LABOUR MARKET OBSERVATORY (LMO) STUDY

The work of the future: ensuring lifelong learning and training of employees

FINAL REPORT

European Economic and Social Committee
Labour Market Observatory (LMO) study on "The work of the future: ensuring lifelong learning and training of employees"

From the European Pillar of Social Rights:

"1. Education, training and lifelong learning. Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.

4. Active support to employment. Everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects. This includes the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification. Everyone has the right to transfer social protection and training entitlements during professional transitions. Young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. People unemployed have the right to personalised, continuous and consistent support. The long-term unemployed have the right to an in-depth individual assessment at the latest at 18 months of unemployment."

Introductory note

In accordance with the procedure set out in the concept paper for this study, a questionnaire was sent out to social partners and third-sector representatives (other civil society organisations) in twelve EU countries, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Sweden; in addition, in order to explore other issues of relevance to the study, the EESC also undertook fact-finding missions in Croatia, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden.

It should also be pointed out that the study began in the pre-COVID period (the first study visit took place in France in February 2020) but the majority of questionnaires were submitted in the second half of 2021 and the study visits were completed in March of this year. This has been an important two-year period in a number of respects, which has led to significant changes in many areas, including in lifelong learning – as highlighted by many, not least the European Commission, CEDEFOP, Eurofound, the OECD, the ILO and the EESC itself – with consequences that have not yet been fully identified. All of this is very likely to have influenced (albeit not explicitly) the respondents' answers, with possible differences in positions between those who contributed to the study before the pandemic and those who did so during the pandemic.
In this context, assigning a researcher to the methodological analysis of the information collected in this way (and in particular of the data obtained from the questionnaires, which, moreover, consisted of 24 open-ended questions, with no character limits) and to the subsequent work of summarising the results, would have been particularly useful. The contribution of an experienced researcher would have ensured a more effective process in terms of assessing the documentation collected and, in particular, highlighting the specific features of the individual Member States in the context of a number of evident difficulties: sometimes very divergent positions on the same questions expressed by the stakeholder groups interviewed; in some cases, failure to spell out acronyms; and often a failure to elaborate on the good practices, which were sometimes only mentioned and not even explained.

In the light of the above, it was decided to single out good practices in the countries where the study visits took place, confident that, presumably during the interviews it would be possible to clarify and learn more about aspects that were clearly relevant but not immediately possible to grasp in the questionnaires.

Finally, in view of the extensive debate that has unfolded over the last two years within the EU and in the individual Member States on individual learning accounts (ILAs) and micro-credentials, and the fact that the EESC has already drawn up an opinion on this issue recently, it was decided to leave those two lifelong-learning instruments out of the equation, though they are also of the utmost importance in the field of worker training.

General comments

Setting out two principles from the European Pillar of Social Rights at the beginning of this study was not simply a way of introducing this work with a quotation for effect; rather, it was a particularly careful choice, aimed at signifying endorsement of these principles, which are also objectives to which the EESC wishes to contribute here, through this study, with a view to their full implementation.

In this regard, the more recent EPSR Action Plan sets three targets to be achieved by 2030. They are considered ambitious by the European Commission itself and are not only tightly interlinked, but also tie in closely with the purpose of this study, which is to identify recommendations and good practices that can help ensure that the right of workers to lifelong learning is effectively enforceable. The three targets are as follows: at least 78% of the population aged 20-64 should be in employment; at least 60% of adults should be participating in training every year; and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million.

Beyond the differences in views and positions expressed by the respondents through the questionnaires and during the study visits, there are certain aspects that appear to be shared by all, for example: lifelong learning as a right; the need for training to be of good quality; the importance of also having green and digital skills; the need for reliable and proper funding for lifelong learning; the difficulty for SMEs in establishing training courses for their employees; more and better social dialogue, including on issues related to in-company training; certification of skills, in particular non-formal and informal skills; remedying the damage caused to training by COVID-19, including by
making greater use of online training; the different governance systems for training in the public and private sectors; and the secondary – but no less significant – role of the third sector, especially in non-formal training.

More specifically:

- **Up-to-date, high-quality training.** Guidance, information, up-to-date training-needs analysis and knowledge of changes in production and on the ground are crucial. Beyond the development of training courses that are in line with the needs of the company and the personal and professional development of workers, quality must also be ensured by the operators in the sector, i.e. the training bodies. However, high-quality training is also a prerequisite for "educational success"; this means that the institutions, especially those providing highly specialised technical training, must be able to keep pace with innovation, particularly in the technological, digital and green fields. Here, it should be pointed out that, as a side-effect of COVID-19, education and training have seen a significant increase in the use of technology, and there is no doubt that investment in dedicated software has been and continues to be rewarding for schools and training bodies. However, teachers and trainers still face the challenge of having to work with too many different systems, so digital ecosystems compatible with education and training need to be created. In so doing, close cooperation between policy-makers, teachers, trainers, the social partners and businesses would be very important in order to achieve interoperability.

- **Dual green and digital economic transition.** Properly pinpointing digital and green skills – which is far from a simple task, especially as some are both digital and green – is a crucial part of the dual economic transition process. If the professional profile required is so specific as to be limited to a small group of workers, the increase in demand for those skills could see increased pay for people who are capable of carrying out those jobs, as well as increased job stability, creating an imbalance in relation to workers who do not have the same skill set. Even now, green and digital professions offer higher salaries than other occupations, but at the same time they also require a higher level of education and training. This means that the dual green and digital transition can certainly go hand in hand with better economic working conditions, but also that, at the same time, this will require further investment in resources and planning in terms of an education and training system that is able to meet the challenges posed by ambitious environmental and digital policies, that can eliminate the mismatch with the labour market, and that is in synergy with industrial research and development policies. That said, the dual green and digital transition requires a constant upgrading of workers' skills, not least to make businesses more productive and more competitive. Lifelong learning is therefore becoming an essential tool in which the social partners have a key role to play.

- **Small and medium-sized enterprises.** The biggest difficulties here are employees being absent from the company during the training, the fact that it is difficult for employers to know their training needs, and the ingrained perception of training as an expense rather than
an investment. To overcome the difficulties faced by SME employers in making use of training activities, they should be provided with financial and non-financial support to enable them not only to provide their employees with quality training, but also to play a key role in and be recipients of this training.

- **Certification of skills.** The process of identifying, validating and certifying skills acquired in formal, non-formal (especially if acquired in the workplace) and informal settings (especially when used in carrying out their work) is of utmost importance to all. For workers in particular, it can constitute added value in terms of applying those skills in the workplace, career progression, mobility, better wages, and greater self-awareness, and this can also have a significant impact on the competitiveness of companies.

- **Role of the third sector.** Although often not involved in the dynamics of businesses, the third sector plays a far from secondary and unconscious role in supporting learning. Third-sector organisations stressed in particular that lifelong learning should be improved not only for workers but for all, with resources invested to ensure that the individual right to training is enforceable for every citizen. It was pointed out that when workers undertake further training, they should benefit from positive consequences on their wage levels, with a positive impact on household income. Companies with a highly skilled and trained workforce are certainly more competitive on the market. Against this backdrop, the third sector stresses that particular attention should be given to the following recommendations: increase the number of people trained at least in the areas that are currently most in demand such as health and civil protection; ensure better coordination on lifelong learning between the public and private sectors; introduce exemptions to encourage the use of training; establish specific national adult education bodies; promote all tools that can showcase skills however they are acquired; put in place systems that enable the "weak demand" to be captured, so that people who are not in a position to directly access education and training, but who are likely – for this very reason – to need it most, are not excluded from it.

**Good practices**

In **Croatia**, the Labour Act stipulates that employers must provide workers on a fixed-term contract with the same training as those on permanent contracts, and also establishes related rights and obligations. In addition, through active policy measures, the state co-finances the costs incurred by the employer in initiating training for employees who need to attain additional skills to carry out their work. This support can be granted to both full-time and part-time workers who work more than 20 hours per week, but cannot be given to those on a lower number of hours.

In **France**, the 2018 reform law introduced retraining or promotion through alternation, the "Pro-A scheme", which enables workers, in particular those whose qualifications are insufficient as a result of technological change or work organisation, to foster their own professional development or promotion and to stay employed. Activated on the initiative of the employee or the company,
the Pro-A scheme can be used for career development, a career move or the co-design of training projects between employees and employers. It aims to help people change profession or job and to facilitate social or professional promotion by obtaining a recognised qualification. The Pro-A system enables the employee to obtain a qualification; in fact, the training courses undertaken must lead to a diploma or professional qualification, a certificate of professional qualification or a qualification recognised by a national collective agreement for the sector. The Pro-A scheme runs for between six and 12 months and is intended for workers with a permanent contract or who have a "single integration contract" (CUI) of indefinite duration, for professional athletes and coaches, and, finally, for workers with a fixed-term contract. The training may take place entirely or partly during working hours, and the workers continue to be paid; if outside working hours, the employee must give their written agreement and it must not exceed the limit laid down in the collective agreement or, in the absence of such an agreement, it must not exceed 30 hours per employee per year.

Furthermore, regardless of the form and duration of the employment contract, the training may take place entirely or partly during working hours and the employee retains the right to remuneration. The status of the worker during the training – i.e. their pay, social protection, obligations towards the employer and how the training costs are covered – depends on the applicable legal framework and on the funding committed to that activity: skills development plan, career transition projects, validation of acquired experience (VAE – validation des acquis de l’expérience), Pro-A scheme, retraining or promotion through work-study programmes, etc. By way of exception, and in the case of so-called "non-compulsory" training, company or sectoral collective agreements may provide for training to take place partly outside working hours; such agreements may provide for compensation for the employee for any childcare costs involved.

In Italy it was decided in 2000 to transfer the management of the financial contribution towards funding worker training from the regions to the inter-professional funds for lifelong learning, set up through agreements between the social partners and managed bilaterally. There are currently 19 inter-professional funds and the contribution paid for lifelong learning is referred to as "0.30", with reference to the percentage which forms part of the "compulsory contribution against involuntary unemployment", calculated on the basis of the wage bill and paid by employers to the National Institute of Social Security (INPS). The management of the inter-professional funds is overseen by national institutional bodies. Currently, 70% of the resources for lifelong learning are managed by these funds. There has been an increase both in the number of companies using training for their employees and in the number of workers having access to further training. Temporary workers or apprentices may have access to training funded by the inter-professional funds, but the short-term nature of their employment makes it more difficult for companies to invest in their training. As it is mainly workers that are already highly qualified who have the easiest access to training, many national collective agreements have sought to introduce the individual right to lifelong learning to overcome this problem. Lastly, we would point out that the particular way in which the inter-professional funds are organised unfortunately means that they are included in – rather than excluded from – the European State aid regime. Since other Member States could
have similar tools, this should not be the case, as it not only helps to improve companies' competitiveness but also helps to make workers more employable.

In addition, the National Collective Labour Agreement (CCNL) for the metalworking and mechanical engineering industry provides for the individual right to training, consisting of the provision of at least 24 hours of training for each employee during each contractual period. In order to give practical effect to this right, with the 2021 CCNL, the social partners undertook to set up a platform to provide a range of services with regard to tailored training. The aim is to help companies organise training for all metalworkers and engineers, making the training process even more accessible, flexible and, above all, affordable. To develop this "Services for training" facility, the 2021 CCNL provided for companies to pay a one-off contribution of EUR 1.50 per person to enrol their workers on the platform www.metapprendo.it. To set up the platform, an unincorporated non-profit association was created, managed bilaterally by the social partners that are signatories to the CCNL, known as "MetApprendo": the companies pay the one-off contribution to MetApprendo and MetApprendo provides the services to the members.

In the Netherlands, the social partners have a crucial role to play in worker training, which is recognised institutionally through their participation in the Sociaal Economische Raad (SER – Social and Economic Council). In 2017, this body issued an opinion on the development of lifelong learning. The social partners are also members of the Stichting van de Arbeid (STAR – Joint Labour Foundation), whose role is to advise public authorities and local and regional social partners. One component of STAR is a working group on education. Since the 1990s, STAR has also drawn up a number of opinions on lifelong learning. The involvement of trade unions in lifelong learning can also be seen in the role of the "learning ambassador": workers trained by the trade unions to encourage their colleagues to develop personally and professionally through on-the-job training. Through this role, the ambassadors also gather information about employees' training needs.

In Poland, although it is still very difficult to transfer knowledge from experienced to younger staff – as in some sectors these workers have already reached retirement age and the number of new recruits is still insufficient to replace them – training programmes that harness the skills and experience of older workers by giving them the role of mentors for younger workers are becoming more widespread and well-known, particularly in large companies. In this regard, the social partners agree that it is particularly important to regulate co-financing for this position by using the resources of the Labour Fund, and have even put forward the idea of a kind of "mentoring agreement", under which these older workers would receive recognition in terms of working time and pay.

In Sweden, the social partners established a transition agreement providing for the creation of "job security councils", financed jointly by employers and workers. The purpose of these councils is to help people who are laid off move to a new job, and they provide for: individual support from a dedicated advisor; financial support towards the transition to new jobs; support additional to that provided by public employment services; advice on developing skills before being made redundant and thus laid off; and finally, support involving actions targeting both employers
and trade union representatives. The job security councils are bilateral bodies covering all areas of the Swedish economy. They were set up by the social partners with the aim of administering and providing services to workers dismissed for economic reasons. They are non-profit organisations and are free from the involvement of the state and free to regulate their own activities. These councils support the transition to new jobs for redundant workers.

Furthermore, in 2020, the social partners from the private sector concluded an agreement on a new additional system – reserved for employed people – for financing upskilling and reskilling, as part of a broader agreement on employment protection and transition. The new system involves both collectively agreed benefits that also include paid training leave and a new public system of training support. Eligibility for the benefits of this new system depends on length of professional experience (minimum 8 years) and on the subject of the studies that the worker intends to undertake, which must contribute to improving their position in the labour market. The state actively supports lifelong learning during employment, including through universities. The government is currently preparing a reform that is expected to be implemented later this year.

**Recommendations**

- Training should be regarded as an individual right and arrangements must therefore be worked out to implement that right in practice; an important element of this process would be to ensure, by legislative or contractual means, a minimum number of hours of training per year for all workers.

- Where provision is made for a public service that is to be in charge of training, it is important that there is effective governance of the system, i.e. governance that is participatory, collaborative and coordinated between the competent authorities, the social partners, the training bodies and any other stakeholders (e.g. third-sector representatives).

- It is crucial to strengthen social dialogue, entrusting the social partners with a more strategic role in the mechanisms for financing training, but also in its in-house design in a way that ensures equal access for all. One instrument here could be to establish joint committees made up of trade unions and employers' organisations, possibly also involving training bodies, and to use skills audits to better identify workers' training needs and, consequently, to map out the training courses to be initiated, in order to improve the competitiveness of businesses and help to preserve workers' jobs.

- It is important to provide for measures to encourage both workers and employers to participate diligently in regular in-house upskilling and reskilling activities: tax incentives and/or financial support measures could make it easier for more workers to access training, especially those employed in SMEs.

- The social partners also have an important role to play in guiding SMEs and helping them to change their mindset with regard to training, facilitating the development of a "cultural awareness" of training, and involving workers and employers in appropriate and specific training courses for each
role and task. In particular, they should help employers understand the degree to which training is an investment – and not a cost – which serves to acquire skills to increase the competitiveness of businesses. Moreover, in order to address the problem of maintaining production levels when workers are absent to attend training courses, employers should be supported in identifying ad hoc instruments, including through financial support measures, in order to facilitate the conditions conducive to accessing training courses.

- Creating a database that would also allow employers, especially SMEs, to monitor skills development needs in the area in which they operate, could be an important tool in identifying training needs.

- Strong social dialogue and personalised training backed up by guidance and advice are essential tools for empowering workers in relation to their own training development; this will also enable workers (possibly through their trade union representatives) to suggest to the employer further training courses in line with their duties. Incentives and/or tax relief could also encourage workers who are more reluctant to undertake training. This could be done, for example by means of staff welfare "packages" with a training component, which would offer upskilling courses, alongside courses that cater for personal interests. However, it is crucial to put in place strategies to help workers understand the importance of training for their personal and professional lives; from this perspective, information and engagement in this regard in the workplace – particularly led by trade unions – could play a pivotal role.

- Simplifying the administrative procedures involved in accessing dedicated funds is another priority: promoting clarity can make it easier to access and make use of resources dedicated to training; SMEs complain that they often do not have the necessary structures to make the best use of all available opportunities.

- Work organisation policies should be addressed so that senior workers can take on a role in the training of young people and pass on their experience. This could be made possible through the creation of figures such as coaches, mentors, etc. For their part, the young workers could "reciprocate", for example by helping senior colleagues with IT skills, in a sort of "peer-to-peer" training. This inter-generational exchange would turn a potential source of conflict and competition into collaboration, whereby the younger workers can rely on trusted mentors to help them settle into the workplace and the more senior workers can feel appreciated for the experience they have gained over time and their ability to pass it on; a mentoring system of step-by-step support leading up to retirement could also be envisaged, with a corresponding equally gradual integration of the young person.

- Different possibilities should be explored for rolling out remote training, in both synchronous and asynchronous mode, to be carried out during working hours with certainty as regards subjects, content and timing of implementation.
With regard to the area of green and digital skills, this should also be seen as an additional training and reskilling opportunity, including for low-skilled workers, with a view to helping them keep their jobs (and also ensure their active citizenship), as the dual green and digital economic transition requires highly skilled workers with higher levels of technical and specialised skills. Within the national framework of adult learning initiatives, dedicated budget items should be provided for. In addition, training courses dedicated to acquiring these skills should also cover soft skills, which are valuable when it comes to understanding and managing a world of work (and beyond) that is changing at an ever increasing pace.

Training leave should be established whereby workers who have completed a minimum period of service at the same company can apply for a suspension of employment for training leave for a specified period – continuous or split – throughout their working life, to be used for the completion of compulsory education, the attainment of secondary education, or a degree, and/or participation in training activities other than those put in place or funded by the employer. During the period of leave for training, employees would keep their job. In some countries, when this leave is used to obtain a higher education qualification, the worker can obtain state financial support as a form of remuneration. Collective agreements could govern the arrangements for taking such leave, the maximum percentages of workers who may take it, the situations of deferral or of refusal to exercise that right and all other related aspects.

Equally important would be the establishment of lifelong learning leave, whereby both employed and unemployed workers could exercise their right to continue taking training courses throughout their lives, in order to increase their professional knowledge and skills through a training offer that enables personalised, certified and recognised training at national and European level. Training could correspond to the worker's own choice or be arranged by the company, through company or regional training plans agreed between the social partners. Collective bargaining could establish the number of hours to be spent on such leave, the criteria for selecting the workers and the arrangements for working hours and remuneration linked to participation in the training courses.

Since, in some cases, third-sector associations are organised in such a way as to offer training courses, sometimes even providing them to a greater extent than profit-making organisations (in particular to young people who are unemployed), the EU should also find means and resources to support them in this activity.

In some countries, the establishment of sectoral committees made up of business representatives and representatives of educational and training institutions has proved successful in combating the mismatch between labour supply and demand; this experience should be replicated and tested further, as it could be particularly useful (especially for SMEs) in the rapid implementation of courses that capture the training needs of companies.
- Particular attention should be paid to those groups that are often excluded from training courses, but who, for this very reason, are most in need of such measures: the low-skilled, people over 45, people with disabilities, women returning to work after prolonged absences due to family duties, and migrants and refugees, if properly trained and retrained, could constitute important resources. In this context (and beyond), we would like to draw attention to the three steps set out in the 2016 EU Recommendation on *Upskilling Pathways: new Opportunities for Adults*, i.e. skills assessment, provision of a tailored learning offer, and validation and recognition of skills acquired. With regard to refugees, in view of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we would highlight the recent EU recommendation of 5 April on the *Recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*, aimed at encouraging Member States to introduce streamlined procedures to enable those benefiting from temporary protection to obtain missing skills and quickly integrate into the labour market.

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*Country reports are available upon request.*