Comparative Report
Deliverable 4.1

Caterina Astarita, Nouran Hassan and **Doina Postica,** Centre for European Policies Studies (CEPS)

Milou Habraken, Mattias Stepman and **Karolien Lenaerts,** HIVA - Research Institute for Work and Society - KU Leuven

Pepka Boyadjieva, **Vassil Kirov** and **Gabriela Yordanova,** Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Science (IPS-BAS)

Katrine Engdal Vorting and **Lone Fajstrup Toftild**, Department of Entrepreneurship and Relationship Management of the University of Southern Denmark (SDU)

Matteo Colombo and **Tomaso Tiraboschi,** Fondazione ADAPT, Italy

Ivana Studená, **Lucia Kováčová** and **Lucia Mýtna Kureková**, Institute for Forecasting, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences (IF CSPS SAS)

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Executive summary

I SKILL (Industrial Relations to Kick-Start Inclusive Adult Learning) is a project investigating how industrial relations and social dialogue may contribute to the advancement of adult learning, with a focus on up-skilling and re-skilling in the EU. This document presents project Deliverable D4.1 “Comparative Report”, which aims to provide a comparative analysis of the conclusions from the quantitative analyses and the national case studies. A comparative perspective will be applied to different country contexts and key strategic sectors, policy measures and impacts on types of workers.

More specifically, to this end, the comparative report is based on the results obtained in: i) Deliverable D2.1 “Working Paper on the Role of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Improving Adult Learning Outcomes and Equity” prepared as part of WP2. That working paper presented empirical analyses documenting the state-of-play of adult learning in the EU27, documented the current situation, and related observed outcomes of adult learning participation in the EU27 to indicators and characteristics of the industrial relations regimes and social dialogue at the country, firm, and individual levels; ii) Deliverables D3.1 “National reports”, prepared as part of WP3. The reports investigated, based on desk research, semi-structured interviews and roundtables, the context regarding adult learning systems, their policy framework, governance, key actors and outcomes with a focus on industrial relations and social dialogue. The set of selected Members States included are Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy and Slovakia and the strategic sectors investigated are automotive for Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, Italy and Slovakia, and plastic for Denmark.

Main takeaways from the Deliverables D2.1

The purpose of this empirical paper was to investigate whether industrial relations and social dialogue have an influence on adult learning outcomes within the EU27 and, if so, how and in what direction. The results show that:

- When looking at the relationship between social dialogue and industrial relations and adult learning participation outcomes in the EU, **there is a statistically significant association between the intensity of social dialogue and adult learning participation outcomes** using both the individual/worker perspective (EU-Labour Force Survey) and the firm perspective (European Company Survey).
- **At the firm level, the presence of employee representation bodies is positively linked to the percentage of employees receiving both formal and non-formal adult learning**. This is especially true for trade union representation, a works council, and other country-specific bodies. Non-union staff representation does not seem to influence adult learning incidence. Furthermore, employee representation seems to have the largest impact on formal adult learning incidence. Non-formal adult learning incidence is also positively associated with employee representation but not with the same gravity.
- Using EU-LFS data in the EU countries, **a statistically significant, albeit fairly small, relationship between adult learning participation rates and the intensity of social dialogue at the EU level was found.** More specifically, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between union density and bargaining coverage indicators and adult learning participation rates, but the role of employer association density is not statistically significant. However, an increase in trade union density is associated with fewer hours in adult learning, but the magnitude of social dialogue indicators in explaining adult learning outcomes is fairly small. Moreover, using ECS data, firm-level

employee representation does seem to increase the percentage of employees receiving training.

Main takeaways from the Deliverables D3.1

Although the Member States analysed are heterogeneous in terms of their adult learning systems, governance structure, and actors involved, they exhibit numerous similarities.

- There is **consensus about the key relevance of adult learning** not only for its contribution to economic competitiveness, innovation and employability but also as a buffer against social risks and a tool for personal development and fulfilment.
- The **labour market is under significant pressure which leads to labour, knowledge and skills mismatches**[1]**.** To address the latter, **continuing training, up-skilling and re-skilling are key.** Indeed there is a widespread recognition that the workforce will require additional or new abilities and that depending solely on the knowledge and skills acquired in early education and training will be insufficient. In the context of mismatches, **working conditions are also very relevant.** Mismatches may hide recruitment bottlenecks that originate because wages are below a competitive level or other poor working conditions.
- There are **strong barriers to the involvement in and to the provision of training for adult learners**, therefore affecting both adults in general, employees and employers. On the one hand, the barriers identified for adults are, generally, classified in the literature as situational, dispositional and institutional[2]. Furthermore, at the workplace, the role of organisations and their decisions may interact with barriers for individuals. Barriers restrain from participating in adult learning, affecting to various degrees different groups and in particular the disadvantaged ones. On the other hand, the barriers identified for employers include costs, market failures, and an inadequate training offer, and affect micro, small and medium-sized companies in particular. The presence of obstacles leads to a suboptimal rate of participation in adult education, falling short of the set objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Achieving a high participation rate is an important goal, but guaranteeing the quality and effectiveness of adult learning is equally important. In this sense, tools for quality verification become essential.
- Further challenges have been identified, depending on the Member State: a low propensity of workers and companies to consider adult learning as an investment; difficulties for companies, especially SMEs, in accessing, information, available funds, managing and implementing courses, and dealing with bureaucracy; flaws in the system of monitoring and anticipating market skills and training needs; flaws in supporting the validation of on-the-job skill learning.
- **There is a vast network of actors involved in adult education learning** (i.e., national and subnational government, social partners, sector funds, education and training providers, employers, and workers) **that put in place a wide range of plans, initiatives,**

[1] Misalignments between the demand and the supply of labour and/or professional knowledge and skills. More specifically, labour mismatches refer to those who have yet to be recruited, whereas professional knowledge and skills mismatches can both refer to those who have yet to be recruited and those employed.

[2] Rubenson, K., and Desjardins, R. (2009), The impact of welfare state regimes on barriers to participation in adult education: a bounded agency model, Adult Education Quarterly, Vol. 59, pp. 187–207. A more detailed classification is proposed in Department of Work and Social Economy (2021), Action plan on lifelong learning. Setting sail for a learning Flanders that includes: (i) dispositional barriers, (ii) institutional barriers, (iii) situational barriers, and (iv) informational barriers.

and measures to promote adult learning. **However, it seems that the efforts are not yet sufficient and that the adult learning system still has many deficits.**

- **The role of social partners in adult learning is paramount, with the expectation that their participation will progressively intensify.** With the due differences among Member States, the role of the social partners lies in guaranteeing the right to training, enhancing access to lifelong learning and evaluating its quality, and motivating employees to engage in training. Furthermore, they have an active role in promoting lifelong learning by influencing policy, sharing knowledge about effective strategies, and fostering a supportive atmosphere that acknowledges its significance. They focus on tasks such as identifying and communicating training requirements, creating job and skills profiles, offering input and feedback on training policies and initiatives, monitoring and evaluating lifelong learning policies, programmes, and actions, negotiating collective agreements, and providing funding for training[3].
- **National reports proposed a series of recommendations that have been summarised in this comparative report in fifteen points[4]:**
    - Improve lifelong and adult learning culture;
    - Consider the relationships between adult learning policies and other policy areas;
    - Prioritise the equality and inclusiveness aspects of adult learning;
    - Value the work-life balance, mental health and well-being of employees;
    - Streamline administrative processes and ease the bureaucratic burden;
    - Reduce various sources of fragmentation both at the geographic and institutional levels.
    - Develop a career guidance policy during school years, including a more attractive presentation of the sectors;
    - Enhance the support for the development of 'transversal' skills;
    - Boost training quality through training quality assessment;
    - Promote and further develop the validation process of skills and knowledge; acquired through non-formal and informal learning and practice;
    - Keep up with new training techniques, including digital tools, while keeping them inclusive;
    - Assess the skill requirements associated with the context, the market and the company needs;
    - Support SMEs;
    - Further improve the activity of social partners and collective bargaining in the adult learning system;
    - Foster the collaboration between all the stakeholders involved.

[3] More details on the measures in which they participated in any capacity are described in detail in Chapter Two.
[4] Expanded upon in Chapter Two.

Introduction

Our societies and labour market are changing due to global developments such as the green and digital transition. As a result of these (ongoing) trends, the demand and supply of skills is changing and workers need, or are likely to need, more and new competences and skills. This means that adults cannot rely solely on the knowledge gained in their early education and training. Even the training that employees receive when starting their employment is not expected to be enough. Adult learning is therefore of key importance. Nevertheless, participation in lifelong learning is relatively low, especially among at-risk groups (who need training the most). Workers are faced with many barriers that may be difficult to tackle. The European Commission with the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan set an ambitious target whereby at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year by 2030. This target was recently confirmed by the Porto declaration (8 May 2021). Industrial relations and social dialogue can contribute to reaching this goal as they can contribute to the learning opportunities that are made available to adults. The Comparative Report (D4.1), of the I SKILL project will, therefore, provide an analysis of different country contexts and key strategic sectors, alternative policy measures, and different impacts on types of workers.

The report consists of two chapters. The **first chapter** summarises the results obtained in the quantitative part of the WP2 (deliverable D2.1): "Working Paper on the Role of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Improving Adult Learning Outcomes and Equity"[5]. The paper aims to assess the relationship between industrial relations, social dialogue, and adult learning participation in the EU27. The research questions posed include whether stronger industrial relations and social dialogue contribute to higher adult learning participation rates and more equity in accessing adult learning opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Using data deriving from various sources (i.e., EU Labour Force Survey and European Company Survey) and making use of both descriptive statistics and econometric analysis, the results confirm a link between the level of social dialogue and adult learning participation across the EU27. The **second chapter** aims to compare the results obtained in WP3, which includes "National reports"[6] and "National policy briefs" of five Members States: Belgium (Flanders)[7], Bulgaria,

[5] Kureková, L.M., Lenaerts, K., Studená, I., Štefánik, M., Tobback, I. and Vangeel, N. (2023), "Working Paper on the Role of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Improving Adult Learning Outcomes and Equity", I SKILL Project - Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue to Kick-in Inclusive Adult Learning – Deliverable 2.1. https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-projects/i-skill/

[6]
- Habraken, M., Stepman, M. and Lenaerts, K. (2023). I SKILL National Report – Belgium (Flanders). Working Paper I SKILL Project - Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue to Kick-in Inclusive Adult Learning – Deliverable 3.1 https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-projects/i-skill/
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- Studená,I., Kováčová,L, and Kureková, L.M. (2023), I SKILL National Report –Slovakia. Working Paper I SKILL Project - Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue to Kick-in Inclusive Adult Learning – Deliverable 3.1 https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-projects/i-skill/

[7] Belgium is a federal state composed of language communities and geographical regions that each hold powers and responsibilities for different fields. Lifelong learning falls under the responsibility of the communities and regions. That is why the national report and the remainder of this policy brief discuss the situation in Flanders. The division of powers and responsibilities across governance levels creates challenges for lifelong learning.

Denmark, Italy and Slovakia. While this set of Member States was chosen precisely because of its heterogeneity[8] from various points of view, it is also interesting to highlight the points of contact and the similarities regarding the Member States' adult learning systems, their policy framework, governance, key actors and outcomes, with a particular focus on the role of the social partners, social dialogue and collective bargaining in the specific realm of adult learning. The findings presented in these reports are based on the combination of several research methods: i) desk research covering national legislative and strategic documents relevant to adult learning as well as other documents on social dialogue in the designated sector; ii) primary data collected via semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from the public and private sector (depending on the Member States a combination of national/subnational government representatives, social partners – trade unions and employer's organisations - employee and, training providers, other governance actors, specific company representatives and workers; iii) a roundtable that served to discuss and validate the preliminary results of the empirical research with key stakeholders. As per the key sectors, the Partners of the I SKILL consortium chose automotive for Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, Italy and Slovakia, while Denmark chose plastic.

The **structure of the second chapter** is organised as follows. In the first section, we proceed with a focus on the social partners, with particular attention on the tools they devised, or in any case they managed, that are functional in fostering access to and the quality and effectiveness of adult education. The second section presents, again in a comparative perspective, many aspects of the adult learning system challenges and possible solutions. While acknowledging the consensus on the policy's key importance of adult learning policies, it is recognised that, despite all the efforts, there are still many obstacles to overcome in the future. Main obstacles encompass barriers to participation in and access to training for adult learners, and challenges arising from labour and skill shortages (both for recent graduates who are still seeking employment and individuals who require upskilling and reskilling initiatives). A subsection is devoted to company-level learning and training practices. Section three brings together fifteen recommendations selected among the most relevant and formulated based on the concluding sections of the national reports. Each recommendation, while formulated in a general way, when explained in more detail, takes into account the differences between the Member States studied in the I SKILL project.

[8] Indeed, as recalled in Astarita et al. (2023): The selection of the Member States for the I SKILL project was based on the different reasons recalled below:
"- The EU enlargements generated further diversity in industrial relations. The five Member States have different industrial relations systems (Visser, 2009): central-eastern (Slovakia, Bulgaria), central-western (Belgium), Nordic (Denmark) and southern (Italy).
- The selection reflects diversity in adult learning, in governance, participation, inequalities and the role played by social partners in adult learning matters (Desjardins, 2017).
- The selection reflects the welfare regimes according to Esping-Andersen (1990, 1998).
- Combining the aspects above and considering different production regimes, the selection takes into account differences in institutional complementarities proposed by the varieties of capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Hancké et al., 2007)."

1. Insights from Deliverable D2.1 "Working Paper on the Role of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Improving Adult Learning Outcomes and Equity"

The aim of the working paper that serves as deliverable D2.1 "Working Paper on the Role of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Improving Adult Learning Outcomes and Equity" is to empirically assess the relationship between features of industrial relations and social dialogue and adult learning participation and outcomes in the EU27. More specifically it focuses on the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between social dialogue and industrial relations and adult learning participation outcomes in the EU?
- Do industrial relations succeed in fostering access to adult learning opportunities?
- Are those who tend to participate less (e.g., low-qualified) involved more (or less) in countries characterised by strong social dialogue?

These questions are empirically addressed with descriptive statistical and econometric analyses, using data covering two perspectives: the worker perspective (European Union Labour Force Survey, EU-LFS henceforth)[9] and the firm perspective (European Company Survey, ECS henceforth)[10]. This data is combined with institutional data measuring industrial relations in the EU, extracted from the OECD-AIAS-ICTWSS dataset[11].

The main results of the paper are:

- **From the individual/worker perspective** and based on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) data[12], among the most relevant conclusions, **it was found that:**
  - **Adult Learning participation outcomes at the EU level are relatively stable over time**. **However, there is large heterogeneity across Member States** (in the paper, 2020 was considered);
  - **Participation in formal adult learning, non-formal adult learning, and the average hours spent in adult learning are highly correlated at the country level.** Countries with higher participation in formal adult learning also have higher non-formal participation, as well as a higher average number of hours spent in adult learning.
  - Differences in adult learning participation are evident also within Member States. To map these differences along individual-level characteristics, the gaps in adult learning participation were calculated along gender, education, employment status, type of employment, and the occupational risk of computerisation. It resulted that **the adult**

[9] For additional information about the LFS survey, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey

[10] For additional information about the ECS survey, see https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/surveys/european-company-surveys-ecs

[11] For additional information see https://www.oecd.org/employment/ictwss-database.htm

[12] In the context of LFS Adult learning is understood here as learning which includes education and training activities which are either formal or non-formal in the measurement period of the past four weeks. Formal education refers to participation in education or apprenticeship at the respective level of education (ISCED). Non-formal learning activities might include any courses, seminars, conferences, private lessons or instructions outside the regular education system.

learning participation gap along education levels and concerning the risk of computerisation was the most pronounced. Smaller gaps were observed, on average, across gender, employment status, and type of employment.

- **Low-skilled individuals have consistently lower adult learning participation rates compared to both medium and high-skilled individuals across the EU Member States**, including those where the overall adult learning participation rates are high.
- **Adult learning participation is consistently higher for individuals working in occupations with a lower risk of computerisation**[13]. This implies that to the extent that adult learning takes place, it is taken up only to a limited extent by individuals affected by the twin transition.
- **The relationship between social dialogue and adult learning participation rate, is, in general, statistically significant albeit fairly small.** More specifically, it was found:
  - a positive and statistically significant relationship between union density indicators and adult learning participation rate as well as between bargaining coverage indicators and adult learning participation rates.
  - a not statistically significant relationship between employer association density and adult learning participation rates.
- There is **no evident positive link between equity in adult learning and social dialogue at the EU level**. Instead, the evidence suggests that **stronger social dialogue favours employed workers over the unemployed, and those in occupations at low risk of computerisation rather than those at high risk of computerisation**.

From the firm perspective and based on the European Company Survey (ECS) data, among the most relevant conclusions, it was found that:

- **The incidence of formal and non-formal**[14] **adult learning is** 44 % for formal and 45% for non-formal in EU establishments in 2019. Furthermore, the incidence **differs greatly among all EU27 Member States** and the heterogeneity is g**reater when looking at those in formal adult learning compared to those in informal adult learning**.

[13] The risk of computerisation has been calculated based on the probabilities estimated by Frey, C. B. and Osborne, M. A. (2016), 'The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?', Technological Forecasting & Social Change, Vol. 114, pp. 254-280.

[14] In this context formal education means the "training sessions on the establishment premises or at other locations during paid working time" whereas non-formal education means "on-the-job training or other forms of direct instruction in the workplace from more experienced colleagues" based on the following ECS variables:
PAIDTRAIN – Question: "In 2018, how many employees in this establishment participated in training sessions on the establishment premises or at other locations during paid working time? Your best estimate is good enough. *Enter the exact number of employees or tick one of the percentage categories".* Possible replies: "none at all; less than 20%, 20% to 39%, 40% to 59%, 60% to 79%, 80% to 99%; all"
ONJOB – Question: "In 2018, how many employees in this establishment have received on-the-job training or other forms of direct instruction in the workplace from more experienced colleagues? Your best estimate is good enough. *Enter the exact number of employees or tick one of the percentage categories".* Possible replies: "none at all; less than 20%, 20% to 39%, 40% to 59%, 60% to 79%, 80% to 99%; all".

2. Insights from Deliverables D3.1 and D3.2 “National reports” and “National policy briefs”

2.1 Social partners in adult learning governance

The ecosystem of actors involved in adult learning governance is, in general, extensive in all the Member States under scrutiny in this Comparative report[15]. It is also common that the division of powers and responsibilities across governance actors and levels leads to fragmentation and a lack of cooperation, which can pose obstacles to the effective implementation of lifelong learning policies[16]. For the description of the complete set of actors, and the corresponding governance infrastructures which operate in the adult learning system, this report refers to the individual national reports. In this section, instead, the focus is on describing the main characteristics and the role of social partners[17], also when participating in social dialogue[18] and collective bargaining[19].

[15] For example, Flanders in Belgium (where a wide range of public and private bodies and organisations operate across different levels and geographical areas) or to the case of Bulgaria where the adult learning sector is heterogeneous and comprises different kinds of institutions regulated by different normative acts.

[16] For example is the case of Italy. The Italian National report, indeed, stresses that: “The context is fragmented and it lacks a system in which the tasks and responsibilities of those involved in continuing education are specifically defined, as well as a coordinating superstructure that can set shared and strategic objectives capable of charting a direction. The lines of training intervention in terms of programming overlap among the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, regions, autonomous provinces, social partners and individual companies, just as funding for training (clearly excluding cases of self-financing by the companies themselves) is accessed through national, regional or collective-bargaining instruments.

[17] Social partners: representatives of employers and workers, usually employer organisations and trade unions. https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Glossary.pdf

[18] Social dialogue: is defined by the ILO to include all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. Collective bargaining is a specific form of social dialogue. Social dialogue can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or it may consist of bipartite relations only between labour and management (or trade unions and employers' organizations), with or without indirect government involvement. Social dialogue processes can be informal or institutionalised, and often it is a combination of the two. It can take place at the national, regional or enterprise level. It can be interprofessional, sectoral or a combination of these. https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Glossary.pdf

[19] Collective bargaining: according to Article 2, ILO Convention No. 154, collective bargaining extends to all negotiations which take place between an employer, a group of employers or one or more employer organisations, on the one hand, and one or more worker organisations, on the other, for determining working conditions and terms of employment; and/or regulating relations between employers and workers; and/or regulating relations between employers or their organisations and a worker organisation or worker organisations. Collective bargaining normally results in a written document (collective agreement) that is mutually binding for a stipulated time. https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Glossary.pdf

2.1.1 Belgium

Belgium is characterised by both employers' organisations and trade unions[20] to have a strong social partner organisation which is cooperative in nature. Their bargaining style is integrated/coordinated, and a power balance exists between the social partners.

Among the activities of the employees' representatives in the adult learning system, as explained in the Belgian (Flanders) national report, they:

- **Help shape training policy at the company level**. In Belgium, this can be done: "through these representatives' involvement in the works council, for example, where information on training policy must be shared (as per collective bargaining agreement no. 9) and through the social balance sheet. It can also be done through the representatives' involvement in the committee for prevention and protection at work, for example, or through their involvement in the occupational health and safety committee, as well as through union representation and the conclusion of collective bargaining agreements.".
- **Help to address barriers to the provision of and participation in training**. As recalled in the Belgian (Flanders) national report: "In the research project from the VUB and ABVV, the following priorities for employee representatives were identified: (i) training for all (e.g. monitoring training participation, paying attention to groups that participate less in training, improving the accessibility of training), (ii) training for sustainable employability and retention (shifting from a short-term to long-term vision of training), (iii) training for job security (proactively paying attention to opportunities in the company and elsewhere), (iv) training which goes beyond training for job-specific skills (e.g. checking the composition of the training offer and whether it allows competences to be broadened and deepened) (VIVO, 2022).".

Among the activities of the social partners together in the adult learning system, as explained in the Flemish (Belgium) national report, they:

- **Jointly manage sector funds: "**A sector fund is partly financed by the government and partly by compulsory contributions made by employees and companies. The overall aim of a sector fund is to help ensure that there are sufficient and well-trained employees working within the sector in scope. One of their tasks is to organise or support training activities for the benefit of employees in their sector (VLAIO, 2022). The training, and aspects such as coaching, which the sector funds offer are not necessarily provided by the funds themselves. This can also be provided by existing, often private, training providers (personal communication – interviews). This could help further explain the high score for private training providers in the survey conducted by Randstad Research (2020). Another tool which the sector funds have is the ability to provide grants/premiums related to training and developing employees (details differ

[20] "[…] Belgium, has three major trade union confederations: the Christian trade union confederation (ACV in Flanders), the socialist trade union confederation (ABVV in Flanders) and the Liberal trade union confederation (ACLVB in Flanders). Each in turn has different divisions through which they represent employees at the sector and regional level. The distinction between blue-collar and white-collar workers is important here as Belgian unions tend to bundle their services towards blue-collar workers based on the sector in which a blue-collar worker is active (sector divisions). For white-collar workers, divisions based on function instead of sector are created. The structure for the employers' organisations is a little more complex as there are organisations that operate at federal level, at regional level and at sector level (although the sector organisations can be a member of an organisation at federal/regional level).".

per sector fund). Sector funds thus inspire and support companies to work on lifelong learning.".

- **Participate to the social dialogue with the Flemish Government on socio-economic themes** in VESOC[21]**. "**A strong emphasis on investment in lifelong learning is also present in the VESOC agreement 'Alle hens aan dek' [All hands on deck] of December 2020. This agreement aims to stimulate lifelong learning by: (i) strengthening education for labour market transition, (ii) actively linking temporary unemployment to education, (iii) supporting entrepreneurs who invest in training, (iv) retraining and doing competence checks for employees, and (v) boosting workplace learning (Flemish government, n.d.a)".
- **Participate in drawing up training plans for companies**. "The 'Arbeidsdeal' [Labour Deal] of 2022 […] contains various measures aimed at training. […] More specifically, companies with more than 20 employees are required to draw up a training plan by 31 March each year, with specific attention to at-risk groups such as older workers and workers with disabilities, and to bottleneck occupations in the sector to which the company belongs. The law also foresees a role for social partners. More particularly, social partners can set the minimum requirements to be met by the training plan in a collective bargaining agreement.".

2.1.2 Bulgaria

In **Bulgaria**, the partnership between employers' organisations and trade unions is ensured through the work of the *National Council for the Promotion of Employment* (NCEP), under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The NCEP is a permanent body for cooperation and consultation in the development of employment policy. It operates with an equal number of representatives of the state, national organisations representing employers and national organisations representing employees. At the regional level, the partnership approach is ensured through regional Employment Committees.

As per the social partners operating the adult learning system, there are many actors involved in Bulgaria, each with a distinct role (thus on this occasion for expositional purposes it is better to briefly refer to each of them):

Among the **nationally represented employers' associations,** there are:

- the **Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association** (BICA) and the **Bulgarian Industrial Association – Union of Bulgarian Business** (BIA). Each has its vocational training centre[22]. Recently, BICA has developed and presented models for the introduction of individual learning accounts and micro-credentials as a solution to the problem of low participation among adults in lifelong learning;
- The **Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI)**[23];

[21] The Flemish Economic Social Consultation Committee.

[22] According to the Labour Code, employees do not lose their rights to training by changing their employer or labour market status. Some employers prefer to independently organise training for their employees in order to ensure the quality and relevance of the training.

[23] A nationally represented employers' organisation established in 1895, is an independent NGO for assistance, promotion, representation and protection of the business interests of its members, which contributes to the development of international economic cooperation and helps promote the European and international integration of the Republic of Bulgaria.

- The **Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria (KRIB)**, which formulates policies for the labour market[24];
- The **Union for Private Economic Enterprise (UPEE)**[25] is an authentic representative of micro, small and medium-sized businesses and manufacturers in Bulgaria with the mission to support the establishment of new enterprises and jobs, as well as to work actively for the country's economic and social progress.

Among the **nationally representative employees organisations** there are:

- The **Confederation of the Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB)** is the largest public organisation in Bulgaria. It organises training courses to assist employees in improving their professional skills and in adapting to both the Bulgarian and European labour markets;
- The **Confederation of Labour 'Podkrepa' (CL Podkrepa)** which has the objectives of conduct training, consultations and qualification courses in the fields of labour law relations, social security, working conditions, ecology, industrial relations, employment, vocational training, retraining and development of civil society.

Moreover, there are: formats **for cooperation with relevant stakeholders**[26] and The **National Council for the Promotion of Employment (NCEP)**[27]. The NCEP **discusses and gives opinions** on the development and implementation of employment policy, **adult training for acquiring professional qualifications and the National Action Plan for Employment.**

Furthermore, another way **the partnership principle is applied** i**s the participation of all stakeholders in thematic working groups for preparation of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2021-2027** and in the monitoring committee of the programme. In this way, they participate in setting the priorities of the programme, in defining the scope and eligibility of the target groups and activities of the operations and subsequently in discussing the results, annual reports and, where available, the evaluations.

Additionally, social partners:

- **With collective bargaining agree on different kinds of training and professional qualifications** (as according to the Annual Report on Collective Labour Agreements for 2021). This includes the creation of councils for professional qualifications with the participation of representatives of workers and employees; the work on annual programmes for maintaining and improving qualifications and staff retraining; the setting of criteria for tying the knowledge and competences of staff with their labour remuneration upon signing a contract for qualification improvement or retraining; the internal organisational of training, such as initial and periodic training without detachment

[24] It drafts particular policies for overcoming the lack of a qualified labour force and creating conditions for a developed, flexible, deregulated labour market. KRIB, together with the World Bank and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, also prepares analyses and recommendations for increasing employment, boosting the flexicurity of the labour market and the quality of human resources.

[25] That was established on 22 December 1989 as the first non-governmental association of private entrepreneurs in the Republic of Bulgaria to unite private businesses and support their activities and successful development. The UPEE has been recognised as a nationally representative employers' organisation since 1993.

[26] That already existed in Bulgaria before the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults. These formats are part of the mechanisms and consultation processes for policy development and for defining the policy financing priorities with national and European funds.

[27] Under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, is a permanent body for cooperation and consultation in the development of employment policy. The NCEP operates with an equal number of representatives of the state, national organisations representing employers and national organisations representing employees.

from work; periodic training with separation from work; retraining if the need arises for reassignment to a new workplace; the conduction of courses, seminars, conferences and other forms of training related to labour and insurance legislation along with safe and healthy working conditions, following the initiative of unions, for which the employer provides funding.

- **Anticipate skills needs:** "During the last three years, social partners have been collaborating with the Ministry of Education to introduce the 'Sectoral Skills Councils' in Bulgaria, following the UK model. […] One of the first sectors to be included is the metal/machine building sector. […]."
- **Address skill shortages:** employers' organisations have recently been involved in different EU-funded projects to tackle the issue of skill shortages. "One example is the project 'Digital Skills Development'. […] The project is a pilot, and its results are expected to be the basis for activities to be carried out under the new Human Resources Development Programme 2021–2027, aimed at the national development of digital competences. Upon completion of the project, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy will use the project results for policy making."
- **Contribute to addressing the imbalance between demand and supply:** "Another recent project was to create a model for solving one of the main problems in the labour market for the last 15 years, namely the imbalance between the demand for skilled labour in key areas for the Bulgarian economy's development and the supply of qualified human resources[28]. In this project, a model for how to make certain professions attractive was developed, including in the metal sector."

2.1.3 Denmark

Denmark is characterised by a social dialogue that is deeply rooted in national culture, institutions and historical traditions, fostering a relationship between social partners[29] based on consensus and mutual respect for diverging interests.

Among the activities of the social partners in the adult learning system, as explained in the Danish National report, they:

- **Participate in tripartite agreements**: between 2008 and 2016, only one tripartite agreement concerning adult education and continuing training was established. In 2017, a more recent tripartite agreement was reached, which has subsequently been extended until 2023[30], in which social partners placed significant emphasis on general

[28] See details at http://profesii.bg/%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b5%d0%ba%d1%82%d0%b0/%d1%86%d0%b5%d0%bb%d0%b8-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b5%d0%ba%d1%82%d0%b0/

[29] As explained in the Danish National report: "The social partners consist of the Confederation of Danish Employers (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening) and the Danish Trade Union Confederation (Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation), representing employers' organisations and trade unions, respectively."

[30] As explained in the Danish National report: "In the recent tripartite agreement, the government and social partners have identified five problems: i) There are 600 000 adults with inadequate literacy skills; ii) The level of vocational education has declined; iii) Education providers have limited or no economic incentives to offer vocational education and training (VET) courses; iv) There is difficulty in establishing connections between different educational levels (a lack of recognition of individual competency assessments); v) Adult education centres face issues in coordinating various education providers and creating an overview of opportunities. These problems are addressed through 81 points of content, with a specific focus on vocational education: strengthening basic skills in literacy and numeracy; easing access to individual competency assessment; modernising vocational education (Arbejdsmarkedsuddannelser); digitalising the adult education system; increasing compensation and establishing a new fund for reskilling.

adult education and VET. This focus was prompted by a decrease in the training participation rate and the demand from companies to enhance the skills of unskilled employees and make them vocationally proficient.

- **Participate in the formulation of the VET legislation.** As explained in detail in the Danish National report: "The Danish Parliament (Folketinget) is responsible for legislation regarding VET, which is formulated through tripartite agreements with social partners. It is through these tripartite agreements that legislation, policies and initiatives for VET are negotiated. **In terms of VET, the social partners also play a crucial role in management, priority setting, development, organisation and quality assurance** through representatives on school boards and education committees (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022). The committees determine specific courses, education programmes and training initiatives relevant to their respective sectors. They are also **responsible for discontinuing courses with low attendance or limited relevance to the labour market**. The social partners **provide financial support** for the committees and their secretariats, covering tasks related to VET implementation, evaluation and financial reporting (STUK, 2019)."
- **Foster motivation among employers and employees**, particularly regarding stimulating demand for adult education and training among those who are less motivated.
- **Enhance the skills of individual employees,** to improve their employability and their development opportunities and to support the companies in becoming more competitive in the global market
- **Have a crucial role in the flexicurity model**[31] in which, inter alia, social partners are involved in supporting the upskilling and reskilling of employees and the unemployed, promoting a smoother flow in the labour market. Active labour market policies focus on enhancing the skills of the unemployed, benefiting both companies and individuals.
- **Participate in "sector-specific local education committees" and "continuing training and education committees"** that play a crucial role in ensuring that the education programmes offered remain up to date with the latest industry trends. These committees, consisting of representatives from both employers and employees, collaborate to determine the necessary competencies and develop new courses. Recognising that industrial partners possess valuable knowledge and are capable of identifying emerging trends and potential business opportunities, these committees are proactive in responding to industry changes. Additionally, they stay informed about new regulations at the national and EU levels that may impact the labour market's skill requirements and strive to stay ahead of such developments.
- **Trade unions** educate their representatives to assist and support employees with the administrative and motivational aspects of participating in adult education and training programmes. The role of these representatives is vital, and the trade unions witness a significant impact when their representatives possess administrative skills. **Employers'**

[31] As explained in the Danish report: "Flexicurity, originally developed in the Netherlands and Denmark during the 1990s and later adopted by the European Union in 2007 (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009), is a framework aimed at balancing the demands for labour market flexibility and security, thereby creating a sustainable situation for both employers and employees. The Danish flexicurity model fosters a mobile and transaction-friendly labour market by offering limited job protection, generous unemployment benefits and active labour market policies (Bekker and Mailand, 2017). Flexicurity also promotes educational opportunities and ongoing training for employers and employees, facilitating leaves of absence and the search for substitutes.

organisations actively encourage employers to make long-term investments to meet future regulations and legislation that may affect their businesses.

- **Engage in dialogue with training providers**

2.1.4 Italy

Italy is characterised by a polarised, state-centred industrial relations regime and the role of social partners in public policy is of an irregular and politicised type.

Among the activities of the social partners in the adult learning system, they:

- **Play an increasing role in designing, implementing and monitoring various training programmes;**
- **Help foster access to training and continuous education.** Indeed, **as a result of industrial relations**, there are different means for the above-mentioned purposes:
  - The **subjective right to training**[32] was introduced by the social partners during the renewal of the national collective bargaining agreement **in the engineering-industrial sector** in 2016. The new right provides for all employees in the sector to have access to 24 hours of training, which is to be carried out over 3 years. This right also allows access to training pathways for low-skilled workers;
  - **Metapprendo**[33] **is a digital learning platform for remote and/or asynchronous training on different topics**. This platform also provides an online learning portfolio for the worker to be able to keep track of learning that has already taken place;
  - **The New Skills Fund**[34] (which is a public fund co-financed by the European Social Fund, and which was created in 2020 and then refinanced in 2022) represents a specific policy measure for Italy concerning worker training. The involvement of social partners is central to the integration of financial support in the fund. The New Skills Fund is available for companies that retrain their workers and modernise their production processes. The fund has made it possible to reshape working hours through company or territorial agreements that provide for part of the total time spent in training activities (a minimum of 40 hours per worker, and a maximum of 200 hours). The fund also covers the cost of social security and the workers' contribution to the cost of training.

• **Play a decisive role in joint interprofessional funds.** The joint interprofessional funds **were created by collective bargaining on a sectoral basis**[35] and are important tools for the training and retraining of Italian workers. More specifically, **social partners play a decisive role in training and retraining by approving the training plans that are then financed by the funds.** They further add value to these training plans by inserting skills that correspond to identified needs and that are able to promote quality jobs. This task can

[32] This refers to specific sectors. As explained in the Italian National Report: "In this context, we refer especially to the subjective right to training introduced by the metalworking collective agreement (Bavaro, 2017; Mostarda, 2021; Impellizzieri and Machì, 2021) and then by the electrical sector. This agreement specifies a training allowance with the right to use it over 3 years. The fact that this right is subjective is an unusual aspect because, if the employer were to default, the worker still has the possibility to use the training pool independently. Other sectors operate differently, without this subjective right: for example, different and sometimes more extensive training activities may be proposed in terms of hours but with cost sharing or outside of working hours and, above all, they are not enforceable by the worker.".

[33] This refers to the automotive sector at the national level.

[34] Through company or territorial agreement

[35] The most representative social partners in the industrial sector created Fondimpresa, which is the most important interprofessional fund in Italy in terms of member companies and resources.

be tackled by social partners firstly, by investing in their own representatives by providing them with the requisite skills for the planning of training, and secondly, by providing their representatives with the work of the bilateral bodies as support. Social partners need to promote forms of collaboration between the private sector and public policies on continuous training to make the use of resources more efficient by avoiding overlaps. A crucial part of this collaboration is the creation of tools to facilitate qualification and retraining processes that are also for the unemployed and the inactive. Indeed, some interprofessional funds have already started to collaborate, thus improving the inclusiveness of these tools.

- **Are active in the Forma.Temp[36], the fund dedicated to temporary jobs[37]**.
- Will possibly soon **be active in the expansion contracts and the social shock absorber.** The **expansion contracts are** aimed at the recruitment of new professionals, the retraining of staff skills and the early exit of workers nearing retirement – a tool to facilitate generational turnover. However, the available resources were found to be insufficient, as the cost to companies is still too high. The **social shock absorbers,** under determinate circumstances, offer the possibility of conducting training at the same time as work suspension has been introduced.
- **Participate** through collective bargaining **in regulating the area of vocational training for workers**.

An important role pertains, as well, **the collective bargaining at the company level.** In the Italian national report this theme is discussed in depth[38]: **"According to recent studies** (Impellizzieri, 2023; ADAPT, 2022) **of Italian collective bargaining, the number of second-level collective agreements that contain contractual clauses on training are growing**. **In 2022**, for example, more than one in five contracts (according to the studies mentioned) **dealt with the point and a first systematisation of regulatory models also became possible[39]**."

[36] Forma.Temp: "provides 60 000 training courses per year for 360 000 people, and thus operates (also) within the automotive sector. This experience is interesting because the parties have structured, starting with the so-called Biagi Law of 2003 (Legislative Decree 276/2003), a system for which training is often aimed at the employability of the worker, including and especially fixed-term, in transition. The training is not, therefore, solely dedicated to full-time and permanent employees, but also and especially to all those who turn to employment agencies to find a job or change jobs, and who often do not immediately gain permanent contracts. Forma.Temp provides not only the provision of resources to carry out training activities, but also placement bonuses at the end of the courses and an entry skills assessment. It is also experimenting with a digital badge system.".

[37] Also this refers to specific sectors.

[38] Bold added by the authors of this Comparative report.

[39] More specifically, as explained in the Italian National report: "There are at least five types of agreements, classified by content, used by social partners to intervene. The first type considers agreements for the establishment of joint bodies with the functions of consultation, discussion, planning and monitoring of training activities, where special commissions are established and recognised trade union representatives. These commissions can have different roles depending on the case, ranging from sharing decisions and therefore, responsibilities (including the merits, for example, of proposals for projects or pathways for professional updating, monitoring and promotion), to mere consultation or the sharing of information. A second type concerns agreements that define the principles, content and purposes of corporate training activities, going beyond the training plans that are developed with the resources of the interprofessional funds and defining other parallel and/or additional training measures. These may in particular include certain categories of workers who demonstrate training needs or specific conditions, e.g., elderly workers or those with care responsibilities, low-skilled workers, seasonal workers and young people with apprenticeship contracts for a company placement. The third type covers agreements that incentivise participation in training activities through a financial reward, which can be provided in different forms and conditions. For example, participation in training could become a criterion for obtaining a performance bonus, or the outcome of a course and the results obtained could be made

Nevertheless, it is added that: "[…] the above reveals an attempt through collective bargaining to **give more weight to training in the employment relationship as a tool for productivity and innovation of companies** within a dynamic of participation and negotiation, but so far without achieving a particular strategic weight relative to company choices. Often training is a front for mere consultation between the parties, with the risk of 'under-negotiation' (Heyes and Rainbird, 2011), that is, **lacking a proactive role for unions** which call for the acceptance of training plans administered by company management without confrontation and with a reduced payroll cost. That said, there would need to be the **introduction of a subjective right to training for those contracts, most of which do not include it**, and a process of verification and improvement where it does exist. On the other hand, company agreements contain good practices that still do not spread and, in most cases, **do not take advantage of the role that joint bodies in the relevant sector could have** (Varesi, 2012)."

2.1.5 Slovakia

Slovakia is characterised by a fairly weak social partnership. Furthermore, the structure of social dialogue tends to be decentralised to companies[40]. In this respect, as explained in the Slovakian national report: "Collective bargaining in Slovakia is organised primarily at sectoral (industry) and company (plant) level, with a growing relevance of the latter form (Kahancová, Martišková and Sedláková, 2019)."[41]

As far as adult learning is concerned at national level:

- **<u>Employers' organisations</u> have acted as an influential voice in debates about the education system and skill development.** Among their activities, as explained in the Slovakian national report, they:
  - **focused on formal education:** due to skill and labour shortages repeatedly faced by firms in Slovakia, most interventions led by employer associations focused on formal

decisive; in other cases, a scholarship is provided for completing a specific course underway. The fourth type of agreement has the purpose of attesting, certifying and enhancing the acquired skills and professionalism. In this case, some systems identify and then certify the professional and transversal skills of the workers at the company. Sometimes, the training mechanism can lead to an increase in the contractual job grade or a bonus, as a result of an evaluation process of the skills obtained. Finally, a fifth category entails agreements that are functional for external markets and the management of employment transitions and relocation of workers who have been made redundant or are in a situation that requires relocation (for example, in the event of a company crisis or closure of the company), where in certain cases the companies bear the costs for the re-skilling of the worker (also with public support or with agreements with the company where the transitioning worker should be hired)."

[40] As explained in the Slovakian National report: "A tripartite social dialogue was set up in 2000 and brings major labour unions and employer associations representatives to meet regularly with the government.. The role and competences of tripartite have changed over time, and since 2021 more unions have been allowed to take part in negotiations with government and employer associations; still, tripartite attains a mainly consultative nature (Šumichrast and Bors, 2023; Kahancová and Martišková, 2023)"

[41] As explained in the Slovakian National report: "the company-level bargaining dominates within the automotive industry (Hašková, 2017; Šumichrast and Bors, 2023; Martišková, 2019). Automotive industry belongs to a leading manufacturing sector in terms of organized social dialogue, with labour unions active in all four major automotive plants, but the intensity and character of social dialogue vary across them (Šumichrast and Bors, 2023). The highest union coverage exists in VW Slovakia where cooperative labour relations have been pointed out as a good practice. In addition to traditional themes of wages and working time, training programmes have also been part of the company-level social dialogue (Haipeter and Jo, 2021). The remaining plants are also unionised, typically with two different labour union bodies active within the company: traditional labour union OZ KOVO, and newly established unions MOV (Moderný odborový zväz) (Šumichrast and Bors, 2023)."

education, its quality and its (poor) structure (i.e. resulting in the introduction of dual VET)[42].

- **had a key role in the revitalization of Sectoral Councils** established in the past in the framework of the National Framework of Occupations as forums for specifying sectoral qualification needs and standards. The project brings together on a regular basis all relevant actors - different sectors, employers, unions, third sector, and ministries. It creates a unique and much needed platform for communication, to specify what is needed in the labour market in respective sectors. In its activities, it focused mostly on adaptations of formal education, rather than developing a sustainable framework for recognition of qualifications and for validation of skills which are crucial elements for a systemic functioning of skills agenda.
- **engaged in the promotion of individual learning accounts**: More recently the debate has also focused on non-formal education and its role in responding to fast changing skill needs. Employers together with some other actors (e.g. education providers) have been pushing for the adoption of universal tools which would enhance the level of adult learning and workplace learning, such as individual learning accounts (OECD, 2020)[43].

Remarking on employer's associations the Slovakian national report states that: "While employers are very influential in shaping the content of debates, they might be blind to social problems and fail to see the issue of adult learning in its complexity, including the role it can play for elevating the exclusion of low-skilled adults from the labour market.".

- **Trade unions do not seem to be actively engaged in existing debates about adult learning, as they are more focused on wage increases and working conditions. Nevertheless, due to the structure of social dialogue, which is decentralised to companies, exceptions in trade union activities might exist at the plant level**. As pointed out in the Slovakian national report: "Generally, trade unions in Slovakia prioritise political action and changes to legislation over collective bargaining as their dominant strategy to improve worker conditions (Kahancová and Martišková, 2023). Some observers have argued that acute labour shortages improve the strategic position and power of trade unions in the automotive industry (Haipeter and Jo, 2021), and in the past for example bargained for the right to requalification for redundant employees (Martišková, 2019). It is therefore reasonable to expect that social dialogue might be one of the effective mechanisms in shaping and improving adult learning opportunities.".

In terms of how social partners could improve their involvement in adult learning:

- As stated by the peak union representatives who intervened in the semi-structured interviews, **trade unions must be more engaged in collective bargaining and policy discussions about adult learning, and this agenda must become an integral part of**

[42] The implementation of the Slovak dual vocational education and training (VET) system started in 2015/16. The (VET) sector has long been a robust cornerstone of the Slovak education system. The level of participation in secondary vocational education and training (VET) is one of the highest in the European Union (EU). Nevertheless, the skills possessed by VET graduates do not consistently align with the demands of the labour market. The dual VET system was implemented to rectify the discrepancy. Employers, primarily from the automotive industry, have initiated this programme to foster stronger collaborations between schools and companies. Its main objective is to promote vocational education and training that aligns with the demands of the labour market.

[43] OECD (2020). *OECD Skills Strategy Slovak Republic: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/bb688e68-en.

the unions' activities. Education is not the highest priority due to the expert and unions` personal capacities' constraints. In the words of a trade union representative: *"If we, representatives of trade unions, don't participate in this [adult learning for digital transformation], we are at a great disadvantage, and when we wake up, it may be at a time when the whole thing will bypass us. We should already be pointing out problems at this stage."*

As far as social dialogue on adult learning works at the company level, the Slovakian national report highlights that:

- "In the case study company, there is an active and functional social dialogue at the plant level. However, general findings imply that trade unions are thus far not actively engaged in training and learning agenda at the workplace. The trade union plays a rather traditional role in collective bargaining, while training and upskilling are not included in social dialogue at the company level. Currently, the active company-level collective agreement does not include any specific clauses on training and education at the workplace. The company-level social dialogue issues are shaped by the preferences and needs of unionised workers that relate to wages and working conditions.";
- "While formal arrangements have not transpired, discussions at the level of social dialogue between the management and the workers' representatives include training and learning issues. The management and the union share an understanding of rapidly changing skill needs and the benefits of up-skilling policies, including job rotation.";
- "The company management anticipates that training could be a part of a renewal of the collective agreement. In this respect, however, HR aspires to establish a fund for education where trade unions would financially contribute to covering expenses on re-training and up-skilling programmes.";
- "Both employer and company-level trade unions communicate the potential for greater cooperation in terms of involvement of social dialogue in the topic of up-skilling and supporting increased participation of employees in learning. Both employees and trade unions perceive the lack of motivation of employees to participate in upskilling and reskilling as a serious barrier to organisational development.".

2.2 Insights from a comparative perspective on national reports

This section focuses on analysing essential aspects of adult learning and adult learning systems from a comparative perspective. It acknowledges the consensus on the policy's key importance and recognises that despite past, present, and planned efforts, there are still many obstacles to overcome in the future. Obstacles encompass barriers to participation in and access to training for adult learners, and challenges arising from labour and skill shortages (both for recent graduates who are still seeking employment and individuals who require upskilling and reskilling initiatives).

2.2.1 Consensus around the key importance of lifelong/adult learning

Both societies and the labour market are changing due to global developments such as the green and digital transition and other ongoing megatrends. As a result, **the demand and supply of skills is changing and workers need,** or are likely to need, **more and/or new competences and skills.** This means that adults cannot rely solely on the knowledge gained in their early education and training. Even the training that employees receive when starting their employment is not expected to be enough. **Thus, from a comparative perspective, it can be claimed that, in general, there is consensus among the Member States included**

in this study on the importance of lifelong[44], adult and continuing learning, including up-skilling and re-skilling.

To cite some examples, the Belgian national report claims: "lifelong learning is considered critical, not only for its contribution to economic competitiveness, innovation and employability but also as a buffer against social risks and a tool for personal development and fulfilment […]". Similarly, the Bulgarian national report states: "The stakeholders agree that adult learning, upskilling and reskilling, are fundamental for the development of the national economy and enterprises." This kind of opinion is shared also in the Italian national report, in the words of some workers and employee representatives: "[…] the value of training is confirmed, at least for two reasons: as an instrument for attracting and retaining staff, and to cope with the technological innovations introduced. All respondents agreed on the strategic importance of training to address the challenges posed by the twin transition […]".

Along with recognising lifelong/adult learning as a priority, the awareness about the importance of investing in and promoting adult learning among employers and workers increased as well. This translated into plans, initiatives, and measures. nevertheless, there are still relevant challenges to tackle. Indeed, despite the numerous efforts made:

- The participation rate is low and lower than the EU27 level for four out of five Member States covered in the I SKILL project, and it is lower for those who are most in need for all the five Member States and for the EU27 (as also confirmed, in brief, by the descriptive statistics in the first section of this Chapter)[45].
- Some groups of employers appear to be left out; this mainly concerns smaller organisations. For example, the Italian national report underlines: "The importance of training is particularly perceived in the automotive sector, which in Italy consists mainly of small to medium-sized enterprises that require, now more than ever, skills enabling the technological and organisational transformation processes triggered by the green and digital transitions."

Overall, the outcomes of lifelong and adult learning policies are still unsatisfactory, and, as indicated in the Bulgarian national report, many of the difficulties related to adult learning in recent years persist. The following sections, namely 2.2.2, 2.2.3, and 2.2,4, are specifically focused on thoroughly analysing various types of challenges.

2.2.2 Barriers to the involvement in and to the provision of training for adult learners

This section is concerned with examining the various types of barriers that employees and employers encounter, respectively, concerning the involvement in and the provision of training for adult learners.

For employees

As suggested in the Flanders (Belgium) national report, in general, **four types of barriers** can be identified[46]: "(i) dispositional barriers, which refer to the characteristics, attitudes,

[44] It is worth noting that in the Flanders (Belgium) national report, one respondent posed a more macro-level question; namely, what the goal of lifelong learning should be, because as long as this is not clear it remains a difficult concept to execute.

[45] On the worker side, those more in need can be proxied by the less educated but other categories are involved as older workers and migrants.

[46] The classification proposed is similar to the one in Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) that divides the obstacles to involvement in lifelong learning into three categories: "situational barriers, dispositional barriers, and institutional

perceptions and experiences that someone has in relation to learning, such as negative previous learning experiences; (ii) institutional barriers, which follow from the mechanisms, practices or procedures relating to the education and training system, such as the employee not meeting training requirements and it being difficult to reach training locations; (iii) situational barriers, which are linked to a person's personal or professional situation, e.g. a lack of time (due to work and/or family) or a lack of support from the employer; and (iv) informational barriers, which refer to the availability of information on the importance of lifelong learning, the training offer and the support that one can receive (DWSE, 2021)".

In general, certain categories of workers may face a greater burden from certain of these barriers. As an example, older or lower-educated workers may encounter dispositional barriers, whereas women may face situational barriers. The combination of these barriers and the perceived lack of motivation or desire to learn may lead to a low level of engagement in lifelong learning. This is true also for other disadvantaged groups, like workers with a migration background or from ethnic minority groups (as for the Roma, as flagged in the Bulgarian national report). Finally, the Belgian (Flanders) national report found that: "several studies show that especially blue-collar workers and workers with more operational or supportive roles have fewer training opportunities (VIVO, 2022). "To enhance the rate of participation, it is imperative to address these obstacles, elevate the drive to acquire knowledge and enhance the entire educational environment. Collaboration among policymakers, social partners, companies, and other relevant actors is essential."

As far as the dispositional barriers are concerned, part of the obstacle lies in the insufficient motivation of the employees themselves to acquire additional knowledge and skills. More specifically, the Bulgarian national report highlights **the relevance of lack of skills or psychological factors**: "Particular groups could be especially at risk in the context of an unwillingness to learn — e.g., according to an interview with a training provider representative, referring to '[a]dults who have certain resistances to technologization and the widespread adoption of technology. For them, these barriers are related to lack of skills, fear of failure, worry about damaging the device they are operating', as well as '[i]lliterate persons, currently engaged mainly in manual work requiring the performance of unsophisticated operations, with a low degree of responsibility'. For both groups, which are at risk of being excluded from the labour market, solutions to address their constraints should be sought through various motivational tools and an individually targeted approach". In a similar vein, the Danish national report, referring to workers with low educational background in a specific company, **underlines the relevance of previous experiences**: "Understanding that previous negative experiences can make it challenging for these employees to participate in education and training, the company aims to remove barriers by providing on-site teaching within the production facility. By offering courses directly at the workplace, the company expects to increase participation by approximately 20-30%". Furthermore, **a particular resistance can be encountered towards acquiring specific skills depending on the individual worker characteristics**. As explained in the Danish national report: "While digital and sustainable skills are prioritised by management, employees do not share the same level of interest. Some employees find digital skills challenging, particularly if they are not accustomed to technology,

barriers". Situational obstacles are those that are tied to a person's life circumstances at a certain time in the family life cycle and professional life. Personality characteristics or personal attributes gained from early educational experiences are referred to as dispositional obstacles. Institutional obstacles involve mechanisms within institutions that discourage or impede participation. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) point to the fact that individuals have agency to decide on involvement in education or training, but owing to boundaries, they are unable to perform the chosen action to participate. Rubenson, K., and Desjardins, R. (2009), The impact of welfare state regimes on barriers to participation in adult education: a bounded agency model, Adult Education Quarterly, Vol. 59, pp. 187–207.

and may exhibit resistance towards learning them. This resistance can stem from perceived difficulty or a belief that it is too late to acquire these skills, considering their age. Conversely, most of the younger generation possesses stronger digital skills but may lack mechanical skills, which can also impede their participation in relevant training and education". **Dispositional barriers are referred to as well** in the Slovakian national report w**ith specific reference to early school leavers**[47] that as: "[…]adult learners could need preparation to enter second-chance education programmes. Such support is in other EU countries provided in non-formal basic skills programmes but in Slovakia such programmes exist to a very limited extent (Studená and Gállová, 2021)."

Among the institutional barriers there are **the financial barriers** mentioned in the Flanders (Belgium) and the Slovakian national reports. This latter refers both to the early school leavers in access to second-chance education (e.g., costs related to commuting or the absence of stipends for socially disadvantaged students) and the unemployed adult learners. In Denmark, one interviewed company highlighted that: "The industry's collective agreement grants employees the right to 10 days of education or training, which is partly financed by trade union members. Transportation and accommodation expenses are covered by the company. Without this support, employees would likely attend fewer courses, especially considering the current inflationary environment." Another relevant institutional barrier is the **lack of qualified trainers and training centres** as flagged in the Bulgarian national report. This latter point highlights that according to the trade unions: "[…] the low level of motivation is also a result of the low pay, few opportunities for career development and difficult working conditions in the metal sector."

Situational barriers are typically linked to the **lack of time** as mentioned in the Flanders (Belgium) national report or to a **lack of work-life balance policies** that would enable parents to participate in second-chance educational programmes as underlined in the Slovakian national report.

Informational barriers relate to a **lack of information about existing adult learning opportunities** which are mentioned in the Slovakian national report.

It is common that numerous barriers may activate jointly, as is the case described in the Flanders (Belgium) national report referring to the unemployed: "Participating in training during this time would seem logical but is not self-evident. Barriers to this include the unpredictable nature of temporary unemployment, the administrative burden that can accompany application processes, the absence of contact details which thus prevents training providers from reaching the target group, and employers fearing that newly acquired knowledge will be used at other employers or in the search for a new job".

The solutions that can remedy the existence of these barriers are complex. The Belgium (Flanders) national report mentions some studies underlining that: "To increase the participation rate, it is essential to tackle these barriers, raise the motivation to learn and improve the overall learning culture (Van Langenhove and Vansteenkiste, 2020). Several

[47] As explained in the Slovakian national report: "Low-skilled adults have particularly weak prospects in terms of employability in Slovakia and therefore a prospective stream of formal adult education could be represented by second-chance education programmes offering opportunities to gain formal degrees later in life. Due to rising school drop-out rates, the need for these programmes is likely to grow (Rigová et al., 2021). As per system design, second-chance education programmes can be provided by elementary or secondary schools, but in practice, secondary schools prevailed in the past in providing second-chance education in a distance-learning form. The current research on second chance education (Rigová et al., 2021) shows these programmes are insufficiently funded, the schools lack information about how to implement them, and lack overall expert support among other institutional actors in their implementation."

studies suggest that to be able to do so, policymakers, social partners, companies and other relevant actors must work together (Van Langenhove and Vansteenkiste, 2020; Van Cauwenberghe et al., 2021).". Furthermore, the Danish national report proposes an interesting point of view regarding a change in the workplace culture in general as an instrument to stimulate participation: "The topic of employee motivation was discussed in all semi-structured interviews and the roundtable session, providing various perspectives on the issue. However, instead of focusing solely on individual employee motivation, it would be more insightful to examine workplace culture according to the interviewees. Typically, companies in industries with predominantly low-skilled workforces do not have a strong culture of prioritising adult education and continuing training. Consequently, it can be uncomfortable for individual employees to stand out among their colleagues and not conform to the prevailing work culture. To enhance motivation among individual employees, the workplace culture regarding adult education and continuing training needs to embrace lifelong learning as an integral part of being in the labour market."

For employers

In the scientific literature, several barriers to providing lifelong learning have been identified for employers (including costs, market failures, and an inadequate offer) which affect micro-sized, small and medium-sized companies in particular.

Belgian and Italian economies, for example, have a high share of micro, small and medium-sized companies, for which barriers such as financial and opportunity costs, market failures, a lack of information and an inadequate training offer, could be more pertinent than among larger companies. The limited budget problem for SMEs is flagged as well in the Bulgarian national report. In the Danish national report is also considered that among SMEs, a strategic approach to adult education and training is less common. Many SMEs concentrate on providing employees with the necessary certifications mandated by law. If individual employees show interest in attending adult education or training, they are often responsible for seeking out additional information themselves. Moreover, SMEs may lack the administrative staff to assist employees in applying for courses or subsidies, thereby creating higher administrative barriers for employees. Due to their size, SMEs are unable to send a group of employees for education or training simultaneously. As a result, many SMEs encounter issues, such as course cancellations by education providers or low relevance for their specific production. Additionally, since employees from different companies may attend the same course, the content cannot be customised to specifically cater to the production needs of individual SMEs.

2.2.3 Labour and skills shortages and mismatches

Green and digital transitions, which have been transforming labour markets across Europe, increased the risk of labour and skill shortages or mismatches. Shortages and mismatches are an important challenge for various sectors and occupations, and, in particular, for the automotive one. As considered in the Flemish (Belgium) national report: "The number of hard-to-fill jobs is on the rise, such that experts and stakeholders are now referring to a hard-to-fill-economy (Dekocker, 2023)". This theme is considered mainly in the Flemish, Bulgarian and Slovakian national reports. As for the reasons behind the shortages, there may be:

- **A decrease in the labour supply due, in turn, to an adverse demographic situation**. Especially relevant are the long-term trends of a **decreasing active population** and an **ageing labour force** (e.g., as in the case of Bulgaria and Slovakia), exacerbated by the high levels of emigration and relatively **low levels of incoming immigrants** (e.g., as in the case of Slovakia). In the Bulgarian case study also **a relatively high level of poverty** is identified as a relevant adverse element.

- **The lack of sufficient supply of STEM[48] profiles or technical or vocational education**. **STEM profiles are particularly under the spotlight,** as claimed in the Flemish[49] (and in the Danish[50] national reports**. It seems, indeed, that despite the various strategies implemented to encourage the younger generations to enrol in STEM,** the number of students who opt for STEM remains too limited. A similar case is recorded, as well, in Bulgaria where the social partners agreed that there has been a continuous trend of decreasing interest towards the engineering disciplines, while at the same time, the demand for engineers has continuously been increasing[51]. The Italian national report foresaw the demand for new professionals especially in the areas of production processes, automation and mechatronic systems, products and materials, and environmental sustainability. The R&D area related to processes for products and materials will also require skilled workers, along with engineers and designers[52].
- **A misalignment between education and/or skills and labour market needs for the newly admitted workers.** This kind of mismatch is flagged in the Flemish national report which highlights that, especially, the employer's organisations have argued that **the formal education offered does not meet the employers' expectations**. As underlined by the Slovakian national report, both the employer's organisation on the sectoral level and the peak-level trade union organisation, pointed out that the skills of **the newly admitted workers do not generally fulfil the needs of the employers**, specifically in the automotive sector.
- **A weak link between companies and the education system.** In the Bulgarian national report is recognised that: **"**the formal education system has not been able to provide the required skills for the machine building sector — for a number of reasons, including the lack of specialised vocational education and training classes, and the low motivation of pupils (Kirov, 2018).". Similarly, the Slovakian national report points out that employer's organisation on the sectoral level and the peak-level trade union organisation agreed on claiming that: "One of the reasons for the shortage of qualified workers is […] the

[48] Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

[49] In Belgium are pursued actions aimed at promoting the sector among students and the future workforce via dedicated campaigns, the integration of automotive technology in the STEM curricula, and improved collaboration with schools and training providers.

[50] As underlined in the Danish national report: "Regarding green and digital skills, the focus of political and public attention lies primarily on the traditional education system, aiming to encourage the younger generation to pursue vocational or STEM education. The adult education and training system receives political support through the negotiation of tripartite agreements involving social partners and the government. Yet, since 2000, numerous analyses and reports on the subject have highlighted the recurrence of similar obstacles and proposed comparable solutions. Nevertheless, it has proven difficult for politicians, social partners, stakeholders and others to successfully establish a well-functioning adult education and continuing training system that effectively meets the demands of the labour market (Andersen, 2019)."

[51] It is also interesting to underline that in Bulgaria: "the roots of this decreasing interest can be found in a previous stage of development of Bulgarian industry and the particular sector under scrutiny. At the beginning of the 1990s, many employees lost their jobs in the metal and machine building sector. Representatives of particular professions, e.g., welders, migrated to find jobs abroad. Not only did workers attempt to find jobs abroad, but many engineers also left the country. In the first two decades after 1989, working conditions in the sector were poor, an additional reason for its diminishing attractiveness. However, the situation has changed and today it is completely different. The sector has attracted significant investment. sufficient labour force to work and fulfil the orders received by the sector."

[52] It is also explained that "As such workers do not seem to be readily available in the labour market, the training pathways of higher technological institutes (ITSs) seem to be a good entry pool for the workers in demand, as they are able to build shared plans with companies, in addition to vocational education and training (IeFP) and the higher technical education and training system (IFTS)."

underdeveloped nexus between business and educational systems[53].” The Slovakian national report also points out that the lack of cooperation between companies and the education sector is critical mainly for SMEs for which the training system might be more costly.

- **Possible failures deriving from continuing education (including up-skilling and re-skilling).** As explained in the Flemish national report: “It is now widely recognised that the workforce will need more/new competences and that relying on the knowledge and skills gained in early education and training will not suffice. In this regard, especially employers’ organisations have argued that the formal education offered often does not meet employers’ expectations (Dekocker, 2023).” In this context, continuing training, including upskilling and reskilling is considered key. Nevertheless, possible problems in the process of continuing education can arise from the following, as highlighted in the Italian national report: “There is […] often a disconnect between the training profiles created in the context of study and continuing training and occupational profiles linked to the categories of the classification systems. This distance creates at least two problems: a failure to make the most of the training carried out, with the risk of even more highly skilled workers being employed in low-skilled jobs, and a difficult dialogue between the world of training and the world of work, with the former building profiles that are disconnected from the actual professional framing systems.”.
- **Job quality issues.** The Flemish national report also recalls that a part of the policy debate argues that: “labour shortages appear to be the most pressing, and have increased most, in those sectors and occupations with poor conditions and low wages (Zwysen, 2023)”. This is flagged also in the Bulgarian national report as far as willingness to training is concerned: “While trade unions agreed about the low level of motivation, they explained this by the low pay, few opportunities for career development and difficult working conditions in the sector.”

To **address these challenges various strategies have been put in place**[54] to cite some examples it can be mentioned that:

- **Companies count mainly on workplace learning.** As explained in the Bulgarian national report, companies rely mainly on workplace learning to train early-career workers[55].

[53] To address this challenge, Slovakian social partners, as described in the Slovakian national report: “[…] made active steps to ensure that the provision of the workforce improves. First, employers […] have lobbied for the (re)introduction of dual education based on active cooperation between schools and employers. Dual education vocational schools are organized with a key element of workplace training in the form of an apprenticeship in a specific field (Fazekas and Kureková, 2016; Šćepanović, 2020). Second, various legislative changes to the Labour Code were introduced. This includes the introduction of “flexikonto” following the German example of flexible working time arrangement. Another key feature of the labour supply model embodies a fairly lenient regulation related to agency work, including employment of immigrant labour, which enables to respond flexibly to fluctuations in the production cycle, with less oversight over working conditions and worker rights (Šumichrast and Bros, 2023). These efforts take place at the backside of poorly developed adult education in Slovakia with few national-level opportunities in terms of well-accessible training schemes or funding which would incentivize adult learning and enable adaptation to changing skill needs (Machlica et al. 2017; Fazekas and Kureková, 2016).”

[54] Others will be discussed in section 2.4.5.

[55] “The following quotation from an interview with a trade union representative summarises quite well companies’ focus on concrete on-the-job training related to particular machines. ‘A snapshot of the whole industry shows that the introduction of new machinery relies on on-site training, and thus on the so-called instructions. These relate to the characteristics of specific machines and have no connection with the continuing training of adults to provide them with an orientation to the new working realities that are coming in the near or more distant future and which will require tangible changes in the nature and organisation of work.’ (Trade Union Federation)”.

- **As a complementary strategy, existing labour and skill gaps are filled with the employment of foreign workers,** as suggested in the Bulgarian and the Slovakian National reports. In the Bulgarian case, it is reported that this happens despite the complex procedures for hiring foreign employees according to Bulgarian legislation. For the Slovakian case, it has been stressed that employers commented that: "the recruitment of foreign workers is challenging. A range of issues arise related to broader integration support (e.g. housing), which is underdeveloped at national or local levels, and this thus raises various problems at the workplace and in the communities. Employment of foreign workers demands the provision of language courses and requalification or training courses in their native language, which further increases costs for the companies".

2.2.4 Additional challenges and possible solutions

Further challenges limit the effectiveness of the training carried out and, in this context, the role of the social partners is decisive at the national, subnational, sectoral and company levels. Challenges can be related to workers, to companies or both. Among the most relevant ones it is worth mentioning the following:

- **Low awareness of workers about adult learning and its benefits.** This challenge has been flagged in Slovakia where: "According to the union representative, companies do not work with the motivations of the workers systematically; they claim that further learning should be promoted not merely by the pay bonus mechanism but also by promoting the self-development of the workers".
- **Reluctance, from the company side to consider continuing training, upskilling and reskilling as an investment. As suggested in the Italian national report:** "the organisation of work often makes the time factor particularly valuable, so that training almost turns out to be a negative investment … [and] … in the case of easily replaceable staff or of those on fixed-term contracts, it is more complex to convince the company to invest in them".
- **Difficulties for companies, especially SMEs, in accessing the available funds[56], managing and implementing courses, and dealing with bureaucracy.** As underlined in the Italian national report "Currently, in the automotive industry and beyond, there are significant differences based on company size. Larger companies are often better structured and able to plan, manage and implement numerous and articulated training courses for their employees. In contrast, smaller ones struggle with this planning and management activity, as many interviewees repeatedly pointed out. The former can also do without a relationship with public policies and thus with programmes financed by national or community resources. The latter, often lack sufficient resources to make adequate investments in training, and have difficulty – complicated by bureaucracy – in accessing the opportunities made available by the social partners and the public." A possible solution identified in the Italian national report is that: "[…]it would be

[56] As far as funds are concerned, for example in the Italian national report is underlined: "Despite the presence of financed training, the main channel of financing for companies in Italy is a company's internal resources through self-financing (Unioncamere, 2021). This signals a difficulty on the part of companies to access or even know the external financing possibilities to which they are entitled. In turn that creates a major difference between larger companies that can afford internal courses with their own funds, and smaller entities, such as small companies, which in light of only self-financed sources, do not organise courses.". Furthermore, again in the Italian national Report: "Some interviewees pointed out that for accessing the resources made available by the interprofessional funds and the New Skills Fund, there are bureaucratic aggravations and complications that, once again, limit the use of these tools by less structured enterprises.".

appropriate to identify the different emerging training needs, and then link them, from time to time with the different tools available: whether regionally, nationally or devised by bilaterality and collective bargaining. Only by first having this overview will it be possible to imagine and develop a complementarity between different measures, even reasoning in terms of territory, supply chain or district.".

- **Difficulties for companies to access the right information.** As highlighted in the Italian national report: "Currently, the connection between training policies designed and managed by industrial relations and public policies dedicated to the same issues is therefore limited, if not completely absent. Some interviewees, however, pointed out that companies are also very attentive to regional training opportunities (as well as those of interprofessional funds), although in a context in which the latter are often little known, and not always easily accessible, by less structured companies.".
- **Flaws in the system of monitoring and anticipating market skills and training needs.** To cite some examples, the Bulgarian national report highlights the necessity of better anticipating change and new skills requirements based on labour market needs, while in Italy, the National report recognises that many companies often have little knowledge of their own needs. This seems to be the case, especially for smaller firms. Belgium tackled this issue through the establishment of sector funds that are acknowledged, as confirmed by the gathered interviews, for their proactive involvement in anticipating evolving skills requirements. Indeed, sector funds thus have a very good understanding of what is happening in their sector in terms of the knowledge and skills that are required and available and their central position allows them to be particularly committed to harder-to-reach groups (e.g. small and medium-sized companies).
- **Flaws in supporting the validation of on-the-job skill learning.** This challenge is referred to in various national reports (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark and Slovakia). The Belgian (Flanders) national report, in particular, refers to the case of the wood sector, urging other sectors to take inspiration: "The ESF-project WPL4BK *'levenslang gekwalificeerd werkplekleren'* resulted in the wood sector being the first in Flanders to issue an official professional qualification for what employees learn in the workplace. This marks an important achievement because issuing an official professional qualification for what employees learn on the job enables on-the-job learning to be incorporated in the set target for training participation (60 %). In addition, it broadens the view or mindset of how lifelong learning can be achieved, as following formal training is not indeed for everyone (e.g. those who are more hands-on learners or those with poor previous learning experiences). Furthermore, a professional qualification for on-the-job learning might address the problem of certain groups often receiving fewer training opportunities – specifically those who have been trained for a shorter period of time, who are further removed from the core activity or from a managerial or specialised position within the organisation, or who are less (digitally) skilled in orientating themselves in training (VIVO, 2022; and insights from our roundtable discussion)."

2.2.5 Company-level learning and training practices

How training is provided is changing considerably

As highlighted in the Belgian (Flanders) national report: "**E-learning and blended learning formats have become more common and are continuing to become so** (probably as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic during which e-learning was almost the only available learning method…)." This is confirmed also in the case of Italy where: "especially since the pandemic, synchronous training activities have become more prevalent thanks to the provision of virtual classrooms" and in Slovakia where: "telework have become an integral part of the company

policy even after the most severe pandemic waves ended especially in R&D and for high-skilled workers." **Nevertheless, more conventional on-the-job learning and side-by-side learning, remain of great relevance.**

Companies in the Member States under scrutiny in the I SKILL project put in place several approaches and tools to enhance learning accessibility and opportunities. It is worth describing some of them and the opinions expressed by the interviewees.

As a first step, both the Bulgarian and the Slovakian national reports mention **induction plans[57] for the newcomers followed by long-term plans**. Regarding the introduction of new products, the Italian national report, referring to one of the companies interviewed, highlights that it: "conducts widespread, cross-cutting training courses across different areas of the company, so that each worker understands their role in the creation of the new product".

Moreover, **Member States made use of online tools for different purposes**:

- **Tools for streamlining the process of visualising the possible career path** (Belgium) **and the process of finding relevant training** (Denmark). More specifically:
  - In **Belgium,** one company among those interviewed was developing an **internal company career path platform.** It aims to help workers visualise the possible career paths in the organisation, to offer them details on each function, to take ownership of their career path and to stimulate learning-related dialogue with their manager. In addition, the platform helps managers by providing function details with which they may otherwise not be 100 % familiar. In Belgium, as well, Educam[58], on request of the social partners developed a **competence self-check tool** that was piloted in 20 companies. As explained in the Belgian (Flanders) national report: "with this tool, employees can indicate their level of competences to the best of their ability. The tool thus maps an employee's self-reported competences, which helps in visualising someone's need for training. This visualisation, in turn, aids employers with their training policy.".
  - In **Denmark,** one company among those interviewed, referred to **a course catalogue** that was created specifically for employees in the production department to streamline the process of finding relevant courses for employees[59]. Indeed, the course catalogue is easily accessible, allowing employees to gain an overview of the

[57] In the Bulgarian national report is explained that: "One company employee interviewed had previous experience within the automotive sector, but at a different company, thus on rather different software. They adapted quickly to the new workplace, thanks to the team leader, despite some inaccuracies in the plan they received upon hiring." An employee representative in the semistructured interview claims: "[Some] of the video materials included within the individual induction plan [were] 'old', containing information that was not relevant to the company's current processes (old interface of some programmes, etc.). This was kind of [a] problem within the self-study period. But I had weekly meetings with my team leader, so those problems were quickly solved."

[58] Educam is the sector fund for blue-collar workers in the automotive sector and related sectors.

[59] As explained in the Danish national report: " The course catalogue encompasses various types of adult education programmes, such as those for general adult education (Forberedende voksenundervisning), vocational education, and adult and continuing higher education (academy and diploma level). Management recognises the importance of building skills on a solid foundation, ensuring that employees possess basic skills before progressing to topics such as digitalisation, safety and optimisation. In line with this, all employees are offered dyslexia screenings. Approximately 30 % of production employees face challenges related to dyslexia. Therefore, the course catalogue includes literacy courses in Danish to address these challenges, after which they can focus on developing other skills.

learning programmes management deems relevant for them and are relieved of the burden of navigating official websites filled with irrelevant information.

- In **Slovakia,** a **job portal supports job rotation**. The portal posts information about job positions based on which team leaders may decide whether rotation of certain workers is necessary. Job rotation serves not only for upskilling purposes but also to mitigate single sourcing which occurs when the employees cannot be substituted due to the unique skill set they acquire.

- **Tools for providing online training at the workplace (Bulgaria and Slovakia) and virtual reality programmes:**
  - In **Bulgaria**, the company interviewed has **an internal online training platform** that is accessible to all employees with some of the training being devoted to newcomers and others for reskilling and upskilling. Training is held during employees' working hours and is free of charge. It is available in a hybrid form and it is conducted by both company employees (mainly for technical skills) and external training providers (mainly for soft skills).
  - In **Slovakia,** one of the companies interviewed, recently established its **e-learning platforms** for all categories of workers, providing employees with access to e-learning materials, online courses, and exams in proximity to their workstations so that small learning sessions can be undertaken during the workday. The transition to online learning was accelerated by the intention to make knowledge-sharing and learning more systematised and effective.
  - **On the nature of the training (e.g., online vs in person), interviewees expressed various opinions.** In **the Belgian National report,** it was noted that blended learning: "creates more individualised learning processes, compared to in-class training sessions, since blended learning allows for better handling of variations in, for instance, learning speed and assistance. Nonetheless […] these new learning methods also create challenges such as deciding what can be done digitally, deciding where an in-person approach is still valuable, and deciding how best to assist trainers with the changing learning context." In the **Slovakian national report,** it was quoted that: "Some of the employees appreciate that they may take e-learning training and testing […] as it makes learning more flexible vis-à-vis the work schedules of individual workers and their work-life balance needs. On the other hand, in the studied company as well as some others, workers communicated a preference for in-person training forms due to a need for social contact with team workers […]. The training specialist also admits that the effectiveness of some courses, such as those fostering social skills (presentation skills, teamwork), is less effective if they are conducted online or in a hybrid form."
  - In **Denmark** and in **Slovakia** the national reports refer as well to virtual reality programmes. In Denmark, one of the companies interviewed: "[…] is actively exploring opportunities to enhance learning among its employees through digitalisation, leveraging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). The digitalisation efforts centre on training newcomers and providing specific safety instructions. In Slovakia, one of the companies interviewed: "[…] utilises virtual reality programmes developed in cooperation with university students as programmers. In the virtual learning tool, operators provide information and assistance in the process of manipulating the robotic appliances. This approach is particularly useful for operators who are supposed to gain technical skills and find ways for potential cooperation between operators and machine adjusters. According

to the HR representative, this process also accelerates adjustment of robots which is usually time-lengthy and delays the production process.".

Further to the online tools, **some Member States**, in particular Belgium, Italy and Slovakia **refer to additional internal initiatives aimed at fostering continuing training, including reskilling and upskilling.**

- In **Belgium**, as highlighted in the national report, the three companies involved in the semi-structured interviews developed their **training centres or training academies**. One interviewee pointed out the benefit of these initiatives as they enable the workers to be up-to date with the newest required knowledge. Nevertheless, the existence of a training centre in an organisation, however, does not imply that such centres are free from challenges. On the downside aspect, the same interviewee mentioned that such centres might train their employees in too narrow a manner in terms of brand specifics[60].
- **In Italy,** as suggested in the national report, **larger companies often develop corporate academies**, for the training of new hires yet also for the qualification and retraining of employees, and they personalise the training offer as much as possible. Thus, they do not rely on 'external' collaborations – for example with the training system – but rather try to involve professionals as teachers for pathways where the skills are always tailored to the specific needs and identity of the company. Some **companies of more limited size are also identifying 'external' partners to provide solutions for their training needs**, for example by collaborating with higher technological institutes (ITS) and universities, and for the realisation of training and retraining courses, drawing on the resources made available by bilaterality.
- **In Slovakia,** as detailed in the national report**, one company decided to design its own requalification programme due to a shortage of candidates for a specific position.** The specific example referred to the position of machine adjuster[61], but as recalled in the interview with the head of the production unit: "[…] We started with operators and machine adjusters, but we develop and apply it [this procedure] also for mechanical maintenance workers." Nevertheless, as also pointed out by the respondent, such a procedure of supporting mobility cannot be imposed on all

[60] In the Belgian (Flanders) national report other problems related to the training centres are as follows: "One company interviewee for instance pointed out that project teams (e.g. for the development of a new electric car) are focused on organisational aspects (like how best to move the new car through the factory and what infrastructure adjustments are needed) but forget about the people (i.e. employees also need to be trained for this). Creating this awareness was thus something the interviewee hoped to improve in the future. Another challenge, mentioned by the same interview participant, is that the organisation tends to ask for the benefits of a proposed training idea in terms of (financial) numbers – for example by when the company would notice a return on investment. Such questions are understandable from a business perspective, but they are difficult to answer since training centres work with people."

[61] The programme was intended to last about four months and was suitable for candidates, either already employed workers or other job applicants. Especially those who graduated from technical vocation schools (mostly electrotechnics) were invited to apply for the role of machine adjusters. The usual practice is that if these candidates fail in the admission process for a job position of machine adjuster, they may be offered the job of operator and later they may be re-trained for the role of machine adjuster. The course entails general skills, technical skills, mathematics, and logical thinking. After being admitted, the mentor provides guidance throughout the training. At the same time, peer-to-peer support can be observed in the company when a more experienced machine adjuster provides a newly employed adjuster with mentorship during the first months of employment. Well-experienced adjusters are also offered more advanced courses such as courses on performance monitoring and rebuilding the robot, and maintenance courses.

categories of workers and training. For illustration, for technicians in electrical maintenance, training requirements are strictly regulated and defined.

Finally in some Member States, at the company level, it is reported that **there are different forms of individual support for employees**.

- In **Belgium,** one of the companies further expressed the important role that **training coordinators** play as they are the ones who talk to the employees regarding the topic of training and career, who draft the personal development plans (a tool which offers support to promote someone's labour market-oriented personal development) and who do all the administrative work related to the aspect of adult learning within their company. The job of a training coordinator is thus critical to the re-and upskilling of employees.
- In **Bulgaria,** where companies rely mainly on workplace learning[62] to train early-career workers, every employee, upon joining in, is coupled with a **mentor whose main role is to help integrate into the work environment both informally and formally**. The presence of a mentor was highly appreciated by employees, as confirmed in an employee's representative interview.
- In **Slovakia,** within the abovementioned requalification programme, the employee, after being admitted, is provided with **mentor guidance** throughout the training. Also, **peer-to-peer support** is envisaged in the company.
- In **Slovakia,** at the company level, a **tool for supporting internal mobility within the company** is also available: the so-called 'Talent management'. As explained in the Slovakian national report, the managers organise regularly interviews with the employees. Such an assessment serves to evaluate the performance of the employee and in cooperation with the HR management), the production unit or R&D managers decide whether the employee may be promoted or moved to another job position. These meetings also serve to encourage people who are not ambitious to apply for a higher position themselves. Talent Management was a policy transfer from the German headquarters and adjusted to some extent to the Slovak context.

2.3 Key recommendations from the national reports

This section brings together fifteen selected recommendations based on the concluding sections of the National reports. Each recommendation, while formulated in a general way, takes into account the differences between the Member States studied in the I SKILL project.

2.3.1 Improve lifelong and adult learning culture

In the Belgian (Flanders) national report a poor lifelong and adult learning culture seems to be particularly pressing. Thus, it is recommended its improvement among all actors and levels. Some examples from the Belgian (Flanders) national report are: "informing companies of why lifelong learning matters and of what the benefits are for them in the short and the longer run, […] raising companies' capacity to offer training and to create a stimulating environment, especially given that those who are not motivated to learn sometimes cannot assess their training needs properly on their own or point to external factors such as only taking training

[62] "Learning opportunities offered by the company are evaluated highly by personnel. They are easily accessible, and permission of a team leader is not always required. It is even possible for an employee to go through a training course more than once if they consider it necessary". In the words of an employee representative: "The training offered by the company is diverse. Even now, I have [identified] a [course]. I discussed it with my team leader and the answer was positive. He has never refused me, actually. We are waiting for other colleagues to join in order for the course to take place, but even if no one [else] enrols — it will be held individually for me."

because they are obliged to do so". The Slovakian national report highlighted that: "To develop lifelong and adult learning culture […] learning opportunities need to be individualised, accessible, and flexible for any adult.". The Italian national report refers to critical remarks towards the system of active policies, which is too focused on providing support only when a person becomes unemployed, rather than adopting a lifelong learning-oriented strategy. Instead, "[…]there should be a change of approach to continuing education: thinking of it not only as a tool to manage emergencies and crises but also as a useful investment for the company and the worker […]".

2.3.2 Take into account the relationships between adult learning policy and other policy areas

The future improvement of adult learning policy may be interwoven with the development of other policy spheres, so it is important to intervene in these latter to enhance the effectiveness of the formers. This is the case, for example in Bulgaria, where many of the challenges faced by the adult learning system result from socioeconomic and institutional problems. In another respect, the Italian national report claims the strict interconnection between the adult learning system and industrial policies[63].

2.3.3 Prioritise the equality and inclusiveness aspects of adult learning

Regarding company training activities, the Italian national report states that the agreement that defines their principles, content, and purpose, needs to be more inclusive by referring to: "[…] certain categories of workers who demonstrate training needs or specific conditions, e.g., elderly workers or those with care responsibilities, low-skilled workers, seasonal workers and young people with apprenticeship contracts for a company placement." In the Slovakian national Report is underlined that the design of some public funding is insufficient in addressing inequality: "While public funding for adult learning provides good opportunities for some learners, the design of the schemes does not address inequality. Different types of support to low-skilled adults need to be developed by the state so that low-skilled adults with disposition barriers to learning can profit from current opportunities in terms of workplace learning and the upskilling and reskilling routes." Furthermore, in the presence of " increasing labour shortages and polarisation, attention to low-skilled adults needs to be intensified, as they represent an untapped labour source. Social dialogue could play a more active role." The Italian national report mentions, as well, the necessity of creating tools to facilitate qualification and retraining processes for the unemployed and the inactive. Some interprofessional funds have already started to collaborate in this direction.

2.3.4 Value the work-life balance, mental health and well-being of employees

Automation and technological change at different levels of production and development seem to bring challenges vis-à-vis mental health and well-being related to the increasing burden of responsibility. As explained in the Slovakian national report: "[…] skill development and

[63] "The main problem that can be observed in the Italian context [… is] the absence of national industrial policies aimed at promoting the sector, in the light of the challenges posed by the twin transition. It is, therefore, urgent to devise and implement a truly national strategy, […] attentive to the different ramifications for the value chain of the sector; the characteristics of the companies involved, given the prevalence of micro and small to medium-sized enterprises; to the integration of resources and tools to promote process and, above all, product innovation; and to the skills acquired by workers. Without identifying a direction and a goal […] to reach, it is impossible to design appropriate training policies, which must be thought of – and concretely implemented as – necessary elements for the very feasibility of policies and not as accessory items, as often happens. Only in this way is it possible to face the challenges of the transformations taking place by governing their impacts, not only economic but also social ones […].

increasing the resilience of employees at the workplace should go hand in hand with work-life balance policies, given that adapting skill sets can put further pressure on workers' well-being."

2.3.5 Streamline the administrative processes and ease the bureaucratic burden

This recommendation, included in the Bulgarian, Danish and Slovakian national reports, refers in the first case study to: "Simplifying administrative burdens in the context of EU-funded public measures for learning in companies", in the second case study to: "Promoting a more flexible education system, that is essential to alleviate the burden of excessive regulations on educational institutions. This would enable them to explore and implement new strategies that better align with the evolving needs of companies and the educational landscape […].", and in the third case study to: "Decreas[ing] the administrative burden of publicly funded schemes faced by employers so that progress can be made in terms of their outreach at the employee level and in dealing with the skills challenges […]."

2.3.6 Reduce various sources of fragmentation

As explained in the Bulgarian national report, institutional fragmentation poses a significant challenge. But fragmentation is meant also in a 'geographical' sense, as in the cases considered in the Italian national report: "Some of the instruments that have been mentioned as crucial for the promotion of continuing training are still too fragmented at the territorial level or have rules that are not uniform. This applies, for example, to the certification of skills, which is only operational and accessible in some Italian regions. Or to the modalities of management of the interprofessional funds, which differ from one fund to another and which should be more uniform (in particular regarding the resources to be allocated to training). Apprenticeships, especially dual apprenticeships, are still only in a minority of national collective agreements."

2.3.7 Develop a career guidance policy during school years, including a more attractive presentation of the sectors

As suggested in the Bulgarian national report, one of the most significant issues in the country is the lack of motivation of young people to study engineering and technical specialities (this problem is referred to also in the Belgian and Danish case studies). In this regard, it is essential to devise strategies to enhance the appeal of these occupations. More in general, on this topic also the Italian national report intervenes, claiming that it is necessary to: "develop a new mindset, moving toward the formation of untrained skills, collaborating with educational institutions to intercept young people before they finish their studies: offering support to schools and universities, providing teachers from the world of work (professional experts), developing training modules by hosting students in companies, to help them not to just acquire professional skills immediately expendable in the labour market, but to achieve a form of training closer to the world of work, especially in terms of soft and transversal skills." The need to foster cooperation between the education system and the business sector to foster adult learning is flagged in the Slovakian national report as well.

2.3.8 Enhance the support for the development of 'transversal' skills

As suggested in the Slovakian national report: "The adult learning system needs to enhance support to the development of soft skills for adults, including social skills and critical thinking […] and this goes both for formal and non-formal education and training programmes." The need for enhancing the support for the development of transversal skills is expressed also in the Bulgarian and in the Italian national reports.

2.3.9 Boost training quality through training quality assessment

The goal of reaching a certain training participation rate[64], although important, is not without its shortcomings. One limitation is that the objective solely emphasises the quantity of training being pursued, without offering any indication of whether workers experience improvements after undergoing the training. Consequently, it fails to address the quality of the training being undertaken. As suggested in the Belgian and the Bulgarian national reports it is key to improve the quality of adult learning. In this respect, the quality assessment of adult learning is a significant instrument, as the Belgian national report emphasises. This latter also suggests that using evaluation surveys, run after the individual training courses, allows for collecting data that can feed reporting at the aggregated level and provides a starting point for adding a quality component to the current quantitatively oriented lifelong learning goal.

2.3.10 Promote and further develop the validation process of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning and practice

This recommendation, given in the Bulgarian national report, is shared also in the Belgian (Flanders) case study that highlights: “Learning can take different forms, […h]owever, […it] is often seen as following in-class or digital training – something that can be tracked. On-the-job learning in Flanders is usually neither recognised nor mapped […]. In addition, although non-formal and informal learning are important forms of learning in the work context, an employee's competences are often more likely to be weighed against the formal qualifications he or she possesses. The knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired through non-formal or informal training prove more difficult to validate.” This validation is particularly relevant for blue-collar workers. Validation of new skills is considered important as well in the Danish and in the Slovakian national reports.

2.3.11 Keep up with new training techniques, including digital tools, while keeping them inclusive

The Bulgarian national report recommends introducing modern training techniques, adapted for adult learners, and a personalised approach, especially for low-skilled and less educated social groups. Furthermore, the impact of digitalization can be observed in the emergence of tools designed to enhance adult learning in various Member States. Nevertheless, as suggested in the Belgian national report as the instruments being discussed are of a digital nature, it is important to focus on digital illiteracy. Companies and trade unions are already prioritising digital literacy, which is a matter of special concern in Belgium due to its relatively restricted level of digital literacy compared to other EU Member States. It is crucial to ensure that those with little proficiency in digital abilities can navigate digital technologies and effectively utilise them. The responsibility for this duty could be assigned to different entities (government, unions, sector funds, companies) based on the entity that created the instrument and the intended audience. Action is therefore needed at the national and regional levels to ensure the accessibility of these tools, while the social partners could also work to ensure that the opportunities (and the related resources) made available are effectively accessible to all companies in the sectors and territories they represent.

[64] On the 4th of March 2021, a European Pillar of Social Rights action plan was presented, determining a new EU headline objective of 60 % of individuals (aged 16-64) engaging in training every year by 2030 (European Commission, 2021a). This target was confirmed by the Porto declaration (8th of May 2021), demonstrating the greatest degree of political commitment to adult learning.

2.3.12 Assess the skill requirements associated with the context, the market and the company needs

The Bulgarian national report emphasised the importance of evaluating the needed competences and skills, underlying the crucial role of the social partners in this process.[65] On a slightly different respect, the Danish national report suggests that it is relevant to have a:"specific planning of adult education and training programmes to ensure that the needs of the labour market are adequately represented" and also added that: "One of the key recommendations is the implementation of a systematic assessment of the labour and skill requirements associated with new environmental, climate, energy and supply legislation". In the Italian national report it is suggested to improve the effectiveness of territorial observatories for vocational training, which should also carry out the fundamental task of mapping, anticipating and sharing the needs of companies and, in turn, contributing to developing paths of continuing education.

2.3.13 Support SMEs

Employers face several obstacles to lifelong learning (including costs, market failures, and an inadequate offer of educational opportunities). These challenges particularly affect micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises due to limited resources and knowledge and are recognised in particular in the Danish, the Italian and the Slovakian case studies. In the Danish national report, to cite an example, it is suggested to: "[…] establish a comprehensive support system. This system would assist SMEs in identifying relevant courses, applying for subsidies and systematically planning their education and training activities".[66]

2.3.14 Further improve the activity of social partners and collective bargaining in the adult learning system

Social partners, depending on the peculiarities of individual Member States, may be qualified to participate in the implementation of most of the abovementioned recommendations. In the previous sections, their specific interventions are described at length. The national reports recommendations describe further specific areas where the involvement of social partners could be enhanced or expanded.

- The Bulgarian national report suggests promoting collective bargaining to improve the overall working conditions to stimulate training. In this respect, it is claimed in an interview with a sectoral-level trade union: "Maybe in Bulgaria, we mainly look at wages and, at the same time, the issue of professional qualification and retraining, and unfortunately the working conditions are a bit in the background, but this needs to change […]. It is important that the section on adult learning, on qualification and training in general, be more specific in the [next] sectoral collective agreement."
- The Italian national report underlines that there is still room for improvement regarding the collective agreements underlining that most of the company collective agreements do not contain any provision for training. The Italian national report also insists on i) rediscovering the role and the functions of bilateral bodies (see also next

[65] As stated in the Bulgarian national report referring to the content of an interview conducted with a national level employment organisation: "The evaluation of competencies, the evaluation of skills, must also be in our hands, because how will the state evaluate the skills of workers and employees, according to which standard? Who creates this standard? Who tells that person what skills they need to fill that job? So, even assessment centres must be part of a dialogue and social partnership accordingly."

[66] For a detailed proposal in Denmark that suggest the appointment of an ad hoc 'national secretary' see the Danish national report (2023).

recommendation) and ii) the necessity of an industrial policy, inter alia, based on the integration of public and private resources (including those made available by the social partners) and which design involves the participation of and dialogue with the social partners in the sector.

- The Slovakian national report emphasises the importance of equity and highlights the limited role of social dialogue in promoting it. The report suggests that social partners would appreciate assistance in enhancing their expertise and personal capacities, enabling them to actively contribute to the development of adult learning programmes.

2.3.15 Foster the collaboration between all the stakeholders involved

Creating and consolidating the relationship between various stakeholders involved in the adult learning system can be beneficial in several respects, for example, in the:

- Increasing training participation, as suggested in the Flemish (Belgium) national report: “To increase the participation rate, it is essential to tackle […] barriers, raise the motivation to learn and improve the overall learning culture […]. [… To] be able to do so, policymakers, social partners, companies and other relevant actors must work together […]”
- Exchanging relevant information, as suggested in the Bulgarian national report: “Employers, schools, and other relevant local stakeholders would benefit from more vivid cooperation in the area of adult learning programmes at all skill levels or age categories of adults. To this end, improved information for employers and schools about possibilities to implement programmes for adults would be beneficial, including e.g. second-chance education programmes, micro-credentials, professional baccalaureate programmes and so on.”.
- Rediscovering the role and function of specific bodies, as advocated in the Italian national report referring to bilateral bodies: “Bilaterality can today play a decisive role in promoting inclusive and quality adult learning paths, thanks to its participatory logic and constant dialogue between employers’ representatives and workers' representatives (e.g. by activating or reactivating the numerous bilateral committees that have been established, to create a branched system at a territorial level but with national control, dedicated to anticipating training needs). At the same time, committees at the company and local level can promote knowledge of the tools that have been created by negotiation to increase workers' skills. These committees can promote the accessibility of the tools to all interested parties, and can provide assistance and support.”.