



Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults

Executive summary

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Learning opportunities that allow adults to up- and re-skill are vital components for economic growth and social equality. The Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways¹ (2016/C 484/01) aims to ensure that everyone in society has a comprehensive set of basic skills, knowledge, and competences to achieve their full potential, play an active part in society and progress on the labour market. The Recommendation sets out a three-step approach to offering low-skilled adults access to upskilling pathways, through a skills assessment, a tailored and flexible learning offer, and validation and recognition of skills and competences. This approach is underpinned by outreach, guidance and support measures for learners, as well as coordination between relevant actors in education, training, employment, and social policy.

This study contributes to the evaluation staff working document of the European Commission. It outlines the change that has occurred between 2016 and 2021 with regards to upskilling pathways in Member States in response to the Recommendation. It then proceeds to assess the extent to which this response has been effective, efficient, relevant, in coherence with other EU and national policies and programmes and has delivered EU added value. On the basis of these findings, it draws key lessons learned.

Key findings

Effectiveness

The evidence shows that Member States have made only **moderate efforts to facilitate access to upskilling pathways since the Recommendation was adopted**. 14 Member States made changes to their upskilling approach to align more with the Recommendation. Member States that had high need for change in 2016² have been more likely to instigate change to implement the Recommendation, as seen in Table 1. The **indicators relevant to upskilling pathways also show moderate progress**, including increased participation in adult learning, increased level of digital skills and a decreased share of low-qualified adults across the EU.

Table 1 Summary of degree of need for change and degree of actual change

Need for change in 2016	Degree of change 2016-2021			
	Significant change	Moderate change	Modest change	No change
High	BE, PL, BG	EL HR, MT	SK, CZ, CY, IT	HU, IE, RO, ES
Medium	LV		DE	LT, LU, PT, SI
Low			EE, DK,	AT, FI, FR, NL, SE

Source: *Ecorys/3s, 2022*. Full explanation of the methodology is included in Annex 1 and Annex 9. 'No change' indicates that no significant changes to better align the country's existing approach to the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation were identified. It does not mean that no changes took place at all in the country's upskilling approach.

¹ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN)

² High need for change is defined as high shares of low-qualified, low participation rates, and/or a low degree of implementation of the three-step approach,

However, **there is limited evidence which shows that this improvement is the result of upskilling pathways** implemented in response to the Recommendation. There has been no noticeable change in the trends of the relevant indicators after 2016, with long-term trends suggesting that higher educational attainment levels are principally due to improvements in initial education. Any direct macro effects of the measures taken in response to the Recommendation are not yet visible and are likely to only become fully apparent in the longer term, given that individual upskilling journeys usually take a number of years to complete.

Even if a causal link between the Recommendation and the improvements in the main indicators cannot be ascertained, evidence shows that the **Recommendation has contributed indirectly to renewing the focus on the low-skilled target group and outlining what is effective in supporting them**. Consultations undertaken for this study confirm that the Recommendation has highlighted the challenges with current provision for the low-skilled, set out a way forward for improving the support available, and stimulated cooperation between actors in the adult learning field. This is particularly the case in Member States that had high need for change in 2016.

Implementation of the three-step approach

In terms of implementation of the **three-step approach**, the study has shown that progress is most noticeable on skills assessment and the provision of tailored learning. Measures for validation and recognition of skills, whilst increasing since 2016, are less prevalent and are still missing in several countries, with evidence that they remain challenging to implement. There is also limited evidence of efforts to ensure integration of the three steps into one comprehensive pathway.

As called for in the Recommendation, all Member States have identified **priority target groups** for upskilling pathways including long-term unemployed, older workers, people with disabilities, and nationals with a migrant background or third country nationals. However, the definition of the target groups of upskilling pathways is often broad, prioritising the low-skilled in general. There is limited evidence of measures that are designed *specifically* for vulnerable groups. Even when marginalised target groups are identified, challenges remain in reaching them, including a lack of awareness of opportunities amongst the groups themselves, financial barriers to participation, and challenges with stigma and low motivation of the individuals.

In line with the Recommendation, Member States have delivered upskilling pathways to a high degree in **cooperation with relevant stakeholders**, including social partners, public employment services and regional and local actors. The study found evidence of outreach and guidance services provided to potential learners, although more holistic, tailored support is less common and guidance is less systematically available for individuals that are in employment. Support to employers is overall piecemeal and inconsistent, and there is also considerable scope to increase the systematic provision of training for staff delivering upskilling programmes for adults.

EU support to implement the Recommendation has included mutual learning activities, research, stocktaking of implementation and financial support through EU funding. The mutual learning and research activities undertaken have contributed to bringing adult learning to the attention of relevant actors and to stimulating cooperation between them. Furthermore, EU funding has been identified as an important contribution of the Recommendation, with the ESF in particular supporting some structural changes in Member States, particularly those with less developed adult learning systems, even though the **need to upscale ESF-funded upskilling projects and embed them in institutional structures with long-term sufficient funding** remains.

Efficiency

There are challenges to assessing the efficiency of the Recommendation given the difficulty in separating out the costs and benefits that have arisen as a direct result of the Recommendation from those that might have occurred in its absence. Nonetheless, the study has found that the **scale of costs and benefits** is influenced by the extent to which Member States' pre-existing adult education measures aligned already with the Recommendation in 2016. In countries that were implementing measures in line with the Recommendation already, stakeholders confirmed that they incurred no or very limited additional costs as a result of the Recommendation. In countries where adult learning systems were less in line with the Recommendation, costs were higher.

Nonetheless, across both groups of countries, evidence indicates that the **costs are proportionate to the benefits achieved**. This is due to the perceived long-term benefits of implementation: both on the individual level, through increased wages and/or moving into stable employment and, on the societal level, through increased income tax and VAT as a result of increased wages and consumer spending and lowered costs of welfare payments.

The study found that it is unlikely that benefits of the Recommendation could have been achieved at a lower cost, although there some **factors have negatively impacted efficiency**. These include the impact of Covid-19, challenges to delivery such as lack of staff trained specifically for adult learning and their skillset, and the difficulty of reaching more vulnerable target groups.

The extent of support provided for upskilling pathways greatly depends on Member States' willingness and capacity to earmark **funding** for adult learning. Adult learning overall tends to be supported by state budgets, within the education or active labour market policy system, or by employer contributions. There is, however, a lack of concrete data capturing this spending, as funding for the education of adults provided by the state within the education system is often not estimated or recorded, which makes it challenging to assess the degree of national support. **EU funding**, however, has supported the Recommendation through a range of different EU programmes and funding mechanisms. The largest of these was the European Social Fund (ESF), with over EUR 42 billion allocated to investment priority 10.iii (enhancing equal access to lifelong learning) for the period 2016-2020. Funding was also available under a variety of sources including Erasmus+, the Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Horizon 2020, the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) and the Technical Support Instrument (TSI).

The scale of EU funding available suggests that considerable resources were available to meet the needs targeted by the Recommendation. Nonetheless, there is a **risk that an over-reliance on EU funding can hinder the large-scale impact of the measures**, with project-based measures introduced, as opposed to large-scale reform. This is particularly the case for adult learning, also because national funding for this policy area is often included within broader budget lines for education investments as a whole and can thus remain scattered and insufficient.

Relevance

The Recommendation's objectives continue to be **highly relevant to the current EU socio-economic and policy context**. Challenges that existed when the Recommendation was adopted - including high levels of low-qualified adults - have persisted, whilst new challenges resulting from the Covid-19 crisis, the transformation of jobs and work, and the acceleration of the green and digital transitions, have heightened the relevance of the Recommendation. These challenges have even increased the need to focus on basic skills – in particular, digital skills – and low-skilled adults, who remain highly vulnerable to the evolution of the socio-economic context.

The **three-step approach** remains a very useful framework to guide both policy and implementation of upskilling measures. Each step is relevant considering needs of the target group for hands-on, integrated support. The flexible framework provided by the Recommendation also remains relevant as it allows Member States to identify their own priority groups in light of evolving and differing needs.

Coherence

There is overall a **good level of coherence between the objectives, target groups and measures** defined in the Recommendation and relevant policies and strategies at national and regional level. Evidence from the study shows that Member States either already had national and regional policies in line with the Recommendation, adjusted their policies as well as in some cases their legal frameworks governing vocational education and training (VET) following adoption of the Recommendation, or introduced new policies to ensure coherence.

The objectives, target groups and measures of the Recommendation have a **good degree of coherence overall with other related EU level policies** in the fields of training and employment, adult learning, and equalities. These other EU policies are complementary to the Recommendation and do not duplicate it, with limited potential for overlap. The analysis shows a general trend of an increasing specific focus on and acknowledgement of the importance of upskilling under other relevant EU policies over time.

The Recommendation also has a high degree of coherence with relevant EU funding mechanisms, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF) and the ESF+, Erasmus+, the Employment and Social Innovation programme (EaSI), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Just Transition Fund (JTF), the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP), the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation also shows a very good degree of internal coherence.

EU added value

The Recommendation generated **EU added value in four main areas**. It provided a common framework for the design of national upskilling policies; it promoted a focus on basic skills and low-skilled adults and raised awareness of the multiple vulnerable groups among this target group; it provided an impetus for more structured coordination among key stakeholders, contributing to a more joined-up approach; and it offered financial support by leveraging funding at EU level which in turn leveraged some national support through co-financing requirements.

The study indicates that the objectives of the **Recommendation could not have been achieved to the same extent** without the EU level intervention. Nonetheless, EU added value of the Recommendation could be increased by improving its visibility at the national level, further acknowledging the diversity of the target group, and continuing to provide supervision and support at EU level, including increasing mutual learning and knowledge-sharing.

Lessons learned

Based on its findings, the study identifies some key lessons for implementation of the Recommendation moving forward.

- There is a need to ensure that the good practices that have been implemented since the Recommendation was adopted to support low-skilled adults are upscaled into system-level reforms **to ensure structural, and long-term improvement** of adult learning systems that can support this target group. Exploring mechanisms to encourage the mainstreaming and transferability of successful approaches

developed using EU funding into more permanent national funding mechanisms could help in this regard.

- It is essential to **continue to develop awareness** of the importance of acquiring basic skills and of the need for specific upskilling measures for low-skilled adults. Awareness-raising activities could include targeted communications campaigns, the provision of examples of good practices from across the EU, as well as communication on the benefits of upskilling for all actors.
- There is considerable scope for **improvement in the outreach methods** used to reach low-skilled adults, as well as the effort dedicated to this preliminary step. Working with local actors who have experience with specific groups of low-skilled adults and funding directly earmarked for outreach are key in this regard.
- In these efforts, particular attention is needed to **avoid the stigmatisation of low-skilled adults**. Rather than focusing on deficits of the individual, skills assessments and outreach should focus on the benefits to be achieved and the existing strengths of the individual.
- There is room for improvement in the implementation of tailored learning offers, including **better identifying and adapting the training to the needs of low-skilled adults** facing different forms of additional disadvantage.
- Establishing fully functioning validation systems continues to require a concerted policy effort. Among others, it is important to consider **how transversal competences can be better taken into account in qualifications/learning outcomes**, since these are crucial for low-skilled adults, but not generally well addressed in validation systems.
- A key focus of future action should also be the **smooth integration and improved permeability of the three steps** and accompanying measures into one comprehensive pathway.
- Upskilling pathways would benefit strongly from **integrating a holistic gender and equality perspective** into all steps given the intersectional nature of different disadvantages (e.g., age, disability, migrant status, gender, socio-economic status) often faced by low-skilled adults.
- The emphasis on **encouraging wide-ranging cooperation** with key stakeholders in the implementation of upskilling pathways should continue and be reinforced.
- The implementation of upskilling pathways at national and regional level would benefit from **increased monitoring and evaluation** of the approaches implemented. More disaggregated data would provide important learning for future policy measures. Exploring the **establishment of relevant EU-wide benchmarks** and indicators would be very helpful in order to help understand progress across the EU in implementation.
- There has been a positive impact in terms of using existing EU funds to support implementation of the Recommendation. To avoid the risk that the majority of funding for adult learning/upskilling is directed to target groups which are closer to the labour market, **clear guidelines and targets, to EU funding targeted at upskilling could be developed**.
- The measures defined in the Recommendation have been shown to provide a relevant and comprehensive framework for supporting low-skilled adults effectively. To increase its relevance and future-proof the Recommendation, it could include a

greater transversal emphasis on upskilling that can help adapt to the green and digital transitions, as well as the impacts of demographic change.

- Other measures could also be further promoted. These include measures which address wider aspects of the lives of low-skilled adults, including skills to foster greater social and financial inclusion (e.g., money management, online banking, etc.), and support measures for attending training (e.g., transport, support for care responsibilities) which, whilst covered by the Recommendation, need further attention in implementation.
- There is scope for **more targeted mutual learning** focusing on basic skills and upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults, for sharing good practice and raising awareness.

