



European Network of Public Employment Services

Upskilling, reskilling and prevention in times of crisis

PES Thematic Review Workshop

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
New developments.....	2
PLANNING OF UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES	3
Planning skill content	3
Targeting of services	4
IMPLEMENTING UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES.....	7
Promotion to individuals and/or companies	7
Administration costs and institutional set-up	9
Cooperation with stakeholders.....	9
Providing vulnerable workers with access to online upskilling services	10
Regional variation	10
MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES	11
REFERENCES	12

INTRODUCTION

This paper will provide an overview of the key questions and issues for Public Employment Services (PES) relating to providing upskilling programmes and services to employees (and their employers). We will draw on existing promising practices and academic research, as well as the discussions held in the Thematic Review Workshop 'Upskilling, reskilling and prevention in times of crisis', held on 23-24 October 2020. The main objective of the measures discussed is to prevent (prolonged) unemployment for those likely to be affected by automation and robotisation. These workers are largely doing routine tasks – in the sense that they can be easily programmed – and have low to medium levels of education and low digital skills. It is becoming clear that they will not be able to switch to performing more complex (less routine) tasks, and transfer smoothly to different jobs, without receiving training. Given these workers' limited resources, it is likely that they need to be supported by public institutions. The European Commission's updated [Skills Agenda](#) (published on 1 July 2020) emphasises the need for upskilling and, in order to achieve this goal, calls for strengthening the cooperation between different public and private institutions.

In 2017, when the PES Network started its work on prevention, the idea that PES would need to work with employees was accepted, but few had a mandate to put forward ambitious programmes and services. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has, to some extent, contributed to nudging PES in this direction. First, in many countries PES are taking a leading role in coordinating crisis packages for employees (including short-time work) and, thus, have seen their mandates enlarged to cover those at risk of job loss. Second, these tasks have necessarily meant that PES need to collaborate closely with employers, which is a prerequisite to providing upskilling services to employed jobseekers. Third, PES have had to provide more and more services using a range of digital channels, which will contribute to their capacity to deliver services to employed jobseekers who might not have the time and opportunity to work with the PES in person. Finally, there is growing concern that the COVID-19 epidemic will also speed up the adoption of automation and robotisation as employers would want to avoid their production activities being suspended for a considerable time as a result of health concerns.

In this paper, we first provide a short overview of the recent advances in knowledge about the effect of technological change (and the COVID-19 pandemic) on the labour market. We then go on to review the main issues relating to the management of upskilling programmes and services for at-risk employees in three stages of the process: planning, implementation and evaluation. Throughout the paper, we make short references to recent activities of PES in this area, especially the practices highlighted at the Thematic Review Workshop in October 2020.

New developments

Recent academic work on the effect of automation and robotisation has shed some new light on the careers of workers by relying on longitudinal data. These studies largely corroborate earlier findings. On the one hand, productivity largely increases in firms investing in new technologies and they do not necessarily decrease total employment. On the other hand, production workers lose their jobs and are being replaced by tech workers (Humlum, 2019). These technological advances can account for up to a quarter of the employment losses of production workers over the last 20 years in Denmark, for example.

Workers seem better protected from the long-term negative consequences of technological changes if they are better adapted to performing non-routine tasks and have IT competencies. Following an automation-related job loss, workers with such skills tend to be able to find employment more quickly and do not have to face a significant downgrading of their job (Ten Berge et al., 2020). However, those most likely affected will need support from public institutions (PES and training institutions). Goos et al. (2019) show that only

workers who possess at least 80% of the skills required for new jobs can make a relatively rapid transition, and that most workers displaced due to automation do not have the required skills. Schmidpeter and Winter-Ebmer (2019) not only show that the risk of displacement due to automation has risen over the last 20 years in Austria, but also provide evidence that PES-financed retraining facilitates re-employment, and is particularly effective for workers who have worked in jobs that required performing routine tasks.¹

At the same time, it seems to be clear that the negative economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is also borne by people in positions of relatively high vulnerability. Much research has gone into not only taking stock of jobs lost, but also into predicting which types of tasks (jobs) can be done with relatively little risk of contagion (for example, working from home). CEDEFOP estimated that about 22% of jobs are at risk of disruption due to the pandemic, and this is likely to increase existing inequalities (see Pouliakas and Branka, 2020). Thus women, low-educated and low-wage workers, those with a migration background and those working on temporary contracts are over-represented in jobs most negatively affected (Basso et al., 2020).

Beyond the immediate aftermath of the crisis, it is likely that the pandemic will provide additional impetus for firms to move towards automation and robotisation. Indeed, there is some circumstantial evidence that robotisation tends to reduce risk of exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19. The scant research on the intersection between the likelihood of automation and risk of exposure to the virus points to the fact that these two tend to be negatively associated, meaning that less than 8% of the workforce (in the US) is likely to be immediately affected (Chernoff and Warman, 2020). It seems that women educated at a medium level face a particularly high risk that their jobs might be automated, as they tend to work in jobs such as customer service representatives.

PLANNING OF UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES

The issues arising when planning upskilling programmes are manifold. First, the stakeholders need to be aware of: (i) those who are likely to be affected by technological changes, and (ii) the future skills needs of employers and the target population. Second, there needs to be careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of existing programmes and services, as well as how these can be coordinated to offer services in a cost-effective way.

Planning skill content

While there is no consensus on precisely how occupations will change (whether certain jobs will disappear, or rather their content transformed), there is a fairly good understanding of which tasks might be automatable. While priorities might have changed in the short term due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this is unlikely to fundamentally alter our expectations of what type of workers will need upskilling.

While in many larger countries skills forecasting is a rather involved and intricate process, resource-constrained PES can, in principle, benefit from the availability of existing or forthcoming international data on occupational skill content, employers' skills demands and workers' skills levels. The more novel of these not only rely on surveys (such as the European Skills and Jobs Survey of CEDEFOP, and PIAAC from OECD), but also analyse online job portals using big data and machine learning techniques. CEDEFOP's Skills Online Vacancy Analysis Tool for Europe collects recent information on skills demanded by employers.² An additional fruitful avenue seems to be the analysis of PES' own job portals,

¹ It also seems to be the case that younger unemployed persons benefit more from retraining, and that these workers can upgrade their jobs and move to positions requiring performing more non-routine tasks.

² See: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/skills-online-job-vacancies>

especially if they use competences (and competence-based matching). This can be used to analyse: (i) what types of skills are in high demand; (ii) whether persons using certain skills tend to lose their jobs; and (iii) the evolution of skills gaps between the two. Indeed, this is an approach that is currently being developed in Belgium, as this can inform the planning of skills courses.³

A possible positive consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic may be new and more regular cooperation with employers about their skills needs. A number of PES have reported having launched new surveys (especially about employers' short-term skills needs), which are likely to continue to be conducted in the longer run. Similarly, local (regional) offices have intensified cooperation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is likely to lead to a more informed skills planning process.

In some cases, when launching large-scale programmes, it is especially useful to conduct in-depth surveys and discussions. This was exemplified by Estonia, when launching and updating the 'Work and Study' programme. While the programme was based on in-depth work done in several sectors by a different institution, it also included surveys of employers about the specific IT skills needed in the labour market.⁴ Further knowledge can be gained by analysing pilot projects, such as in the case of Luxembourg. One relevant conclusion of the 'Skills Bridge' project was that based on four main characteristics of firms, the skills needs of their employees can be (to some extent) distinguished. After gathering information from a range of sources, a number of PES have concluded that upskilling the digital competencies of low-skilled workers is one of the key requirements in order to enable them to move to better jobs. However, the 'Skills Bridge' pilot project (LU) has also shown that soft skills (interpersonal, transversal skills) can be equally important in companies that are undertaking a technological transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which in many cases has encouraged inter-institutional cooperation, has brought to light one area of planning skills content that will be important for the future: institutional fragmentation. In other words, institutional responsibility for service provision is often tied to the benefits the client might be currently receiving (rather than to the type of service, which in turn is related to the clients' needs). More specifically, given that in most countries PES traditionally only offer training courses to unemployed jobseekers, they might not be well informed about the existence and modalities of support for (at-risk) employed jobseekers.⁵ The issue of institutional responsibility across a client's lifecycle will also become a key issue when planning upskilling programmes in the future.

Targeting of services

Targeting services effectively needs prior intelligence about which employees might be the most at risk of losing their jobs, as well as information about who would receive upskilling even in the absence of public support. The most relevant issue in this respect is the potential choice between two approaches. One possibility is to design a very finely targeted programme, which accurately identifies those individuals and firms that are most in need, but risks a relatively low take-up rate due to having to comply with relatively strict requirements. The other contrasting option is to have upskilling programmes that are open to all, but run the risk of leading to having many participants who would have undertaken a course even in the absence of a state subsidy.

³ Furthermore, co-operation with PES can also be used in a fruitful manner (instead of trying to compete with these) especially for smaller organisations.

⁴ These surveys were useful in the sense that they included a few key areas in IT skills which are in high demand in all sectors.

⁵ Clearly, this also depends on the current institutional responsibility for the payment of benefits and delivery of services. There are notable exceptions from fragmentation, especially in countries where the PES is directly responsible for training provision (public adult training is overseen by the PES), such as in Portugal.

The first issue of targeting is the **'menu' of retraining courses**, and how potential participants are guided through the process of choosing a course. In some countries, individuals (or firms) essentially have an unrestricted choice, so long as the course is needed for their career (for upskilling the workforce). This is followed in the Flemish Region of Belgium (VDAB), the Netherlands, Germany and France, among others.⁶ In a handful of other countries, the choice of training courses has to be formally approved by the PES (such as in Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland). In a number of other countries, such as Estonia, the range of courses is restricted and is set by the PES and/or the relevant ministry. In these countries, the retraining is put in place to address specific and well-defined challenges, such as the lack of digital or language skills, or to encourage the upskilling of relatively low qualified workers.

Setting the menu of retraining courses is also directly related to the public contribution to the costs of training. Economic considerations dictate that courses providing transferable skills to workers ought to receive significantly higher public subsidies than those which are specific to a firm or a particular technology. While delineating courses based on how transversal the skill content is might not be straightforward, this is an approach that is currently being adopted in Luxembourg.

There is increased awareness that upskilling need not mean a long retraining course and that it may be more cost-effective to provide shorter courses. Indeed, the PES of the Flemish Region of Belgium has been working toward modularising its training courses, in such a way that citizens can benefit from the elements that are most needed to gain the right skills for the next job. This approach facilitates training tailored to individual needs.⁷

A second, related question is whether workers (or companies) are encouraged to seek **counselling** when choosing a relevant training course. In most countries, workers are encouraged to consult online career counselling materials, while in a few countries, such as the Netherlands or Belgium (VDAB), online counselling is made available for workers looking for an upskilling course.⁸ Within Estonia's 'Work and Study Programme', it is mandatory for supported individuals to set up a training plan with a relevant employer counsellor before getting approval for funding. At the same time, coaches for companies are offered in a handful of pilots or small-scale programmes (such as the 'Skills Bridge' project in LU), in order to build an upskilling plan for their employees. Clearly, upscaling such pilots will require that participating companies develop structured skills development plans that indicate why different upskilling activities are relevant.

A third design issue is targeting based on **workers' characteristics**. The question is whether retraining services are offered only to some groups of workers, or whether the right to such services is to be universal, albeit with some vulnerable workers (or companies) being incentivised or prioritised. In some countries where citizens (workers) are entitled to vouchers (or training accounts) there are no restrictions on potential participants – such as in Flemish Belgium, France and the Netherlands. In these countries, preferential treatment of persons from a vulnerable background is exercised via financial incentives. By contrast, in a number of countries where programmes are specifically designed for upskilling individuals in a risky situation (or companies undergoing transformations) the main target group is limited and explicitly specified.

⁶ In all these countries, citizens or workers have access to training through a voucher-style system or individual training account.

⁷ Clearly, this goes hand-in-hand with the introduction of validation of different skills and experiences. One recent example is the Hospitality Industry Professional Skills Card, which has been recently piloted by SEPE (the federal PES of Spain). This card is to serve both as an instrument to recognise skills acquired through experience and as an instrument to guide further skills acquisition.

⁸ In a similar vein, individuals applying for training vouchers in the German Bildungsprämie programme were required to attend counselling session, which are now offered in an online form.

A fourth issue in terms of the design of programmes is the **financial incentives** attached, and the more nuanced question of 'payment vehicle'. This is a particularly thorny question, as estimates of the proportion of persons who would have participated in training even in the absence of the subsidy range from 35–75%. It is clear that those financial arrangements which do not particularly focus on cash-constrained individuals are likely to be less effective in this respect. For instance, the subsidy system in the Netherlands is being redesigned for this reason, as it is clear that giving tax reductions favours those who are not cash-strapped and hence are less likely to be in a vulnerable position.

The design of financial incentives can be tailored in such a way that it is to support lower qualified or more vulnerable persons. This can come in the form of restricting the maximum amount of subsidy available at a relatively low value, such as in a recent plan in the Netherlands (which restricts the maximum subsidy to 1,000 EUR).⁹ An alternative route is to explicitly favour lower-qualified (or more vulnerable) persons, and differentiate the subsidy rate. For instance, financial support for training vouchers in the Belgian Flemish Region is more advantageous for lower-qualified persons, and a number of programmes in Austria and Germany offer a higher subsidy rate for the training of workers above the age of 45. Unfortunately, we have relatively little evidence on how well this kind of financial incentive works in terms of reaching people who would otherwise not have participated, nor on the fine-tuning of these incentives. However, this is an area that clearly needs further investigation and research.¹⁰

The last crucial design issue is whether it is worth targeting and/or approaching **companies** in order to facilitate upskilling or whether individual workers instead need to be directly offered the chance to improve their skills (potentially without the knowledge or consent of the employer). While the first approach seems to be beneficial as employers might be cogent of their employees' (future) skills needs, it could run the risk of employers wanting to concentrate training activities on workers who are already more likely to be retained.¹¹ Furthermore, while it might be relatively straightforward to target retraining to individuals based on their education, income etc., it may be slightly more difficult to perform a 'triage' of firms.¹² In contrast, promoting retraining and reaching out to people with a vulnerable background, without relying on their employers, might require more effort (and potentially lead to lower take-up rates).

Broadly speaking, a handful of countries offer upskilling possibilities to workers directly¹³ (as has been established for at least ten years in Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands) in the form of vouchers¹⁴ or individual training accounts. Indeed, the updated Skills Agenda calls for considering a more widespread use of individual learning accounts in order to empower individuals and to provide financial support to enable upskilling activities. The prime example is the 'Compte Personnel de Formation' (CPF), introduced in France in 2015 and reformed in 2018. The aims of the CPF are: (i) to reduce inequalities

⁹ Clearly, this assumes that the further training for higher qualified persons is more expensive than the threshold value for the subsidy, while typically the courses which vulnerable workers need cost less than this value.

¹⁰ There is some evidence that on top of financial incentives, other obstacles (such as access to childcare services during upskilling activities) also need to be addressed in the case of vulnerable employees.

¹¹ In these cases, it is not clear how the interests of (vulnerable) workers is protected. In general, PES try to rely on employee organisations to safeguard against these programmes only serving the interest of employers.

¹² This can be done effectively in small-scale pilots – as in the 'Skills Bridge' (LU), where companies were hand-picked based on an initial needs analysis – but this is much more difficult to do in large numbers.

¹³ One of the most ambitious novel programmes in this respect was the introduction of the 'Work and Study' programme in Estonia in 2017.

¹⁴ A similar programme was in place in Latvia, the European Social Fund project 'Lifelong Learning Measures for Employed Persons' (2010 – 2014). The EU-funded adult education project 'Improving the professional competence of employed persons' co-ordinated by the Latvian State Education Development Agency 2017-2023 is a follow-up of this previous project.

in access to training; (ii) to encourage personal autonomy in the take-up and choice of training; and (iii) to improve skills. These training accounts are primarily funded by compulsory contributions from employers, with preferential rates for low-skilled, disabled people, or those working in particularly arduous conditions.¹⁵

A large number of PES have historically offered retraining courses to companies undergoing structural reorganisation. However, in terms of training for employees, most PES offer preferential programmes for SMEs, which are assumed not to have the financial and human resources to organise such training internally. In these cases, the PES, the employer and the employee mutually agree to provide training to the employee. Such programmes exist in Austria, Estonia, Germany and Poland (among others), and the state typically finances between 50% and 80% of training costs, and in some cases also finances part of the lost work hours of trained employees.¹⁶

The most interesting and novel development in upskilling programmes for employers has been a combination of career counselling and upskilling programmes offered to private firms by PES, in collaboration with HR consultants. In both Germany and Luxembourg, this kind of service has recently been piloted with considerable success. This qualification counselling in Germany primarily targets SMEs, which do not have developed HR departments. The main idea is that consulting staff support employers' planning of further training in order to fill job vacancies with less qualified existing staff. In a follow-up to pilots, the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (German PES) launched a subsidy which (following the consulting services) can cover 50% of training costs and missed work hours for SMEs. A similar initiative has been piloted in Luxembourg, in the 'Skills Bridge' project, which assisted companies that were facing a large transformation. Besides establishing skills development plans and personal coaching for employees using innovative tools (such as AI-based predictions for the evolution of tasks), consultants provided IT and soft skills training.¹⁷ The project provided a large volume of initial help in upskilling employees and appears to have had longer-lasting effects, with 90% of trained employees still working for the same companies. Furthermore, based on the positive developments in this pilot, the PES of Luxembourg is planning on scaling up such career counselling for firms.

IMPLEMENTING UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES

The main issues arising when implementing upskilling programmes are twofold. First, how to maximise the take-up of the services while at the same time being mindful of endeavouring to reach those who need the services the most. Second, how to ensure that upskilling activities are done in a sufficiently flexible way so that they respond to employees' needs, using multiple channels (bearing in mind the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Promotion to individuals and/or companies

The way in which the promotion of upskilling activities is carried out depends, to some extent, on whether the upskilling programme targets employees directly, or whether it is companies that decide about their workers' needs.

There is ample evidence to suggest that engaging and communicating with employees is important, and it is likely that more highly-educated workers are much more aware of the importance of upskilling than those who are lower educated. Thus, it is a pressing matter

¹⁵ For a critical review of the experiences of individual training accounts, see OECD (2019).

¹⁶ Some of these programmes also include a clause that employees receiving training cannot be fired for 6 months.

¹⁷ Companies also received subsidies for the wages of participating employees. The training period was up to 12 working days per firm.

that lower-educated persons are convinced to initiate and undertake upskilling activities off the job, especially given that some may have difficulty exerting self-discipline in terms of starting up and persisting with activities that require investment yet have distant pay-offs (i.e. when automation may displace them in the future).

The evidence of how far information (and financial incentives) can go in promoting the case for jobseekers to begin, and partially self-finance, upskilling courses at their own initiative is mixed. Görlitz – Tamm (2017) report on an experiment that targeted a random sample of individuals with information about the existence and conditions of a training voucher programme in Germany. However, the intervention did not increase the take-up of the voucher. More recently, van den Berg et al. (2018) analysed whether sending brochures to employees about a subsidised training programme for workers at SMEs lead to a take-up of training around seven months later. They found that while the brochure increased awareness of the programme, it did not raise participation in the training subsidy.¹⁸

Most PES use a variety of channels to promote upskilling activities, ranging from flyers through to their own websites and social media pages. Advertisements on national and local media (including printed and audio-visual media) are also used, taking into account that the targeted workers might not speak the official language of the country at a sufficient level. Even with such widespread promotional activities, it takes a significant amount of time for potential beneficiaries to become aware of new programmes, as the experience of the Estonian PES shows, which estimates that it took two years for their promotion to come to fruition.

Given the mixed success in ensuring participation, the question is whether and how to use more finely-tuned communication techniques to reach those who need the services the most. In principle, for those persons who have been clients of PES, this might be possible, as the PES has sufficient information about them. This was used by the Estonian PES when launching the 'Work and Study' programme.¹⁹

In principle, since a large number of people might have come into contact with the PES recently who had not previously registered as jobseekers but unfortunately lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a larger pool of persons can be targeted in the future. A number of concerns remain, however. First, whether the information accessed by PES on potential clients is rich and precise enough to fine-tune targeting and communication. Second, whether there are any ethical concerns about actively offering public services to some individuals but not to others.

Given that a number of upskilling programmes target companies (SMEs), promotion for employers also raises a number of issues. Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, two phenomena have been appearing simultaneously in a number of sectors. On the one hand, some tasks are slowly being automated; on the other hand, there is a shortage of (more skilled) labour, who might be able to work with new technologies. In many countries, the shortage of skilled labour is so severe (especially for SMEs), that even though upskilling programmes cover wages (up to a limit), firms are unable to let employees participate in courses during work hours. This is therefore one of the areas where further research and probing is surely needed. Building contacts with SMEs is an area in which the fact that more companies have come into contact with the PES during the COVID-19 pandemic (as PES tend to coordinate short-time work and other crises measures) might create future

¹⁸ However, it did seem to induce male employees, particularly those who were at risk of job loss to take up self-initiated and self-financed training.

¹⁹ PES that provide not only unemployment benefits (such as in Slovakia or in Norway) will have the advantage of having accrued information on a large number of potential clients (even if they were not registered unemployed).

opportunities, a possible development that was identified, for instance, by the German PES.²⁰

Administration costs and institutional set-up

Clearly, a crucial element in increasing the take-up of measures designed for more vulnerable persons (or SMEs) is to avoid having a burdensome application process, which might discourage participation. This is an issue that has clearly been identified as a point to develop by a number of PES.

On the side of the individuals, it is important to try to automatise eligibility checks and to dispense with long paper trails. This was clearly identified as a challenge by the Estonian PES, but also as an issue that it's necessary to solve. The issue that might arise is how to make the process smooth for individuals with very low levels of digital literacy. A further issue related to institutional set-up is the often time-limited nature of upskilling programmes and the sometimes fragmented service delivery. This puts individuals of vulnerable backgrounds at a disadvantage, as they might have issues with collecting precise information about opportunities in a timely fashion.

As for employers, in a number of programmes offering substantial training subsidies, they have to indicate why reskilling is needed. Checking and ranking applications is clearly an arduous task, especially for PES with more limited capacity.²¹ In particular, when companies can offer training to employees internally (such as in Croatia), checking the adequacy of training can create a further issue, given the limited time available to process claims.²²

Cooperation with stakeholders

Cooperation with stakeholders is crucial for the upskilling of employees in both the planning and the implementation phases of programmes. In all countries, employers are consulted when gathering information about the type of skills needed (as detailed above). Beyond this, there are two developments we need to note. First, that cooperation with PES and private providers is needed, as PES do not need to compete with them. Second, it is clear that in order to reach out to persons with vulnerable backgrounds (some of whom might not have trust in the PES), cooperation with local stakeholders is needed.

There have been promising developments in these areas, which will hopefully continue as a result of the special programmes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. One exemplary programme was launched in November 2019, when the Spanish PES (SEPE), the National Foundation for Training in Employment, and 23 technology companies signed an agreement whereby these companies provide free access to digital skills training (based on their CSR commitments). Besides free-of-charge access to over 500 educational videos and courses of varying complexity (ranging from a few minutes to 20-hour technical courses)²³, the advantage of this collaboration is that it now offers a single point of access to users.

At the same time, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the most effective ways brought to the surface some of the more problematic issues of cooperation. This often

²⁰ While in principle, in a number of countries training of employees during short-time work schemes is encouraged and subsidised, the take-up of such training has been low, and this is clearly made even more difficult by social distancing measures.

²¹ This has been reported as an issue by the Polish, the Bulgarian and the Croatian PES.

²² In Croatia for instance this has to be done within 10 days of receiving a request for subsidies.

²³ While digital skills training is very popular in information, digital communications and IT sectors, there is a significant demand also from business services. Marketing & trade basic courses (on internet use) are popular, along with courses on internet security; but also specialised courses such as big data and business intelligence.

comes from the fact that different stakeholders have contrasting perspectives and interests. This means that while PES might care about national goals, social partners care about sectoral interests, and regional (local) governments focus on citizens living in their jurisdiction. However, the cooperation which started in spring 2020 might have longer-term positive consequences, insofar as stakeholders will be able to think about regular cooperation in order to provide clients with the most adequate services.

Providing vulnerable workers with access to online upskilling services

While providing access to training to those with low skills is a general issue, solving it has become an even more urgent task in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, the pandemic has speeded up the transition toward digital service delivery, which is likely to be instructive for the future, in the sense that at-risk employees might not have the time to access training courses in-person (during regular work hours).

There are a number of issues related to the digital skills of both PES' clients and service providers, which needed to be solved urgently in the spring of 2020. One promising practice comes from Portugal, which we will highlight here.²⁴ First of all, trainers received digital skills training, and digital training materials were elaborated. As a result, the majority of training programmes could be provided either fully online or in a mixed format. Second, clients' digital literacy needed to be tested and reinforced, which was generally done in the week before the start of the training courses. Third, the issue of clients (especially from vulnerable backgrounds) not having access to the internet or computers needed to be solved, with the majority using computers at IEFP's training centres, and a minority being loaned devices. With these three steps, transition to digital service provision was made possible in a couple of months, and the number of clients receiving upskilling services could be expanded to include employees of companies that were using short-time work schemes.²⁵

Regional variation

Cooperation with stakeholders at the regional level is extremely important. This is clearly useful at the planning phase, where regional variation in skills needs ought to be revealed; as well as in the implementation phase, where local stakeholders can play a key role in ensuring promotion and participation.

This is clearly crucial in large, federal states, as well as in countries where legislation explicitly gives responsibility to regions in implementation of services (for example, for career counselling in France). However, regional cooperation is crucial for all PES. For instance, in the Belgian Flemish Region, sectoral teams for each province have existed within VDAB since a couple of years ago, and these coordinate counselling and upskilling activities. More recently, in the Netherlands, to implement the recovery package from the COVID-19 crisis, regional labour market transition teams are being set up, which involved the PES (UWV), municipalities, social partners and private companies (including Private Employment Service) teaming up to implement the re-deployment of persons affected by job-loss in the most effective way.

²⁴ It needs to be kept in mind that the Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional is distinctive, in that it is also a training agency with a substantial number of training centres. Hence, only a smaller part of upskilling services are contracted out to private providers.

²⁵ Note that this meant up to 60,000 additional clients. While the majority were given access to relatively short courses, a significant number followed longer (25-50 hour) programmes.

Another important recent example comes from the deployment of the Skills Investment Plan in France²⁶, as well as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the interesting developments in the implementation of the Skills Investment Plan is that only in two regions of France is Pôle emploi fully responsible for its implementation, while in all others the regional government takes a lead role (and the PES cooperates). In regions where PES take a lead, they perform a fully regional analysis of the demand for skills, which leads to an identification of the most promising sectors. In each of these sectors, there is a specific team that works not only on the identification of skills needs and professional pathways, but also on the development of new and innovative training courses (particularly suited for youth from a vulnerable background). The COVID-19 pandemic meant that a timely response needed to be deployed, including identification of the transferable skills, and the introduction of shorter qualifying courses.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF UPSKILLING PROGRAMMES

Evaluation of upskilling programmes for employed persons is a largely unexplored field, given that these programmes are relatively novel. There are some specific challenges with evaluating these programmes, and it is more complicated than the evaluation of training programmes for unemployed persons.

One area where there is considerable potential for piloting includes randomised control trials in communication about upskilling programmes. This is due to the fact that these interventions do not necessitate any changes in the major design elements of programmes (which are sometimes prescribed by laws), rather they focus on 'information treatments', in other words processes that are to be fine-tuned. These experiments are very valuable, as we have seen that take-up of upskilling programmes by low-skilled employees remains an issue.²⁷

Furthermore, in countries where large-scale upskilling programmes are being deployed, there is a potential for having regional (innovative) variations of them. A current example comes from France, where such regional variation is an integral part of the implementation of the Skills Investment Plan. Furthermore, this plan is exemplary in that piloting and scientific evaluation of innovative skills programmes are part of the design.

Evaluating upskilling programmes for employed persons is somewhat difficult due to a number of issues. First, the person (or the company) can decide whether to enrol in such a programme, and this motivation might partially explain the outcomes. It can therefore be difficult to disentangle the role played by motivation from the quality of the programme. The second issue is related to finding the criteria for success, in other words to determine the most relevant outcome variables. It is not clear whether simply employment and earnings are to be measured, or whether to consider that the person's skills have improved and s/he can perform more complex tasks. Due to data access limitations, most PES can currently only concentrate on the short-term consequences: i.e. whether the beneficiary of the upskilling retained their job in the firm, or whether they became (registered) jobseekers. However, for a deeper analysis of the longer-term effects, including a trained person's career pathway, more data integration will be needed.

²⁶ The PIC is an ambitious five-year action plan (with a budget of 15 billion euros), which has the objective to provide training for one million young persons and a further one million jobseekers further away from the labour market (who have not previously been clients of the PES).

²⁷ A handful of such experiments have been conducted in Germany.

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