

D3.1 – National report Flanders (Belgium)

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Executive summary

Our society and labour market are changing due to global developments such as the green and digital transition. These developments are also noticeable in Flanders, Belgium. 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/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 received at the start of their employment is not expected to be enough. Adult learning or lifelong learning (the two terms are used interchangeably) is therefore important.

Nevertheless, participation in lifelong learning is relatively low, especially among at-risk groups (who need training the most). Workers are faced with a number of barriers that may be difficult to tackle. Moreover, Flanders is lacking a learning culture and the motivation to participate in lifelong learning is limited. To address this issue, Flanders has set itself the goal in its recent action plan for lifelong learning of reaching a training participation rate of 60 % by 2030 (DWSE, 2021; European Commission, 2021). This goal is in line with the target set by the European Union, and Flanders has introduced a wide range of measures and initiatives to this end.

Social dialogue and industrial relations can contribute to reaching this goal as they can contribute to the learning opportunities that are made available to adults (the focus in this report is on employed adults). However, the manner in which social dialogue and industrial relations play a role in adult learning varies across countries.

The I-SKILL project, for which this report has been written, therefore aims to establish comparative knowledge on how industrial relations and social dialogue contribute to adult learning. Our report addresses adult learning, social dialogue and industrial relations in the Flemish context (Flanders) – both at large and more specifically in the automotive industry.

The insights presented in this report have been obtained by means of secondary data sources (such as policy documents, reports and website content) and via primary data collection. In particular, 10 semi-structured interviews (with people from different perspectives, not including employees) and a roundtable discussion (with employees) were conducted. Based on the knowledge acquired, the following conclusions and recommendations are put forward in this report:

- **Ensure access to high quality training for all** – With the goal of a training participation rate of 60 % in 2030, Flanders (and Europe) have adopted a rather quantitative focus. More attention should be devoted to the quality of the training offer in order to ensure that workers are better off after following training, and that the competences they have gained can be more easily transferred to other jobs. The training offer itself should be developed with a broad view in mind, so that all employers and employees can find training that is relevant to their needs.
- **Recognise on-the-job learning** – Learning can take different forms but on-the-job learning in Flanders is often not recognised. Efforts must be made to support the validation of on-the-job learning, which is a major form of learning in many companies, especially for blue-collar workers.
- **Explore a better use of digital tools** – Various digital tools are being developed to stimulate adult learning in Flanders. This should be continued, but overlap between

tools should be avoided and tools should be developed bearing in mind that not all workers have well-developed digital skills.

- **Improve the learning culture** – Given that the lack of a learning culture emerged as a structural challenge to lifelong learning in Flanders, all stakeholders must dedicate efforts to address this issue – e.g. by motivating employers to establish a stimulating working environment; and by appointing contact persons to promote lifelong learning in their organisation and to serve as a bridge to other organisations.

Introduction

This report focuses on the contribution of industrial relations and social dialogue to adult learning among employed adults in Flanders (Belgium¹). Adult learning refers to *'a range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training'* (European Education Area, n.d.). In this report, the terms adult learning and lifelong learning are used interchangeably. Flemish policy documents and social partners more often use the term lifelong learning.

Adult learning is of importance since the labour market and the competences required for it are shifting due to various transitions like technological transformations, the green transition, migration, and an aging population (Crevits, 2021; DWSE, 2021). These transitions are leading to the disappearance of certain jobs, the drastic change of others, and the creation of new ones (Manyika et al., 2017; OECD, 2019). Adults can therefore no longer rely solely on the knowledge gained in their early education and training, especially as the transitions are also causing a shift towards longer career durations. This holds true for adults across all sectors and occupations – including the automotive industry, at which this report takes a closer look.

The automotive industry is a sector with companies that are involved in various activities, ranging from manufacturing to selling and repairing automobiles. According to Andreas Tschiesne, a senior partner at McKinsey, the European automotive industry is experiencing a second tipping point (Educam, n.d.) – the first being the replacement of the horse with the passenger car. This second tipping point is driven by three simultaneous transitions – to electric, autonomous, and connected/shared mobility. These three transitions not only impact on the design of cars, but also affect how cars are produced, sold, and need to be maintained (personal communication – interviews). The changes to the design of the car and the work-related adjustments that result from these inevitably lead to shifts in the skills required to work in the automotive industry. These shifts in skills and the importance of adult learning in the automotive industry are highlighted by Educam, the knowledge and training centre for the automotive sector and related sectors. The *Route 2030* study that Educam carried out on the impact of the current transitions in the automotive industry mentions for instance that *'coaching and training programmes for your staff on every level are indispensable tools to implement all these changes as efficiently as possible'* (Educam, n.d., p.1).

Despite policymakers, social partners, labour market actors and employers being aware of the changing skill demand and skill supply, participation in lifelong learning in Belgium is low and a proper learning culture appears to be lacking. Adults in Flanders are not generally inclined, or are only slightly so, to pursue further training or retraining after their initial education (DWSE, 2021). Data from the 2016 Adult Education Survey (AES), for example, show that nearly 35 % of the working Flemish respondents (aged 25-64) did not want to participate in training during the reference period, and therefore did not do so (Steunpunt Werk based on Eurostat/Statbel - AES, 2023). The Flemish government recognises the importance of a

¹ Belgium is a federal state that is composed of communities (the Flemish-, French- and German-speaking communities) and regions (the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital regions). The federal state, communities and regions are all equal from the legal viewpoint but have powers and responsibilities for different fields (Belgian government, 2023). In Flanders, the community and regional institutions are merged. Lifelong learning falls under the responsibility of the communities and regions.

learning society and intends to reach a training participation rate of 60 % by 2030. This goal is in line with European ambition (European Commission, 2021).

Social dialogue and industrial relations can contribute to the achievement of the training participation target set by the European Union and Flemish government (OECD, 2019). Indeed, Belgium is categorised as having a social partnership tradition when it comes to social dialogue and industrial relations (Furåker and Larsson, 2020). This implies that both the employee and employer side have strong social partner organisations, which are cooperative in nature. Their bargaining style is integrated/coordinated and a power balance exists between them. The social partners thus exert institutionalised influence over public policy (although success depends on the ruling political party; Vandaele, 2023). Furthermore, the union density in Belgium is higher than in other countries with a social partnership tradition (Furåker and Larsson, 2020) and Vandaele (2023) even indicates that trade unions in Belgium are faring better than those other countries in the European Union (although union membership and density in Belgium somewhat deteriorated between 2014 and 2019). The organisation rate of employers' organisations in Belgium is high as well. Vandaele (2023) further mentions that there is a stable bargaining coverage in Belgium since collective agreements at the industrial and cross-industrial levels are nearly always extended to (other) workers and firms within these (sub)sectors.

Traditionally, the social partners play a key role in shaping social and labour policy in Belgium. In addition to ensuring the right to training, social partners are also committed to improving access to lifelong learning and to monitoring its quality. By helping shape policies around lifelong learning, exchanging information about what works and what does not, and by creating an environment that recognises its importance, social partners actively boost lifelong learning. More specifically, they work, for example, on identifying and signalling training needs, developing jobs and skills profiles, providing input and feedback on training policy and specific training (in terms of content, form and modalities), encouraging employees to participate in training (both individually and collectively), monitoring and evaluating policies, programmes and actions around lifelong learning, concluding collective agreements on lifelong learning, and funding training. In terms of motivating workers to attend training sessions, employee representatives can engage with workers (e.g. to understand why someone cannot or does not want to participate, so that any problems can be addressed).

The remainder of this report is divided into three chapters. **Chapter 1** provides insights into adult learning from the Flemish perspective and from that of the automotive industry, and it discusses the methodology adopted for this report. More precisely, Section 1.1 focuses on the numbers related to adult learning while Section 1.2 covers the respective policy framework in Flanders. Section 1.3 provides information on the key actors related to adult learning in Flanders, and Section 1.4 offers more information on the selected sector, the automotive industry. Section 1.5. then discusses the methodology. **Chapter 2** discusses the insights obtained from the data collected via our semi-structured interviews and roundtable discussion. **Chapter 3** then concludes with recommendations made on the basis of the insights obtained and discussed in the earlier chapters.

1. The adult learning context

1.1 State of play: lifelong learning and the demand and supply of skills

In line with the targets set by the European Commission, the Flemish government aims for a training participation rate of 60 % of all adults every year by 2030 (DWSE, 2021). In 2021, the proportion of Flemish workers (aged 25-64) participating in a training course during the four-week reference period was 11.2 %. For comparison, the EU-27 scored slightly higher with 11.5 %, and the three best performing countries scored 33.4 % (Sweden), 31.7 % (Finland) and 28.8 % (the Netherlands) (Steunpunt Werk based on Stabel - EAK and Eurostat - LFS, 2023). These results show that Flanders still has progress to make in order to join the best performing countries, and to reach its targeted training participation rate of 60 %. Data from the 2021 Enterprise Survey, conducted among 1 657 companies from Flanders and Dutch-speaking Brussels, revealed that 62.6 % of the participating companies offered some form² of training in 2021 (SERV - Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid, 2022). This result is a small decrease compared to 2018 (65.4 %). There is, however, a big difference visible in the type of training offered. In 2021, the percentage of e-learning had more than doubled (from 19 % in 2018 to 41 % in 2021). This finding is attributed to the Covid-19 crisis during the period in which the survey was conducted. Results from the 2021 Enterprise Survey further show that if a company provided training, an average of 63.8 % of the employees received it (SERV - Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid, 2022). When the data on the training offering and the share of employees receiving training are combined, the following distribution is obtained: 37.4 % of the companies offered no training; at 21.4 % of the companies, less than 50 % of the employees received training; and at 41.2 % of the companies, more than 50 % of the employees received training (SERV - Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid, 2022).

Thus far the focus has been on employee participation in training and on companies' training offers – but the topic of adult learning can be captured in a broader set of numbers. The 2021 Enterprise Survey for instance also provides data on the personal development plan (PDP), a tool which offers support to promote someone's labour market-oriented personal development. The survey shows that in 2021, 14.2 % of the companies used PDPs, which is a small decline compared to 2018 (15.4 %). It also shows that PDPs are more common in the largest companies. In addition, the 2021 Enterprise Survey presents data on the topic of written development plans. These provide an overview of all the development needs in the organisation and of the offers with regard to development that are organised. In total, 25 % of the companies that were surveyed had a written development plan, and these plans are again more common in larger companies. Compared to the PDP measurement, however, the percentage of companies with a written development plan has increased fairly significantly (in 2018 the percentage was 19.9 %; SERV - Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid, 2022).

In addition, survey data collected from employee representatives revealed that 4 out of 10 representatives indicated having little or no say in their training policy in their workplace, while 8 out of 10 employee representatives indicated wanting to be more involved in the

² The study used the following training classification: *common training* defined as an education, training or course within the company that was planned in advance and paid at least in part by the employer; inside or outside the company; *on-the-job training* defined as planned periods of supervision on the shop floor or in the work situation (while one is working), and; *e-learning* defined as online or on the computer (SERV, 2022).

training policy (VIVO, 2022³). Based on the data collected by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the VIVO report further states that the more operational or supportive functions often receive fewer training opportunities. The report also highlights that training for the low-skilled and blue-collar workers often takes place at the proposal of the employer (top-down) while the highly educated and white-collar workers have more room for initiative (VIVO, 2022³).

From a policy perspective, three training incentives are of interest. More specifically, under certain conditions, the Flemish government offers: 1. *training leave* which gives employees the right to be absent from work for training with full pay as the employer is reimbursed for these hours by the Flemish government; 2. *training credit* which gives employees an extra premium from the Flemish government when they take time credit to follow a course, and; 3. *training cheques* which are a digital payment support (€125) with which employees can pay for their personal share in the direct costs of training (DWSE, 2022_a; personal communication - interviews). Results from a 2021 population survey revealed that the vast majority of respondents (employees and job seekers) could not spontaneously name a training incentive. When offered the name of the incentives, respondents mostly recognised the training cheques, followed by the training leave and lastly the training credit (DWSE, 2022_b). Most respondents (71 %) had furthermore never used a training incentive. The main reasons for this are that the employer paid for the training (41 %) or that training was organised by the employer (38 %). In addition, the 2021 population survey revealed that the employer, the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training (VDAB) and the Flemish government play an important role with regard to informing people about financial support options for training, since they were the top three answers given by respondents to the question 'By whom would you prefer to be informed about the possibilities of financial support for attending work-related training?' (49 %, 40 % and 36 % respectively). The trade unions came in fifth place with 18 % (DWSE, 2022_b).

1.2 The Flemish lifelong learning policy framework

In the Vision 2050 document of 2016, the Flemish government underlined its focus on the topic of lifelong learning (Flanders. Flemish government, 2016) and stipulated that by 2050, Flanders would be a region with a learning culture where everyone is fully prepared for an ever-evolving labour market. This emphasis on establishing a culture of lifelong learning is also evident in the 2019-2024 coalition agreement from the Flemish government (Flanders. Department of Chancery and Administration, 2019). To achieve this goal, the coalition agreement highlights several steps. One such step is the creation of a lifelong learning platform. The coalition agreement further mentions that lifelong learning will remain a focus within adult education and that a '*expertisecentrum innovatieve leerwegen*' [centre of expertise on innovative learning pathways] will be established. In addition, it is indicated that the policy reform of employee training incentives, addressed in the VESOC agreement of 2017, will be rolled out further⁴. VESOC stands for the Flemish Economic Social Consultation Committee

³ The results are based on survey data from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The background of the employee representatives that filled in the survey is not specified. Results could thus stem from representatives active in various sectors, but they could also be limited to the two sectors involved in the European Social Fund (ESF) project of which this publication is part.

⁴ The VESOC agreement of 2017 addressed the creation of three new training incentives (those discussed above) and the identification of five building blocks to achieve a coordinated policy: a labour market and future-oriented focus; a generic quality framework/quality assurance system; a recognised training database; uniform monitoring and evaluation; and the promotion of transparency and digitalisation (SERV, 2017).

and is where trade unions and employers' organisations are in social dialogue with the Flemish government on socio-economic themes. 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)

One outcome of the earlier mentioned *'expertisecentrum innovatieve leerwegen'* was a concept note entitled *'De lerende samenleving'* [The learning society] published by the deputy prime minister of the Flemish government and Flemish minister of economy, innovation, work, social economy and agriculture in 2020 (Crevits, 2020). This concept note describes the challenges and assignments for lifelong learning in Flanders and the way in which the lifelong learning action plan will be further developed in strong partnership. It focuses on four challenges: (i) making everyone eager to learn; (ii) making learning accessible; (iii) matching supply and demand properly; and (iv) learning becoming work and work becoming learning.

Based on this concept note and on the 2019-2024 coalition agreement, a *Lifelong Learning Partnership* was established in 2020 to develop an action plan for lifelong learning. The partnership consists of diverse members as it includes representatives from the Social-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), actors in the education sector and public training providers, private training providers, the local level (i.e. urban and municipal education), the Lifelong Learning Commission of the Flemish Educational Council (VLOR), and a business school (De Vos, 2020). The result of this partnership was the Flemish action plan of 2021 entitled *'Action plan on lifelong learning. Setting sail for a learning Flanders'* (DWSE, 2021). The action plan proposes seven flagships that each consist of a set of actions believed to leverage an acceleration of lifelong learning. These flagships are: (1) move towards a knowledge agenda for lifelong learning (LLL); (2) move towards a segmented mobilisation strategy; (3) investigate a person-centred use of Flemish LLL incentives; (4) move towards a single Flemish strategic competence programme; (5) guide and support LLL: accompanying policies; (6) guide and support service providers; and (7) strengthen partnerships for learning in a future-oriented way (DWSE, 2021).

Although the focus of our report is on Flanders, it is important to underline that lifelong learning is also high on the policy agenda of the federal government. Pierre-Yves Dermagne, Federal Minister of Economy and Employment, said in his policy statement of November 2022 that in the current legislature, *'great importance will be attached to the training of workers throughout their careers, but also to retraining and to those who want to change career direction. For this, the continuous training of workers will be crucial. We will therefore introduce an individual right to training'* (p. 8)⁵.

These flagship principles were taken up in the *'Arbeidsdeal'* [Labour Deal] of 2022, which contains various measures aimed at training. Those measures were later enshrined in the law containing various labour provisions of 3 October 2022 (*'wet houdende diverse arbeidsbepalingen'*). 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

⁵ <https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1610/55K1610014.pdf>.

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. In addition, the law introduces an individual training right for each employee. Companies with at least 20 employees must provide four training days per year and per full-time employee starting in 2023 (formal and informal training both count). From 2024, this will be five days. In some of our interviews, experts and stakeholders explicitly referred to the Labour Deal and the legislation, and to how it interacts with what is happening within sectors and companies.

1.3 Key actors

The theoretical framework for lifelong learning used by Buysse (2020) identifies the following key actors: government, citizens (here we focus on employees), employers and entrepreneurs, education and training providers, sector funds, and social partners. These actors and their role will now be discussed in more detail in the order in which they are listed. All of these actors are represented in or consulted by the bodies discussed earlier, and have contributed (directly or indirectly) to the lifelong learning strategies, measures and actions outlined above.

1.3.1 Flemish government

The topic of adult learning, or lifelong learning, falls under two separate policy domains of the Flemish government: the domain of Education & Training (OV) and the domain of Work & Social Economy (WSE). The first domain includes the Department of OV (DOV) which, among other things, provides policy preparation and policy evaluation for the domain of adult education and is responsible for the development of regulations for adult education institutions. The second domain on work and social economy consists of the VDAB (the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training) and the Department of WSE (DWSE). This department is responsible for the coordination and development of the Flemish policy for the domain of employment and the social economy, and is tasked with the follow-up, monitoring and inspection of that policy. It also implements measures to facilitate and regulate entry, re-entry or exit from the labour market, and labour market mobility (Flemish government, n.d._b).

For recent, and future, lifelong learning policies, the government receives support from the Lifelong Learning Partnership that was established in 2020. In addition, the SERV offers policy advice, whether it be requested by the Flemish government or provided on the SERV's own initiative. An example of the latter is an advice report, from 2020, entitled '*Levenslang leren: visie en partnerschap*' [Lifelong learning: vision and partnership] (SERV, 2020)⁶. The Department of WSE further commissions Steunpunt Werk, which is a policy-oriented research centre at the Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven, to offer research-based support and advice on Flemish labour market policies (Steunpunt Werk, 2023_a). For instance, in 2020 Steunpunt Werk, launched the first version of its lifelong learning monitoring report, in which insights on training participation are provided as well as insights on the training efforts of employers in Flanders, on the basis of six different sources (Steunpunt Werk, 2023_b). In addi-

⁶ In this advice report the SERV calls for the establishment of a lifelong learning partnership, instead of a platform that directs the rollout of lifelong learning in Flanders. The SERV also developed five strategic objectives based on its theoretical framework for lifelong learning (which is the same as the one presented in Buysse, 2020).

tion, the Flemish government concludes sector agreements with sectoral social partners in which the social partners commit to carrying out lifelong learning actions and projects in their sector (Flemish government, n.d.c).

1.3.2 *Employees/workers*

Being those who perform the learning, employees play an essential role in adult learning. It is thus important to assess the need and willingness of employees to learn and their motives for this.

Although the promotion of lifelong learning has for long been a priority for policymakers and the social partners in Belgium, participation rates remain (very) low, especially among groups such as lower-educated and older workers (Visser and Staats, 2022). The Flemish action plan for lifelong learning stated that people in Flanders are not generally or are only slightly inclined to pursue further training or retraining (DWSE, 2021). This is reflected in data from the 2016 Adult Education Survey (AES) which showed that 34.6 % of the working Flemish respondents (aged 25-64) who did not participate in training during the reference period did not want to do so (Steunpunt Werk based on Eurostat/Statbel-AES, 2023). Of these respondents, 21 % indicated not having a need, 3.2 % experienced a hindrance and 10.4 % did not answer.

The problem of a lack of need is also observed in a survey on lifelong learning conducted by Randstad Research among 2 007 Belgians aged 18-65 in 2019 (Randstad Research, 2020). When asked about their reason for not participating in training over the past 12 months, the main answer among respondents with a job was 'I didn't need it for work' (50 %), and 17 % indicated 'I didn't need it for personal reasons (not work)'. Additional top motives for not participating in any training were a lack of time due to family responsibilities (20 %), no courses in the immediate vicinity (14 %), training time incompatible with working time (13 %), a lack of employer support (12 %) and not wanting to go back to school (10 %).

These motives correspond with the **four types of barriers** to learning mentioned in the Flemish action plan for lifelong learning (and in the literature on this topic): (i) *dispositional barriers*, which refer to the characteristics, attitudes, 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).

Some of these barriers may weigh more heavily on certain groups of workers than others. For example, women in particular may be confronted with situational barriers, while for lower-educated workers dispositional barriers may be at play. Together, these barriers and the perceived low learning needs/willingness to learn result in low participation in lifelong learning in Flanders. 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 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).

1.3.3 Employers

For employees, employers play a critical role with respect to learning since organisations are one of the actors that provide training for them. Findings from the survey conducted by Randstad Research even showed that the employer is the main training provider for employees as employers ranked number one, with 39 %, on the question ‘Who is the provider of the training?’ (Randstad Research, 2020). Employers are thus an essential source for employee development.

With this in mind, it is relevant to assess how well Flemish organisations perform with respect to the topic of employee training and development. An answer to this question can be found in data from the 2021 Enterprise Survey (see Section 1.1 for details on the numbers). In addition, the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) of 2020 showed that, of the three Belgian regions, Flanders has the largest share of companies offering training to their employees (83.9 %) (Statbel, 2022). To count as a company offering training to its employees, the respective company must indicate that its employees have received some form of formal or informal training. The CVTS data further indicated that continuing vocational training occurs more often in companies with at least 50 employees and that the relative share of companies offering continuing vocational training is sector-dependent. The best performing sectors were the financial and information/communication sector, with 96.2 % and 95.6 % respectively. The sectors that scored the worst were the economic activities of arts, entertainment and recreation, and providing accommodation and meals, with 55.5 % and 58.4 % of these companies respectively offering some form of training. In general, the provision of training appears to be well-embedded in Flemish organisations although the actual situation is dependent on the size of the company and on the sector in which an employee works (this is also supported by data from the 2021 Enterprise Survey). In other words, there is still margin for additional upskilling and reskilling activities in smaller companies and in specific sectors.

Data from the 2019 European Company Survey show that offering opportunities for training and development is very often or fairly often used by nearly 65 % of Belgians to motivate employees and to prevent employee turnover. Almost 90 % of companies with at least 250 employees use this approach, compared to 72 % of companies with 50–249 employees and 65 % of companies with 10–49 employees. The European Company Survey also includes a question on the main motives for offering training to employees. Of the possible motives, ensuring that employees have the competences they need for their current job appears to be by far the most important (95 % of the companies surveyed consider this very or fairly important). Improving employee morale is the second most important reason for offering training (85 %) while enhancing the ability of employees to formulate ideas for improvements within the company comes in third place, followed by offering training to allow employees to acquire the competences they need for jobs other than their current one.

Besides offering training, employers also make a difference towards lifelong learning by stimulating the relevance of learning – in other words, by providing support for learning and creating a learning culture. The earlier mentioned barriers to learning highlighted a lack of support from employers as a hindrance. Results from the survey conducted by Randstad Research further showed that employees who have followed training work more in companies that stimulate training than those who have not followed any training (50 % and 30 % respectively).

Despite this generally positive picture, it must be recalled that the Belgian economy has 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 (Baiocco et al., 2020). Data from the 2019 European Company Survey show that in Belgium about half of the employees participated in on-site or off-site training during paid work time in 2018. This percentage increases with company size: it averages 47 % among companies with 10–49 employees, 53 % among companies with 50–249 employees and 64 % among companies with at least 250 employees. Similar results are obtained for gaining practical experience or some form of direct on-the-job training from more experienced colleagues. Nevertheless, in a third of the companies, participation in training and professional development activities is only possible if the workload and the work schedules allow it. In the remaining companies, the workload and work schedules are adjusted to allow participation. Here again it is especially the larger companies that have the flexibility to do this (reported by 75 % of companies with 250+ employees vs. 66 % of companies with 10–49 employees).

1.3.4 Training providers

The category of training providers is quite diverse. It includes public institutions, private training institutions, and digital platforms such as GoodHabitZ. Findings from a survey conducted by Randstad Research showed that private training institutions are the second most important training provider for respondents with a job, scoring 33 % on the question 'Who is the provider of the training?' (Randstad Research, 2020). The VDAB and adult education centres were only selected by 9 % of the respondents with a job (Randstad Research, 2020). Other options, such as unions/employers' organisations and digital platforms, received even lower percentages.

The reason why the results from Randstad Research (2020) showed that private training institutions play a major role in the provision of training for employees is that these private training institutions have more flexibility with the content of their training offers. This was also mentioned in the interviews we conducted. More specifically, two interviewees mentioned an existing tension between, on the one hand, education providers like adult education centres who are slow and cumbersome with respect to developing new/innovative content but who guarantee quality content, and on the other hand, private providers who are much more flexible, who can respond more easily to market demand but whose certificates are not validated or are much less recognised (personal communication – interviews).

1.3.5 Sector funds

A sector fund is jointly managed by trade unions and employers' organisations and 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 per sector fund). Sector funds thus inspire and support companies to work on lifelong learning.

1.3.6 Social partners

Last, but not least, there are the social partners themselves. First, 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). As stated in the introduction, union density is high in Belgium as is the organisation rate of employers' organisations.

Employee representatives 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. Employee representatives can help to address barriers to the provision of and participation in training. 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).

With respect to lifelong learning, a literature study by Hermans et al. (2020) finds that in general a strong positive effect exists between the presence of a union delegation in a company and employee training. This finding was also proven to hold true for Belgium. From the perspective of the employees (HIVA-KU Leuven data⁷) it was found that the number of employees who reported having no days of training differed quite extensively between those working in a context with a trade union presence (25 %) and those without (47.6 %). The data, however, also revealed that trade union presence has no or at best an ambiguous effect on the nature of the training. This could be due to the manner in which the Belgian social dialogue operates with respect to training. In other words, unions have clear "quantitative" pro-

⁷ Specifically, data from the 2019 HIVA-KU Leuven Temporary Employment Survey, in which temporary agency workers with and without a temporary employment status were surveyed (with a focus on temporary agency workers).

visions in sectoral and company collective agreements, but they may have less influence in the “qualitative” interpretation of these agreements.

Data from the 2019 European Company Survey (ECS) in which managers were surveyed, further showed that the share of employees who participated in training during working hours in 2018 – reported by a manager – was significantly higher for those working in a context with a union delegation (60 %) compared to those without (47 %). In addition, the share of employees who participated in on-the-job training given by more experienced colleagues during working hours in 2018 – reported by a manager – was also higher in a context with a union delegation (48 %) compared to a context without (51 %), although the difference here was smaller and not significant. Again, findings show that the presence of a union is relevant in the matter of employee education and training in Belgium, especially in non-on-the-job training settings.

Social dialogue contributing to adult learning is also reflected in the notion of social dialogue 2.0 in which the dialogue should no longer be just about the traditional, socio-economic themes (purchasing power, labour costs) but also about the content and usefulness of sustainable jobs and sustainable careers. Social dialogue 2.0 further implies a shift away from the conflict view (us vs. them) towards a partnership approach in which critical friendship becomes important. The critical friendship concept combines “rest”, by respecting others’ interests and appreciating and supporting others’ responses, with “unrest” by facilitating mutual critical feedback. This shift in approach is essential when addressing the ‘soft’ themes (e.g. job quality, training) since these themes require more creativity and react allergically to the hard bargaining mindset used for the traditional themes (De Prins, 2019). The contribution of social dialogue and industrial relations to adult learning is reflected in a statement by one of the Flemish trade unions – ‘as a trade union, we play a role in personnel policy, and therefore in training policy’ (ABVV, 2022).

1.4 The Flemish automotive industry

1.4.1 Description and statistics

The automotive industry has a long history in Belgium and has traditionally been an important sector in terms of employment and its contribution to the overall economy (Agoria, n.d.; Febiac, n.d.). Prior to the outbreak of the second world war, Belgium was one of the leading automobile producers in the world. Since then, several production plants have been closed down (Renault Vilvoorde, Opel Antwerp, Ford Genk) but with Volvo Ghent and Audi Brussels the Belgian automotive industry is a major player that manages to attract investment (e.g. the latest models of electric cars are being produced in Belgium). Belgium also hosts a large number of parts manufacturers, producers of heavy vehicles like trucks and buses (e.g. DAF Trucks, Volvo Trucks, Van Hool) and research and innovation centres (e.g. Flanders Make). It thus has a well-developed ecosystem and is well embedded in global strategic value chains. The country’s central location and its extensive logistics networks are key features in this regard.

However, the categorisation of the automotive industry in Flanders is relatively complex. First, Flanders has a sector labelled ‘automotive sector and related sectors’ which comprises four subsectors. The automotive sector consists of the *garage sector* (mainly focused on the maintenance and repair of motor vehicles, and the retail sale of new and second-hand vehi-

cles) and the *bodywork sector* (mainly focused on the repair and construction of car bodies). The related sectors consist of the *metal trade sector* (mainly focused on the wholesale of industrial equipment and transport equipment other than motor vehicles) and the *metal recovery sector* (mainly focused on the wholesale of waste and scrap, and the recovery of metal waste). Flanders has a further sector labelled the ‘metal and technology industry’, which is an extremely diverse sector, with the manufacturing of cars and caravans being only a small part of it (Flemish government, n.d._a). Given the vast diversity of subcategories in the metal and technology industry sector and the absence of subcategory details, available statistics here offer no insights for the automotive industry specifically. To present some data, Table 1 summarises key figures for the automotive sector and related sectors.

Table 1. Statistics for the ‘automotive sector and related sectors’ in Flanders

Number of businesses (2018)

Garage sector ; Bodywork sector	3 274 ; 493
Metal trade sector ; Metal recovery sector	2 052 ; 118

Company size (2018)

The four sectors are pure SME sectors

Number of employees employed (2018)

67 793

50 % with blue-collar worker status

Evolution of the number of employees (2014–2019)

+ 2.5 %

Percentage of employees by origin (fourth quartile 2018)

72.3 % Belgian

22.8 % foreign

4.7 % unknown

Percentage of employees aged 50+ (2019)

27.5 %

Projected percentage of employees aged 55+ in 2025

Garage sector ; Bodywork sector 13.7 % ; 16.6 %

Metal trade sector ; Metal recovery sector 16.5 % ; n/d

Number of BEV requests per 1 000 employees, with absolute numbers in parenthesis (school year 2018–2019)

85.0 (2 758)

Note: the numbers shown include all four sectors unless otherwise specified

Abbreviations: BEV = paid educational leave ; n/d = no data

Sources: Flemish government, n.d._a ; DWSE, 2020

Box 1. Temporary unemployment and training

The automotive industry is a sector that was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis of 2009-2010, which resulted both times in a high share of temporarily unemployed workers. In Belgium, temporarily unemployed workers remain employed but perform less or no work due to circumstances and receive a benefit for their non-working days. 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

(Jacobs et al., 2012). Consequently, the training campaigns/offers by VDAB and sector funds were not always a success in terms of the extent to which they were used. On the bright side, what did appear to work were the following strategies: providing a (sufficiently high) extra premium for employee and employer, organising training (at the workplace and/or flexible web-based courses) in consultation with the employer, focusing communication towards the employer as they know the target group, and limiting administration as much as possible for employee and employer (Jacobs et al., 2012). These findings highlight the importance of establishing a good relationship between the sector fund and the companies in that sector in order to reach the respective audience, develop relevant training and reduce administrative burdens.

1.4.2 Relevant actors

White-collar workers active in the automotive industry can join a general white-collar division of any of the three trade union confederations. Blue-collar workers in the automotive industry (those belonging to the category 'automotive sector and related sectors' or working in a car manufacturing company that falls under the 'metal and technology sector') can join the metal division of the socialist trade union confederation (ABVV-metaal), the metal division of the Christian trade union confederation (ACV-CSC METEA) or the metal division of the liberal trade union confederation (ACLVB-metaal). Industrial relations and social dialogue are well developed in the automotive industry and its related industries.

At the division level, trade unions inform their members, and non-members, about their rights regarding education and training⁸. In addition, they influence the lifelong learning policies and actions in the automotive industry as reflected in the sector agreements. This influence is of course in accordance with the general lines set out by the overarching trade union confederations to which the specific divisions belong (ABVV, ACV, ACLVB). The overarching confederations also offer support regarding career guidance, advice and orientation⁹. To a lesser extent, the confederations promote training (e.g. on digital literacy) which is offered by external companies like Educo and Comé.

Another relevant actor in the automotive industry is the two employers' organisations – Traxio (which represents the automotive sector and related sectors) and Agoria (which represents the metal and technology industry). Like the trade unions, the employers' organisations influence the lifelong learning policies and actions in the automotive industry through, for instance, sector agreements. Traxio's website specifically offers information on lifelong learning. In addition, our interviewee from Traxio indicated that employers are often asked whether they take into account the costs of employees who do not participate in training (personal communication – interview). Agoria meanwhile has a whole thematic webpage on (lifelong) learning and careers¹⁰.

⁸ <https://www.hetacv.be/je-rechten/werken-in-de-privé-sector/opleiding> ; <https://www.aclvb.be/nl/artikels/de-arbeidsdeal-treedt-werking>.

Each subsector represented by ABVV-metaal has its own brochure, an example being <https://www.abvvmetaal.be/images/opzak/oz-koetswerk.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.hetacv.be/dienstverlening/loopbaanadvies1> ; <https://abvvloopbaanbegeleiding.be/> ; <https://www.aclvb.be/nl/loopbaanbegeleiding>

¹⁰ <https://www.agoria.be/nl/human-capital-education/levenslang-leren-en-loopbanen/nieuws>

Finally, the sector funds also play a major role in the lifelong learning domain. Educam, for example, is the sector fund for blue-collar workers in the automotive sector and related sectors, while Cevora is the sector fund for white-collar workers, and Mtech+ is the sector fund for employees in the metal and technology sector. More specifically, Educam serves as a knowledge and training centre, initiating and stimulating (talent) development and training among employees and for organisations. Educam consists of two entities. Together with other organisations such as the VDAB, one of Educam's entities shapes the training that is offered and develops the training catalogue based on demand from the sector and on developments within it. Educam's second entity is the operating body that sells and provides the training that is on offer (personal communication – interview). Meanwhile Cevora is the sector fund for white-collar workers in several sectors, and Mtech+ is a recent construction consisting of five provincial funds for the metal and technology industry. In this new constellation, Mtech+ has also expanded its focus beyond training so that it now also concentrates on coaching and supporting sustainable careers (personal communication – interview).

1.4.3 Relevant agreements/plans

For the automotive industry and its related sectors (i.e. with reference to the joint (sub)committees 112, 142.1, 149.2, 149.4), a sector covenant was concluded between the Flemish government and the sector-level social partners for the period 2023–2025. Alongside the main agreement, two addenda were attached: one concerning dual learning and the other concerning diversity and inclusion¹¹. According to the covenant, about 57 000 blue-collar workers and 48 000 white-collar workers were employed in the automotive industry and its related sectors in 2021. In total, these sectors comprise around 9 450 companies. Each sector covenant starts with a description and analysis of the challenges facing that particular sector – for example in terms of skills demand and supply.

For the automotive and related sectors, the Flemish government agreed to pay out € 636 000 to Educam to pay six full-time employee (FTE) sector consultants as part of the sector covenant. In return, the sector fund agrees to a range of so-called 'results commitments' or 'performance commitments' (*resultaatsverbintenissen*) that must be achieved. The first result commitment is to **reach workplaces and the workers in those workplaces**. This is measured as an increase of 5 % in the number of workplace visits (to 420 visits compared to 400 in 2022). The second result commitment in the sector covenant is to improve **intersectoral collaboration**, notably on the subject of inclusion and diversity. The third result commitment is to provide a training offer that is **tailored to the needs of the sector**, measured as an increase of 5 % in the number of training hours completed (so that 424 283 hours are completed in comparison to 404 079 hours in 2021).

To achieve these result commitments an action plan is proposed that centres around several thematic areas. One thematic area is the **alignment between education and the labour market**. This area includes actions aimed at promoting the sector among students and the future workforce (e.g. via dedicated campaigns, the integration of automotive technology in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) curricula, and improved collaboration with schools and training providers). A second thematic area is the **(lateral) in-flow, throughput and retention of workers** in the sector. This includes actions such as improving the quality of the training offer, making databases available that list the competences

¹¹ <https://www.vlaanderen.be/sectorconvenants/overzicht-van-lopende-sectorconvenants-en-addenda..>

required in the sector, supporting dual learning, and exploring potential collaborations with social economy enterprises. A third thematic area is called **lifelong learning and competence policy**. This area envisages actions such as the development of a 'training CV', digital performance scans, and initiatives around the training credit. A fourth thematic area is **workable work** and includes information campaigns on workability and stress, and the promotion of a toolbox around workable work. The fifth and final thematic area is **diversity and inclusion**. On this topic, a separate addendum was concluded, which in turn contains several commitments on results and on actions. More precisely, Educam commits to increasing the number of training hours followed by workers with a migration background from 27 300 hours to 27 573 through a communication campaign, through the development of a guide and training offer for sectoral consultants, and through providing information on language coaching.

1.5 Methodology

This report relies on data collected through (i) semi-structured interviews, set at the regional (Flanders), sectoral and company levels, and (ii) a roundtable discussion, which focused on the workers' level. We decided to hold a roundtable discussion with workers partly to avoid overlap in participants, and partly to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by workers, as several studies point to significant barriers and a poor learning culture among workers in Belgium. Furthermore, this roundtable discussion was also recommended by certain interviewees. Overall, our approach ensured that the data collection efforts were complementary. In what follows, the findings from the interviews and the roundtable are discussed together. Data collection was carried out according to the guidelines provided in the I-SKILL project and following the KU Leuven guidelines on research data and ethics, in order to ensure that the highest professional and quality standards were met.

1.5.1 Semi-structured interviews with experts and stakeholders

Interviews are a means to collect a richer type of information which can help to explain, better understand and/or explore a subject of choice. This approach fits the formulated aim of the I-SKILL project and our interviews were therefore conducted between January and June 2023. They lasted on average 60 minutes and all took place digitally via Microsoft Teams. Interview participants were selected on the basis of their knowledge of adult learning and the extent of their focus on it, while also considering the role of the interview participant and the organisation they represent. Interviewees from different perspective levels were selected to ensure a broad range of insights.

This implied that we targeted institutions and organisations and contacts from the Flemish, sector and company levels. For the Flemish level, we spoke to a representative from the SERV and the VLOR, as well as to an associate professor who conducts research on changing labour-management relationships and social dialogue. For the sector level, we spoke to one trade union, two sector funds and one employers' organisation. For the company level, we interviewed three companies in the automotive industry. All three companies were major players in the automotive industry in Belgium (multinational enterprises, a large number of workers, diverse in terms of their economic activities) and were recommended to us by some of our interviewed experts and stakeholders as being worth further investigation for these companies' approach to lifelong learning (e.g. own training academies). In total ten interviews were conducted (Table 2).

Table 2. The stakeholders and companies that were interviewed

Flemish level	Sector level	Company level
Flemish Educational Council (VLOR)	Educam (sector fund)	Company A <i>Car brand</i>
Social-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV)	Mtech+ (sector fund)	Company B <i>Importer and retailer of various car brands</i>
Associate professor <i>Expert on changing labour-management relationships & social dialogue</i>	ACV-METEA (trade union)	
	Traxio (sector federation)	Company C <i>Car brand</i>

1.5.2 Roundtable discussion

Roundtable discussions, or focus groups, are small group discussions with a specific audience and specific discussion topic. For the purpose of this study, a roundtable discussion on the topic of lifelong learning was held with employees working in the automotive and the manufacturing industry. The roundtable discussion was held online (via Microsoft Teams) in July 2023. In total, a group of four workers participated in the meeting, which should therefore not be seen as a representation of Flemish employees in general. The intention for the roundtable discussion was to add further insights from the perspective of employees. In addition to the roundtable respondents, two people from HIVA-KU Leuven were present to moderate the discussion.

The roundtable discussion started with a general introduction of the I-SKILL project and of the people present. It then moved on to topics such as the respondents' views on the importance of lifelong learning, their experiences with learning, and the points of improvement they thought should be addressed. In total, the discussion lasted 75 minutes.

2. Insights from the data collected

Below we discuss the insights obtained from the interviews and the roundtable discussion. The insights from the interviews are discussed according to the level at which they fit best (i.e. the Flemish, sector, or company level). This does not imply that the findings under a respective level stem solely from respondents belonging to that level. For instance, the interview with the SERV representative also contained relevant information for the sector level. The insights from the roundtable discussion are discussed under the heading 'Employee level' (see Section 2.4).

2.1 Flemish level

The Flemish government provides **three training incentives** – the training cheque, credit and leave (see Section 1.1) – with which it aims to encourage employees who want to combine work and education. All three incentives can be requested by the employee. As the

training leave involves reimbursement for the employer, it can also be requested by the employer. According to the respondent from the SERV, the three training incentives are not equally popular. Specifically, the leave is used relatively often while the cheque and credit are used less or almost not at all. The fact that the credit is hardly used was also reflected in the 2021 population survey (73 % didn't know it existed; DWSE, 2022_b). The results of this survey are included in a larger evaluation report of the Flemish training incentives. This report in turn is given to the SERV for advice. In other words, the SERV evaluates the annual evaluation report on the Flemish education incentives, which is prepared by the DWSE. During the interview it was mentioned that the advice of the SERV was under development – but this has now been published. One of the main outcomes of this advice is that the SERV considered it too early to make proposals for a possible reform of the incentives due to the disruption of the Covid-19 years and due to the report thus lacking information to judge to what extent the incentives achieved the stated objectives of the respective VESOC agreement. However, the SERV underlined that the evaluation of the annual report must go further than the current monitoring, and must not only describe the current situation but also reflect on what can be improved (SERV, 2023). This advice to **expand the current monitoring** is in a sense also observable in our interview results. More concretely, it was mentioned that currently the number of workers participating in a training course (as reflected in the numbers reported in Section 1.1) is measured, but not the impact of that training course. Although the current measure fits with the stated goal in the Flemish action plan for lifelong learning – ‘Our intention is to reach a training participation rate of 60 %, in line with the European ambition’ (DWSE, 2021, p.7) – it does not address the question of whether relevant training is being undertaken. One respondent mentioned that the notion of quality assessment is a topic of discussion within the Lifelong Learning Partnership, but this is still in its infancy.

What is also in its infancy is the *‘leer en loopbaanrekening’* [learning and career account], which was mentioned by a few respondents and which is being developed by the Flemish government. This *‘leer en loopbaanrekening’* is meant to be a user-friendly and personalised digital overview accessible to all Flemish citizens. A note on it from the SERV (2022), however, indicated that although the formulated objectives state a broad focus, it comes down to employees alone in the practical elaboration of the plan. The goal of the *‘leer en loopbaanrekening’* is to help the Flemish people find their way in the vast landscape of training and career-related support initiatives. To achieve this a phased approach will be used to develop the digital platform, as endorsed by the SERV (SERV, 2022). In addition, one of the respondents voiced the concern that a plan exists at the federal level to develop a similar *‘leer en loopbaanrekening’* platform. According to the interviewee, this would not be good as people would have to log in on two different platforms. This concern overlaps to an extent with a comment from another respondent related to the **challenge of coordination**. In particular, this other respondent said that the developed action plan bundles a number of important initiatives together but that these initiatives often lack coordination with each other. As a result, there are many initiatives in place, or proposed, which run parallel to each other. It was mentioned that even within the Lifelong Learning Partnership, initiatives are being taken without coordination. Despite the relevant partners trying to consider a wider view, it is not common for a new initiative to have been well thought out as regards how it can add and/or be integrated into the set of initiatives that already exist.

2.2 Sector level

The importance of the **sector funds** for lifelong learning has been stated above and became evident once again during our interviews. Their relevance stems from the employee-

development-oriented services they provide, as well as from their close connections with workers, employers, training providers, government agencies and other actors. Sector funds are typically involved in efforts to anticipate changing skills needs, the development and provision of training (including funding), and validation and certification. 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. The central position of sector funds allows them to be particularly committed to harder-to-reach groups (e.g. small and medium-sized companies in the sector) or workers belonging to at-risk groups (e.g. older or low-skilled workers). This is also why adult education centres often turn to sector funds for insights.

Despite their relevance and recognition as key players, sector funds still need to put effort into promoting their offerings. This is done through their own consultants approaching companies. Another means is through the recent Flemish campaign '*Iedereen kan bijleren*' [everyone can up/re-skill] with which 38 sector funds (including Educam, Cevora and Mtech+) and the Social-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) want to encourage employees and companies to learn all their life long and to guide them to the training offer of the sector funds.

A representative from Educam further mentioned that they had developed a **self-check tool** at the request of social partners. 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. The tool was piloted on 20 companies and it was found to be useful and easy. Whether the tool will be rolled out further is something on which the social partners still need to decide. This self-check/competence tool, and the competence check which the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training (VDAB) offers on their website¹², highlight the current interest in tools to visualise people's competences. It is, however, good to keep in mind that the value of such tools is dependent on the relevance and accuracy of the content of the tool (the skills the VDAB tool present for a certain job are for instance not always essential skills – to illustrate knowledge of biochemistry is not, in general, a key skill required for a scientific researcher) and the quality or honesty of the self-reported data. This latter point was also stated by the interviewee from Educam. In addition, the earlier mentioned comment relating to the current challenge of coordination can in a sense also apply here since similar tools are being created at different levels.

The vast extent to which sector funds can contribute to the education and training situation of Flemish employees became further apparent from a mention about the ESF-project WPL4BK '*levenslang gekwalificeerd werkplekleren*' [lifelong qualified workplace learning]. This recent project, initiated by the sector fund of the wood sector, aimed at making invisible on-the-job learning more visible. Specifically, the project's end report stated that Flanders often scores poorly regarding lifelong learning, especially among blue-collar workers. In practice, continuous and frequent learning nevertheless often takes place – learning which mainly happens on the job. Indeed, this form of training is usually neither recognised nor mapped (Woodwize, n.d.). Consequently, in collaboration with companies and the VDAB, the sector fund has used ESF funding to develop sector-relevant modular training programmes that can lead to a professional or partial qualification recognised by the government, during a person's active career. The main target group for the training programmes has been the employees – both new employees with little knowledge and more experienced employees

¹² <https://www.vdab.be/competentiecheck>

wanting to learn new techniques/machines or to develop further. However, the project has also targeted job seekers and people who are further from the labour market. This project has resulted in the wood sector being the first in Flanders to issue an **official professional qualification for what employees learn in the workplace**. Indeed, it serves as a point of inspiration for other sector funds, as well as for the broader audience involved in social dialogue on training and development. This can be seen from the fact that the project was mentioned in the interview with the SERV, and it can also be seen from the conclusion at the end report: *if Flanders wants to score better in terms of lifelong learning, the sector funds can contribute by offering, organising and monitoring (vocational) qualification learning on the work floor*. This is followed by a call to policymakers to investigate how sector funds can be financially supported to take on this socially important role.

In our interview with the associate professor, an initiative was mentioned that is called the **'demografiefonds'** [demographic funds]. This initiative was set up by social partners of the chemicals, plastics and life sciences sector, and the aim of these **'demografiefonds'** is to maintain and improve workability in the context of demographic challenges and the lengthening of people's careers. The funds give companies in the chemicals, plastics and life sciences sector the opportunity to develop new actions, in collaboration with employees and/or employee representatives. These actions should be related to workable work, and the **'demografiefonds'** provide financial support for approved actions (up to a maximum of 0.30 % of the company's gross wage bill for a maximum of four years). Two domains for which companies can submit actions for approval are competences and career policy (demografiefonds, n.d.). Although the initiative exists within a specific sector (chemicals, plastics and life sciences) it can be of interest to other sectors, like the automotive industry. First, the lengthening of careers is a development that transcends sectors; and second, the competence and career policy domains are just as relevant to any other sector, given the technology and green transition developments. In addition, it is also possible to take inspiration from this **'demografiefonds'** initiative and to make adjustments related to content and/or execution that better suit the respective sector (especially as the interviewee mentioned that the initiative is a good idea, but that it is, in practice, difficult to realise as it is a very bureaucratic process).

2.3 Company level

As a result of technological developments and changes in legislation and regulations, work within the automotive industry has become very complex. It no longer entails just manual labour, and technical knowledge alone is no longer sufficient. Continuous training of their employees, ranging from the technical to the administrative and management personnel, is crucial.

The importance of continuous learning is also reflected in the fact that the three companies to which we spoke have their **own training centres or academies**. One interviewee pointed out that such training centres are good as they ensure, or at least enable, that everyone is up-to date with the newest required knowledge. However, this interviewee also mentioned a downside related to the internal training centres, which was that such centres might train their employees in too narrow a manner in terms of brand specifics. This is possibly less of an issue for company B as it covers multiple brands. However, the interviewee from company B indicated that they do not cover brands which are not in their portfolio. In addition, the interviewee from company B mentioned that the certificates they provide might not be valid everywhere, but that those certificates nevertheless show a certain drive and mentality (aspects which appear to be important qualities for companies based on a company interview).

The existence of a training centre in an organisation, however, does not imply that such centres are free from challenges. 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.

In relation to continuous training, company interviewees also pointed to the lack of personnel as a challenge. One interviewee in particular mentioned that they focus on continuous training, but this requires you to have staff to train. Finding technically trained workers is currently difficult and will continue to be so in the near future, as the number of students who opt for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) remains too limited. As a result, **students with STEM profiles have become a point of focus for companies**. One interviewee reflected on this difficulty and offered a suggestion for improvement. In particular, the interviewee emphasised that there are currently many separate initiatives being taken but that it would be good if there was an overarching body that could provide support in highlighting the technical study programmes. Ultimately each brand in the sector has the same goal of making STEM profiles more appealing, but everyone is now trying to achieve this separately, while a joint approach could be more beneficial for all. The interviewee stated that **institutions like the government or Traxio (employers' organisation) could play a role in bringing different automotive brands together to promote technical programmes among students** as no individual brand will take this initiative. The role of the employers' organisation within this discussion was also addressed by another interview participant, who indicated that they would like Traxio to do more and to take more concrete actions besides attending an event and writing an article on the shortage of labour.

Another interview participant addressed the fact that the **manner in which training is given has changed considerably**. 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, as can be seen in the e-learning numbers in Section 1.1 of this report). With respect to blended learning, it was said that it creates more individualised learning processes, compared to in-class training sessions, since blended learning allows for a better handling of variations in, for instance, learning speed and assistance. Nonetheless, the interviewee indicated that 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 line with previously mentioned digital tools, one company interviewee mentioned that their organisation is developing an **internal, company career path platform**. This platform is intended to help visualise the possible career paths in the organisation, and to offer details on each function (what it entails and what competences it requires). The platform is meant to help workers take ownership of their career path and in so doing to stimulate learning-related dialogue between a worker and their manager. In addition, the platform will help managers by providing function details with which they may otherwise not be 100 % familiar (this can further improve the learning dialogue between an employee and manager).

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 in relation to the re-skilling and upskilling of employees. Depending on the number of training organisations and employees with which the training coordinator works, their workload can be very heavy.

2.4 Employee level

During the roundtable discussion all participants indicated that they supported the notion of lifelong learning, although they also had positive criticism about it. One participant, for instance, stated that **training can create expectations**, as employees expect to suddenly be able to move to another job after training. When these expectations are not met it can result in reduced motivation for further training. Another participant in the roundtable discussion mentioned that it was **not always good to keep raising the bar for all workers**. This was meant in the sense that some jobs still require manual work, and some people also prefer this. Some of these workers, moreover, have negative previous learning experiences, which may reduce their motivation to learn. Further clarification of the statement revealed that entry-level functions are being taken out, making those functions more difficult to find. As a result, it has become more difficult for low-skilled people to find a job at the company of this respondent.

All respondents acknowledged that specific and more formal training is available mainly just for white-collar workers, while **blue-collar workers have to rely more on on-the-job learning**. Added to this was the remark that the **training for blue-collar workers is less transferable**. As an example it was mentioned that when someone follows forklift training within their own company, they cannot fully complete the external training programme (for one respondent the test had to be done at their own company which resulted in a certificate from their company and not from the official training provider, meaning that no certificate was provided that was valid outside the employee's own company. For another respondent, the second day of the training programme could only be followed if it was paid for by the employee. The importance of the issue of transferability was highlighted at the end of our roundtable discussion when the added value was underlined of training for blue-collar workers outside their own company.

During the roundtable discussion, **the topic of training academies/departments** was briefly addressed. One respondent indicated that their company did not have a department dedicated to training. Internal training was given on the subject of safety, and the company's maintenance personnel could follow external training but not much existed for the production staff. The organisations at which the other respondents worked did have a training department. However, one respondent stated here that there was an imbalance between the importance of this department and the resources the department received (not enough to meet the needs). Another respondent mentioned that their training department mainly focused on white-collar workers. Workers with technical profiles also received attention (partly because of the shortage of technical personnel, as mentioned earlier) but for the 'common worker' not much is done. The observation from this latter respondent stressed that, unfortunately, **a difference exists between training offers for white-collar workers and blue-collar workers**. This issue was mentioned a few times during the roundtable discussion. For in-

stance, another respondent stated that training for blue-collar workers is still lacking and that training should not only be directed towards specialised profiles and functions.

Finally, one respondent mentioned an interesting, more macro-level statement. Specifically, the respondent indicated their struggle with the definition of the term lifelong learning. The **respondent asked what the goal of lifelong learning should be, because as long as this is not clear it remains a concept that is difficult to execute.**

3. Conclusions and recommendations

In the current context of (strongly) changing competency needs and labour market shortages, lifelong learning is a particularly important issue in Belgium. Despite the attention paid to it by policymakers, labour market actors and the social partners, and despite the efforts to stimulate it, not all companies offer training and employee participation in it is still too low.

In the scientific literature, several barriers to 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. These challenges also emerge in Belgium, where a significant share of companies still report not having provided any training. Similarly, workers face barriers (including dispositional, informational, institutional, and situational barriers) that have an impact on workers' understanding of their own learning needs and their willingness and possibility to participate in lifelong learning. Specific groups of workers, like older workers or the lower-educated, seem more heavily affected in this regard. In Belgium, besides barriers such as a lack of time or too limited resources, the absence of a learning culture has emerged as a major obstacle.

Building on the insights described in the previous chapters, we have formulated a number of recommendations to boost lifelong learning in Flanders.

3.1 Ensuring access to high quality training for all

In line with the European Union, the Flemish government has set the goal of a training participation rate of 60 % by 2030 (DWSE, 2021; European Commission, 2021). Although important, this goal is not without its shortcomings. One is that the goal only focuses on the amount of training being followed. While this goal is in line with the issue at hand (i.e. knowing how many people have followed training courses offers insights into whether more people are pursuing further training or are retraining after their initial education), it does not provide insights into whether these people are better off after following training. The 60 % goal does not, therefore, address the quality of the training followed.

Quality assessments are (often) performed at the level of an individual training course. Educam and company respondents, for instance, mentioned that training offers are assessed via evaluation surveys immediately after the course and/or via personal communication methods. Reporting, at an aggregated level, on the impact of these quality assessments (such as the actions undertaken based on the received outcomes) could be a starting point for adding a quality component to the current quantitatively oriented lifelong learning goal. Sector funds, training academies or training departments and also employee representatives could play a role in gathering the insights at the micro-level, while an organisation like the SERV or Steunpunt Werk could be assigned to write the aggregated quality report.

Insights from the roundtable discussion further highlight that quality assessment is needed with regard to the transferability of training undertaken. For instance, does a training course count when not everything is offered to be able to receive a certificate, or when everything except the final test is completed at the respective training provider? Such questions need to be asked and taken into consideration since the answers impact on the transferability of the knowledge gained. This reflects whether people are better off *in the long term* after following a training course. In short, the long-term focus on training, especially for blue-collar workers, still needs improvement. This is an issue that probably resides most at the level of an organisation. Employers' organisations, ideally in collaboration with employee representatives, would therefore seem the best partner(s) to point this issue out to companies and to solve it jointly.

3.2 Supporting the validation of on-the-job learning

Learning can take different forms as is reflected in the definition of adult learning: '*a range of formal and informal learning activities*' (European Education Area, n.d.). However, learning 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 (Woodwize, n.d.). 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.

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).

Issuing an official professional qualification for what employees learn in the workplace can thus be an essential tool to improve the Flemish learning culture. We therefore recommend other sectors to draw inspiration from the ESF-project WPL4BK and to introduce modular training programmes in their respective sector which can lead to a professional or partial qualification that is recognised by the government. Sector funds and companies play an important role in the development and provision of these programmes.

3.3 Exploring a better use of digital tools

Besides affecting jobs and the competences required for them, the influence of digitalisation is also noticeable in the tools that are being developed to stimulate adult learning in Flanders. Some examples of these tools are the digital learning and career platform that is being developed by the Flemish government; the self-check tool for mapping and visualising em-

employees' competences, which has been developed by the sector fund Educam at the request of social partners; and the career insight platform which is being developed by one of the companies to which we spoke. These three examples depict the wide range of actions that are being undertaken to improve adult learning in Flanders (improving awareness of the three training incentives; improving awareness of an employee's competences in order to assess their training needs; and improving awareness of the possible career paths that can be taken in a company). All three digital tools contribute to improving the Flemish learning culture in their own way.

We recommend continuing with the development of such tools. However, we would add a few warning signs to this recommendation. First, the development of similar tools must be prevented as much as possible. This implies the need for better collaboration and coordination, or the need for clear segmentation where similar tools serve distinct and separate audiences. Second, as the tools addressed here are digital, attention should go to digital illiteracy. Digital literacy already appears to be a focus point for companies and the unions, and it is an area of particular concern as digital literacy appears more limited in Belgium than in other EU Member States. Ensuring that those with less developed digital skills can find their way to digital tools and be able to work with them is critical. This task could be assumed by various partners (government, unions, sector funds, companies) depending on who developed the tool and who the targeted audience is.

3.4 Improving the learning culture

Finally, as the issue of a poor learning culture seems particularly pressing in Flanders, it is of critical importance to invest in improving the learning culture among all actors and at all levels. This includes informing companies of why lifelong learning matters and of what the benefits are for them in the short and the longer run. It also includes 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 because they are obliged to do so.

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