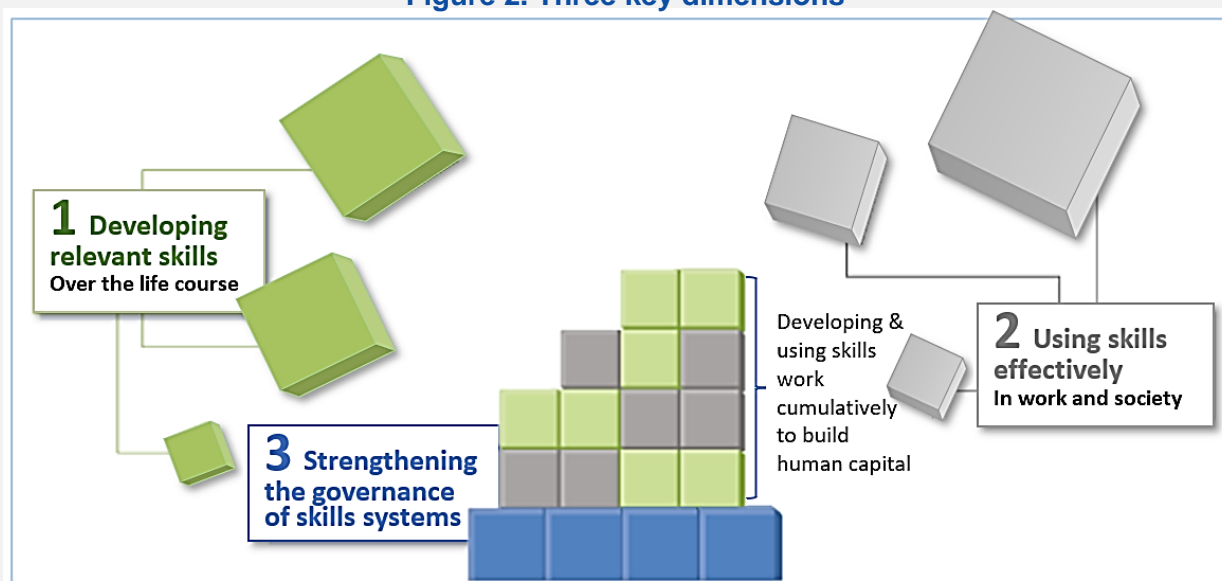
Figure 1. OECD Skills Strategy framework

OECD Skills Strategy framework¹⁸

The OECD Skills Strategy provides countries with a framework to analyse their strengths and weaknesses as a basis for taking concrete actions along the following three dimensions:

- developing relevant skills over the life course;
- using skills effectively in work and in society, and
- strengthening the governance of the skills system. An effective Skills Strategy strengthens a country's skills system by facilitating policy collaboration and coherence across these Three key dimensions.

Figure 2. Three key dimensions



OECD's work supports countries with different types of projects:

- **Assessment and Recommendations (A&R) ('diagnostic phase' before 2019):** Each OECD Skills Strategy A&R report reflects a set of skills priority areas, opportunities and recommendations identified by broad stakeholder engagement and OECD comparative evidence while offering concrete examples of how other countries have tackled similar skills issues.
- **Implementation Guidance projects ('action phase' before 2019):** The A&R report can be followed up by an implementation guidance project in which the OECD performs in-depth analysis on a specific topic identified in the A&R report or to support the implementation of the strategy by deepening the consultation and cooperation with all stakeholders to define concrete steps forward.

Some common themes for each of the dimensions in OECD Skills Strategy reports are:

- **Developing relevant skills:** improving the skills of youth; improving the relevance of VET and HE to the labour market; fostering a culture of lifelong learning /Strengthening participation in adult learning

¹⁸ See [National Skills Strategies - OECD](#); and explanation in countries' Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report (see for instance the Spanish report from 2015: [Spain_DR_Executive_Summary.pdf \(oecd.org\)](#) [accessed 30-08-2022])

- **Using skills effectively:** reducing skills imbalances; encouraging the adoption of high performance workplace practices; improving management capacity and practices in firms
- **Strengthening the governance of skills systems:** strengthening collaboration across the whole of government; strengthening stakeholder engagement; improving information systems to support informed decision making; aligning and coordinating financing.

All in all, developing a NSS should respect the following building blocks:

- It should be based on a broad and long-term engagement with all relevant stakeholders, both from the public and private sector. It is not enough to only engage stakeholders through a brief consultation.
- It should be based on data and evidence underpinning the identification of challenges.
- It should be developed with an assured commitment from the most important stakeholders to implement the strategy and work together.

2.2.2. Overview of National Skills Strategies

Fourteen EU Member States¹⁹ have developed, or are continuing to develop, NSSs with the [technical assistance of the OECD and the financial support of](#) the European Commission. AT and NL were the only countries who did not seek assistance from the European Commission, while other Member States received EU support up until 2020 through the form of Erasmus+ grants to the OECD. As of 2021, the Technical Support Instrument can provide grants to Member States, which can seek the assistance of the OECD. Member States could also use funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Some countries also developed skills strategies without support from either the OECD or the European Commission (Ireland, Norway and Germany). Table 1 maps the existing NSSs and how they were supported.

Table 1: Overview of (preparatory work for) National Skills Strategies in Europe (with support provided)

MS	Year	EU support	OECD technical assistance
AT	2014	No	Assessment and Recommendations
ES	2015	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
PT	2015 2018	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations Implementation Guidance
IE	2016	No	National Skills Strategy ²⁰ Assessment and Recommendations
NO	2017	No	National Skills Strategy ²¹ Assessment and Recommendations

¹⁹ In chronological order: AT, ES, PT, NL, IT, SI, PL, LV, SK, LT, BE VL, plus LU, BG ongoing.

²⁰ Ireland: Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/>

²¹ Norway: 'Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017 – 2021' - <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3c84148f2f394539a3eefdfa27f7524d/strategi-kompetanse-eng.pdf>

NL	2017	No	Assessment and Recommendations
IT	2017	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
SI	2017 2018	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations Implementation Guidance
PL	2019	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
LV	2019 2020	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations Implementation Guidance
DE	2019	No	National Skills Strategy ²² No OECD support
BE (Flanders)	2019 ongoing	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations Implementation Guidance
SK	2020	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
LT	2021	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
LU	2023	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
BG	2023	Yes	Assessment and Recommendations
MT	Ongoing		

Approximately half of EU Member States still do not have a NSS or have not taken action to develop one. There can be obvious reasons for this, such as the prior existence or ongoing development of comprehensive policy frameworks that (to a large extent) serve the same function as NSSs. An example of this is France, where with the introduction of the Individual Learning Account and accompanying measures, a generic reform framework is provided for skills development and adult learning.²³ For other countries, however, it might still be relevant to start working on a NSS and to reflect on the current challenges of existing systems for skills development and lifelong learning.

²² Germany: A National Skills Strategy was launched in 2019 in cooperation with several partners from politics, business associations and trade unions. It initiates and bundles measures focusing on professional continuing education - https://www.bibb.de/dokumente/pdf/a42_190611_BMAS_Strategiepapier.pdf An implementation report is also available (2021): https://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/a805-umsetzungsbericht-nationale-weiterbildungsstrategie.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

²³ See for more information the materials of the PLA on financing adult learning. For example: European Commission (forthcoming), European Education Area Strategic Framework Working Group on Adult Learning Findings report PLA on financing of adult learning (12-13 May 2022, online)



3. Country examples presented during the PLA

3.1. Introductory/non-country related presentations

The PLA began with two introductory presentations. In the first presentation, the **European Commission** explained the policy context and the background of the PLA. It highlighted the 2023 European Year of Skills as an important impetus for Member States and the European Commission to work together on the topic of skills. The second presentation described the work of the **OECD**, explaining that it is important for countries to engage in the development of a NSS as skills are key drivers for economic growth and social cohesion. The OECD also indicated what can be considered a skills strategy and what, on the basis of the experience of the OECD, can be considered as success factors for effective approaches to work on a NSS:

- Taking a whole of government approach, bringing together different policy domains.
- Engaging stakeholders through consultations, agreements or setting up formal bodies.
- Work on the basis of a strong evidence base.
- Prioritise and focus on key measures. You cannot do everything.
- Moving from design to implementation and adopting skills reforms.

The OECD also highlighted some key enabling factors for the process of developing a skills strategy, such as having a project champion at senior level; involve an inclusive national project team; having champions from outside of government; and carefully choosing the timing of the strategy and its implementation.

During the PLA, three additional non-country specific presentations were given.

- The **Lifelong Learning Platform (LLP)**, highlighted experiences from the European transversal project²⁴ raising the issue of the transversality of skills. The presentation made the point that NSSs need to focus on both skills for work and for life. Research shows the benefits of increasing basic and transversal skills in terms of social inclusion, self-efficacy etc. Also, recognition and validation of prior learning are important elements in the use of existing skills.
- The **European Commission's DG REFORM** presentation highlighted the different forms of support by the European Commission to develop NSSs or adult learning systems. It showed many detailed examples of the Technical Support Instrument's contribution to establishing national education and skills frameworks. It noted the following factors for successful implementation:
 - Political ownership needed for the strategy.
 - Thorough involvement of stakeholders.
 - Instruments for monitoring and evaluation – a strategy needs a solid M&E framework to measure success.
 - Resources are required if strategies are to bring about meaningful change.
- The **European Training Foundation (ETF)** presented three examples from the ETF Partner Countries on how they approach NSS (or their equivalent) and it also explained

²⁴ See: [TRANSVAL-EU \(transvalproject.eu\)](https://transvalproject.eu) [accessed 25-10-2022].

how the ETF itself supports countries in developing lifelong learning/ adult learning systems.

Presentations were also received from the following countries: Slovenia, Finland, Cyprus, Belgium (Flanders), Poland and Romania.

3.2. Slovenia

The presentation from Slovenia explained the process of arriving at a NSS. With the support of the European Commission, in August 2015 an agreement was signed with the OECD to enter a diagnostic phase. This first phase focused on building the capacity of all main stakeholders and bringing all stakeholders together to analyse the challenges of the Slovenian skills system. The 2017 diagnostic report contained nine recommendations. Two recommendations were selected to guide future work, mainly focusing on adult learning governance. A second phase of OECD support from 2017 to 2018 led to the development of a report with eight recommendations to improve the governance of adult learning. Based on these recommendations, specific national actions are taken such as the development of Slovenia's Adult Education Master Plan 2022–2030 (a follow-up to the 2013-2020 plan); and strengthening cooperation between specific actors. The next steps will be setting up a monitoring body and supporting quality assurance in adult learning covering different policies that relate to adult learning. A common tool will be developed to support the monitoring of the adult learning system and to measure the effectiveness of the system. The success factors in the project were political will and high-level buy-in and a whole-of government approach while the challenges encountered were changes of government, the COVID-19 pandemic, new EU developments, funding priorities and recommendations that had to be taken into account.

The presentation also provided an illustration of how challenging it is to reach out to low-skilled adult workers (45+) despite having put in place a conducive environment for training programmes to succeed (through EU funding support). A critical factor in the end was the buy-in of business champions to support low skilled adult employees to participate in the programmes.

3.3. Finland

The Finnish presentation focused on a comprehensive reform of continuing education. This reform was guided by the national parliament and started in 2020 with the aim to run until March 2023 (next elections). A vision, objectives and set of measures were developed through a consultative process and the implementation is monitored through a developed set of targeted indicators. Similar to the Slovenian example, this reform is also based on engagement from the whole of government and a wide group of stakeholders. While this comprehensiveness is very good, it also made it difficult to communicate: people find it difficult to oversee the whole process and this hampers the buy-in and progress. There are also indications that the reform is not yet sufficiently solving the issues raised by labour market stakeholders, such as:

- An ongoing focus on degrees and qualifications which is not the desire of labour market organisations.
- Anticipation of skills needs is still underdeveloped.
- Comprehensive reform is too abstract to communicate
- Too much focus on low-skilled workers as the main benefits can be reached while focusing on medium-skilled workers.
- Lack of new skills related to research, development and innovation.

3.4. Cyprus

Cyprus developed a lifelong learning strategy with the support of DG REFORM. Also here, the process is supported by an external partner (European Association for the Education of Adults - EAEA) and based on a consultation with a wide stakeholder group. This was especially important in agreeing on the vision of the strategy and getting input from all stakeholders. The strategy focuses on developing a long term framework for a knowledge-based society. It took a more comprehensive approach focusing on:

- Governance and M&E
- Reducing youth employment
- Increasing Adult participation
- Improving the quality of teachers, trainers and adult educators

The strategy was a first step, but an action plan is also being developed with key performance indicators (KPIs) and clear divisions of roles and responsibilities of all involved partners.

3.5. Belgium (Flanders)

The background to developing the Belgium (Flanders) skills strategy was the fragmentation of the adult learning and skills development field. There are a lot of providers working in silos and many regulations that work alongside each other. Furthermore, there are many demographic, societal and labour market challenges that require the development of a learning culture, strengthened governance and improved financing of adult learning. With support from the OECD, authorities carried out a diagnosis study and identified priorities to work on. A Partnership for LifeLong Learning was created in 2020 and tasked with writing an action plan for lifeLong learning (presented to the government in November 2021). This action plan consists of actions related to raising awareness, developing mobilisation strategies, developing guidance systems and encouraging partnerships at lower levels. Furthermore, significant funding is secured to boost adult education and adult learning in VET and HE. Also a broad information campaign is foreseen in 2023 to stimulate adult learning in Flanders. The work on the skills strategy led to the following lessons learned:

- Having shared principles and working towards a shared language in terms of the definitions and understandings of life long learning and skills.
- Securing partnerships and ownership having a clear framework for collaboration with stakeholders and clarity about limitations, roles and responsibilities
- Securing broad engagement is necessary: not only Education and Training and Work, but also Culture
- Secure good internal and external communication.

3.6. Poland

The Polish presentation discussed the development of the country's Integrated Skills Strategy. It highlighted the long history of the strategy. It is based on firstly, the LLL Strategy (2008-2013) that introduced learning outcomes and learner-centered approaches, and secondly, the Integrated Qualifications System (2014-2016) that is based on the EQF and that aimed at developing quality certificates and effective investing in skills. The current Integrated Skills Strategy 2030 aims for effective governance of skills policies, enabling LLL and the Integrated Qualifications System to make real difference. The work on the Integrated Skills Strategy was

supported by the OECD in 2019 which led to a set of recommendations. The strategy only focused on a selection of the recommendations dealing with the development of skills and the use of skills in the workplace. The strategy identified eight impact areas, 25 action themes, 100+ lines of action, key entities responsible for implementation, and the funding sources (EU, national sources). The strategy developed an implementation coordination structure that covers both the central and regional level. It applies a whole of government approach bringing together all ministries involved in skills development.

3.7. Romania

Romania already had previous strategies in place such as the Strategy for Continuous Vocational Training for Short and Medium term (2005-2010 Ministry of Labour) and the National Lifelong Learning Strategy (2015-2020 Ministry of National Education). These strategies prepared the ground for the Adult National Training Strategy 2023-2027 which is still being developed. Romania is facing many skills related challenges that the strategy will have to address. The overall objective is to increase the rate of adult learning participation from the current 1.3% to 12% by 2027 by intensifying and improving the provision of formal, non formal and informal learning opportunities. This overall objective is supported by five specific objectives each including a range of measures and actions. The strategy was developed based on a large consultation (seven regional meetings bringing together local authorities, public employment service (PES), employers, training providers social partners) and is supported by the National Coordination Group which constantly supports the strategy development process and gives permanent feedback and an interministerial working group to develop the strategy. Indicators will be developed to monitor and measure implementation progress and the strategy is planned to be flexible and easy to adapt to the geopolitical and economic developments.

4. Outcomes of the PLA: factors for success and next steps

Throughout the the presentations, discussions and break-out sessions in the PLA, three sets of building blocks were identified for NSS-related work leading to improved adult learning systems.

Figure 3: Building blocks for NSS related actions

Setting the ecosystem for designing a skills strategy (process)	The Strategy as national document	Implementation (make it work for adults)
<p>Secure political will High level buy-in</p>	<p>Prioritise action or present a clear communication vision</p>	<p>Tailor approach to target groups</p>
<p>Apply a whole of government approach Involving non-educational department (housing, transport etc.)</p>	<p>Make a strategy and action plan that is agile and responsive to changing needs</p>	<p>Focus on solving a multitude of barriers to participation</p>
<p>Engage wide group of stakeholders in design and implementation Labour market stakeholders, providers, social partners, NGOs, civil society, academia</p>	<p>Focus on skills for work and skills of society Focus on setting up an infrastructure that can support all that need skills development</p>	<p>Apply network, cooperation approach</p>
<p>Set up technical assistance/coordination mechanism Secure well functioning secretariat with prestige and high standing</p>	<p>Ensure clear goals and a M&E system Develop KPI and conduct regular monitoring and reviewing/adjusting processes</p>	<p>Use existing (formal) infrastructure (AE, VET, HE)</p>
<p>Secure a good evidence base for the strategy Make use of existing international and national data to have a good analysis of the situation</p>	<p>Focus on use of skills This also prioritises VPL processes</p>	<p>Ensure time, human resources and financial means</p>
<p>Ensure well planned design, launch and implementation Take time and use momentum</p>	<p>Secure trust in provision (QA) Develop QA for non-formal offer, flexible provision</p>	<p>Invest in quality of teachers, trainers and adult educators, counselling staff</p>
		<p>Develop regional and sectoral approaches</p>
		<p>Emphasise the role of employers to offer opportunities and facilities to support learning</p>

These three sets of building blocks are presented in more detail in the sections below together with a section on actions at EU level.

4.1. Setting the ecosystem for designing a skills strategy (process considerations)

When working on a NSS, or working in a comprehensive manner on skills-related issues, there are a number of preconditions that can increase the chances of success in designing the strategy.

4.1.1. Secure political will and high-level buy-in

It is essential to have political will and high-level buy-in in designing and implementing a NSS. This point was confirmed by the OECD, the Commission and many of the country presentations. For instance in Finland, the NSS reform process was initiated and steered by a Parliamentary committee; in Slovenia, the strategy project was initiated by government decision.

At the same time, however, political will can also jeopardise NSS implementation if the strategy is considered linked too much to a political orientation. When elections change governments and the right precautions are not taken, the NSS development process could be stopped. The precautions could be to create ownership of the NSS amongst a broader stakeholder group (see 4.1.3).

4.1.2. Secure a whole-of-government approach

In many of the presentations, it became clear that developing skills and increasing participation of adults in skills development and lifelong learning is not only dependent on securing a sufficient skills development offer – it also relates to lowering barriers to participation. Adults might refrain from participation if they are dealing with more urgent life/work challenges. This means that a more holistic approach should be taken in which those Ministries that are responsible for education and skills development also cooperate with Ministries involved in non-education issues such as housing, social policies, transport and taxation.

Furthermore, a whole-of-government approach does not only apply at the national level, but also relates to involving those governmental stakeholders at regional and local levels to present a strategy that can mobilise all those necessary to ensure that adults can engage in skills development. Often at local or regional level, more tailored cooperation between stakeholders can be developed that support ecosystems that are better able to support skills development in specific contexts.

The whole-of-government approach is explicitly referred to by Slovenia, Cyprus, Belgium (Flanders), Poland and Romania.

4.1.3. Engage wide group of stakeholders in design and implementation

A NSS can only be effective if it is supported by a wide group of key stakeholders, including labour market stakeholders, education and training providers, social partners, NGOs, civil society, academia, and chambers of commerce and industry²⁵. As indicated by the OECD, these stakeholders can be involved through different means; firstly, through consultations, secondly, through agreements, and thirdly, through setting up formal bodies. The country

²⁵ See for instance as well the 2023 Year of Skills position paper of EuroChambers: <https://www.eurochambres.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/221214-Eurochambres-Position-on-the-2023-Year-of-Skills.pdf>

examples showed different approaches. In Finland, labour market stakeholders are mainly involved through consultations. In Cyprus, social partners, amongst others, are represented in National and the Technical Lifelong Learning Committees. In Belgium (Flanders) a Lifelong learning partnership is established that consists of ten stakeholders from the field of work and ten stakeholders from the field of education.

The engagement of a wide group of stakeholders is essential in depoliticising the strategy and keeping the momentum in the case of changes in government. It is also essential as skills development depends on the further investments of all the different stakeholders. Not having their buy-in seriously hampers the implementation of the strategy.

4.1.4. Ensure technical assistance/coordination mechanism

Besides the buy-in at political level and the buy-in of all major stakeholders, a key factor for the successful development and implementation of a NSS is a well-functioning secretariat that is well recognised and respected in the field and which has the expertise to work on a technical level on the strategy. It is also helpful to make use of external funding (EU) to add to the prestige of the project and to get assistance from external 'critical friends' like the OECD. The Belgium (Flanders) example showed how an influential chair is essential to get other stakeholders fully involved. The Cyprus example showed the essential contributions of the EAEA in supporting the government in setting up the strategy, the Slovenian example showcased how the OECD is providing the assistance needed to keep the process going. The Romanian and Cypriot examples showed that technical coordination groups were established to support the development and implementation.

4.1.5. Secure a good evidence base for the strategy

When developing a NSS, the problem analysis needs to be clear and based on research evidence.²⁶ This evidence can come from international quantitative sources, but it can also be complemented by in-depth qualitative information. In any case, to be able to get to results, the diagnosis needs to be well supported by evidence. This is a major element of OECD technical support in defining NSSs.

4.1.6. Ensure well planned design, launch and implementation

The presentations highlighted that agreements needs to be secured with stakeholders on the vision, objective and form of the strategy and this process takes time. The presentations are indicate that sufficient time is required to design, and implement the NSS, especially to ensure the full engagement of different stakeholders. Rushing the stakeholder consultation can have negative effects on the buy-in and engagement of stakeholders in the strategy and its implementation. Timely agreement on a NSS can be helpful to inform coalition negotiations for a new government. Finally, the examples from Poland and Romania show that the strategies build on top of existing strategies, indicating that developing NSS are not done from scratch and can use the existing stakeholder engagements and outcomes of existing policy discussions.

4.2. The Strategy as a national document (content considerations)

²⁶ See as well: OECD (2022), Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice? Strengthening Research Engagement: [Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Strengthening Research Engagement | en | OECD](#)

When developing a NSS, it should be considered how the form, shape and content of the strategy will inform measures and policy development in the country. The following building blocks should be read more as considerations for developing the content of the strategy.

4.2.1. Prioritise action or present a clear communicable vision

As emphasised by the OECD, the problem analysis (diagnosis) identifies many challenges related to skills development and use in the country which cannot be solved with one strategy. Countries will have to make choices on what to focus on first to make the actions digestible and affordable. The examples from Slovenia and Belgium (Flanders) clearly show that they had to focus on a more narrow set of challenges to solve. Slovenia focused on the governance aspects of adult learning; Belgium (Flanders) on reaching out to those adults most in need.

Other countries, such as Cyprus and Finland, chose not to focus on solving a smaller set of challenges, but presented more holistic strategies or reform agendas to address a number of challenges. A challenge here is that a holistic and wider reform is more challenging to communicate to a wider audience as the message is less clear. This was illustrated by the Finnish example. Hence, when a more comprehensive strategy is proposed, it needs to be ensured that its key aspects remain communicable.

4.2.2. Make a strategy and action plan that is agile and responsive to changing needs

NSSs are longer-term agenda-setting documents. They need to be relevant for the short-term, as well as for the medium, and long-term. Hence, the strategy and its accompanying action plan need to be able to accommodate changes and adjustments where necessary. Each strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan (see 4.2.4) should include provision for a regular relevance-check to see if changes are required. The Romanian strategy and the monitoring provision foresees that the strategy is flexible and easy to be adapted to the geopolitical and economic evolutions.

4.2.3. Focus on skills for work and skills of society

There is a tendency to interpret 'skills' as professional or occupation-related skills and to exclude more transversal skills, basic skills and skills for life. This however is not so much the case in NSSs, which all include measures and actions that more broadly target the development of skills for life. There is a general consensus that to solve existing labour shortages, no adult can be left aside as a result of a lack of basic skills. The strategies in Slovenia, Cyprus, Belgium (Flanders) and Finland explicitly targeted those adults with a lack of basic skills. They focus on securing an infrastructure that can support all those adults that need skills development, focussing on different learning environments (besides work) that are conducive for amongst others, personal development and active citizenship.

4.2.4. Ensure clear goals and a M&E system

A NSS and its accompanying action plan should contain measurable outcomes and results. This means that the strategy should also be accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation system with clear and measurable key performance indicators (KPIs). These KPIs not only measure whether the strategy's implementation is on track, but also whether the strategy needs adjustment in the light of changing circumstances and needs. A regular and timely reviewing and renewing process of the strategy needs to be included in the M&E plan. The country examples from Cyprus and Finland show well-developed indicator sets and monitoring systems.

4.2.5. Focus on use of skills

As emphasised by the OECD, a skills strategy should not only focus on the delivery of skills by the education and training system, but should also focus on the use of skills in (innovative) work places. This relates to whether workplaces are designed in such a way that they stimulate skills development and that they stimulate the application of newly developed skills. This also concerns how systems deal with existing skills in the labour market, how these skills are recognised and validated and how these validated skills lead to transitions between working and learning and transitions between employment sectors. As a result of OECD support, Polish stakeholders emphasised the use of skills in developing their NSS. Skills strategies should also take into account that skills activation does not only happen in the labour market. Skills can be put to good use in other ways by people pursuing personal development and civic citizenship.

4.2.6. Secure trust in provision (QA)

Skills development relies on education and training providers to develop and implement quality offers responsive to labour market and societal needs. While education and training providers can be providers offering formal qualifications (VET and Higher Education), a large part of the education and training offered to adults consists of non-formal provision, often offered by private providers. In order to ensure a quality offer and trust in the offer of skills development, quality assurance mechanisms need to be put in place that on the one hand guarantee a minimum level of quality and trust in the training delivered, but on the other hand do not reduce the flexibility of the training offer.

4.3. Make it work for adults (implementation considerations)

While focusing on the process of setting up NSS and implementing them, the participants also reflected on what would make these NSSs work in practice in reaching out to adults in vulnerable positions. The following implementation suggestions were made:

- **Tailor mobilisation approach to target groups:** Each adult is different and is confronted with different barriers to participation. Policies and measures should focus on solving a multitude of barriers that individual adults face and not just focusing on one (e.g. solve a financial barrier through provision of funding). In focussing on for instance financial barriers, also other barriers need to be taken into account (for instance lack of relevant learning offer, challenges with transportation, caring obligations) in order to effectively engage adults in learning.
- **Apply a networking, cooperation approach and maximising use of existing resources:** This concerns that in reaching out to adults existing (formal) infrastructure (AE, VET, HE) should be used and also that regional and sectoral approaches need to be developed. Finally, emphasise the role of employers to offer opportunities and facilities to support learning.
- **Provision focused on inclusivity and enjoyability:** This relates to making the provision accessible for all (e.g. through flexible provision, validation of prior learning) and also to ensure learning is relevant and enjoyable for the learners. Often adult learners have a negative association with learning and schooling and adult learning provision has to overcome this negative association.
- **Invest in the quality of teachers, trainers, adult educators, validation staff and counselling staff:** Staff is the most important aspect of making provision high quality. Investing in adult learning staff is therefore essential to best support adult learners in their skills development, career and life.

- **Ensure time, human resources and financial means:** All policies and measures should be sufficiently resourced in terms of funding, human resources and time available to conduct the tasks.

4.4. EU support for NSS development

The role of the European Commission in developing NSSs, through the Erasmus+ programme and the Technical Support Instrument, was acknowledged by the participants. The OECD technical assistance to countries contributed heavily to the national developments. In the future, the PLA participants identified the following ways in which the European Commission could provide further support:

- **Facilitate exchange expertise through PLAs and study visits:** The exchange of experiences in developing NSSs is helpful for the participants as it shows them that countries face similar challenges. Study visits that took place in the context of NSS development were considered very helpful to get inspiration for participants' own countries.
- **Continue support through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI):** The TSI support (managed by DG REFORM) is highly appreciated by Member States for developing overarching or specific (e.g. green) skills strategies as it stimulates effectively national ownership for the outcomes of the support.
- **Provide EU template/guidelines for developing NSS:** While all countries develop their own NSS, it could be helpful to provide some European level guidance on how to draft a strategy and which elements should be included in the document.
- The Commission should further promote the following messages, also taking advantage of the European Year of Skills:
 - Countries need a strategic view on skills;
 - Countries can use untapped potential of existing learning providers, including education training providers as well as civil society organisations to support lifelong learning;
 - Skills are not only for the labour market, but for society as well;
 - Make learning fun and enjoyable.



5. Annex: Content of National Skills Strategies (as presented in the PLA background paper)

Developing a National Skills Strategy usually starts with an extensive diagnostic phase to identify key challenges in the country related to skills development. For this, a holistic approach is needed looking at the labour market dynamics; how public policies support skills development and how education systems support skills development and lifelong learning. This requires multiple stakeholders to be consulted and to be engaged in the diagnosis and finally in the development of the strategy, and also to prepare the implementation of the strategy.

Given different national circumstances, challenges and priorities, the National Skills Strategies differ and have a country-specific orientation. Nonetheless, some common challenges emerge from the selection of the individual strategies and preparatory reports. These are briefly discussed below.²⁷

5.1. Relevant skills and labour market responsiveness

This includes both actions in initial education and training and adult learning. Specific examples of challenges specifically related to adult learning concern for instance:

- Expanding adult education, especially for low skilled people (Austria, 2014)
- Improving people's ability to navigate the skills system through effective guidance and flexibility (Austria, 2014)
- Improving the skills of low-skilled adults (Spain, 2015)
- People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning (Ireland, 2016)
- Ensuring adults have the right combination of skills to promote success in work and society, and strengthen productivity, innovation and social inclusion (The Netherlands, 2017)
- Promoting continuous skills development in adulthood, especially among low-skilled adults (The Netherlands, 2017)
- Boosting the skills of low-skilled adults (Italy, 2017)

5.2. Activating the supply of skills and raising overall participation in adult learning

There are challenges related to activating specific groups of learners and workers and helping them acquire relevant skills for themselves and the labour market. Measures include specific outreach strategies; removing barriers and placing incentives for skills development. Specific examples related to adult learning concern include:

- Activating the skills of migrants (Austria, 2014)

²⁷ NB: the OECD diagnostic reports started from the same analytical framework and this framework is visible in the clusters of identified challenges.

- Improve pathways and the coherence of the adult-learning delivery network (Portugal, 2018)
- Raising awareness of adult learning benefits and opportunities (Poland, 2019)
- Making learning more flexible and accessible for adults (Poland, 2019)
- Better sharing and targeting financing to increase participation in adult learning (Poland, 2019)
- Developing a learning culture (Belgium Flanders, 2019)
- Increasing participation among adults out of work (Slovak Republic, 2020)
- Supporting the capacity of employees and firms to engage in adult learning (Slovak Republic, 2020)

5.3. Putting skills to effective use in the economy and society

Another challenge is how to effectively use skills acquired and prevent skills losses in society and the labour market. These measures concern, for instance, how employers can use and validate employees' skills and stimulate innovation, productivity and competitiveness. Furthermore, they can contribute to increases of wages and higher job satisfaction for individuals. This area does not specifically address adult learning systems, but relates to the relevance of validation of acquired competences and making those visible in the workplace and to stimulate employers to engage their employees in training.

5.4. Enabling conditions for an effective skills system

A core challenge is to establish enabling conditions for effective skills systems. This touches upon access to quality learning, financing systems, governance, monitoring and evaluation of skills development systems and policies. Many country-specific measures and challenges have been identified in this regard, such as:

- Access to quality learning
 - Improving and expanding access to high quality learning and labour market information (Spain, 2015)
 - The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually enhanced and evaluated (Ireland, 2016)
 - Improving the recognition and validation of skills developed outside of formal education, especially for the vulnerable groups in Dutch society (The Netherlands, 2017)
 - Supporting the transparency of opportunities and programmes of continuing education and training (Germany, 2019)
- Financing adult learning
 - Financing a more equitable and efficient skills system (Austria, 2014)
 - Financing a more effective and efficient skills system (Spain, 2015)
 - Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of public and private skills financing (The Netherlands, 2017)
 - Investing to improve skills (Italy, 2017)

- Ensuring the sustainable, well-targeted and shared financing of Lithuania's skills system (Lithuania, 2021)
- Governance adult learning and cooperation
 - Improving governance and responsibility structures (Austria, 2014)
 - Strengthening partnerships to improve skills outcomes (Spain, 2015)
 - Strengthening governance of the skills system (Spain, 2015)
 - Strengthening multilevel governance and partnerships to improve skills outcomes (Italy, 2017)
 - Strengthening co-operation on skills policy at the national level (Poland, 2019)
 - Strengthening vertical and subnational co-operation on skills policy (Poland, 2019)
 - Strengthening the responsibility of the social partners (Germany, 2019)
 - Increasing the capacity and co-ordination of governmental and non-governmental actors across the skills system (Lithuania, 2021)
- Evidence-base
 - Improving the evidence base for the development of the skills system (Austria, 2014)
 - Strengthening skills assessment and anticipation information to address current and future skills imbalances (The Netherlands, 2017)
 - Broadening stakeholder engagement in policy dialogue to foster more equitable skills outcomes (The Netherlands, 2017)

5.5. Adult learning related actions in National Skills Strategies

National actions that are recommended for Skills Strategies frequently focus on overcoming adult learning specific challenges. The National Skills Strategies for Portugal, Slovenia, Latvia and Belgium (Flanders) (in development) showcase this. Figure 4 provides examples of suggested actions from those countries.

Figure 4: Example 1 – Portugal (2018)

Example 1 - Portugal (2018)²⁸

Awareness of the value of skills and motivation for adult learning

- Improve the collection, use and dissemination of information on skills performance and the returns on skills investments, building on existing tools.
- Improve the dissemination of information by launching a comprehensive communication campaign to raise awareness of the value of skills and skills investments and tailoring outreach for specific groups.

²⁸ OECD (2018), Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Portugal: Strengthening the Adult-Learning System, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264298705-en>.

- Enhance measures targeting the public administration and providers of social services, to raise awareness of the value of upskilling both for themselves and for their users.

Access, quality and relevance

- Improve the supply of high-quality, relevant and flexible learning programmes.
- Improve pathways and the coherence of the adult-learning delivery network.
- Strengthen quality assurance, including by developing a performance-monitoring and evaluation system and a set of key performance indicators.

Governance and financing

- Set up dedicated governance bodies to oversee adult learning: a permanent inter-ministerial team and a permanent group within an existing multi-stakeholder institution.
- Reinforce existing local networks at the municipal level, or develop new ones, to address current and future needs for skills that align with the local economic development context.
- Establish a stable and quality-oriented funding model through a “skills financing pact”, including targeted financial incentives for learners, employers and providers.
- Introduce targeted financial incentives for employers (specifically small and medium enterprises) and individuals (specifically disadvantaged groups) to encourage provision of, and participation in, training.

Figure 5: Example 2 - Slovenia (2018)

Example 2: Slovenia (2018) improving governance adult learning²⁹

Strengthening the overall conditions for co-operation in adult learning

- Develop a comprehensive adult learning master plan to include all forms and levels of adult education and training, and clarify the roles of all sectors involved.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral oversight and accountability in adult learning to drive policy coherence and partnerships between ministries and stakeholders.
- Enrich decision making and co-ordination with high-quality information on adult learning activities and expenditure, learning opportunities, and skills needs.

Strengthening co-operation between specific actors for adult learning

- Strengthen inter-ministerial co-ordination of adult learning policy, by improving civil servants’ awareness, skills, recognition and resourcing for co-ordination.
- Strengthen co-operation between the central government and municipalities to align national and local efforts, and between local actors to make better use of the resources, knowledge and capacity within each region.

²⁹ OECD (2018), Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Slovenia: Improving the Governance of Adult Learning, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264308459-en>.

- Strengthen government engagement with stakeholders in adult learning policy making and programme design, in order to better meet the needs of adult learners and employers.

Strengthening co-operation to address specific challenges in adult learning

- Improve co-operation on raising awareness about adult learning, with each sector taking responsibility for the groups of adults and businesses to which they are closest.
- Improve co-operation on funding adult learning effectively and efficiently by developing a high-level cross-sectoral funding agreement, and better targeting the funding of each sector.

Figure 6: Example 3 - Belgium (Flanders)

Example 3: Belgium (Flanders)³⁰

Strengthening lifelong learning policies through segmentation

- Segmenting the adult learning market to strengthen a targeted and tailored approach
- A segmentation of the adult learning market based on motivations and obstacles
- The nine identified groups of adult learners and their characteristic
- Segmentation and relevant types of policy
- Information/guidance and the segmentation
- Learning incentives and the segmentation

³⁰ OECD, OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Flanders, Belgium. [The faces of learners in Flanders](#).

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