



# EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO COPE WITH CHANGE

**Comprehensive learning support systems offer people a navigational aid in challenging times**

*‘Human resources are like natural resources; they’re often buried deep. You have to go looking for them, they’re not just lying around on the surface’*

*(Sir Ken Robinson, Ted Talk Longbeach, February 2010)*

Rapid digitalisation, climate change, globalisation and demographic developments have been driving profound labour market changes in Europe. The Covid-19 pandemic has added urgency to the process and shifted the focus of public policy and action <sup>(1)</sup>. Considering these far-reaching transformations, the EU and its Member States have taken action to empower people to cope with change and to harness possible benefits including by providing them access to systematic upskilling and reskilling opportunities and support to employment <sup>(2)</sup>. At policy level, stronger synergies between different types of measures, including financial incentives, guidance, validation, and outreach programmes, will help support continuing learning of all adults <sup>(3)</sup>.

## ENABLING PEOPLE TO BUILD SKILLS THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES

Building on the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [European green deal](#), the [European skills agenda](#), adopted

- <sup>(1)</sup> To rebuild after the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has put together a comprehensive package which combines the multiannual financial framework 2021-27 and an extraordinary recovery fund, Next generation EU (NGEU). It foresees i.a. investment in the green and digital transitions.
- <sup>(2)</sup> This is in line with the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights which states that ‘everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market’ (Principle 1) and that ‘everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment prospects’, including support for job search and the right to transfer social protection and training entitlements during professional transitions (Principle 4).
- <sup>(3)</sup> See the 2020 [Discussion paper on challenges and opportunities for VET in the next decade](#) by Cedefop and the ETF.

in 2020, aims at enabling people ‘to build skills throughout their lives (which) can help the individual to progress in his/her career and to manage job transitions successfully’. Target indicators linked to the proposed actions help monitor adult learning, including adults’ participation in continuing vocational education and training (CVET).



The European Commission’s [Pact for skills](#), one of the actions under the European skills agenda, encourages regional industry partnerships to pool ‘expertise, resources (e.g. shared training) and funding towards concrete up- and reskilling actions’. EU support granted at national level will be directed to activities focusing on stepping up guidance services both for vulnerable groups and those in employment, and on closing (digital) skills gaps.

The [European skills agenda](#) also takes up the idea of individual learning accounts. These are envisaged as a financing tool, possibly shared, to incentivise people to

learn. If people can take their training entitlements along when they move to another job, for instance, they have better control over what, where and when they learn or train. Learning accounts can bolster quality and transparency of training offers, especially if they are made an organic part of guidance and validation systems <sup>(4)</sup>.

Similarly, enhancing the worth and status of small or partial qualifications, including digital credentials, could motivate people to take up learning. One action focuses on exploring micro-credentials which would facilitate ‘granular’ learning. To give value to such qualifications, including those awarded in the private sector, countries increasingly recognise and include them in their qualifications frameworks, thus supporting quality, transparency and take-up. EU Member States will also be able to apply for funding under the flagship area Reskill and upskill of the EU Recovery and resilience facility, to help adapt education systems and support digital skills and educational and vocational training for all ages.

## BUILDING BLOCKS IN COMPREHENSIVE LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The recent [Osnabrück Declaration](#) <sup>(5)</sup> argues for further developing ‘a new lifelong learning culture (which) implies that individuals benefit from career guidance throughout life, can engage in quality and inclusive VET programmes and acquire key competences to actively manage their education, training and employment phases with the support and increased responsibility of all stakeholders.’ It recommends that ‘effective career guidance’ also be included in national skills strategies.

Most holistic learning support systems are made up of essential building blocks: integrated and tiered services delivered in any setting, face to face, online or in combination with digital platforms. The emphasis is on providers and services cooperating closely, creating system synergies ensuring maximum impact.

### Financial incentives

Financial incentives reduce cost barriers to training, helping motivate individuals and companies to undertake and provide learning opportunities. This is particularly relevant in the context of the current health and economic crisis where learners and employers may face liquidity bottlenecks.

There are many financing and cost-sharing schemes targeted at individuals and companies, regulated by national or regional legislation, through collective agreements or at local or company level. These include training funds

<sup>(4)</sup> This idea is supported by the [2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#).

<sup>(5)</sup> Adopted in November 2020 by European education ministers, it provides the framework and the deliverables of European cooperation in education and training for the period 2021-25.

based on company levies, tax incentives, grants, vouchers, individual learning accounts, saving schemes, loans, training leave and payback clauses <sup>(6)</sup>.

These instruments need to be well-targeted and well-designed, to ensure fairness and transparency in the way funds are collected and distributed, and to minimise the risk of deadweight loss or other unintended effects.

Informed guidance provision is key to making potential beneficiaries aware of financial aid schemes. Often it is the most vulnerable who are the least aware of the existence of such schemes.

### Outreach measures: beyond prevention

Reaching out to groups at risk, such as early leavers from education and training, migrants, refugees, people in mental distress or the long-term unemployed <sup>(7)</sup> is a distinctive aspect of high-quality guidance policies. Outreach measures are active interventions which come into play when preventive action has failed. Guidance professionals and social workers turn things around: they go and find people where they are instead of waiting for them to look for help <sup>(8)</sup>. Outreach measures allow for tracking, reengaging and reintegrating people who have disengaged from learning or have been inactive for long periods and cannot be reached through standard measures.

### Individual career management skills

Fostering career management skills is an essential part of career guidance and counselling provision <sup>(9)</sup>. Such skills are increasingly relevant in today’s labour markets, with people facing difficult transitions and multiple risks and their working and learning careers becoming longer and more multidirectional <sup>(10)</sup>. Career management skills are a set of competences that enable people of all ages and skill levels to walk their learning and life paths <sup>(11)</sup>.

There are many approaches to fostering these skills, with different expectations of mastery according to life stages. They should be promoted from an early stage in compulsory education and developed by all citizens. They are helpful especially at crossroads, enabling people to take meaningful decisions, not only about educational and occupational choices. More generally, this awareness helps them assess and channel their aspirations and to manage

<sup>(6)</sup> More detailed information can be found in [Cedefop’s database on financing adult learning](#) and its relevant [thematic studies](#).

<sup>(7)</sup> See also Cedefop’s 2018 briefing note [Reaching out to ‘invisible’ young people and adults](#).

<sup>(8)</sup> These social support measures are designed to help people at their location, as otherwise they might not have access to them. They are covered by the [European guidelines for policies and systems development for lifelong guidance \(ELGPN 2015\)](#).

<sup>(9)</sup> Prioritised in the [2008 Council resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies](#).

<sup>(10)</sup> Further reading: individual country sections of Cedefop’s [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices](#).

<sup>(11)</sup> See the 2015 ELGPN publication [Designing and implementing policies related to career management skills](#).

change, lifelong, enhancing their employability, resilience and autonomy <sup>(12)</sup>.

### Lifelong career guidance and counselling

Guidance and career counselling can help all people develop their learning and working careers at different stages of their lives: from early school-based learning and career activities for the very young, to options designed for older students and opportunities throughout adulthood. Support can be group-based and/or individual and personalised and is delivered through a combination of different channels: face-to-face guidance, web-based interaction (video-conferencing and social media), email, phone calls or chats. These learner-centred services tap into an array of career development resources, including career exploration and career learning experiences, counselling provision using real-time labour market information, as well as individual skills assessment, validation and recognition. By empowering individuals, they contribute to lifting the overall knowledge and skills level of the European workforce. Building strong lifelong guidance systems is essential.

### Recognition and validation of prior learning

Skills assessments allow both the person undergoing the check and the organisation carrying it out to get a picture of what he/she knows and to identify gaps where training may be needed.

The French *bilan de compétences* is one of the oldest and best established skills assessment practices in the world. It is regulated by the national Labour Code and grants all citizens of working age, employed and unemployed, the right to identify their skills and to define a career plan.

Validation and recognition of the skills people actually have allows them to apply for jobs matching their skills or to choose targeted training to complete their skill set. Both play an increasingly important role in holistic career support. Validation refers mainly to procedures used to capture skills and knowledge obtained through non-formal and informal learning, while recognition normally relates to procedures used to attribute value to previously gained qualifications.

### Service professionals: the human interface

In addition to the increasing number of digital platforms providing information, self-assessment tools and other services, guidance and validation practitioners are the learning support system's interface linking individuals with

education, training and employment opportunities and pathways.

These service professionals must possess a wide array of skills: specific field knowledge of regional realities, skills to interpret labour market information and intelligence, plus digital skills allowing them to use assessment tools, to communicate remotely with users, to promote collaborative and individual learning, and to provide information on how users can improve their own digital skills. They must also be familiar with education and training financing tools, study leave and other resources that could benefit their clients.

Recognising that dedicated guidance counsellors act as multipliers and mediators and are essential to a culture of lifelong learning, the Osnabrück Declaration has made their initial and continuous professional development an integral part of the deliverables under its objective 2.

This links in with the renewed attention paid to career guidance practitioner and other staff professionalism owing to the current health restrictions, which have put immense pressure on the remote delivery of public services <sup>(13)</sup>.

## COORDINATING GUIDANCE AND VALIDATION

Coordinating guidance and validation policies is a first step towards integrated support measures that make CVET more attractive. Cedefop research <sup>(14)</sup> shows that learning support systems work best when they are backed by an institutional framework providing a strong national vision of how services interact and coordinate, while accommodating local and regional specificities. Such a framework, driven by national or regional legislation, a strategy and (sectoral) partnerships, allow for a reasonable allocation of responsibilities and effective transitions between guidance and validation.

Flexible, free-of-charge guidance should be accessible to individuals whenever they need it, be adapted to their specific needs and include skills validation as an option. Ideally, it provides screening and profiling, not only as a way of identifying individual skills, but as a way of assessing the readiness of individuals to go through a validation process. Guidance should offer information on the benefits of validation and be available to the individual throughout all stages of a skills validation process: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

<sup>(12)</sup> The importance of career management skills is highlighted both in the *European skills agenda* and in the *Youth guarantee*, which stipulates that all young people under 29 across Europe have to receive an employment, training/apprenticeship, further education or traineeship offer within four months from becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. On 30 October 2020, the Council adopted the *Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation on a bridge to jobs* from 1 July 2020, extending the existing *Youth guarantee* until 2027.

<sup>(13)</sup> The topic was discussed at a *CareersNet meeting in October 2020*. More information is available on the dedicated *event page*. A follow-up publication is forthcoming in 2021.

<sup>(14)</sup> Cedefop has been looking at what it takes to design and implement lifelong learning support systems that encompass both financial and non-financial incentives to training, including career guidance and validation services. A first step was Cedefop's 2019 research paper *Coordinating guidance and validation*.

## BOX 1: SOME EXAMPLES

A regional network of education and labour market stakeholders plays a major role in the Austrian initiative *Du kannst was!* which allows adults to obtain an apprenticeship diploma via skills validation. That is also the case of the Dutch *Working and learning desks* which are part of the *Leerwerkloket programme* for jobseekers and employers. In the Italian Emilia Romagna region, an *Active network for employment* enables public employment services to exchange information on the profile of their clients with training providers and regional employers. Also the Portuguese validation and qualification centres for adults, *Qualifica centres*, offering integrated services, demonstrate that a well-built framework is a cost-efficient and practical way of pooling services and human resources.

Typically, a skills assessment starts with the identification and documentation of a person's existing skills. Digital profiling, web-based self-assessments and skills portfolios are helpful at different stages of the process. A common reference framework of qualifications or competence standards is at the heart of ensuring coherence across services and traceability of information, preventing work duplication.

Individual career development plans feed into personal skill portfolios, which form the basis of a skills validation procedure. Once a person's skills are validated, he/she can return to a job centre or career counsellor to receive information, advice and practical assistance, either to find a job matching his/her profile and interests or targeted further training, such as an apprenticeship, to continue towards a full (formal) qualification.

Any common reference framework should be relatable to non-formal and informal learning experiences, enabling a person to make full use of all his/her prior learning. This can be best achieved if the standards are well defined, such as in terms of learning outcomes. They ensure coherence between outputs (produced at the skills identification stage) and continuity in the interpretation of career development needs and goals. National qualification frameworks potentially support assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, they are not always used, as some processes lead to a certification they do not cover.

Systematic monitoring and evaluation of processes and follow-up of beneficiaries is still rather the exception than the rule. This makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of guidance or validation procedures. Satisfaction surveys can support an understanding of users' experience but they do not provide any information on their subsequent paths pursuing their career goals. It is to be hoped that future systematic monitoring and tracking of user data will help demonstrate the quality and performance of guidance and validation services and show the effects of any steps taken. This, in turn, would improve overall policy coordination.

## THE WAY FORWARD: SYSTEM SYNERGIES FOR COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

Linking lifelong career guidance and validation is a relatively new focus in public policies. Countries have taken different approaches, depending on their traditions, resources and infrastructure, available trained professionals and existing organisation of guidance and validation services.

Effective support to individual career development and learning can only be achieved through stronger system synergies providing for closely interlinked guidance services, financial incentives and access to assessment, validation and recognition procedures.

Comprehensive learning support systems require secure, stable funding over time, a strong digital infrastructure and a high degree of digital penetration of households, a broad stakeholder consensus and highly knowledgeable and motivated staff.

Many EU countries and regions are working towards comprehensive and coordinated learning support systems enabling adults to upskill and reskill throughout their working lives<sup>(15)</sup>. This means that, depending on their resources and systems, they need to coordinate and interlink employment, career guidance, education and training and inclusion policies.

Today, more than ever, people need to be able to rely on accessible, high-quality and comprehensive support to navigate their learning and working careers in the face of economic and societal challenges, and to find new – even unexpected – opportunities. Beyond this, support for learning and career development should lead to meaningful employment and full engagement in society, creating the conditions for a high level of collective and individual wellbeing and life satisfaction.

<sup>(15)</sup> Including throughout their retirement: when people cannot sustain themselves and stay engaged, this creates a cost for society and individuals.