



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S STOCKTAKING REPORT ON UPSKILLING PATHWAYS: EAEA'S REACTION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

March 2019

The European Council adopted the [Upskilling Pathways Recommendation](#) in December 2016, with the aim to support adults with low levels of skills and qualifications to enhance their basic skills that is literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and/or to acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards higher qualifications. In February 2019 the [European Commission \(EC\) published a stocktaking report](#) drawn on information provided by Member States on the measures for the implementation of the Recommendation¹. The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) collected feedback from its members on the state of the implementation of this strategy in 2018, which we will now put into relation to the EC's findings.

Scale of ambition varies in Member States

The EC report found that, due to the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, quite a number of countries are setting in motion new ambitious agendas to support the upskilling and reskilling of the adult population. They are also placing a stronger focus on supporting - in particular low skilled - workers in employment. In some countries, the recommendation triggered a national debate and a critical review of existing programs. EAEA's members also agreed that **Upskilling Pathways has raised awareness for adult education** and that the recommendation has already had an impact in quite a few Member States. Nevertheless, the EC report confirms EAEA's finding that the implementation presents a very diverse picture.

Member States chose a variety of ways to implement the recommendation: it was implemented a) as part of existing lifelong learning, employment or national skills strategies building on existing legislation or policy on adult education, b) as part of wider new upskilling initiatives or c) as dedicated pilot projects. The recommended three step approach is present in a number of initiatives, while several measures embed one or two the steps.

While there is a focus on literacy followed by numeracy, **digital skills are prioritized in a number of countries**. Further, many interventions and initiatives concentrate on vocational skills and job specific skills for employment, with the aim of supporting the acquisition of vocational qualifications for employment. Here EAEA urges that **basic skills provision needs to be more strongly embedded and explicitly addressed**, especially targeting adults with low basic skills.

Although the recommendation clearly provides the option of prioritizing specific sub-groups, it appears that measures currently in place in the Member States adopt an overarching approach covering all potential sub-groups or bundling several target groups.

¹ The report does not aim to evaluate the impact of the Upskilling Pathways on the target group, but to provide a mapping of what actions are set in motion, or reinforced, at Member State level to support implementation of the Recommendation. The evaluation of the impact on the target group will take place within five years from the date of adoption of the Recommendation, i.e. by the end of 2021.

As EAEA found as well, strategies for Upskilling Pathways and the European Agenda for Adult Learning have been linked and support each other. Measures build on the work of the National Coordinator for the European Agenda on Adult Learning. Also, no overarching approach to evaluations seems to be pursued for the moment. The evaluation of all implementing measures and their impact is only mentioned by Member States in terms of the evaluation of EU-funded or individual national projects.

The following paragraphs relate the findings of the EC stocktaking report to EAEA recommendation for the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Strategy from December 2018.

EAEA's recommendations in relation to the findings of the EC stocktaking report:

1. Strengthen the governance of adult education and basic skills in the framework of lifelong learning. A comprehensive lifelong learning strategy will help link learning pathways. Within the Upskilling Pathways strategy, the **responsibilities need to be clearly spelt out**. Additionally, benchmarking and target setting can help the monitoring of progress².

The EC stocktaking report found that **only a small number of Member States refer to groups being established for the coordination** of the many access routes and opportunities. Others add the task to the coordination work being done by National Coordinators for adult learning or wider existing structures. In most Member States responsibility depends on the lead ministry for individual measures with no additional coordination foreseen.

2. Reinforce cooperation between ministries, sectors and institutions of different backgrounds. A good strategy needs good cooperation between different sectors and institutions. Traditionally, many organizations, including ministries and funding sources, work in silos. Upskilling Pathways can be a real incentive to start building bridges.

EAEA members reported that Upskilling Pathways has led to more and better cooperation between the Ministries of Education and Labour. Nevertheless, the EC report states, that many small-scale, unrelated initiatives (largely already existing ESF projects) exist without evidence of mechanisms for coordination or partnership between providers and other stakeholders.

3. Cooperate with civil society and providers. In order to implement the strategy effectively, providers and civil society organizations are key stakeholders. They will know about the needs on the ground but also the challenges and barriers. Including them from the early stages of implementation will ensure outreach, adequate provision and ownership.

The stocktaking report mentions that, in addition to the coordination bodies (steered mostly by the Ministry of Labour or the Ministry of Education), a multitude of actors are involved in the delivery of the Upskilling Pathways steps. Also, the report refers to the EC's tool for mutual learning and sharing of experiences, with the idea to bring together multi-actor country delegations and involving the main organizations supporting the initiative, to build their capacities for the implementation tasks. Stakeholders work together in country teams to map out existing provision, identify main gaps in delivering the three steps and agree on joined

² The EC report underlines that one of the greatest challenges in adult learning is still the fragmentation and lack of coherent governance that brings together the profusion of offers in formal, non-formal and informal adult learning. Often adult learning is not considered to be one sector and there is generally no coordination concerning the governance of adult learning between different sectors in which adult learning takes place. The disparate offer has implications in particular for the learner, as measures, programs, guidance, etc. are not linked in a way the learner can easily navigate them. This hinders the development of flexible, individualised learning pathways.



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

follow-up actions. However, it is not clear from the report to what extent the involvement and cooperation with civil society and providers is being ensured.

4. Analyse and remove barriers. Barriers that hinder people from participating, especially from disadvantaged groups, need to be examined in depth. We urge Member States to analyze their legal and financial frameworks in terms of promoting or hindering the participation of disadvantaged groups.

Implementation of the recommendation relies in most countries on a set of parallel measures, targeted towards (several) sub-groups or towards the acquisition of targeted professional qualifications or types of skills. Therefore, **the education and training provisions tend to be global, generic offers** geared towards the general situation of particular groups, rather than tailored to each individual's specific learning needs. Also, many of the initiatives mentioned in the EC report refer to skills-profiling or skills-screening as a first step in supporting low skilled/low qualified adults. However, **only in few cases these methods appear to be used to identify gaps in basic skills** or barriers for disadvantaged groups. Guidance services are most commonly offered by Public Employment Services and are not yet a common practice in many countries, especially for lower skilled adults. Similarly, only a few specific outreach activities are mentioned in the EC stocktaking report in this regard.

5. Link adult education and basic skills to existing strategies. In many countries, there are social inclusion strategies for disadvantaged groups, but they do not take adult education into account. By integrating adult education into existing initiatives and policies, these will be improved and learning will become mainstreamed.

Many Upskilling Pathways implementation measures are closely related to the establishment of validation arrangements and in line with the EC's 2012 recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning in NQFs and EQF. However, while most Member States are mapping formal qualifications, **there is generally no reference to a qualification level in relation to basic skills.**³ Further the EC report wonders how – or whether - countries link measures to other programs or courses in order to enable learner progression. For example, it is unclear whether when the learners change from unemployed to employed there is a process to follow the individual's trajectory and an offer to transfer to another programme for adults in employment or further learning combined with work etc.

6. Prioritize and invest in adult learning and basic skills. Public investment in adult education and learning and basic skills is crucial for outreach, making the system work and enabling the participation of those who need it most.

Almost all countries have indicated that **much of the activity to support low-skilled adults is co-funded through the European Social Fund.** The report found that most of this EU funding is invested in active labour market policies and while it is being used in part to support low-skilled adults, it cannot be seen as dedicated funding for this group. In fact, much of it supports

³ Synergies between programs in countries that use ESF for skills development, etc. are encouraged through the ESF transnational network on Learning and Skills. The network brings together ESF managing authorities, social partners and representatives from the civil society and has created a link between the Upskilling Pathways and EU funding and provided valuable input on how the ESF supports this initiative.

unemployed people in general, and increasingly those in employment whose jobs are threatened. Also, securing funding for the upskilling of people in employment remains the greatest challenge.⁴

7. Fund and support learning in communities. Communities are essential when wanting to support increased participation of potential learners who have had the least opportunities in the past. Adult learning providers, including the voluntary and community sectors, need more investment to support and funding. This will benefit both learners and communities and result into better skills, increased participation, active citizenship and more social cohesion. This is especially true for remote and rural areas, where adult learning should be made possible.

The EC report does not explicitly present support to learning in communities but gives examples from Member States on how community centers play an important role in the delivery of the skills assessment, learning opportunities or guidance services that are part of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

8. Strengthen non-formal structures. Better infrastructure for non-formal adult education through legislation, institutional development and continuous financing is needed.

As already mentioned, the European Social Fund is playing a key role in the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. In addition, the Erasmus+ programme finances activities of the National Coordinators for the EU Adult Learning Agenda. However, **this does not support the much needed long-term systemic approach to non-formal adult education, as the majority of implementation measures and timelines of initiatives are primarily driven by access to EU funds** and tied in with their planning periods. Many initiatives are running until 2020 and there are no obvious plans on how to sustain them beyond this date.⁵

Based on the feedback of its members and the EC report, EAEA sees a number of positive developments in Europe, but would like to see more and stronger efforts by the Member States. Europe needs effective strategies for adult learning with appropriate funding, governance, civil society participation and partnerships.

More information

Contact: Gina Ebner, EAEA Secretary-General, tel: +32 2 893 25 24, [gina.ebner\(at\)eaea.org](mailto:gina.ebner@eaea.org)

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 141 member organisations in 45 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

⁴ Investment in adult learning is heterogeneous and often very piecemeal, reflecting the scattered and project-based approach with many funding sources, rather than a holistic learner-support approach.

Public funding for adult learning is often included within broader budget lines for education investments as a whole. Hence, a lack of funding breakdowns by adult learning or aspects of adult learning limit the degree to which consistent and direct comparisons can be made between Member States. Often national governments or statistical offices are not easily able to ascertain exactly what has been spent in their own country on adult learning.

⁵ The proposals that the Commission put forward for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2020-2027), and in particular Erasmus, ESF + and InvestEU foresee a renewed and reinforced support for adult upskilling and reskilling, providing thus a stable basis on which to rely beyond 2020, subject to its adoption by the co-legislators. Under the InvestEU Programme, the Commission is also proposing a dedicated "Social Investments and Skills Window" to facilitate access to finance in support of, inter alia, demand for and supply of skills as well as education, training and related services.