ESF Performance and Thematic Reports

ESF Contribution to the New Skills Agenda
Thematic Report

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European Commission
Directorate-General for Employment Social Affairs and Inclusion

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GLOSSARY

Term	Description
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
ALMP	Active Labour Market Policy
COI	ESF Common Output Indicators
CRI	ESF Common Result Indicators
CSR	Community Specific Recommendations
EC	European Commission
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESF	European Social Fund
ESI	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESL	Early school leaving
ET2020	Employment and Training 2020
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IP	ESF Investment Priority
LLL	Lifelong learning
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MA	ESF Managing Authority
MS	Member States
NSA	New Skills Agenda
NSNJ	New Skills for New Jobs
OP	ESF Operational Programme
PAx	Priority Axes
PES	Public Employment Services
SFC	System of Fund Management
SME	Small and medium sized enterprises
SO	ESF Specific Objective
TO	ESF Thematic Objective
UP	Upskilling Pathway

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New Skills Agenda

The New Skills Agenda (thereafter NSA) was launched in June 2016. It is the European Commission's flagship initiative to strengthen the development of human capital in the EU in a way that will increase both employment and competitiveness. It is comprised of three pillars:

1. improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
2. making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable;
3. improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices.

In summary, the NSA will result in a "number of actions to ensure that the right training, the right skills and the right support is available to people in the European Union. It will aim at making better use of the skills that are available; equip people with the new skills that are needed - to help them find quality jobs and improve their life chances" (New Skills Agenda webpage).

In order for the NSA to achieve its objectives it can potentially draw on the support of the EU structural funds, notably the European Social Fund (ESF) and Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), as well other EU-funded programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon2020.

The fact that NSA was launched after the beginning of the 2014-2020 programming, and also that an appropriate time-lag should be factored in for the actual implementation of the different NSA actions, poses a natural limitation to its possibility to influence these programmes. The extent of this limitation varies depending on a number of factors, including the level of execution of the different programmes across Member States and the timescales of each specific NSA action.

The study

The aim of the **thematic report** is to assess the contribution of the ESF 2014-2020 to the objectives set out in the NSA. The study addresses the following four broad questions.

1. How do ESF Operational Programmes (OPs) tackle challenges and objectives identified and subsumed by the NSA, and to what extent is the ESF likely to contribute to achieving the main challenges/development needs in terms of skills development?
2. To what extent are Member States (MS) / Managing Authorities (MA) adapting ESF implementation to contribute to the NSA? Are adjustments possible and made when needs change or new needs emerge?
3. What has been the actual contribution of the ESF to the NSA to date (in terms of achievements and implemented actions)?
4. What are the main criticalities identified and what lessons can be drawn for the remainder of the programming period?

Method

Collecting the evidence to meet the objectives of the study required a multi-faceted approach. This included:

- desk research:
  - o analysis of the Commission's System of Fund Management in the EC 2014 (SFC 2014) database to identify the areas where the ESF funding has supported NSA-like activities in the past;
  - o analysis of ESF Operational Programmes documentation and other documentation as relevant;
  - o collation of EU-wide statistics and indicators (i.e. relating to skills development in the EU); and
  - o analysis of Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).
- field research:

o an e-survey of ESF MAs in the EU to gauge their views about the potential for the ESF to support the NSA;

o country case studies of Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Romania. By conducting semi-structured interviews with Managing Authorities, Ministries / Agencies with responsibility for ALMP and skills development, and ESF beneficiaries, a more detailed insight into the way in which the NSA and ESF can work in synergy was obtained.

The background desk analysis essentially provides an indication of the potential for the NSA to support the 2014-2020 ESF by assessing, for example, the amount of funding allocated in MS to Thematic Objectives (TO)/Investment Priorities (IP) that are consistent with the aims of the NSA. The field research more directly assesses the extent to which the ESF might support the NSA through collecting information from various ESF and NSA stakeholders.

In order to give the study a focus a two-step approach was adopted. First, consideration was given to the NSA in its entirety. In other words, there was an interest in how the ESF contributes to the NSA implementation in general. It needs to be borne in mind that the NSA is wide ranging in its aims. Accordingly, there was a need to focus respondents' minds on how the ESF might support particular actions envisaged by the NSA. **It was decided to focus attention on the Upskilling Pathways stream (UP)**. This is also an action where important synergies with Erasmus +, as well as complementarity with the YEI, are envisaged.

The UP is an important part of the NSA and tackles an issue of long-standing concern in the EU – adults who have poorly developed basic skills. The UP provides adults with a low level of skill an opportunity to improve their basic skills or allow them to progress towards high level qualifications. Participants have their skills assessed, this leads to a learning offer, and finally to having their skills validated and recognised**.**

As noted above detailed evidence on the ESF's capacity to support the NSA was obtained through country case studies. MS were selected for case study based on their position with respect to: (a) the level of skills development (i.e. so that it is possible to assess the contribution the NSA in countries where skills development is either more or less well advanced); and (b) the allocation of ESF funding (i.e. the inclusion of countries with differing levels of reliance on ESF support).

The research was conducted at an early stage following the announcement of the NSA's introduction in June 2016. In many respects respondents to the e-survey and interview participants in the country case studies were just coming to terms with the implications of the NSA. Whilst this results in relatively little information being forthcoming on actions being funded by the ESF directly in response to the launch of the NSA, it does provide an early insight into various ESF stakeholders' thinking about the NSA. As such, the research is timely in that it provides early lessons that can be used to ensure that optimal use is made of the ESF in support of the NSA in the period to 2020.

Findings

In appraising the subsequent elements, one should bear in mind the peculiar timeline of the actions of the NSA. Some actions have already (recently) been launched, some others are yet to start but are relatively well defined, while others, due to start at a later stage, still need to be defined more concretely and are subject to a higher level of uncertainty with respect to their final formulation. This has an implication both in terms of the analysis of the intervention logic (as some by still undergo changes by the Council) as well as for the time wise contextualisation of the findings. Also, and most importantly, it should be kept in mind that responses collected during the field work might be to some extent dependent on the specific country situation vis à vis ESF implementation, with some countries being relatively more advanced than others.

The potential ESF support for the NSA/UP

The starting point for the study was to identify, in detail, where there was scope within the ESF to support the NSA. Analysis revealed that there was substantial scope within the existing

structure of the ESF to support the NSA. The following TOs were considered to be particularly relevant:

- TO10 - Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning;
- TO9 - Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination;
- TO8 - Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility

In more detail, the analysis of the ESF Specific Objectives (SOs) with the TOs showed that:

- although TO10 (Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning) accounted for the largest share of relevant specific objectives relevant to the NSA, it was also apparent that actions relevant to the NSA were spread out across the other thematic objectives as well;
- while TO 10 remains overall the most relevant thematic objective in the ESF to the NSA, it tended to be 10iii (Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings, etc.) and 10iv (improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems, facilitating the transition from education to work, etc.) that showed the highest levels of relevance (40% to 60% of SOs, respectively, were aligned with specific NSA actions under this TO);
- where actions are being undertaken which are aligned with the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathways, much of this would appear to be funded under TO10 – mainly 10iii – but there is also a significant amount of activity under TO 8 and 9.

The implication of the above is that one cannot simply assume that the NSA aligns solely with TO10. The issue of skills is, to a large extent, a transversal one stretching across several TOs. It is also apparent that the UP is potentially supportable by a number of ESF SOs. But the critical finding is that the ESF has been used in the past to fund a variety of activities pertinent to the NSA. There is, therefore, plenty of scope for the ESF to fund actions envisaged under the NSA including the UP.

In terms of **financial allocation,** the analysis suggests that UP relevant ESF funding equates to EUR 6.86 billion, distributed across 13 Member States and 57 OPs. This is a somewhat conservative estimate, in that it only takes into account IPs within each OP where a Specific Objective related to the Upskilling Pathways was found. The countries with the highest share of funding were the UK, FR, RO, PT, IT and HU.

Overall, based on the estimates on common and programme specific output indicators it is estimated that around **10 million participants with low-level of skills will take part in ESF interventions by 2023**, particularly in Italy, Spain, the UK and France, followed by Ireland, Poland and Romania.

How do ESF OPs tackle challenges and objectives identified and subsumed by the NSA

The evidence, on the whole, points towards the ESF already supporting activities that are relevant to the NSA. From the interviews with MAs there was a strong sense that activities were already being undertaken that were consistent with the aims of the UP. But this finding needs to be seen in the light of the evidence which suggests that MAs – and other stakeholders – had relatively little detailed knowledge of the NSA at the time the study was undertaken. So, if the ESF were to provide support of some kind to initiatives other than the UP it is likely that MAs – and other stakeholders – would need to be better informed and provided with guidance about how the ESF might assist with the NSA. For the time being there is a view from MAs and stakeholders that the ESF, and national VET policies more generally, are consistent with the NSA, but this view is derived from a somewhat less than detailed appreciation of the content of the NSA and the actions to which it might lead.

The extent to which MS/MA are adapting ESF implementation to contribute to the NSA

For the most part there is little evidence that MS/MA were, at the time of the study, adapting ESF implementation to the needs of the ESF. There was an awareness that this might need to take place in the future, but for the most part MAs did not report on detailed plans being in place to adapt ESF implementation. This was regarded as something for the future. Concerns, however, were expressed regarding the practicalities of adapting the ESF to implement the NSA. The ESF, at the margin, was considered sufficiently flexible, to the extent that the ESF and NSA objectives broadly correspond. ESF could accommodate changes where the existing direction of travel was not much altered and within the boundaries set by selected indicators of the OPs. Introducing the UP, for instance, was thought to be the type of initiative that the ESF, other things being equal, could probably accommodate without leading to negotiations over re-programming. But if changes to existing programming were likely to be substantial then there were concerns that the ESF would face difficulties in adapting. This was because there was competition for ESF funds so a process of reallocating existing funds via re-programming could potentially lead to lengthy negotiations.

The actual contribution of ESF to the NSA in terms of achievements and implemented actions to date

The statistical analysis revealed that the ESF was already supporting the training / upskilling of many people in the EU in a way that was broadly consistent with the goals of the NSA. From this perspective, it is possible to say that there is substantial potential for the ESF to support actions brought in under the ambit of the NSA. But for the time being there was relatively little to report on with respect to the actions supported by the ESF that were directly linked to the ESF.

Which are the main criticalities and the lessons that can be drawn for the remaining of the programming period?

The NSA is specific in the problems it seeks to tackle and the strategies to be employed in addressing them. But this begs questions about the actions to be taken to ensure that the NSA's strategic goals are realised. The MAs and ESF stakeholders who were interviewed, were of the view that whilst the ESF could support the NSA, they were not yet aware of the specific actions that the ESF might be requested to support. So at a high level, there was confidence that the ESF could support the NSA. This confidence was well founded, given the statistical analysis which has demonstrated the support the ESF has provided in the past to actions of a type that are wholly consistent with the NSA. However, without knowing more about the specific actions to be funded it was difficult for interviewees to be absolutely certain about the level of support they could provide to the NSA or the ease with which that support could be delivered.

Formative lessons

There is a substantial degree of alignment between the aims of the NSA and the activities funded by the ESF. That said, it is only by identifying formative lessons from both the introduction of ESF backed measures similar to those envisaged by the NSA, and the views of MAs and key stakeholders about the ESF's capacity to support the NSA, that one can begin to understand how the ESF might bring about the realisation of at least some of the ambition set out in the NSA. From the country case studies it is possible to identify a number of formative lessons:

- in general, there is recognition across countries that the way in which the ESF is programmed allows a degree of flexibility with respect to accommodating change;
- where that NSA is articulated with respect to existing policy measures – currently funded via either the ESF or national programmes - there is a greater likelihood that the ESF will be able to accommodate NSA originated requests for funding;

- the capacity of MAs and other stakeholders to develop measures to realise the NSA through the use of ESF funding is dependent upon them having access to information and guidance with respect to the specific actions that might be required to support the NSA; and
- whilst ESF programming encompasses a degree of flexibility that allows new challenges to be addressed, it needs to be borne in mind that there is a limit to that flexibility. It is readily apparent that any substantial change to ESF programming is likely to be burdensome and time consuming with no guarantee of success.

Additionally, while the focus of the present report was the ESF it should be mentioned that important synergies clearly emerge for the NSA from the combined implementation of ESF and other programmes and initiatives, namely the YEI and Erasmus+, particularly concerning quality apprenticeships, traineeships and jobs (YEI) and mobility for apprentices, exchange of good practice and innovation, and support to policy reform (Erasmus+). Especially within the context of the UP, one of the objectives of Erasmus + is indeed promoting adult learning and it is apparent how the aims of the ESF, Erasmus + and the NSA converge upon it. As per the YEI, the study confirmed it has already supported that in some MS the development of individualised upskilling pathways for those below 25 years old and, therefore, its advancements will have to be fully deployed.

Recommendations

Information and guidance for ESF Managing Authorities

There was general awareness of the NSA amongst many MAs and stakeholders but much less so in relation to the detail of the measures which might be taken in support of the NSA and to which the ESF might contribute. To this end:

- **clear signposting to MAs as to their role in the NSA** could be in order, within the boundaries set by the European treaties in the area of employment education and training policies; and
- the EC should work towards **gaining a clearer overview of the governance structure of the NSA, or of its various strands/actions, at MS level**. This would help the EC with monitoring the implementation of NSA, different stakeholders and resources at play (including role of ESF MAs in the process) and, at the same time, channel relevant information and guidance. The **Annual Review Meetings** between EC and MAs in Member States represent one potential "entry point" to raise the awareness of MAs on the potential support ESF can provide to the implementation of the NSA in their own countries. Ex-ante conditionalities also represent another important entry point as they encourage MAs and Member States to take a unitary strategy on adult learning and lifelong learning.

Supporting new initiatives and flexibility of ESF Programming

There may be a need to **ring fence resources to adapt existing initiatives or support new ones**. This could also be achieved via a "**financial reserve**". By setting aside a separate resource this may facilitate a broader range of actions being taken. The issue to be explored is what type of reserve could be envisaged, such as: at the EU, national or OP level; through centralised, decentralised or shared management, or also budget support; or according to the type of activating mechanism (e.g. relevance to the CSR).

The ESF seven-year programming period potentially limits its capacity to respond to new demands that might arise in middle of the programming period. This might need to be addressed. The use of a reserve, as mentioned above, might achieve help resolve this issue.

Monitoring and evaluation

The current 2014-2020 programming has introduced several innovations with regards to the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the ESF, including a key set of common indicators and

reinforced evaluation provisions. These could facilitate the M&E of NSA-relevant achievements of the ESF. These shall provide MS and the EC with a valuable tool to, amongst other things,: i) follow up the implementation of the NSA; ii) measure the effectiveness of ESF actions in this regard (vis à vis, for example, other types of interventions/measures), iii) identify remedial actions; iv) increase transparency and accountability of EU funding; and v) provide MS with a benchmarking tool to measure their performance relative to other countries.

The following M&E actions could be adopted:

- measure achievements of ESF to the NSA objectives by means of monitoring progress and performance of NSA-relevant common output and result indicators (such as for example number of participants with low education level or participants having obtained a qualification), at the Operational Programme, MS and EC level;
- encourage Managing Authorities and MS to report on NSA-related achievements through, for instance, Annual Implementation Reports or Progress Reports; and
- encourage MAs and Managing Authorities to implement thematic evaluations on NSA-relevant themes.

Overarching conclusions

It needs to be borne in mind that the ESF has funded a great deal of activity related to actions of a type likely to be implemented as part of the NSA. This is particularly true with respect to the types of intervention that the UP might well lead to. On the basis of this finding it is fair to say that there is substantial potential for the ESF to fund activities that might be initiated as a consequence of the NSA. The data collected from both the e-survey and the semi-structured interviews with MAs and other stakeholders is consistent with this finding: i.e. the ESF is well-suited to delivering programmes that will support the achievement the NSA's goals.

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims

This final thematic report has been prepared under the framework service contract entitled ESF 2014-2020 Performance and Thematic Reports. The aim of the thematic report is to assess the contribution of the ESF 2014-2020 to the objectives set out in the New Skills Agenda (NSA)[1] with respect to both its potential impact (by analysing the programming and strategic choices made by Member States/ ESF Operational Programmes), and its actual implementation (ESF progress and performance in 2014/2015). The study addresses the following broad questions:

- How do ESF OPs tackle challenges and objectives identified and subsumed by the NSA, and to what extent is the ESF likely to contribute to achieving the main challenges/development needs in terms of skills development?
- To what extent are MS/MAs adapting ESF implementation to contribute to the NSA? Are adjustments possible and made when needs change or new needs emerge? (What is the ESF's response to the NSA?)
- What has been the actual contribution of the ESF to the NSA (in terms of achievements and implemented actions)?
- What are the main criticalities identified and what lessons can be drawn for the remaining of the programming period? (lessons learned)

These research questions are further detailed and specified across the following six research criteria:

1. **Coherence, relevance and awareness:** is the ESF, at present, relevant for providing support to the NSA? Are ESF implementing actors sufficiently cognisant of NSA actions and the way to support them?
2. **Flexibility:** is the ESF flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the NSA?
3. **Operationalisation and delivery:** In what way is the ESF contributing to progressing towards the objectives of the Council Recommendation Upskilling Pathways?
4. **Monitoring & Evaluation**: is the current ESF monitoring system suitable to track progress towards the objectives of the NSA?
5. **Expected and actual achievements:** what role will the ESF play with respect to the NSA's objectives? What are the general effects on beneficiaries and on the socio-economic context?
6. **Sustainability and EU added value:** What is the added value of the ESF support to the NSA? What would happen if the ESF ceased to support the NSA? Are expected outcomes sustainable?

1.2 The Scope of the Study

1.2.1 Objective Scope

The NSA is broad in scope and subsequently a wide-range of activities can potentially be undertaken – and supported by the ESF – in meeting its objectives. Accordingly, there was a need to narrow the focus of the study. The Draft Note on the Feasibility of a Thematic Report drew attention to the possibility of restricting the scope of the study to a specific target group or investment priority as this would allow a more in-depth analysis of specific objectives or actions to be undertaken under the aegis of the NSA. It also explored the possibility of limiting

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[1] Both the specific aims and the approach to the study are set out in the Methodological Note on the Feasibility of a Thematic Report on the ESF's contribution to the New Skills Agenda for Europe, prepared by FGB and discussed with DG EMPL.

the analysis to specific strategic action(s) of the NSA that are aligned with the ESF. In the end the latter course of action was adopted.

Analysis carried out as part of this study identified the '**Upskilling Pathways, New Opportunities for Adult Learning'** (UP) as a focus for the study. At the time the study was undertaken, this had been recently adopted by the Council on the basis of the EC proposal to establish a **Skills Guarantee**. Among the reasons for focusing on the UP – and detailed throughout this report - are the following:

- the UP seeks to tackle a phenomenon that has been identified as a major constraint on the growth of the EU economy (i.e. the number of people lacking basic skills);
- the problem being tackled is a large one, given the number of people who lack basic skills;
- from a timing perspective it is one of the NSA actions that is most developed and refined, having already been adopted by the Council on 19 November 2016;
- its scope, in terms of type of support promoted and target groups addressed, are well defined and allow for a better demarcation of relevant ESF activities;
- it is one of the most relevant with respect to the number of ESF specific objectives that are aligned with its purpose; and
- it is innovative as it strongly encourages MS to address issue of basic skills especially for low-skilled adults.

This is not to say that wider aims of the NSA and their alignment with the ESF have been ignored. Rather it is more a case of being able to go from the general to the specific by using the UP as a means to demonstrate a particular point. By narrowing the scope of the study - in its more analytical parts - on the UP, an in-depth analysis of actions that have, or will be, set in train is provided. This is intended to give the Commission tangible insights into how the ESF is and will be used to support the implementation of the NSA. At the same time, more general questions are addressed at the level of the NSA in order to provide a mapping for ESF Managing Authorities that can support activities anticipated under the NSA.

1.2.2 Geographical Scope

This study covers all EU-28 MS through desk and field analysis. A two-level analysis has been employed to ensure the right mix between breadth and depth:

1. EU28 level analysis covering all MS;
2. in-depth analysis (case studies) covering selected MS (ES, IT, NL, RO, and FR)

Some countries are accordingly analysed more in depth than others in order to gather insights into specific research questions. Both levels of analysis have been carried out using a mix of desk and field research.

Both levels of the analysis include general questions on all of the actions contained in the NSA, as well as a specific focus on the UP. In particular, questions relating to the operationalisation and delivery of the NSA relate mainly to the UP so as to glean a clearer picture of the way in which the NSA might be supported by the ESF.

1.3 Methodology

Collecting the evidence to meet the objectives of the study – as outlined above – required a multi-faceted approach (Annex I provides more detail on the methodology). As detailed in the previous chapters, a data collection matrix was constructed that cross-classified specific research questions by the sources of information available to answer them. To recap, the study has analysed several sources of data:

- desk research:
  - analysis of SFC 2014, in particular of OPs specific objectives and monitoring data from AIR 2016 (common and programme specific output and result indicators);
  - collation of EU-wide statistics and indicators (i.e. relating to skills development in the EU);

- o ESF Operational Programmes
- o Country specific recommendations;
- o consideration of other programming documents, such as national and regional strategies or plans for skills development, as relevant;
- field research:[2]
  - o an e-survey of ESF Managing Authorities in the EU;
  - o country case studies of the situation in Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Romania[3] drawing on national data and semi-structured interviews with Managing Authorities, Ministries / Agencies with responsibility for active labour market policies and skills development, and beneficiaries.

In essence, the methodology is based on an approach that proceeds from the general to the specific and from desk to field research. The background analysis contained in Annexes I – with additional information in Annex II - commenced with an analysis of the intervention logic of the NSA with a view to understanding the alignment between the ESF and the NSA; it then proceeded with an analysis of the potentially relevant Specific Objectives' scope to support the NSA and moved on to estimate the possible extent of this support, through the analysis of financial allocation and of a selection of common indicators. This also allowed the study to look in more detail at how countries have used ESF funding to support skills development. This provided valuable background data for informing the discussions with Managing Authorities and other stakeholders with respect to their current thinking about how the ESF might support the NSA in general and the UP in particular.

From an analytical perspective, the aim is very much that of looking at past and present behaviour (with respect to the support the ESF has provided to skill interventions) and at stakeholders' expectations in order to gain an understanding of how actors are likely to respond to the NSA. In this way, it was possible to use previous and current experience with respect to comparable required actions to understand how the ESF either has been able, or will be able over the short-term, to accommodate the NSA. There was an assumption that even if the NSA is consistent with respect to actions the ESF already supports, there may nevertheless be a requirement for already established programming to be amended in some way. So there was a need in conducting the analysis to understand, from previous experience, the relative ease with which existing OPs can be amended, if necessary, to support the NSA.

1.4 Structure of the Report

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 provides an outline of the aims, scope and structure of the study;

- Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the NSA's intervention logic and makes an initial assessment of how the NSA is aligned with the ESF;

- Chapter 3 provides an analysis on the potential contribution of the ESF to the type of skills development envisaged by the NSA based on the analysis of ESF OPs Specific Objectives, Common and Specific Indicators, and AIRs in light of the CSRs received by MS;

- Chapter 4, analyses the responses to an e-survey of MA across the EU-28;

- Chapter 5, presents the findings from the five country studies; and

- Chapter 6, finally, draws the conclusions and lessons learned.

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[2] See Annexes VI, VII, and VIII for further details.
[3] See Annex I for selection criteria for inclusion of countries in the study.

As can be seen above, the report is designed to show how the ESF contributes to supporting activities of a type envisaged under the NSA. In this way, it is possible to understand how the ESF as a whole – and not just the interventions under Thematic Objective 10 (which specifically addresses skill development) – has the potential capability to support the implementation of the ESF in countries with differing skill issues to address.

2 A New Skills Agenda for Europe

As noted above, the NSA is the European Commission's flagship initiative to strengthen the development of human capital in the EU in a way which will increase employment and competitiveness. The NSA differs from previous initiatives in that:

- it looks at skills from a new angle: i.e. the focus on the contribution of skills to competitiveness, and the emphasis given to digital skills;
- aims to upgrading existing measures (e.g. EQF; the Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills, etc.)
- stresses the need to improve basic skills

From a policy perspective, the interest in skills relates to both the economy (c.f. the discourse on productivity and competitiveness) and society (i.e. with reference to the role skills play in bringing about social inclusion / cohesion). It is readily apparent that across the EU over recent years that there have been substantial investments in skills (however defined) which have brought about a number of gains. For instance, one can point to rising levels of educational attainment and falling levels of early leaving from the education system. But a number of challenges remain, such as reducing the number of people who lack basic skills, the capacity of national skill systems to respond to technical change, recognition of informal learning, being able to better match skills supply to demand, and recording and validating the skills of third county migrants. The Communication on the NSA succinctly captures the nub of the problem. "70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills, and even more have poor numeracy and digital skills, putting them at risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion."[4] In other words, there are 70 million people who lack the basic skills generally considered essential to being able to enter and progress in the labour market. This exists side-by-side with employers experiencing problems recruiting people with the skills they need: "40% of European employers have difficulty finding people with the skills they need to grow and innovate".[5]

Annex II provides more contextual information on the importance of skills. Clearly much rests on the capacity of the EU to raise its stocks of human capital. And the NSA is clearly of crucial importance in achieving this end. In this chapter the NSA is considered in detail. First, information is provided about the New Skills Agenda (NSA) and its underlying intervention logic. Second, consideration is given to the added-value the NSA has the potential to create. More precisely, the chapter is intended to:

- provide a detailed understanding of the NSA and its structure, together with identifying possible scope for ESF support, action by action. This has been based on analysis of various documents;
- clarify what is the expected added value of the NSA over previous initiatives. This has been undertaken in the light of the emerging issues facing the EU notably in the field of education and training.

2.1 Intervention logic of the NSA and scope for ESF support

The NSA is a broad and comprehensive plan launched by the EC - involving Member States and stakeholders – designed to boost skills supply, ensure that the skills which national systems produce are measurable against a set of Europe wide standards, and that information is available that will guide investments in skills.

Ultimately the goal of the NSA is to raise skill supply and boost competitiveness and employability in line with the first political priority envisaged in the Political Guidelines for the

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[4] European Commission (2016) *New Skills Agenda: Working together to strengthen human capital, employment and competitiveness*. COM (2016) 381 Final
[5] *op cit*

European Commission (2014), namely A New Boost for Jobs, Growth and Investment.[6] It also seeks to strengthen the inclusiveness of the labour market and increase social investments, as declared by President Juncker and First Vice-President Timmermans in their letter of intent to the European Parliament.[7]

The rationale for intervening at the EU level stems from the fact that specific challenges such as skills anticipation (given that people move across borders to take up work), as well as relevance and transparency of skills and qualifications of mobile EU citizens and third country nationals, are best addressed at the EU level. Furthermore, according to the RoadMap of DG EMPL 'A New Skills Agenda for Europe' of April 2016, '*Better skilled citizens, workers and consumers are at the heart of a fair, democratic, resilient and prosperous Union. A common understanding of the skills challenges in the EU and a shared set of priorities would stimulate urgently needed action in the Member States. A clear agenda at EU level would also ensure synergies and cooperation, maximising positive spill-overs*'.

The New Skills Agenda will achieve its goals through a three-pronged approach whose main objectives are:

1. improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
2. making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and
3. improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices

These are broken down into nine specific objectives, which encompass 10 actions, as shown in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 – Structure of the NSA communication

Work Strand (Level 3)	Specific objective (Level 2)	Action (Level 1)
Improving the **quality and relevance of skills** formation	Strengthening the foundation: basic skills	EC Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the establishment of a **Skills Guarantee**
	Building resilience: key competences and higher, more complex skills	EC proposal for a **review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning**
	Making VET a first choice	Supporting the implementation of the 'Riga conclusion for **quality and labour market relevant** vocational skills and qualifications' (**VET**)
	Getting connected: focus on digital skills	Launch of the **Digital skills and jobs coalition**
Making **Skills** and Qualifications more **Visible and Comparable**	Improving transparency and comparability of qualifications	EC proposal for a **revision of the European Qualification Framework**
	Early profiling of migrants' skills and qualifications	Launch of a '**Skills Profile tool for third country nationals**'
Improving **skills intelligence** and information for better career choices	Better information for better choices	EC proposal for the **revision of the Europass Framework**
		Promote the sharing of **Best Practices on brain drain**
	Boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors	Launch of **Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills**
	Better understanding the performance of graduates	Initiative on **graduate tracking**

There are therefore three 'levels' of progressively more specific objectives set by the NSA:

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[6] A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change, Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session Jean-Claude Juncker, President-elect of the European Commission Strasbourg, 22 October 2014
[7] Letter of intent to the Parliament and the Council; State of the Union speech 9 September 2015, Commission Work Programme 2016 COM(2015) 610 final

- Level 3: NSA work strand, which is in itself a general objective
- Level 2: NSA specific objective
- Level 1: NSA specific action(s) and related action(s)' objectives

This analysis will mirror such structure, and discuss the NSA by:

- Work strand (level 3)
- Specific objective (level 2) and related action (level 1)

The rationale for placing such an emphasis on the distinction between levels 1, 2 and 3, is that in order to glean reliable information and estimates on the ESF contribution to the implementation of the NSA, there is a need understand in detail which activities of the ESF are directly relevant to support the implementation of the specific NSA action. By way of example, if the general objective (level 1) of the NSA is "improving the quality and relevance of skills formation" then one could argue that the entire ESF TO10 "Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning" is relevant; yet when looking at ESF activities funded under TO10 it becomes apparent that not all of them actually support the 10 specific NSA actions. Thus, this study has focused at the level 3 of the NSA (the specific NSA actions) to provide estimates of the extent to which the ESF can support the NSA.

Figure 2.1 below illustrates the Intervention Logic of the NSA, which is derived from the RoadMap of DG EMPL and the issues therein identified along with the NSA communication adopted pursuant to the Roadmap.

In particular, the overarching, broad and specific issues are gathered from the Roadmap of DG EMPL, while the NSA actions and NSA specific, broad and overarching objectives stem from the relevant NSA documentation (communication and accompanying documents). The diagram clarifies how the needs identified by DG EMPL in its roadmap are addressed through the NSA; that is, in other words, the NSA intervention logic.

Figure 2.1 – Intervention Logic of the NSA

Overarching issue	Broad issues	Specific Issue	NSA Action	Specific Objective	Broad objective	Overarching Objective

Sub-optimal levels of growth, competitiveness and employability

- **Lack of skills**
  - Insufficient skills levels
  - Insufficient relevance of skills

- **Inefficient use of available skills**
  - a challenge to understand and assess skills of migrants
  - Insufficient transparency of skills and qualifications
  - Actual use of skills does not exploit full potential of employees' skills

- **Difficulty in forecasting and anticipating skills**
  - no coherent and up-to-date overview of information on skills needs in Europe
  - Access to and quality of career guidance services vary tremendously across the EU
  - Education and training is insufficiently linked and proactive to supporting regional labour markets
  - no clear information or guidance easily available to support potentially mobile EU and non-EU workers
  - existing EU initiatives and web-tools no longer correspond to the reality of modern life

NSA Communication

NSA Actions:
- Skills guarantee/Upskilling Pathways
- review of the Key Competences for LLL
- support to the implementation of the Riga conclusions on VET
- Digital skills and Jobs coalition
- revision of European Qualification Framework
- Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals
- revision of the Europass Framework
- Best practices on brain drain
- Launch of Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills
- Initiative on graduate tracking

Specific Objectives:
- Strengthening the foundation: basic skills
- Building resilience: key competences and higher, more complex skills
- Making VET a first choice
- Getting connected: focus on digital skills
- Improving transparency and comparability of qualifications
- Early profiling of migrants' skills and qualifications
- Better information for better choices
- Boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors
- Better understanding the performance of graduates

Broad objectives:
- Equipping more people with higher and more relevant skills
- Improving transparency and use of available skills, including of EU mobile workers and learners and those having non-EU qualifications
- Improving understanding of skills needs and trends in the labour market

A boost on growth, competitiveness and employability, moving Europe towards upward social convergence

LEVEL 1 | LEVEL 2 | LEVEL 3

In appraising the subsequent analysis, one should bear in mind, as is explained in greater detail below, that some of the NSA actions have already been launched, including the EC proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Skills Guarantee, and the EC proposal for the revision of the European Qualification Framework, as well as for the revision of the Europass Framework. Some of these initiatives are already relatively well defined, while others, due to start at a later stage, still need to be defined more concretely and are subject to a higher level of uncertainty with respect to their final formulation. Furthermore, such proposals may be subject to revisions by the Council. Table 2.2 provides an indication of the current state of play regarding the implementation of the NSA.

Table 2.2 – State of play of the NSA

WS	June 2016	3rd quarter 2016	4th quarter 2016	2nd quarter 2017	4th quarter 2017
1	Skills Guarantee (later Upskilling Pathways)		Digital skills and jobs coalition Adoption by the Council of Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults"	VET modernisation	Review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning
2	Revision of the EQF for LLL Skills Profile Tool			Adoption by the council of a revision of the EQF for LLL	
3	Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills	Revision of the Europass Framework	Best practices on brain drain	Initiative on graduate tracking	

Source: European Commission (2016) [A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness](#) {SWD(2016) 195 final}

The following sections will look in further detail at how the three-work strands of the NSA are structured, including highlighting the needs they seek to address, their objectives, as well as the actions and actors involved. The analysis will then focus on the relevant actions, their specific objectives and activities/interventions they will cover, with a view to highlighting which specific interventions/activities are prioritised, concentrating on those that are likely to be relevant for funding under the ESF.

It is worth mentioning that needs and objectives identified, as well as activities envisaged, are extrapolated by the authors based on their understanding of the NSA Communication, its structure, and all the relevant documentation for each of the actions that form part of the NSA.

2.1.1 Work strand 1: Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation

Needs and objectives - work strand level (level 3)

This work strand is based on the assumption that simply increasing educational attainment and reducing Early School Leaving (ESL) may not be sufficient in order to exploit the full potential the EU's population and tackle labour market challenges. There is a need for high quality and relevant skills that are broad, transferable, and interdisciplinary. The quality of compulsory schooling and suitable Lifelong Learning pathways are seen as key to attaining this objective. This is not only relevant from a labour market perspective; it has a broader, overarching goal to reinforce competences

necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge-based society across Europe. All this can be achieved along with improving individuals' employability.

The study's understanding of this objective is that it not only refers to attaining a qualification, but also to ensuring that such a qualification is related to the demand for skills in the labour market and reinforces the acquisition of the key competences required in a knowledge-based society.

Specific Needs, Objectives and NSA actions (level 2 and 1)

In order to improve the quality and relevance of skills formation, the NSA sets out four objectives and related actions, as shown in Table 2.1 above. The paragraphs below describe the relationship between the objectives identified at the work strand level and their operationalisation through the NSA's 10 actions.

Specific Objective - Strengthening the foundation: basic skills

The first objective of the NSA stems from the idea that in order to access good jobs or even benefit from education and training, people need a minimum level of basic skills. Based on this, the EC issued a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the establishment of a Skills Guarantee. Pursuant to this, on 19 December 2016 the Council adopted the recommendation **'Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults'** (hereafter the UP). The aim of the UP is to offer tailored provision to the individual based on a skills assessment, which will identify basic skills' deficits and document existing skills and experience, including by making use of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Upon the conclusion of the individualised learning path, individuals will have their skills validated and certified. The activities envisaged under the UP are directed at selected target groups, employed, unemployed or economically inactive, or sub-groups such as migrants, rather than all individuals.

The UP focuses on 64 million European adults with low levels of skills and competences whose labour market prospects are limited and, therefore, the need to upskill is both great and most challenging. It contributes to the objective of improving the quality and relevance of skills formation (level 3) as well as to the specific objective of strengthening the foundation with basic skills (level 2). Given that its focus is primarily on adults and young people not eligible for the Youth Guarantee, it complements existing measures that are relevant at levels 3 and 2, including those aimed at reducing ESL and increasing the number of people in tertiary education. Thus, this is one case where the specific objective 'Strengthening the foundation: basic skills' refers to the broader audience of the low-skilled people while the related action (skills guarantee/upskilling pathways) refers only to adults (and then later to those below a certain level of education and not eligible for support under the Youth Guarantee).

Importantly, following deliberations in the Council of the European Union the EC's skills guarantee was reformulated as the UP. Whilst the UP contains much that was in the Skills Guarantee, it dilutes the requirements placed upon Member States regarding its implementation. This is due to the limited room for manoeuvre in the area of employment, education and training policies at the EU level as set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).[8] With the UP, Member States are now encouraged to outline measures for the implementation of the initiative by mid-2018 at the latest, building on existing national arrangements and financial frameworks – without having been given specific obligations to provide a "guarantee" of upskilling.

Amongst the main actors involved are: the MS, social partners, education, training, and guidance providers, public, private and civil society bodies at national, regional and local levels.

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[8] Articles 145-150 and 166 and 167 of the TFEU, for more details see section 4.2.

Scope for ESF funding

The UP encourages MS support to a number of activities targeted at individuals, from skills assessments to outreach measures to training for trainers in adult learning. These are all very much aligned with the ESF's scope and funding. In contrast, the coordination of all the relevant bodies in charge of the UP looks more like a 'systemic' intervention that it is less likely to be funded under the ESF, especially given the timescales of the ESF and the UP.[9]

Specific Objective - Building resilience: key competences and higher, more complex skills

The second specific objective of the NSA focuses on concerns that there may be insufficient emphasis in educational systems on developing key competences such as a range of transversal skills (ability to work in team, creative thinking, digital skills, entrepreneurship, etc.) for active citizenship, innovation and competitiveness. Thus, the EC plans to propose a **review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning'**. The current level of information on this initiative (expected by the end of 2017) means that it is not possible to determine whether the scope of the objective 'Building resilience: key competences and higher, more complex skills' will be pursued in a narrower fashion by this action.

The action's objective is to develop a shared understanding of key competences and to foster their introduction in education and training curricula. This, in turn, will provide support for better development and assessment of these competences. Activities promoted within this context include the introduction of a tool for assessing and validating competences and support to people to acquire a core set of skills, including entrepreneurial competences which can help them set up their own business or social enterprise. These should be in relation pursuant to the revision of the key competences framework for LLL. Another accompanying measure will be the provision of practical entrepreneurial experience.

Actors involved will be Member States, regions, educational institutions and training centres, both public authorities and private bodies.

Scope for ESF funding

With the current state of the information it would seem that the focus of the action is at EU governance level, this action being of a more 'systemic' nature than one aimed at the provision of individual support. Accordingly there would be little scope for ESF funding.

Yet, the text of the NSA, in describing the aim of this action, refers to the help the Commission can provide to MS in the development and assessing of core skills. Accordingly, in the subsequent analysis, the study considers as relevant to this initiative all those actions that provide support to people in the acquisition of core sets of skills, including entrepreneurial competences and experiences. The most relevant initiatives for this NSA action are expected in the follow up to the LLL review mentioned above. Given this consideration, any analysis of the extent to which the ESF might support this action is likely to be relatively speculative at this stage.

Specific Objective - Making VET a first choice

There is acknowledgement that VET is well positioned to deliver the skills that the EU economy needs both currently and in the future. But often young people, and adults, regard the VET pathway as being of lower esteem than the general path, despite the

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[9]The underlying assumption is that such an action cannot be found in the current ESF programming (basically due to the time of the implementation) and will hardly be funded through the ESF at all as probably plans for actions at the governance level have already been made.

evidence that it yields relatively good returns with respect to the probability of being in employment. This reiterates the importance of the NSA goal of 'Making VET a first choice'.

A specific NSA action consists of **supporting the implementation of the 'Riga conclusion for quality and labour market relevant vocational skills and qualifications'**. The aim of this action is to increase VET attractiveness through provision of high quality education and training, and flexible organisation / delivery, allowing progression to higher vocational or academic learning, and closer links with the world of work. Additionally, it has the goal of encouraging and appropriately integrating VET into qualification frameworks and higher level provision.

This action encourages the take up of a variety of activities to enhance VET. Some, such as the strengthening of key competences in VET curricula, are set to take place at the governance level, others aim at providing more immediate learning opportunities to individuals, for example the provision of internships and apprenticeships for VET learners, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, etc.

This appears as one example of NSA actions where no distinction can be drawn between the scope of the objective 'Making VET a first choice' and the actual action promoted thereof 'supporting the implementation of the Riga conclusions **for quality and labour market relevant vocational skills and qualifications'**, that is, between level 1 and level 2 in the analysis.

Actors involved include Member States, social partners and education and training providers.

Scope for ESF funding

Across the list of interventions encouraged by this action, the scope for ESF funding appears vast. The ESF seems well geared to support internship and apprenticeship opportunities, partnerships among learning providers, further opportunities for validating non-formal and informal learning, better data availability on labour market outcomes of VET, and so forth. In this regard, it is important to notice that this action is less innovative than others, in that it aims at supporting the implementation of a 2015 'agenda' on VET, i.e., the Riga Conclusions.

Specific Objective - Getting connected: focus on digital skills

Almost all jobs now require some level of digital skill competence, as does participation in society at large. And the demand for digital technology professionals is steadily increasing year on year. Yet digital skills are lacking in Europe at all levels (nearly 50% of people in the EU have no basic digital skills and 20% have none at all). It is on this basis that the EC has launched the Digital Skills and Job Coalition, the aim of which is to develop a large talent pool and ensure that individuals in Europe are equipped with adequate digital skills.

The actual definition of the activities supported by this action refer to national e-skills strategies, to be developed by Member States by mid-2017 on the basis of targets set by the end of 2016, and to the Charter of the Digital Skills and Job Coalition, which is yet to be published. Actions include the identification of best practice, dissemination on information about available funds, the establishment of national digital skills coalitions connecting public authorities, business, education, training and labour market stakeholders, as well as the development of concrete measures to bring digital skills and competences to all levels of education and training.

The actors involved include MS, those involved in the design, implementation or evaluation of national digital skills strategies, business, education providers, public and private actors.

Scope for ESF funding

In practice, the Digital Skills and Job Coalition is primarily concerned with having its members commit to reducing the digital skills gap. It is anticipated that members may leverage ESF funds.

2.1.2 Work strand 2: Making Skills and Qualifications more Visible and Comparable

Needs and objectives identified at the work strand level (level 3)

Employers are often given insufficient information on what people know and are able to do, especially in cases of individuals with relatively low level qualifications, migrants, and those who acquired knowledge outside of formal learning institutions. Education and training systems are different across Europe, and even more so between the EU and third countries. This hampers the proper functioning of the European Labour market and reduces the chances of mobility. In the light of this, the objective of this work strand is to make skills and qualifications visible and comparable which means having the tools, practices and practitioners capable of capturing and categorising everyone's skills, irrespective of the individual's country of origin and the learning environment where the relevant knowledge was first acquired. This study suggests that any activities which aim at increasing the number of people acquiring an official qualification should be seen as contributing to the objective of this work strand. This is seen as a key element to boost the effectiveness of the European Single Market.

Specific Needs, Objectives and NSA actions (level 2 and 1)

Against the general objective of making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable, the specific objectives of this work strand focus on improving the transparency and comparability of qualifications on the early profiling of migrants' skills and qualification. It would appear therefore that initiatives aimed at increasing the number of people acquiring an official qualification through training provision are not relevant at level 2. These specific objectives are concerned with better recognition and classification of skills rather than campaigns to increase the number of qualified people. The following paragraphs concentrate on the specific objectives of this work strand and related actions.

Specific Objective - Improving transparency and comparability of qualifications

The objective is that of **improving transparency and comparability of qualification** through the **EC proposal for the revision of European Qualification Framework**. The EC proposal will aim more specifically at: making it easier to understand qualifications and related skills; and contributing to their better use in the EU labour market. While the EC proposal will focus at the EU level, there are many activities which will involve MS. Amongst others these include, the regular update of national qualification systems, and greater use of the EQF by social partners, PES, education providers, etc., as well as actions to promote the comparability of qualifications between the countries covered in the EQF and other countries.

Stakeholders involved in this action include social partners, public employment services, education providers and public authorities.

Scope for ESF funding

As anticipated, the scope for ESF funding relates mainly to activities that are related to the revision of the EQF rather than the revision itself, such as the update of national qualification systems and the other activities mentioned above. This has been taken into consideration for the analysis described in the following chapters. The analysis suggests that the actions described above are likely to be funded by the ESF.

Specific Objective - Early profiling of migrants' skills and qualification

Assessing the skills, qualifications and professional experiences of newly arrived migrants is a challenge for many EU countries. There are tools to support this but, as the NSA points out, more needs to be done. Hence the NSA specific objective of ensuring an **early profiling of migrants' skills and qualification** through the **Launch a 'Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals'**. The objective of this tool is to support the recognition, documentation and validation of migrants' skills and qualifications, including refugees, and as such is very much in line with the NSA's specific objectives. Thus, in terms of the study's multi-level analysis, the objective early identification of third country national skills' (level 2) seems to have a scope which is similar to that of the action 'launch of a skills profile tool for third country national' (level 1).

The main activities envisaged by this action include the promotion and sharing of best practice on the recognition of migrants' skills, support and training to staff in reception facilities, the offer of online language learning for newly arrived migrants and refugees, as well as the launch of a tool to identify and document migrants' qualification and skills.

Initiatives promoted under this action are therefore targeted towards both individuals and systems (e.g., training of staff in reception facilities versus development of a tool for sharing information and best practice).

The main actors involved will be staff in reception facilities and identification services, relevant public authorities.

Scope for ESF funding

No detailed information on the actual features of the tool kit for the third country nationals' skills profile is yet available and, in any event, this is to be funded through Erasmus. Accordingly, it is not considered relevant for ESF funding. In contrast, interventions such as the training of staff in reception facilities and the sharing of best practice are likely to be supported by the ESF.

2.1.3 Work strand 3: Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices

Needs and objectives identified at the work strand level (level 3)

The needs identified in this work strand relate to the evolving demand for skills in fast-changing labour markets, and the related need for labour market intelligence by both policymakers and individuals to inform the decisions they make regarding their investments in education and training. In such an environment timely information on the demand for skills is key.

The objective is to equip individuals, employers, education providers and labour market institutions with better information on career choices and skills needs. This is undertaken ultimately with a view to promoting the adaptability of the labour force, reducing the degree of skills mismatch in the labour market, and improving competitiveness. Hence this study considers relevant those activities aimed at improving the effectiveness of PES, and the role of social partners in economic sectors and of labour market institutions in enhancing market intelligence.

Specific Needs, Objectives and NSA actions (level 2 and 1)

There are three specific objectives of this work strand:

- better information for better career choices;
- boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors; and
- better understanding of the performance of graduates.

There is no apparent difference in scope between the general objective (level 3) and the specific ones (level 2). The analysis then turns to assess in detail what the specific

objectives aim for and whether these show any differences with the specific actions promoted thereof.

Specific Objective - Better information for better career choices

It is recognised that the effectiveness of skills intelligence varies among EU countries. In some, partnerships between social partners, governments and education providers are already effectively identifying skills needs and adapting curricula accordingly. In others, partnerships are not yet the norm. Furthermore, access to, and the quality of career guidance services, vary across the EU and yet existing EU initiatives and web-tools no longer correspond to the reality of modern life.[10] Hence the specific objective of the NSA - better information for better career choices – will be achieved via two actions, the **EC proposal for the revision of the Europass Framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications** and the sharing of **best practices on the brain drain**.

As to the first action, the action's objectives are: (i) to help people make informed career and learning choices; and (ii) to set up an intuitive and seamless online service platform.

Activities promoted within the revision of the Europass Framework include support to the cooperation between national centres to improve the effectiveness and reach of tools and services, IT development of web-based services for online skills tools to be linked to/merged into Europass, and awareness raising for end-users of existing services related to skills and qualifications.

The activities promoted within this action are at a systemic level, except for those aimed at raising end-user awareness.

Actors involved are public authorities in charge of providing information to Europass, Eures, and other online tools concerned, as well as the social partners, PES, and education providers.

As to the second action, the sharing of best practice on the brain drain, the action's objective is simply to share effective ways to address the issue of tackling the brain drain. No further information on this activity is currently available

Actors involved are the relevant authorities in charge of policymaking, implementation, and / or evaluation.

In terms of differences between level 2 and level 1 of the analysis, this specific objective (level 2) is rather broad. This may suggest considering relevant for it also any action on PES enhancement. Conversely, the actions promoted (level 1) within this specific objective suggest a narrower reading, as per the activities described above. PES enhancement is thus considered relevant at the level 2 but not at the level 1.

Scope for ESF funding

According to the SWD of 04.10.2016, 'Better EU Tools and Services for Skills and qualifications', the revision of the Europass Framework should have no financial implication other than for IT development, and hosting and maintenance costs of web-based services at EU level. Funding for this is expected from Erasmus+ (EUR 2.5 million) and there are no other financial implications for MS other than contributing to sharing information. Also, the activities of EQF national contact points, national Europass centres, and the Euroguidance centres are co-financed through Erasmus+.

In view of the above, these activities are not likely to be funded under the ESF. Conversely, the sharing of best practice on the issue of the brain drain may have scope for funding under the ESF.

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[11] Building on the results of the Eurograduate feasibility study http://www.eurograduate.eu/

Specific Objective - Boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors

With the pace of technological change a major challenge for industry and especially SMEs is to better anticipate and manage the transformative change with regard to skills requirements. Many sectoral initiatives have been launched but these projects often remain fragmented, with limited impact on education and training. Hence the NSA specific objective of boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors, pursued by means of launching a **Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills**. The objectives of this action are: (i) to improve skills intelligence and tackle skills shortages in economic sectors; (ii) to coordinate and mobilise key players; and (iii) to create sectoral skills partnerships. Activities promoted towards such objectives include the translation of sectoral strategies into identified skills needs and related solutions, the recognition of sectoral qualifications and certification, the collection of evidence on skills gaps (all three at the EU level), and finally the roll-out of EU sectoral partnerships at national and regional level. In this case, the objective of boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors seems aligned to the specific action promoted to achieve that objective. Yet, activities for the development of knowledge and skills in specific high value sectors seem to go somewhat beyond what is explicitly promoted by this action. For this reason, they have been classified within this study as relevant for level 2 of the analysis.

Actors involved include industry, including social partners, education and training providers, and relevant authorities in charge of education and training policies.

Scope for ESF funding

This action seems to refer to a system level change, and to address only indirectly beneficiaries in the labour market, or those in education or training. Thus, the ESF may be relevant only indirectly, to support the roll-out the sectoral partnerships defined at the EU level, once they will be defined.

Specific Objective - Better understanding of the performance of graduates

Good quality information on the employment outcomes of VET and higher education is key to identifying success or failure factors for graduates in specific regions or economic sectors and for devising appropriate solutions. In particular, a lack of fine grained information and comparable data is found in this area. In addition, while many Member States have developed some form of graduate tracking, there is currently limited exchange of good practice and comparable data between countries, which impedes the analysis of education outcomes and challenges across the EU. Hence the NSA objective of better understanding the performance of graduates, by means of an **Initiative on graduate tracking**.

The objective of this action is to develop or improve collection, analysis and use of information on the skills use and employment outcomes of leavers from education and training (both from tertiary education and VET). Such information can be obtained from administrative data sources (e.g. by linking education, social security and tax databases) or graduate surveys and used to inform career guidance for prospective students, curriculum design, and steering of education systems (to address skills gaps, for example). A number of Member States have already started to implement different forms of tracking system, primarily, but not exclusively, focused on higher education graduates. The specific objectives of the initiative will be to improve cooperation and mutual learning to support the further development of national tracking systems, including in those countries with limited experience of such practices to date, and to provide more internationally comparable data on graduate outcomes from a new EU-

level graduate survey.[11] MS will be also encouraged to include within their tracking systems people who leave education and training without graduating. These EU-level actions will be backed up by a Council Recommendation on graduate tracking, pursuant to the EC proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates of May 2017.

Scope for ESF funding

The main scope for use of the ESF would be in further development and implementation of national tracking systems in countries where such systems are under-developed (part of the first specific objective). ESF funds have already been used for pilot tracking systems in countries including Romania and Hungary, so further support should take into account previous actions and reflect EU recommendations and good practices from other MS.

2.2 Legal basis and added value of the NSA versus previous initiatives

Against the background set in the previous section, it is apparent how the NSA seeks to foster innovative approaches to the evolving challenges the EU is facing and address emerging needs in a systematic manner. It does so by updating existing tools so as to make them relevant to current labour market needs (e.g. the revision of the key competences framework for LLL, the review of the EQF, the revision of the Europass framework, etc.) and especially by linking them to one another, in order to address the issues of a lack of skills, inefficient use of available skills, and difficulty in forecasting and anticipating skills.

Clearly, the possibilities for action at EU level to address skills related problems are limited by specific provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) in the area of employment, education and training policies. Under its remit, the EU is given right to work alongside MS "*towards developing a coordinated strategy for employment and for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce*" (Art. 145), as well as to "*contribute to a high level of employment by encouraging cooperation between Member States and by supporting and, if necessary, complementing their action*" (Art. 147). Nevertheless, "*in doing so, the competences of the Member States shall be respected*" (Art. 147) and "*incentive measures* […] *shall not include harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States*" (Art. 149). By a similar token, in the area of education, vocational training, youth and sport the EU "*shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity*" (Art. 165). The same approach applies to VET systems (Art. 166).

Thus, NSA's ultimate goal is to create a strategic all-encompassing vision to address pressing skills gaps and issues in Europe. This vision is the key to triggering stakeholders' commitment and stimulating further engagement of the MS at all levels, including potentially mobilising public and private investment towards clear EU level priorities set by the NSA. An EU-level vision also maximises positive spill-overs in a number of ways, and especially in taking account of cross-border elements of skills anticipation and of skills comparability, especially when it comes to third country nationals.

The NSA is also innovative in that it stresses the need of business-education partnerships in different domains (e.g. partnerships to enhance VET provisions and dual learning opportunities, but also the Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills, which has

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[11] Building on the results of the Eurograduate feasibility study http://www.eurograduate.eu/

launched a pilot project at the EU level led by the industry, with results that will be then rolled out at the national level and will affect educational institutions).

Finally, in focusing on the low-skilled through the Skills Guarantee/Upskilling Pathways, which includes a further commitment towards providing all individuals with ICT literacy, the NSA is fully in line with the first principle of the Pillar of Social Rights, which aims amongst other things at providing everyone with 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"* and 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"*.

In comparison with the preceding initiative on skills, namely "A New Skills for New Jobs Agenda" (NSNJ), which was similarly geared towards the issue of employability, one notable difference is the wider breadth of the NSA, which includes concrete initiatives geared towards boosting skills supply (e.g. Upskilling Pathways and what promoted under the NSA specific objective "making VET a first choice"). In contrast, the NSNJ mainly aimed to "anticipating and matching" through the following four work strands:

- addressing mismatches (including promoting geographical mobility)
- strengthening the Union's capacity for forecasting and anticipation
- deepening international cooperation
- mobilising Community instruments

It goes without saying that the added value of the NSA versus other more specific initiatives (e.g. the EU Agenda for adult learning, ESCO, Skills Panorama, etc.) is its comprehensiveness and the idea of taking stock of existing measures, tools and practices under a more synergic reference framework.

In conclusion, while there have been a number of skill initiatives over recent years, the New Skills Agenda provides a somewhat starker picture of the challenge facing Europe, and outlines concrete and inter-related measures to address these. In particular, in 2014/2015 a mid-term review of the ET2020 framework was carried out in order to assess whether the EU was on track to achieving its objectives or new policy initiatives were needed. The review highlighted that while early school leaving rates were dropping and higher education attainment continued to improve, too many 15-year-olds underachieved in mathematics and reading and one in four adults was caught in a low-skills trap, which limited their access to the labour market while simultaneously closing avenues to further education or training. Against this background, the review identified three main policy challenges: (i) stressing the importance of an integrated framework covering education and training at all levels, with permeable life-long learning experiences; (ii) the importance of recalibrating the policy focus to include the pressing challenges facing the labour market, together with the role of education in promoting equity, inclusion and active citizenship; and (iii) the importance of monitoring and mutual learning in the context of the ET2020. These policy priorities have since been translated by the EC and the council jointly[12] into six priority areas, as follows:

1. relevant and high-quality knowledge, skills and competences developed throughout lifelong learning, focusing on learning outcomes for employability, innovation, active citizenship and well-being;
2. inclusive education, equality, equity, non-discrimination and the promotion of civic competences;

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[12] 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) — New priorities for European cooperation in education and training

3. open and innovative education and training, including by fully embracing the digital era;
4. strong support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other educational staff;
5. transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility;
6. sustainable investment, quality and efficiency of education and training systems.

The NSA appears as particularly well suited to meet the the six new priority areas of the ET2020 framework, as it fosters concerted efforts towards achieving each one of them by seeking further stakeholder engagement and steering/mobilising existing resources.

3 ESF Programming and its expected contribution to the NSA

As highlighted in the previous section, one of the goals of the NSA is to align existing European and national funding towards the EU priority areas. It was also clarified that there is scope for the ESF to fund the 10 NSA actions.

This chapter aims at providing an estimate of the extent to which ESF programming is expected to contribute towards the objectives of the NSA. It does so by analysing the NSA-relevant Specific Objectives of the ESF Operational Programmes, related financial allocation and expected achievements. In so doing it focuses specifically on the analysis of ESF contribution to the Upskilling Pathway as this is the action that is best suited to being analysed using the ESF programming data available.

The starting point of the analysis is the NSA communication and its accompanying documents, [13] according to which the ESF, together with the other ESI funds (ERDF, CF, EAFRD, EMFF) and EC programmes and initiatives (AMIF, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus +), is expected to play a key role in supporting the **objectives** and **actions** of the NSA. Through the ESF, substantial investment in skills development relevant for the labour market will be provided by the MS. ESF funding that would appear to be most relevant for the NSA is that allocated under **Thematic Objective 10** "Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning" and its ESF-relevant Investment Priorities:

- 10(i) preventing early school leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early childhood, primary and secondary education;
- 10(ii) improving both the relevance of education and training systems and the transition from education to work and life-long learning;
- 10(iii) modernising higher education;
- 10(iv) developing vocational education and training, apprenticeships and traineeships.

The EC also expects that **additional relevant Investment Priorities**, such as those related to access to employment, integration of young people in the labour market and adaptability of workers, will also support education and training (e.g. for young early school leavers or adults without the necessary qualification levels allowing for direct labour market integration support) and dual learning, notably through apprenticeships. These actions are considered of direct importance to the NSA, in particular those linked

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[13] European Commission (2016) A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness {SWD(2016) 195 final}; European Commission (2016) Analytical underpinning for a New Skills Agenda for Europe. SWD(2016) 195 final

to improving basic skills and upgrading existing skills of employed (so that they remain and progress on the labour market) and unemployed people alike (in order to promote their access to the labour market).

In the following sections, firstly an overview of the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) received by MS in 2017 is provided to give an indication of the main priorities relating to skills development across MS and better contextualise the analysis.[14] Second, the allocation of ESF funds across various activities of relevance to the NSA/UP is looked at along with the related achievements recorded by various skills related indicators at EU and MS levels.

3.1 Country Specific Recommendations

For the purpose of this report, the CSRs for 2017 have been analysed with a view to identify overlaps with the priorities set by the NSA, and see to what extent MS are encouraged also in this way to take action in domains that are germane to the NSA. This is deemed a contextual element that can better explain also the way each ESF OPs of the different MS are or will be geared to support NSA-relevant activities. Table 3. 1, Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 below present a summary of the Country Specific Recommendations for each Member State in relation to each Work Strand of the NSA. The right-hand side column of the tables gives an indication of the "strength" of the link (strength decreasing from red to pink). Note that within this analysis, not only the text of the CSR was taken into account, but also any relevant considerations included in the recitals. The column "CSR" allows for a distinction between two cases (Y for CSR and N for recitals).

Table 3. 1 – 2017 CSRs relevant to Work Strand 1

MS	CSR	CSRs relevant to Work Strand 1 – 'Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation'	Relevance
AT	Y	Improve the educational achievements of disadvantaged young people, in particular those from a migrant background	🟠
BE	Y	Ensure that the most disadvantaged groups, including people from a migrant background, have equal access to quality education, vocational training, and the labour market.	🟠
BG	N	*Improve access to LM for LTU and NEETs and low-skilled people, especially for disadvantaged groups (skills shortages and mismatches) and improve basic skills and education opportunities e.g. for Roma*	🔴
CY	Y	Complete the reform of the education system to improve its labour market relevance and performance	🟠
CZ	Y	Remove obstacles to growth, in particular […] by fostering employment of underrepresented groups	🟠
DE	N	*VET investments to integrate migrants*	🟠
DK	N	*Labour market inclusion and improving employability of disadvantaged groups especially if from a non-EU-migrant background (and low skilled), young low-skilled, workers above 60 years old*	🔴
EE	N	*Counteract wage dispersion related to differences in skills*	🟠
ES	Y	Increase labour market relevance of tertiary education.	🟠
FI	Y	Take targeted active labour market policy measures to address employment and social challenges, provide incentives to accept work and promote entrepreneurship	🟠

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[14] See Annex V for further details.

MS	CSR	CSRs relevant to Work Strand 1 – 'Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation'	Relevance
FR	Y	Improve the access to the labour market for jobseekers, notably less qualified workers and people from a migrant background, including by revising the system of vocational education and training.	(dark red)
HR	Y	Improve adult education, in particular of older workers, the low-skilled, and the long-term unemployed. Accelerate the reform of the education system.	(dark red)
HU	Y	Take measures to improve education outcomes and to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma, in inclusive mainstream education, as the growing demand for a highly skilled workforce is not matched by a sufficiently large pool of applicants to tertiary education and adequate completion rates.	(orange)
IE	Y	Deliver an integrated package of activation policies to increase employment prospects of low-skilled people and to address low work intensity households	(dark red)
IT	N	*Develop adult learning to increase LM outcomes for low skilled*	(dark red)
LT	Y	Address skills shortages through effective active labour market policy measures and adult learning and improve educational outcomes by rewarding quality in teaching and in higher education.	(dark red)
LU	N	*LLL and upskilling especially for older workers*	(dark red)
LV	Y	Up-skill the labour force by speeding up the curricula reform in vocational education.	(dark red)
MT	N	*Improve labour market relevance of skills, advance LLL opportunities, improve labour market participation of older and low-skilled women*	(dark red)
PL	Y	Take steps to increase labour market participation, in particular for women, low-qualified and older people, including by improving skillss and removing obstacles to more permanent types of employment	(dark red)
PT	Y	Together with social partners, ensure that minimum wage developments do not harm the employment of low-skilled people	(light orange)
RO	Y	Strengthen targeted activation policies and integrated public services, focusing on those furthest away from the labour market. […] Improve access to quality mainstream education, in particular for Roma and children in rural areas.	(orange)
SE	N	*Increase basic skills performance of young people and integrate newly-arrived migrants pupils into the school system*	(light orange)
SI	Y	Intensify efforts to increase the employability of low-skilled and older workers, particularly through targeted lifelong learning and activation measures.	(dark red)
SK	Y	Improve activation measures for disadvantaged groups, including by implementing the action plan for long-term unemployed people and by providing individualised services and targeted training.[15]	(dark red)
UK	N	*Address skills mismatches and provide for skills progression, including by continuing to strengthen the quality of apprenticeships and providing for other funded "Further Education" progression routes*	(orange)

[15] The Slovak action plan on the integration of the long-term unemployed, largely financed by the European Social Fund, seeks to remedy this via a comprehensive approach to personalised services. This will be achieved by providing specialised counselling, a new profiling system, cooperation with private employment agencies and the delivery of targeted training programmes designed by employers based on regional labour market needs.

The most notable result is that all countries except the Netherlands have received CSRs that fall under the purview of WS1, though to differing degrees. Specifically, 13 MS have either received CSRs or have been warned on the same issues that fall under the aegis of the Upskilling Pathways, VET enhancement (action 1 and 3 of the NSA), or the importance key competences for LLL. On the other hand, there appears to be a lower emphasis placed on digital skills. Many CSRs encourage MS to improve their system for LLL and to address the upskilling needs of disadvantaged groups through personalised approaches, which is fully consistent with the UP. The situation changes when it comes to WS2, as shown by Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 - CSRs relevant to Work Strand 2

MS	CSR	CSRs relevant to Work Strand 2 – 'Making Skills and Qualifications more visible and comparable'	Relevance
AT	N	*Labour market integration of people from a migrant background, in particular women born outside the EU and job seeking refugees, remains a challenge*	🟠
HU	N	*Further efforts are needed to facilitate transitions to the primary labour market effectively. The profiling system for the unemployed is operational but not yet fully effective.*	🟠
SE	N	*Challenges remain in integrating low-skilled people and non-EU migrants into the labour market and reducing the substantial employment gap for non-EU-born women. Sweden has made considerable efforts in the reception of asylum seekers and in the integration of refugees and other immigrants. Further improvements may well be necessary as in 2016 only one third of participants to the introduction programme were in work or education 90 days after having completed the programme, and a comprehensive approach and governance on the corresponding recognition of qualifications are still missing.*	🔴

Issues relating to WS2 appear only in the recitals of the CSRs of three MS, namely AT, HU and SE, and relate mostly to labour market integration of migrants. The issue of visibility and comparability of skills seems to remain somewhat on the background.

Finally, Table 3.3 shows CSRs that are relevant to WS3.

Table 3.3 – CSRs relevant to Work Strand 3

MS	CSR	CSR relevant to Work Strand 3 – 'Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices'	Relevance
BG	N	*The labour force continues to shrink because of population ageing combined with emigration (brain drain)*	🔴
CY	N	*Skills mismatches in the labour market are still largely unaddressed, affecting prospects for long-term sustainable growth. Participation levels are low in upper-secondary vocational education and training and the labour market relevance of higher education is weak, resulting in a high share of tertiary graduates working in occupations that do not necessarily require a tertiary degree.*	🟠
ES	Y	Reinforce the coordination between regional employment services, social services and employers, to better respond to jobseekers' and employers' needs.	🟠
PT	N	*Further cooperation between the business sectors and learning providers is needed*	🔴
RO	N	*The labour force continues to shrink, as the population is ageing and emigration remains high (brain drain)*	🔴

The most recurrent trends are the issue of brain drain and skills mismatches, to be addressed through better coordination in economic sectors, skills anticipation and more

coordination among employment services. Five MS are concerned with these issues though only one, namely Spain, has received a CSR on them.

Overall, it can be said that there is a high degree of consistency between the priorities set by the NSA and trends recurring across CSRs for 2017. This is particularly true for WS1; less so when it comes to issues such as visibility and comparability of skills and qualifications that are touched upon only indirectly by the CSRs.

3.2 Operationalisation of the NSA through ESF OPs

The analysis now turns to how the ESF can contribute to the implementation of the NSA actions and objectives. This is achieved by looking at the Specific Objectives (SO) selected by each ESF Operational Programme.

In order to do this all Specific Objectives selected by 2014-2020 ESF OPs in the MS were screened and ultimately **categorised** according to their relevance with NSA actions and objectives, using text analysis.[16] This is a key step in the methodological approach and has enabled a first, tentative demarcation of NSA-relevant IPs (by linking the SO to the IP under which it was selected), for each OP in each MS. Thanks to the information on Categories of Intervention for each relevant IP the corresponding financial allocation, output and results indicators and targets[17] were singled out and analysed. This is intended to gather insights on the programming of the ESF and to 'cherry-pick' those IPs and OPs whose specific objectives and targets are potentially more relevant to the NSA/UP. The cross-IPs distribution of relevant specific objectives by MS and OPs is employed to this purpose.

It might be worth remembering that **Operational Programmes** are the key instrument of ESF programming for establishing a close link between the structural funds and the path to growth and social cohesion set out at EU and MS levels (including the fulfilment of CSRs). OPs break down the overarching strategic objectives agreed in national strategic documents and are organised in Priority Axes (PAx), broadly corresponding to the main strategic intervention areas of the OP, and select relevant indicators and financial allocations. In a drive to reinforce result orientation of ESF funding, 2014-2020 OPs are programmed according to **Thematic Objectives (TO)** and further broken down in **Investment priorities (IP)**. They are defined by EU regulations and are common to all MS; they thus represent the overall strategic framework of ESF intervention logic within which each MS/OP can build its strategy according to specific development needs. Investment priorities are in fact further "translated" by OPs Managing Authorities (MS) in **Specific Objectives** (SO) that describe the **expected results** (in terms of a positive change) and thus operationalise the OP strategy though more concrete objectives. IPs are a key unit of analysis in the present programming period as it is at this level that result and output indicators are selected and the financial allocation defined.

In interpreting the results reported below, one should bear in mind the usefulness as well as the limitations of an approach that is based on an assessment of relevance which relies on the phrasing of the specific objectives defined at the programming level in each OP. This approach is potentially affected by bias, such as, for example, an underestimation of relevant OPs and IPs, due to the wording of a specific objectives that may be deliberately broad or general but may suggest the coder that there isn't a strong link between the OP and the NSA. Although such considerations have informed the selection of relevant specific objectives, it would be hard to claim that this can be representative to a full extent.

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[16] Source: ESF Performance and Thematic Report Database, based on selected extractions from SFC2014
[17] Source: ESF Performance and Thematic Report Database, based on selected extractions from SFC2014

3.2.1 Analysis of ESF OPs Specific Objectives

The first step of this analysis is concerned with reviewing and classifying all the ESF Specific Objectives according to the criteria set out in section 2.1. In assessing the relevance of each ESF SO, two main factors have been considered:

- whether the ESF Specific Objective is relevant at levels 1, 2 or 3 of the classification set out in Chapter 2, i.e. at the level of the (i) 10 NSA actions, (ii) nine NSA specific objectives, or (iii) NSA work strands, (iii) respectively; and
- to which NSA action, specific objective or work strand the ESF specific objective is tied.

This classification provides an interesting picture of how, and whether, ESF programming is aligned with the NSA in terms of SOs.

Figure 3.1, below, shows the potential relevance of the ESF to the NSA in its broadest sense, i.e. by looking at the level of the work strand objectives (level 3). For Figure 3.1, and the following figures, relevance is defined as the relative weight (percentage) of relevant SOs per each respective IP. This measure is calculated per MS where needed.

Figure 3.1 – NSA Relevance of ESF IPs (relative frequency of IPs with NSA-relevant SOs) by work strands (Level 3), EU28
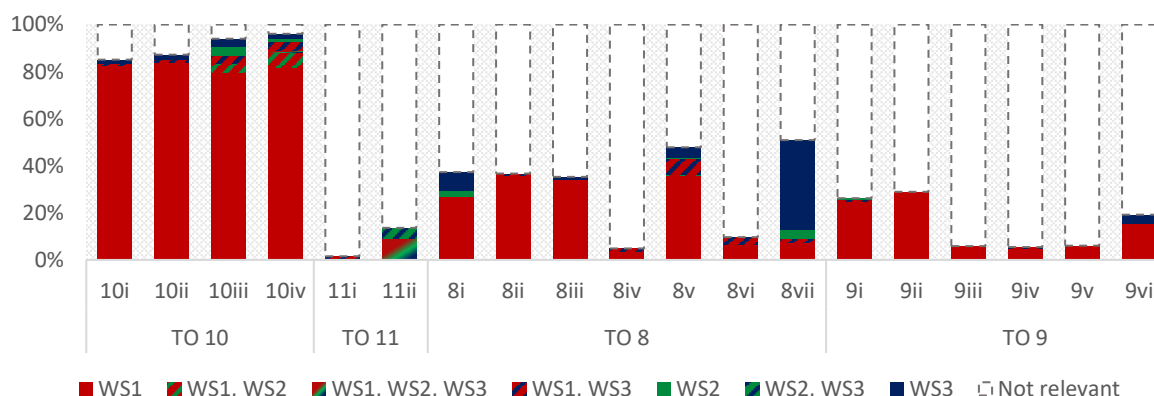
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

As expected, while TO10 appears to have the highest share of NSA-relevant SOs and is almost "fully" relevant for the NSA general objectives, several additional investment priorities seem to be rather significant – **especially but not limited to 8i, 8ii, 8iii, 8v, 8vii, 9i and 9ii**. For these, more than 1 in 4 of the specific objectives selected by the MAs appears to be relevant to the NSA general objectives (level 3).

There is another relevant feature that emerges from Figure 3.1, namely Work Strand 1 'improving the quality and relevance of skills formation' accounting for the majority of relevant SOs across all IPs (except 8vii). The reason for this is that WS1 is concerned with most upskilling initiatives, including social inclusion through the provision of basic skills training and labour market integration through work-experience, especially in VET. WS1 is also connected to initiatives promoting a stronger matching with labour market needs; similar to WS 3 'improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices'.

Regarding the remaining work strand, SOs linked to the improvement of quality and efficiency of PES account for a large share of WS3 relevant interventions. Nonetheless, also more specific interventions such as 'tackling the issue of brain drain', 'improving information on qualifications relevant for the labour market' and 'graduate tracking' are envisaged under the ESF.

As for WS2, 'improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices', this seems to remain somewhat in the background of the ESF programming; however, it may

be due to the rather systemic nature of typical WS2 actions as well as to the way SOs are drafted, i.e. sometimes in broad terms. Yet, some limited examples of SOs seeking to improve skills recognition and labour market integration of migrants, as well as initiatives for updating and improving consistency of the national qualification frameworks are envisaged, are found particularly in 8i, 10iii and 10iv.

This horizontal and high-level approach would not alone suffice to gauge whether and how the NSA specific priorities are reflected within the ESF programming. Attention is now turned to the alignment of ESF SOs with the NSA by differentiating between levels (as identified in section 2.1).

Figure 3.2 below shows the distribution of SOs relevant for the NSA, differentiating this time by their level of relevance, notably by distinguishing between upskilling initiatives in general (level 3) and, e.g., those upskilling initiatives aimed specifically at adults with below EQF 4 (level 1) or general support to PES services/ career guidance (level 3), and specific initiatives such as sectoral cooperation for skills assessment and anticipation or development of a graduate tracking system (level 1).

Figure 3.2 - Alignment of ESF SO with the NSA, by level of relevance and IP
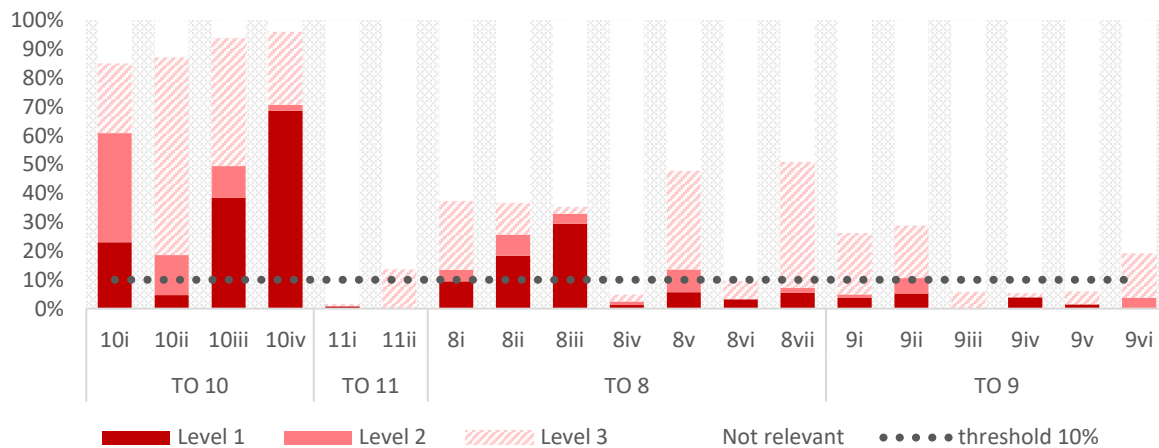
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

As expected, Figure 3.2 presents a more telling picture than that at the work strand level. Although overall TO10 remains the most relevant thematic objective, a certain distinction between its IPs arises, **with particularly 10iii and 10iv continuing to show high relevance** (40% to 60% of SOs aligned with specific NSA actions) and, on the contrary, 10ii showing a much more limited significance at the action level (level 1) than at the work strand level (level 3).

According to this classification the most relevant IPs, defined as those having at least 10% of their specific objectives aligned with the NSA, are:

- 9 at level 2 (NSA specific objectives) and namely: 10i, 10ii, 10iii, 10iv, 8i, 8ii, 8iii, 8v and 9ii; and

- 5 at level 1 (NSA actions), and namely: 10i, 10iii, 10iv, 8ii, and 8iii.

The analysis of the specific objectives is suitable also for a more refined assessment of which are the NSA actions that account for the largest share of relevant SOs, as shown by the following Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.3 - Alignment of ESF SO with the NSA, by NSA action (level 1) and IP
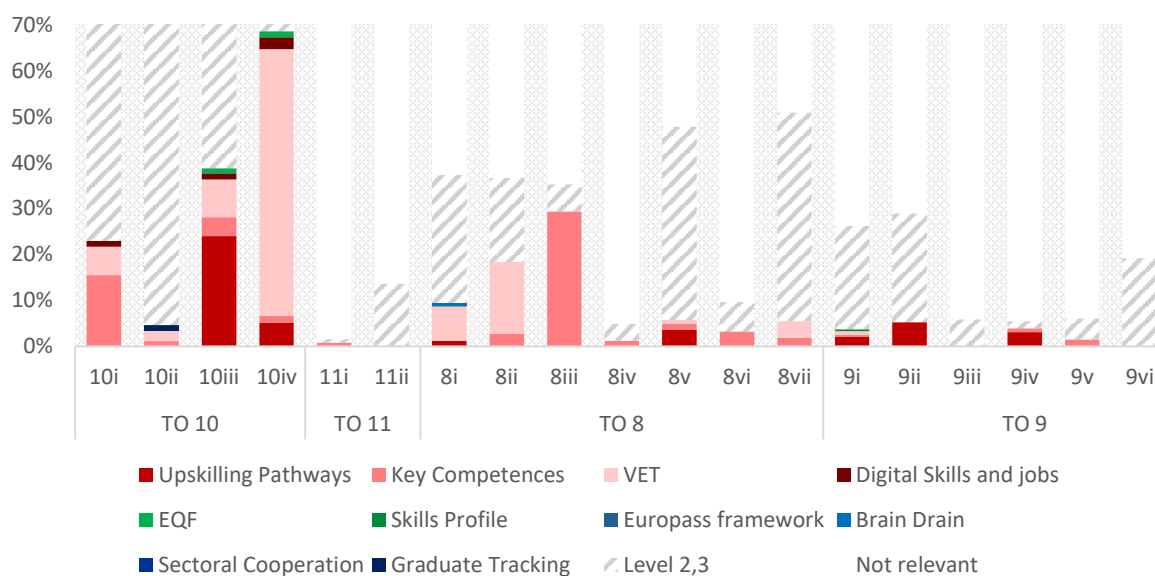
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

Figure 3.4 - Distribution of relevant SO by NSA action, trend line showing cumulative frequency
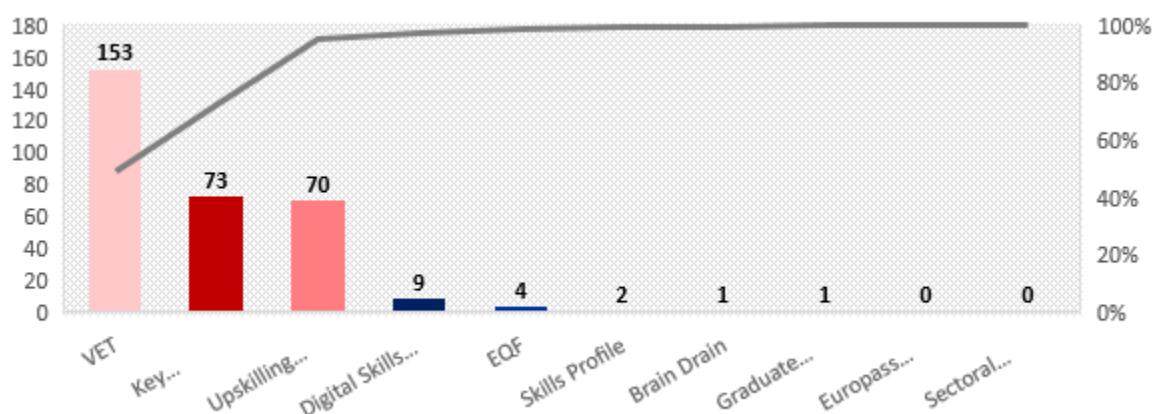
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

The above figures point clearly at **a large representation of the first three actions of the New Skills Agenda across all reevant IPs, accounting alone for nearly 95% of all relevant SOs.** This only confirms that actions within **Work Stand 1 'improving the quality and relevance of skills formation'** are those more extensively mirrored in ESF, and particularly **action 3**, EC endorsement of the Riga Conclusions for quality and labour market relevant vocational skills and qualification**, action 1,** the former Skills Guarantee, now 'Upskilling Pathways' and **action 2,** the upcoming EC proposals for a review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.

One reason that explains this is that these actions are of a more individual nature, which, in combination with the limited level of detail offered by the ESF SOs, means that they are the only ones effectively traceable in this analysis. Conversely, the NSA's more systemic actions, such as the skills profile tool or the revision of the EQF or Europass

framework,[18] may fall under the scope of general capacity building objectives. This would be a case for the over-representation of Work Strand 1 in the classification of SOs carried out within this analysis. It can also be argued that interventions under the first work strand have a much larger magnitude than the remaining actions of the NSA, as they seek to address broader and more widespread issues.

Another important point should be emphasised when considering the relative frequency of WS1 interventions, namely the qualitative difference between SOs linked to the initiative 'Upskilling Pathways', and those linked to action 2 and 3. While 'Upskilling Pathways' is a fully new and fairly specific initiative promoted by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council, the initiative on VET (action 3) consists ultimately in placing stronger emphasis on the 2015 Riga Recommendations. Their significant breadth, especially in terms of target groups addressed and interventions encouraged, makes that a large number of ESF SOs reflects their aims.

Also the figures on action 2, namely the 'EC proposal for a review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning', should be considered in light of the fact that this is still in an early/preparatory phase of the action, with its issue date being set for late 2017. With the current state of the information, as anticipated, it seems to transpire that the focus of the action is more concentrated at the EU level. In addition, the objectives of the actions are described in a broad and somewhat vague fashion, consequentially expanding the scope of the SOs that are assumed to be relevant within this analysis, eventually boosting their number.

Ultimately, the analysis of the SOs confirms that the broad scope of the NSA as a whole is reflected rather transversally throughout the ESF OPs and IPs. By limiting the observation at the level of the specific actions that the NSA envisages, with a smaller number of ESF Investment Priorities continuing to be relevant for the NSA[19], IPs 10iii and 10iv stand out particularly as the most relevant. Another key finding is that ESF SOs related to NSA actions of Work Strand 1 are dominant throughout the ESF and are spread across different IPs, with five IPs having around 20% of relevant SOs or above.

Figure 3.5 focuses on the cross-IPs distribution of the first action of WS1, which is arguably the most relevant and innovative of the entire NSA, i.e. 'Upskilling Pathways, New Opportunities for Adults'.

Figure 3.5 – cross-IPs and cross-MS distribution of SOs relevant for the action 'Upskilling Pathways'
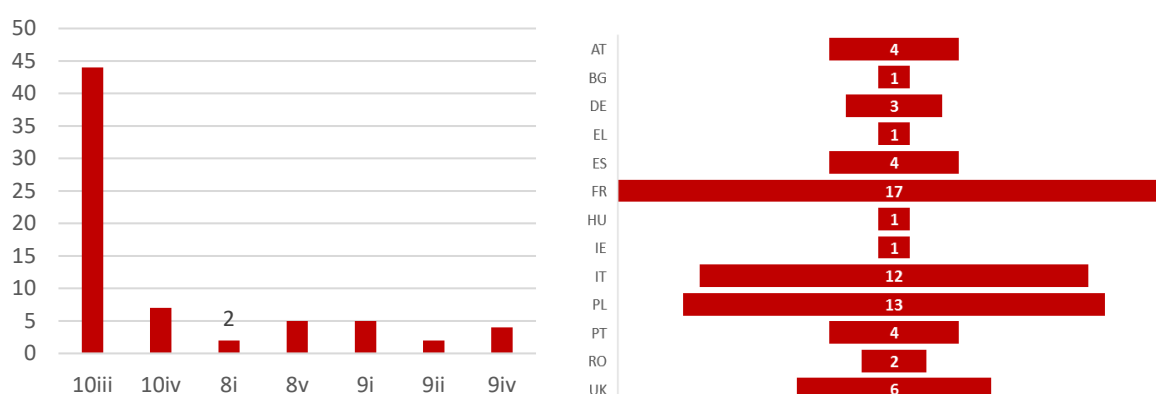
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

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[18] According to the communication of the NSA, the revision of the Europass framework in particular is primarily funded through Erasmus+, especially with respect to the development/refinement of the relevant IT tools.
[19] These are taken into account in the subsequent analysis of relevant Specific Indicators

The analysis of the cross-IPs distribution of relevant SOs provides for a much clearer demarcation of how the ESF is to contribute to the 'Upskilling Pathways'. Overall, investment priority 10iii ('Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings [..]') comprises the highest number of SOs that aim to provide adults with education and training for basic skills. An intuitive reason for this is that adult learning is typically funded under IP 10iii.

This overview of Specific objectives clearly shows how **basic skill needs cut across different themes and investment priorities**, ranging from **education to employability, adaptability and social inclusion**. It also provides a picture of SOs which go into different levels of detail and can alternatively provide for a narrower or broader scope of the related intervention.

3.2.2 Financial allocation of Upskilling pathways

Through the analysis of ESF Specific Objectives and their alignment with the NSA it is possible to make a tentative estimate of NSA-relevant ESF programmed resources, based on the financial allocation of relevant IPs.

In the present and the following section on indicators we will focus our analysis on the Upskilling pathway, as this is the action for which the scope of ESF support is more relevant, as explained in section 2.1.1 above, and for which the available data provide a more reliable analysis, as shown in this section and the following one sections 3.2.2and 3.2.3).

Figure 3.6 below, shows a preliminary distribution of ESF financial programmed resources by country and IPs based on SFC2014 data.[20] The figures have been calculated considering only the OPs with SOs deemed relevant for 'Upskilling Pathways', and aggregating the relevant allocation by IP and MS.[21]

These should be taken with caution as the resulting figures are clearly an approximation for the following reasons:

- financial allocation is only available at IP/Priority Axis level (and therefore at a higher level than that of the SO), potentially leading to an over estimation;

- it may well be that also OPs and IPs other than those with SOs which clearly address low skilled adults with upskilling initiatives can pursue a similar aim (under estimation); and

- the flexibility of OPs means that once national plans for the implementation of the UP will be drafted ESF resources may be made available to support the UP (underestimation).

Such an approach allows for an estimation of the amount of funding relevant for the purposes of the Skills guarantee/'Upskilling Pathways'.

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[20] Extractions: ESF Performance Database
[21] Note that if for a given Member State two OPs with relevant specific objectives have been identified, in OP#1 relating to IP 10iii and in OP#2 relating to IP 8i, the allocation of OP#2 in IP 10iii and of OP#1 in IP 8i was not considered

Figure 3.6 – ESF funding of high relevance for the action 'Upskilling Pathways'
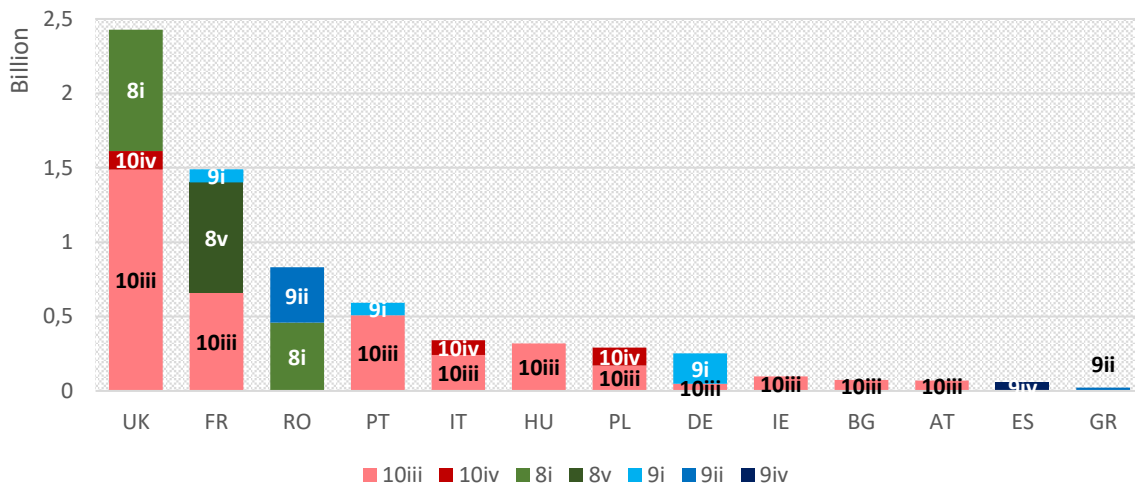
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

According to Figure 3.6, the countries with the highest share of relevant ESF funding are the UK, France and Romania, followed by Portugal, Italy, Hungary and Poland. Presumably the intensity of the funding of basic skills training under IPs belonging to TO 8 and 9 may be somewhat lower than that under TO10. This may be relevant especially for Romania, whose aggregated target is fully made up by TO 8 and 9. Yet the selection of specific objectives mitigates this bias, by including in the estimate IPs from TO 8 or 9 only for those OPs where an UP relevant SO was selected for that IP.

Overall, this analysis suggests that potentially UP relevant ESF funding amounts to EUR 6.86 billion, distributed across 13 Member States and 57 OPs.

3.2.3 Analysis of indicators for Upskilling pathways

Output and result indicators provide important information concerning the further operationalisation of the ESF OPs: together with SOs they are a key element of the intervention logic and show how expected results (by 2023, i.e. at the end of the validity of the programming period funding) from implementation of the ESF can be measured. Indicators are defined at the level of the SO (result indicators) and IP (output indicators); they can either be selected from a list of indicators as per Annex I or II of the ESF Regulation (common indicators) or be programme specific.

The third step of this analysis is thus devoted to aggregating and estimating the expected targets of UP-relevant specific and common indicators, outputs and results, selected by the ESF OPs.

A key premise of this analysis is that common indicators are reported in AIRs even where these are not selected by the MA, i.e., there is no target set for that indicator. As a result, looking at the selection of Common Indicators is relevant to assess the MAs' programming choices (ie whether a given indicator was selected during the programming phase and hence is an expression of the policy maker expected achievements), while achievement values go beyond the selected targets. Elaboration is based on the extraction of AIR2015 data from SFC2014.

An additional disclaimer that should be made before proceeding with the analysis is that these estimates are tentative and not exhaustive, especially since MS/OP adopted very different approaches when selecting indicators (e.g. common versus specific indicators, or concerning the number of indicators per IP or SO).

Specific (output) indicators

Relevant programme specific indicators selected by the MAs were analysed with the help of a categorisation exercise carried out for the drafting of the ESF Synthesis Report (for aggregation purposes at the EU28 level), within the framework of the present service. The exercise adopted a double categorisation approach, i.e. according to the unit and the typology of the intervention (see below) and the outcome of the categorisation exercise stored in the ESF Performance Database.

The analysis of Specific Indicators is suitable both to assess how the operationalisation of the ESF can be relevant for the NSA, and particularly for the UP, while drawing an indication of how much it is planned/expected to achieve. Because of the way programme specific indicators are selected, providing a full overview of all specific indicators that may be relevant for the various actions of the NSA is not feasible within this study. The reason for this is that specific indicators often refer to multiple forms/types of interventions and adding up data, even within the same relevant IP, would cause the figure to be unreliable.[22]

Thus, each of the following figures presents data in specific sub-dimensions, so as to look at those most significant and reliable at hand. Because such sub-dimensions can be fine-tuned only through categories of Specific Output Indicators (SOI), the analysis of Specific Result Indicators is not included within this study, in that their aggregation would not be meaningful.

Importantly, their categorisation takes into account two dimensions for each SOI, namely:

- what is the unit of the intervention? (differentiating by a number of categories grouped under three main clusters: individuals, products/projects, entities);
- what is the typology of the intervention? (E.g. apprenticeships, basic skills training etc.)

Due to the use of a combination of these two criteria, estimates resulting from such fine-tuned analysis can give a more accurate measure of the expected ESF contribution to the Upskilling Pathways.

Figure 3.7 displays the results of the abovementioned estimates, limited by the following exclusion/inclusion criteria:

- only SOI selected within relevant IPs in relevant OPs were included;

- only SOI categorised as 'basic skills education and training (including second chance education)' were included;

- only SOI referring to the cluster were considered, except SOIs referring to:
  - students;
  - individuals below the age of 25;
  - individuals with tertiary education (ISCED 5-8).

Once more, this selection seeks to improve reliability of data, by filtering out Specific Indicators that are not fully relevant to the scope of the UP.

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[22] For example, an ESF intervention aimed at poverty reduction may be comprised of various components, such as, basic skills training, financial support, guidance, sociosanitary services and so on. It is often the case the related indicator captures the number of participants involved in such intervention as a whole, without necessarily differentiating by the form of support provided.

Figure 3.7 - 2023 targets for Specific Output Indicators providing basic skills in the domains relevant to Upskilling Pathways, by MS and IP
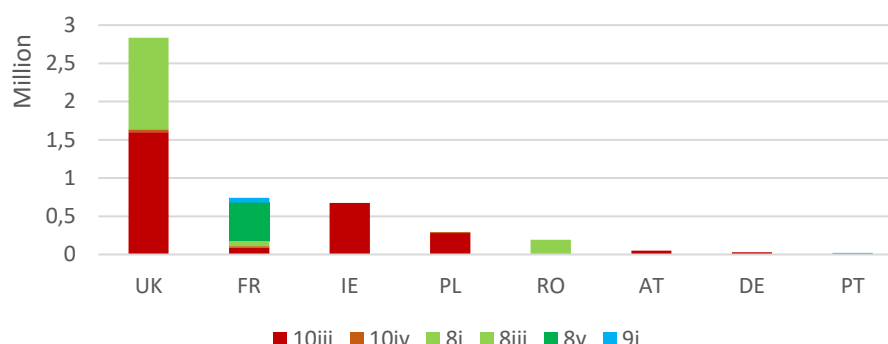
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

According to this data, eight MS selected NSA-relevant programme specific output indicators. Especially the UK, but also France, Ireland, Poland and Romania, have selected Specific Output Indicators which targeted from 0.2 to 2.8 million participants (per country) **through the provision of basic skills, excluding students and people below the age of 25**.

In terms of operationalisation, it is again IP10iii that accounts for the largest share of targets, followed by TO8's IPs such as 8i and 8v.

Common Output Indicators

For the purposes of this analysis the common output indicators that provide a more reliable estimate of NSA-relevant targets, are those related to the **ISCED qualification of participants** and thus linked with the UP**.**

First how many participants with level 2 ISCED qualification and below are targeted across all Member States (COI9 in SFC2014), per IP, was assessed. This indicator is particularly relevant for the NSA as it addresses low skilled individuals, targeted by the UP. Figure 3.8 displays the aggregated values of the COI9 2023 targets by MS and IP. It shows that that only seven MS have specifically selected this indicator. It also shows that **Italy and Spain show very high targets of the relevant COI9.** As per the cross-IPs distribution, the largest share of targets is represented by TO10 investment priorities. Regarding 10i, this may reveal a certain tendency, especially for Italy, at targeting early school leavers. This means that adults in need of basic skills may not be the sole focus of these interventions.

Figure 3.8 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 CO9 targets on below ISCED 2 participants addressed, by MS
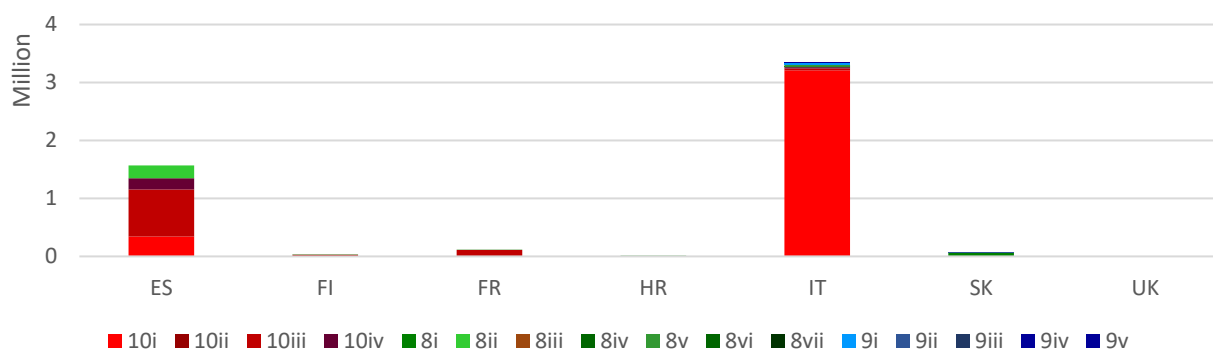
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

The ESF targets for participants with **ISCED level 3 or 4** (CO10 in SFC2014) are shown below in Figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 CO10 targets on ISCED 3 or 4 participants addressed, by MS
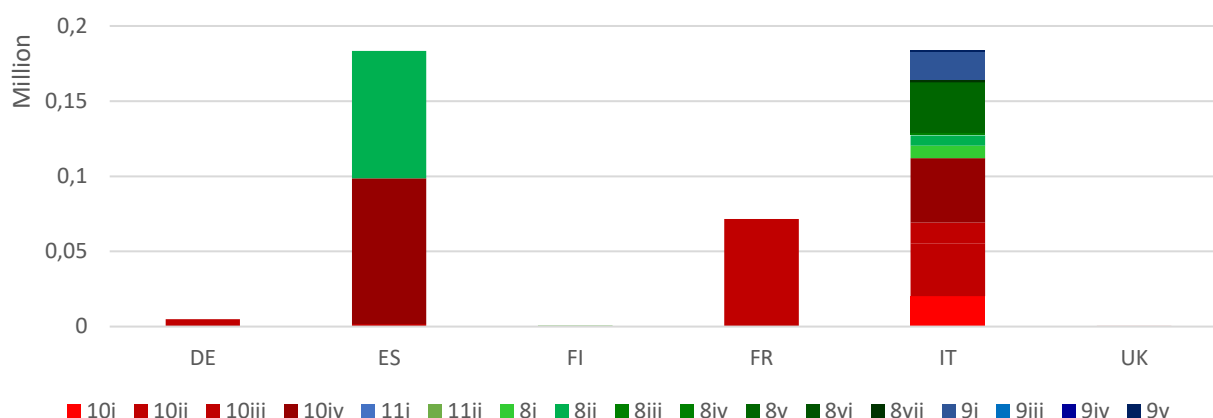
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

Figure 3.9 shows that only six MS have selected this indicator in their OPs. Although the magnitude of these targets appears significantly reduced, both Italy and Spain account for the majority of the 2023 targets for C0I10. It is possible to observe how non-TO10 targets tend to grow in comparison with the distribution by TO of targets on below ISCED 2 participants, thus showing increasing relevance of TO8 and 9 when it comes to participants with ISCED level 3 or 4.

Overall, based on the estimates on common and programme specific indicators, it is expected that around 10 million participants with low-level of skills will take part in ESF interventions by 2023, particularly in Italy, Spain, the UK and France, followed by Ireland, Poland and Romania.

Common Result Indicators

The NSA-relevant common result indicators are those relating to training or qualifications achievements i.e. **participants gaining a qualification upon leaving** to those **in education or training** (CRI3 and CRI2 respectively). Figure 3.10shows the results of the aggregation of expected targets for these two indicators across UP-relevant IPs, for each OP.

Figure 3.10 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 CRI targets on participants who have participated to training or gained a qualification (CRI2 + CRI3), in OPs and IPs relevant for the Upskilling Pathways, by MS
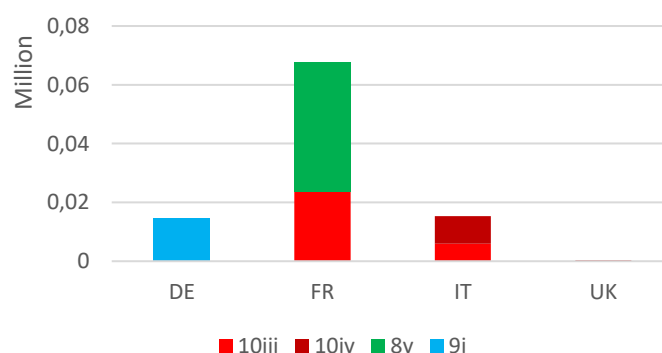
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

The figures are modest, possibly signalling a somewhat limited use of CRI in UP-relevant OPs and IPs. Only four countries that have selected either CRI2 or CRI3 show positive values, with France leading, followed by Italy, Germany and the UK. This time, TO10 investment priorities are not over-represented, with IPs 8v and 9i accounting for a larger share of the overall target. **Overall, about 100 thousand people are targeted within the selected UP-relevant OPs and IPs.**

A second estimate looks at **participants in employment upon leaving** (CRI4) - that focuses on employment - , was selected with UP-relevant OPs and IPs by France and Italy only, as Figure 3.11 shows.

Figure 3.11 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 CRI targets on participants in employment after leaving, in OPs and IPs relevant for the Upskilling Pathways, by MS
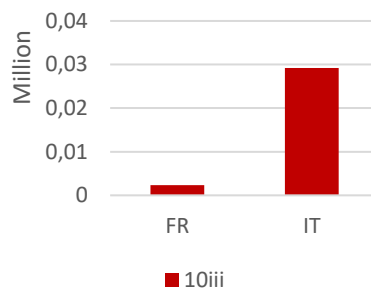
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

This time, relevant targets are found only under IP 10iii, with nearly 30 thousand participants targeted by Italy and less than five thousand by France.

3.2.4 Early progress of relevant indicators

The delays in the implementation of the ESF experienced by many MS mean the progress of relevant indicators is still quite modest. However, this section provides a first overview of how MS are progressing in terms of COI and CRI deemed relevant for the Upskilling Pathways.

To start with, Figure 3.12 shows the Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 COI cumulative values of participants with below ISCED 4 education attainment, by MS. It is thus a rough representation of how many low skilled people have benefitted from the ESF in various activities so far.

Figure 3.12 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 COI cumulative values of participants with below ISCED 4 educational attainment, by MS
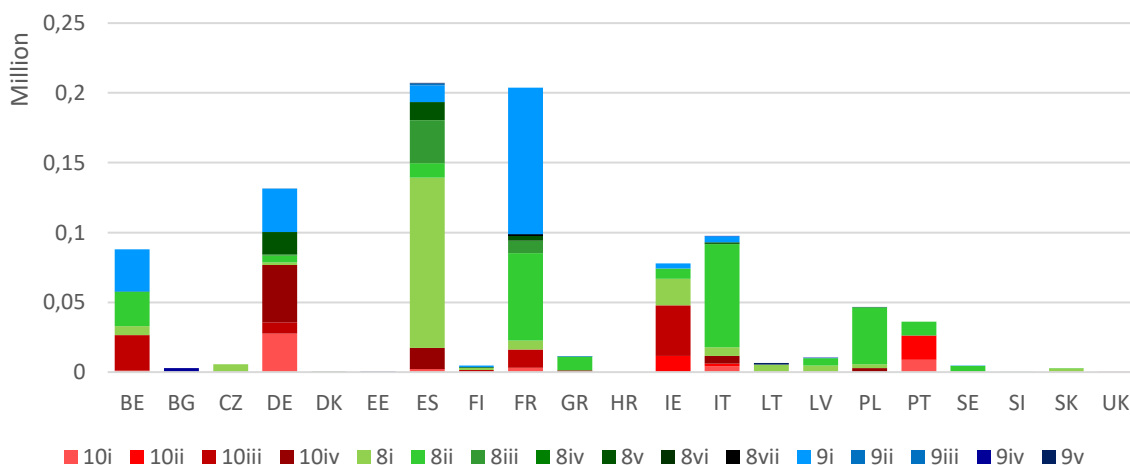
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

On the one hand, it would appear that quite a significant amount of low skilled people have received support through the ESF, especially in ES, FR, DE, IT, BE and IE, which is positive if one considers what is the ESF already doing to support the low skilled. On the other hand, if we take these values as a proxy of ESF support to the Upskilling Pathways, the somewhat modest presence of TO10 IPs across the distribution may be suggestive of a possible upward bias of this estimate, with people lacking basic skills which may be addressed within the context of activities not directly relevant for the UP. Nevertheless, the aggregated figure that over one million participants with below level 4 ISCED have already been addressed remains encouraging.

Finally, some significant progress is also traced in terms of Common Results Indicators, both immediate and longer term. To ensure reliability of estimates, i.e. their relevance to the UP, values shown in Figure 3.13 below are aggregated only across OPs and IPs deemed relevant for the UP. Figure 3.13.

Figure 3.13 – Cross-IPs distribution of 2023 CRI cumulative values, by MS. On the left, participants who are in training of have gained a qualification upon leaving; on the right, participants who have improved their labour market condition or are in employment upon leaving.
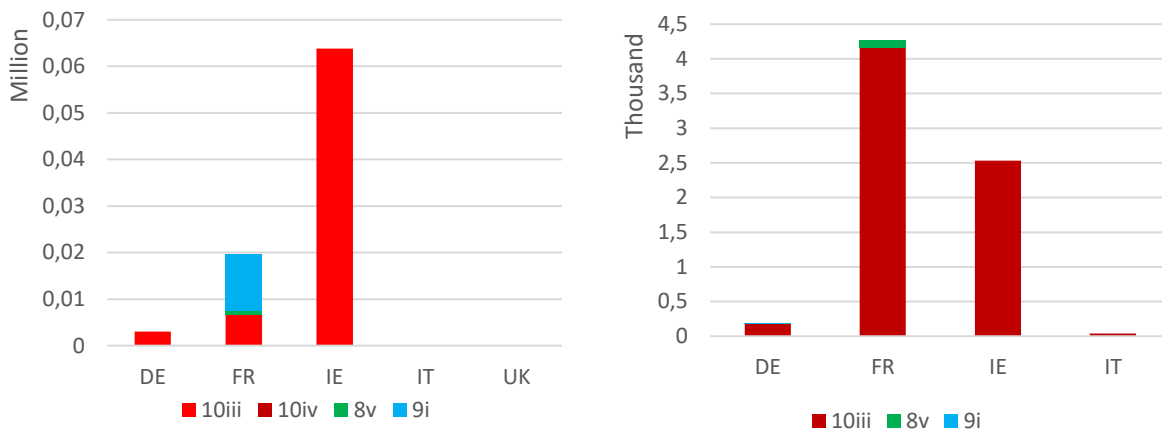
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014

One interesting element to emphasise is how Ireland displays good performance, with already over one hundred thousand participants who have been offered basic skills training. Nearly a one hundred thousand have also gained a qualification or are in training upon leaving.

3.3 Conclusions

The analysis illustrated in this chapter is concerned with identifying activities funded / or likely to be funded under the ESF that are directly or indirectly relevant to the goals of the NSA. The aim was to gauge the extent to which the ESF (at the SO level) was aligned with the NSA. In summary, the results show the following.

- Work Strand 1 of the NSA 'improving the quality and relevance of skills formation' is the strand that accounts for most SOs that are relevant to the NSA.
- Within this Work Strand, there are qualitative differences between SOs linked to the 'Upskilling Pathways' initiative and those linked to action 2 and 3 which are ultimately less innovative or too broad to result in concrete initiatives relevant to the respective NSA action.[23]

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[23] While 'Upskilling Pathways' is a fully new and fairly specific initiative promoted by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council, the initiative on VET (action 3) consists ultimately in placing stronger emphasis on the 2015 Riga Recommendations. Their significant breadth,

- Although TO10 (Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning) accounts for the largest share of relevant SOs, it is also apparent that actions relevant to the NSA are spread out across the other thematic objectives too.
- While, overall, TO10 remains the most NSA relevant thematic objective in the ESF, IPs 10iii (Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings, etc.) and 10iv (improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems, facilitating the transition from education to work, etc.) show the highest levels of relevance (40 to 60 % of SOs, respectively, are aligned with specific NSA actions).
- Where actions are being undertaken that are aligned with the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathways much of this would appear to be funded under TO10 – mainly 10iii – but there is also a significant amount of activity under TOs 8 and 9.

The implication of the above is that one simply cannot assume that the NSA solely aligns with TO10. The issue of skills is, to a large extent, a horizontal issue stretching across several TOs. This poses a number of challenges to the development of a methodology that will provide insights into how the ESF can support the NSA.

In terms of **financial allocation,** this analysis suggests that relevant ESF funding equates to EUR 6.86 billion, distributed across 13 Member States and 57 OPs. This is a somewhat conservative estimate, in that it only takes into account IPs in each OP where a SO related to the Upskilling Pathways was found. The countries with the highest share of funding were the UK, FR, RO, IT and HU.

Overall, based on the estimates on common and programme specific indicators, it is expected that around **10 million participants with low-level of skills will take part in ESF interventions by 2023**, particularly in Italy, Spain, the UK and France, followed by Ireland, Poland and Romania.

Finally, the analysis of Common Result Indicators shows rather modest figures, possibly signalling a somewhat limited use of CRI in UP-relevant Ops and IPs (vs programme specific result indicators). Overall, about 100,000 people are targeted within the selected UP-relevant OPs and IPs in DE, FR, IT and the UK through training activities or the acquisition of a qualification.

Finally, within this chapter an analysis was made that tracked the **early progress of relevant indicators**. Within the selection of relevant common output indicators nearly one million people lacking basic skills have been addressed through different activities across 22 MS, with ES, FR, DE, IT, BE and IE leading the field. Finally, in terms of results indicators, it is IE who has performed well, with over a 100,000 individuals gaining a qualification or participating in training upon leaving.

Overall, this analysis suggests that under the current framework of targets and indicators there is room to provide substantial support to low skilled individuals.

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especially in terms of target groups addressed and interventions encouraged, means that a large number of ESF SOs are relevant here. Also the figures on action 2, namely the 'EC proposal for a review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning', should be considered in light of the fact that this is still in an early/preparatory phase of the action, its issue date being set for late 2017. With the current state of the information, as anticipated, it seems to transpire that the focus of the action is more concentrated on the EU level. In addition, the objectives of the actions are described in a broad and somewhat vague fashion, consequentially expanding the scope of SOs that are assumed to be relevant within this analysis, eventually boosting their number.

It is noteworthy that MS are encouraged also within the framework of the European Semester to undertake activities that are relevant for the NSA, especially with respect to WS1 and to the Upskilling Pathways.

4 The ESF present and future implementation and the NSA: results of the EU-28 e-survey to ESF MAs

As part of the field research carried out for this study, an e-survey was submitted to all ESF Managing Authorities across the EU-28. The purpose was to find out about MAs' awareness of the NSA and their views about how the ESF might support the implementation of the NSA. In total, 50 completed questionnaires were returned along with 10 partially completed ones. Reponses were received from 23 MS covering around a third of all OPs. The results should be regarded as indicative given that they are drawn from only a selection of MAs and the fact that they are probably dependent also on the different levels of implementation of ESF in different countries; nevertheless, they provide some key insights into the degree of symbiosis between the NSA and ESF. Detailed answers and graphs are provided in Annex VIII: Detailed results of the EU-28 e-survey to ESF MAs.

4.1 Coherence, Relevance and Awareness

The first important finding of this e-survey is that the awareness of the NSA and especially of the UP across the EU is rather limited (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 – Level of awareness of ESF MAs on the contents of the NSA, by MS
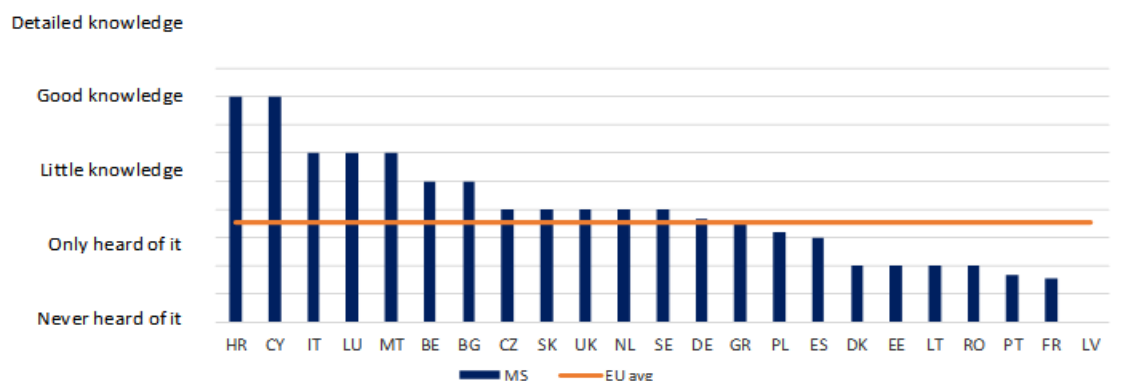
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Nevertheless, the general view of MAs is that their ESF OPs are relevant to meeting the needs of the NSA (see Figure 4.2). This result is consistent with the findings in section 3 which demonstrated the alignment of existing ESF activities with the objectives of the NSA.

Figure 4.2 – Relevance of ESF OPs in their current formulation for the NSA and the UP, by MS[24]
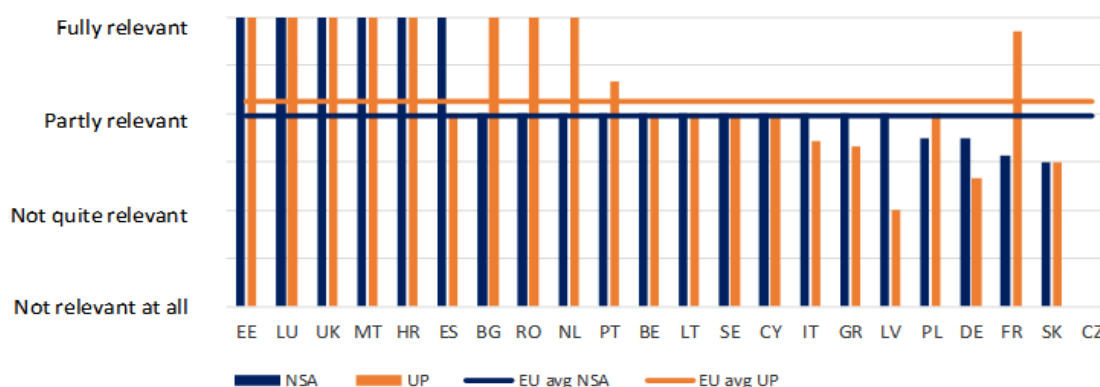
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The second important finding is MAs reporting that 'initiatives aimed at improving the skills of low skilled adults' is the one in which they are mostly involved in, out all of the NSA's objectives. Although this does not necessarily mean that they are engaged in activities that strictly adhere to the specification of the UP, it gives a good idea of what ESF activities are already being undertaken that are relevant to the NSA.

The third finding is that, as anticipated by the analysis of SOs, the most relevant TO for the NSA is considered to be TO10, and especially IP 10iii. Whilst TO8 has been selected as the most relevant Thematic Objective by a substantial share of MAs, reaching up to 42% when considering the sole UP (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 – Most relevant IPs: NSA vs UP comparison
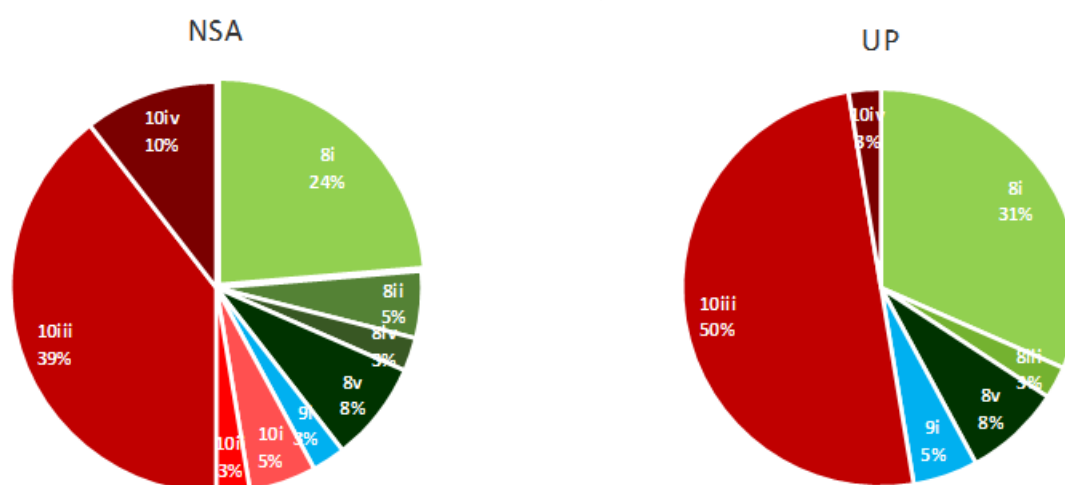
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

4.2 Flexibility

Due to a lack of clarity on the details of the NSA and the fact that OPs are already considered partly in line with the latter, the issue of flexibility can only be discussed in preliminary terms. That said, most MAs believe that the NSA will only influence their OPs modestly, and that this has occurred to small extent thus far (see Figure 4.4).

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[24] Respondents having answered 'don't know' are not represented within this graph

Figure 4.4 – Extent to which the NSA has affected /will affect ESF OPs, by MS
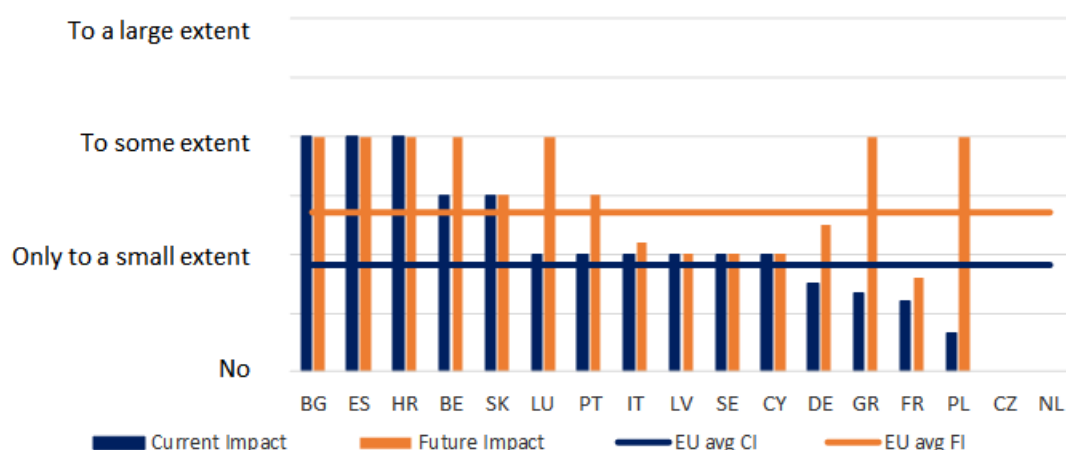
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The overwhelming majority of MAs declared that, at present, they have not developed new actions nor amended existing ones to support the NSA. When looking to the future, two in three respondents expect that new activities will be developed, and one in three that existing ones will be amended (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5 – Answers on how the NSA will affect ESF OP activities, by MS[25]
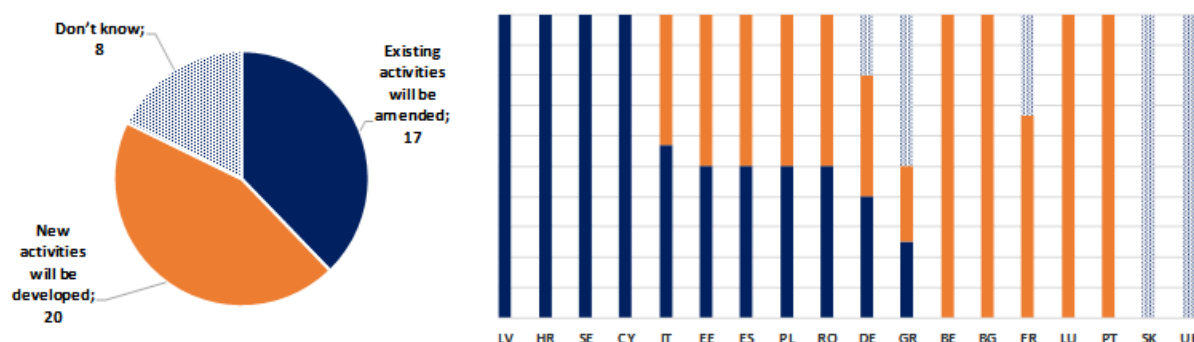
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

On average, it is expected there will be an element of difficulty to provide support to the NSA, mainly because funding is already committed and that OPs may not be flexible enough to allow changes. This is true especially if one considers the progressive targets set and approved in the last two years. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the OPs is considered enough to provide support to the NSA by two-thirds of the respondents who believe that some adaptation will be needed.

Focusing on the UP, results remain similar. The expected impact of the UP on ESF OPs is considered modest, primarily because: 1) Existing plans may be binding; and 2) Activities in place are already aligned with the UP. The adaptation of the ESF OPs to the requirements of the UP is considered somewhat difficult because there may be little support from stakeholders to develop actions coupled with a lack of awareness of the UP in policy communities. These two reasons are found throughout the EU-28.

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[25] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

4.3 Operationalisation

As to the operationalisation of the UP, it is clear that at present little is being done as MAs await more details about it. Expectations for the future are to carry on with existing activities that are relevant for the UP (nearly 40% of respondents), followed by the revision of existing actions and initial consultation with policymakers. Just above 10% of respondents expected to be developing new actions to support the UP (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6 – Activities in which MAs expects to be involved to support the UP, by MS
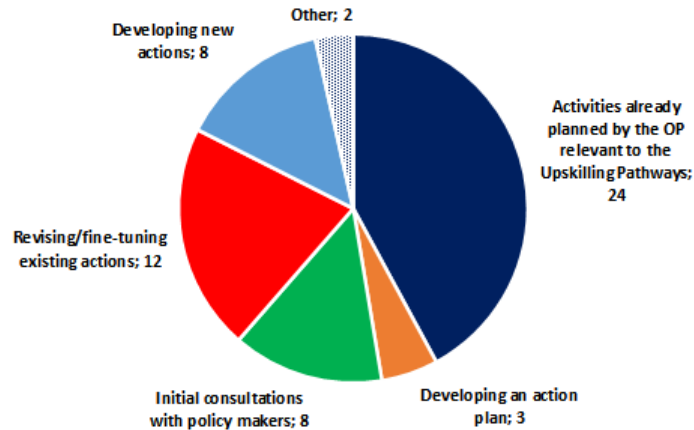
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

This confirms that the UP is not expected to bring substantial changes to the current structure of the ESF, while it may well reshape some of its interventions.

In looking at how much of the current upskilling for low skilled adults aligns with the UP requirements, it seems that a three-step approach (assessment-training-validation) is already being followed or planned to be followed quite closely through the EU, especially step-two – provision of ad-hoc/modular training. Some countries, however, such as CZ, DK and LV, indicated that they will not be involved in any of this.

Furthermore, few countries across Europe declared that their ESF OPs provide support to staff in the adult learning field. Among 'no' respondents were NL, UK, CY, PT, ES and LT, in addition to the aforementioned CZ, DK and LV.

4.4 Monitoring and evaluation

The most significant result of this section is that the majority of MAs (around 60%) collect data - in addition to that which is mandatory - in order to monitor and evaluate interventions considered relevant to the NSA. The most frequently mentioned additional data collection tool was the use of ad-hoc questionnaires/surveys, followed by the use of administrative data and general statistics (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7 – Monitoring and evaluation data for initiatives relevant to the NSA, by MS
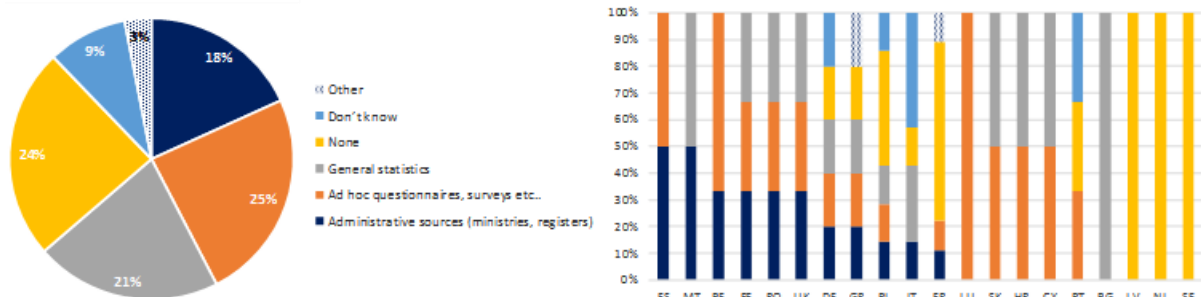
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

As to the monitoring of the UP, again around two thirds of MAs reported that they monitor interventions that are relevant to this end, especially with regard to the validation of skills acquired. This means, inter alia, that the analysis of the contribution of the ESF to the NSA may be complemented in future with additional sources of information and, most importantly, that there is ground to build upon in seeking to shape a monitoring system for the UP.

An exception is represented by the monitoring of outreach, guidance and support measures. As anticipated in the introduction of the UP (see section 2.1.1) many times actors in charge of devising upskilling initiatives do not monitor over the effectiveness of the related outreach and/or guidance activities. This may well hinder effective reach of the UP's target group.

4.5 Sustainability and added value

Finally, most MAs – except in NL and SE - regard the ESF as being a necessary support mechanism if the NSA is to achieve its aims (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8 – Added value of ESF funding in supporting the NSA, by MS
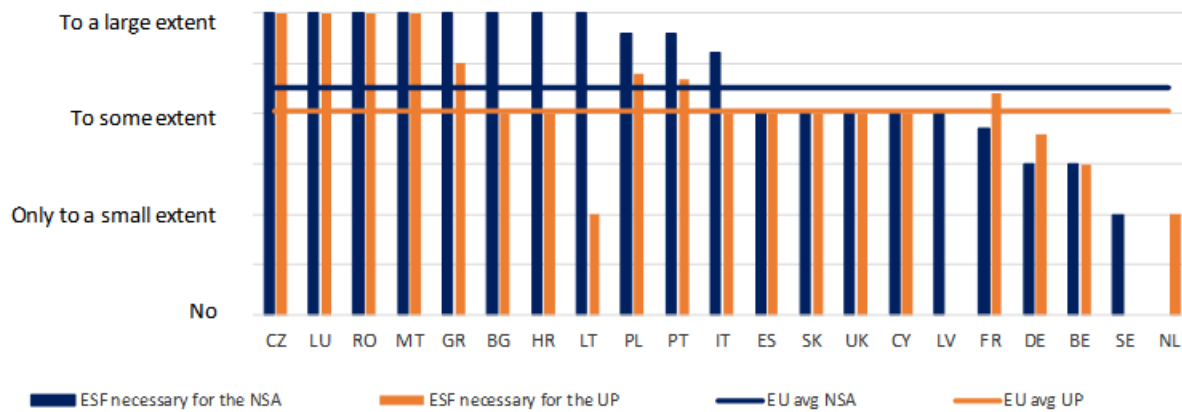
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

4.6 Conclusion

Although the evidence from the e-survey is indicative it reveals a number of key points. MAs awareness of the NSA is, at present, somewhat limited. Nevertheless, they regard some of the actions in which they are currently involved as being directly relevant to the NSA, especially the UP. Moreover, their view is that if the NSA is to achieve its goals, then the ESF will play an important role in achieving that end. The provision that needs to be added in this regard – and it is an important one – is that the ESF, given the demands which are made of it, cannot always readily flex to meet new needs. The implication is that the NSA will very much need to work with the flow of existing ESF activities if it wants to harness the support of the ESF. These issues are explored in the next chapter which are based on more in-depth discussions with MAs – and other stakeholders - in selected countries.

5 The ESF present and future implementation and the NSA: Case studies on selected MS

This section provides a summary of the information obtained from the semi-structured interviews with MAs and beneficiaries in five selected EU countries:[26]

- France;
- Italy;
- the Netherlands;
- Romania;
- Spain

Information is provided on the capacity of the ESF to support the NSA with respect to:

- **coherence, relevance and awareness** – i.e. the extent to which there is awareness of the NSA and whether policies at the national level are consistent with the goals of the NSA;
- **flexibility** – the scope for ESF activities to flex in response to meeting the goals of the NSA;
- **operationalisation and delivery** – the extent to which programmes are already being delivered via the ESF that are consistent with the NSA;
- **monitoring and evaluation** – the extent to which these may need to be adapted should the ESF be used to support the NSA;
- **expected and actual achievements** – what past ESF performance indicates about its capacity to support the NSA; and
- **sustainability** –expectations regarding the sustainability over time of any interventions introduced under the aegis of the NSA.

The case studies also include a background section on each country's policy context.

The interviews with MAs and ESF beneficiaries provide more detailed information about expectations regarding the capacity of the ESF to support the NSA. In other words, they provide an indicative insight into the way in which the ESF might optimally support the NSA.

5.1 France

5.1.1 Policy Context

France faces a challenge with respect to the employment of young people. The proportion of young people in France who are not in employment, education or training (the NEET rate) has risen in recent years, from less than 14% in 2008 to 16.6% in 2015, despite the average NEET rate in the EU falling since 2013. This is despite the fact that young people in France today are more highly educated than their counterparts from the past. In 2015, the percentage of 25-54 year–olds with a low level of education (ISCED 0-2) was 18.3% compared with that of 39.8% of 55-74 year-olds. And for people with a medium level of education, the percentage of 25-54 year-olds was 43.7% compared with that of 3.5% amongst 55-74 year-olds. This is higher than the average in the EU. The overall unemployment rate in France stood at 10.1% in 2016, with most unemployed people possessing a low level of skills. France has the third highest percentage of 30-54 year-olds with low literacy skills (21%), and the fourth highest percentage with low numeracy skills (27%). So the evidence points to there being a relatively high penalty

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[26] See Annex VI.

for young people, in the guise of an increased risk of being unemployed or NEET, who have failed to acquire key employability skills (literacy, numeracy, etc.). Training provides a means of acquiring those skills. The average quarterly training access rate was around 8.5% in 2011, with a high difference by age, and by socio-economic category (higher for young people and twice as high for executives).

The National Reform Programme mentions various provisions in the promotion of equal opportunities and improving the functioning of the labour market such as access to training.

Given this context, the objectives of the French Partnership Agreement are the following:

- tackling unemployment, in particular youth unemployment through the Youth Employment Initiative;
- improving the quality of education and training supply so that it achieves a better match with labour market demand;
- raising the qualification and skill levels of those in the labour force; and
- preventing early school leaving.

Interventions supported by the structural funds, in particular the ESF, have been aligned with the Europe 2020 objectives and priorities and will contribute to achieving the expected results for France:

- early school leaving: 9.5% (11.6% in 2012);
- tertiary or equivalent education completed by those aged 30-34 years: 50% (44% in 2013); and
- an employment rate for those aged 20-64 years: 75% (69.4% in 2012).

With regard to structural funds expenditure the following points are particularly relevant to the skills debate:

- 27% of the structural funds (ERDF, ESF) and 64% of ESF funds are planned for use in supporting Thematic Objective (TO) 08 (Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility) and TO10 (Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning); and
- at the end of 2016, 26% of ESF expenditure was committed to around 7,000 projects.

Due to the distribution of powers between the State and the regions following the reform of decentralisation, the management of ESF 2014-2020 is shared between the State (two-thirds) and the regions (one-third).

With the State being responsible for employment policy and social inclusion policy, the national ESF OP is dedicated to these policies through a strategy based on three main Priority Axis, namely:

1. Support the jobless and inactive towards employment, support professional mobility and develop entrepreneurship,
2. Anticipate changes and secure career paths,
3. Combat poverty and promote social inclusion.

These respond to one of the main challenges facing the National ESF OP – to develop employment and skills initiatives in response to the Country Specific Recommendation: "Increase the participation of adults to life learning, in particular low skilled and unemployed".

In so doing, the three Priority Axis aim to address six specific challenges, notably:

1. contribute to better individualised services offer for job seekers, mainly for people in difficulty, by promoting specific tools and innovative approach,

2. improve support to young people, in particular unemployed, in order to facilitate employment access,
3. develop employment and skills in order to face changes and to contribute to secure career paths,
4. promote active ageing by facilitating the seniors employment,
5. strengthen active inclusion in order to combat poverty,
6. develop social innovative projects.

For the second Priority Axis, within Intervention Priority 8V, two specific objectives are directly connected to NSA and UP with the aim to promote lifelong learning.

1. Specific Objective 3: Train the employees, specifically the most distant from education,
2. Specific Objective 4: train the economic licensees.

At the regional level, the regions being responsible for vocational training, the ESF is mainly focused on Investment Priority 10 iii aiming to propose to the people in difficulty, in particular young and job seekers, skills training connected to the labour market and allowing access to sustainable employment.

5.1.2 Evidence from the field analysis

Coherence, relevance and awareness

At a national level, both employment and vocational training policy are fully in line with the content of the NSA in general and UP in particular. It is with respect to the following strands of the NSA which national policies in France are most aligned to:

1. improving the quality and relevance of skill formation; and
2. improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices

In this regard, the authorities in France are well aware of the content of the NSA and have strongly supported the European Commission in the development of the NSA. Recent reforms of VET in France – the recent law reforming the vocational training – is consistent with the NSA given its emphasis on linking VET to the needs of the labour market.

The French government has set up a new system of skills governance that is based on a process of social dialogue. It is designed to improve provision of training to employees, and to ensure that training for people with a low level of skills – and a low level of access to training - is prioritised.

Those interviewed as part of this project said that the new governance system allows for a better shared understanding between the social partners of both skill needs (the demand side) and the plans that need to be implemented to satisfy those skill needs through more efficient actions than those taken in the past (i.e. improvements to skills supply). National financing supports the actions of the national and regional committees, but the ESF provides additional support to assist in the development of new skills that have emerged as a result of economic and technological change and in assisting people develop secure career paths through the provision of information, advice and guidance.

The above points to France having made substantive changes to its skills system over recent years with an emphasis on increasing access to training, improving provision of careers advice and guidance, and assessing and validating skills acquisition. This was all undertaken prior to the introduction of the NSA and, importantly, was supported by the ESF. This is why interviewees were very much of the opinion that the NSA is in line with both national and regional policy in France, and the actions currently – or those that are planned to be – supported by the ESF. Because all this was set up before the NSA, it

seemed self-evident to interviewees that ESF OPs were well positioned to support NSA actions.

Within the Priority Axis 2 of the National ESF OP, Investment Priority 8v is relevant for the advancement of the NSA and the UP. Four Specific Objectives are directly linked to the strands of the NSA:

1. SO 1 (to improve employment management and skills in supporting actions to anticipate and manage changes);
2. SO 3 (train employees with the least amount of training, in particular, low skilled, women and older people);
3. SO 4 (training the licensed employees who need to acquire new skills due to economic difficulties and changes); and
4. SO 5 (develop employment through skills management especially in areas affected by economic restructuring).

Within SO 3 – that which is most relevant to the NSA and the UP - ESF support aims to build and implement training paths for employees with low skills level. Two kinds of actions are supported: (i) on the one hand actions aimed at combining a training and a vocational project that takes into account the upstream and the downstream phases; for instance the vocational project is concerned with skills assessment and the training element with delivering the skills and validating the acquisition; and (ii) on the other hand individual and collective training actions allowing the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge by being able to adapt training provision so that it better meets the demand of the labour market and allows individuals to develop sustainable careers. This includes actions aimed at developing and strengthening individuals' digital skills. Most of the actions are implemented at regional level by the regional services of the Ministry of Employment, Vocational training and Social Dialogue. An ESF amount is delegated by the MA from the national level to regional services. The interviewees – both MA and its services at regional level and beneficiaries – said that this guaranteed that actions were relevant to the local context. Only a few specific actions, which have national scope, are implemented at central level.

The regional ERDF-ESF OPs, managed by the regional councils, within Investment Priority 10iii, provide support actions promoting skills acquisition, increasing levels of qualification held by individuals, and for securing careers/career paths for unemployed people and other job seekers.

The MAs, the IBs and the beneficiaries interviewed consider, ultimately, that it is OPs within IP 8v and IP 10iii that are fully consistent with the objectives of NSA and UP and, importantly, that relevant actions have already been partly supported by the ESF.

Flexibility

Because the MAs of the ESF OPs consider that their OPs are in line with the goals of the NSA goals and the UP, the ESF already provides support to actions relevant to these initiatives. Accordingly, there is no need for any further alignment or adaptation.

Operationalisation and delivery

At the end of 2016, around 1,000,000 persons had taken part in actions supported by ESF, 800,000 within the ESF National OP, and 200,000 within the ERDF-ESF regional OPs. For most actions, the target groups are: people far from employment; employees with low skills; employees aged over 54 years; women; workers with disabilities; and employees in precarious employment. In more than half of all cases, participants are beneficiaries of social assistance and low skilled people.

Under IP 8v SO 3, in order to improve access to training and to increase skills, it is planned to promote skills assessment and validation of individual skills through the development of individualised training paths that should result in an employment

contract. Actions leading to a diploma and/or training in a profession are strongly supported. Beneficiaries mentioned the high interest shown by vocational training institutions in the integrated approach to skills learning and validation designed to strengthen the employability of individuals, starting with a skills assessment, leading to a learning offer, and then validation of the skills acquired, thereby bringing about more integration between training and the provision of vocational skills. If the aim was only to provide information to raise the awareness of individuals in the need for training, ESF support would not be forthcoming.

Monitoring and evaluation

Interviewees considered the system both useful and efficient in monitoring the implementation of ESF, and the result indicators are relevant to goals of the NSA and the UP even if these initiatives have yet to be adopted.

Expected and actual achievements

The evaluation of the last programming period highlighted the link between access to training - especially skills / employability training and the need to design an overall approach combining vocational and training projects based on three steps: (i) skills assessment; (ii) learning; and (iii) validation. The NSA and the UP are considered by those involved in the ESF's implementation as guidelines to achieve the expected results, with respect to increasing participation lifelong learning over the life-course and improving individuals' employability.

Sustainability and added value

The sustainability of actions that relate to the NSA and the UP are assured because they are fully consistent with national policies, the reform of the vocational education and training (VET) system, the creation of "personal training accounts", the new VET governance structures involving stakeholders, and the need for training plans to be developed at the regional level (to better ensure skills supply meets demand). Interviewees agreed that it is the national budget that provides the all-important support for these actions, but the additional support provided by the ESF is also important as it provides European added value. For this purpose, the Partnership Agreement and the ESF OPs are strongly connected to the national reforms and strategies.

5.1.3 Conclusions and formative lessons

In conclusion, one can point to the authorities for France having a good knowledge of the NSA in general and the UP in particular. This is true for members of the national and regional committees for employment and for those engaged in training and vocational guidance. MAs of the ESF national OP and of the ESF regional OPs are members of these committees which additionally include representatives from enterprises and the social partners. The interviewees mentioned presentations and exchanges taking place in these committees on issues relating the NSA and generally seemed well informed. The General Directorate for Employment and Vocational Training of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is the MA for the ESF national OP, was strongly involved in the determination of the French position regarding how the UP might be addressed. One may also point to the fact that France has supported initiatives such as the UP as they are fully in line with national priorities and recent reforms. The interviewees agreed that the ESF has a role to play in ensuring that the NSA meets its aims in its entirety. That said, they pointed in particular to the first strand of the NSA as being particularly relevant to the ESF: improving the quality and the relevance of skills formation. Moreover, they considered the Upskilling Pathway as something which was fully in line with ESF OPs, for instance within Priority Axis 2 for the national ESF OP.

It seemed easier for interviewees to make reference to the UP when explaining how the ESF might align actions germane to the issue of vocational training and skills upgrading. In this regard, it was worth noting that the ESF had already supported actions relevant

to the NSA and the UP. Interviewees mentioned being ready to further increase such support over the next few years. They seemed to consider NSA as a comprehensive and strategic approach to tackling skill issues in France. But if the resources of the ESF are to be fully marshalled in support of the NSA, then the actions which are to be initiated under the NSA need to be more fully specified in various documents (e.g. communication, recommendation, guidelines, etc.) with more thought as to how they might be operationalised and targeted so that those managing the ESF can more readily see what needs to be supported and whether it is in scope of the ESF at the national or regional levels.

5.2 Italy

5.2.1 Policy Context

In Italy, the indicators depict a country lagging in comparison to the European average:

- The participation in education and training of people aged 25-64 increased from 6.2% in 2007 to 7.9% in 2014.[27] The country ranks 14th in the EU and is still below both the EU (10.8%) and Eurozone (11.1%) averages.
- Regarding the share of population with either less than primary or primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0-2) Italy ranks fourth[28] with 40.1%. This figure is above both the EU (23.5%) and Eurozone (27%) averages. Italy has stayed in the same position since 2006, but has improved by 8.6 percentage points (p.p.) since then. Concerning the share of the population with either upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3-4) Italy ranks 18th with 42.3%. This figure is slightly below both the EU (46.5%) and Eurozone (43.9%) averages, but it does represent an increase in comparison to the 38.4% rate registered in 2006.
- As for early school leavers (education and training), the figure in 2016 was 14.1%; despite being the fourth highest in the EU and considerably above the EU-28 average (10.8%), the rate has been in decline since 1992 when it stood at 37.5%. Furthermore, this rate means the EU2020 national target, which was set at 16%, has already been reached.[29]
- The quality of skills provision remains a challenge for the Italian system, given that the percentage of adults (16-65 years old) scoring at or below level 1 in literacy in the Survey of Adult Skills is 27.7%, compared with 19.9% at EU-level, and in numeracy the results are 31.7% and 23.6% respectively. Finally, the percentage of individuals without basic digital skills in Italy is 57% of the population aged 16-74, 26 p.p. above the EU average.[30]

Accordingly, a number of policy actions have been undertaken by the Italian government to improve the skills situation, most notably the following.
- The National Plan for Digital Schools (dating October 2015) which earmarked EUR 400 million (of an overall EUR 1.1 billion budget) for the so called 21st century skills, including digital skills.[31]
- New forms of vocational learning through school/work alternation and apprenticeships, now also involving high schools, thanks to training centres identified by the Governmental Agency Italia Lavoro.[32]

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[27] European Commission, Summary of the Partnership Agreement for Italy, 2014-2020, 2014. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/partnership-agreement-italy-summary-oct2014_en.pdf
[28] Italy trails only Malta (56.5%), Portugal, and Spain in this ranking (latest data: 2015).
[29] Source: Eurostat.[30] Source: OECD.
[30] Source: OECD.
[31] MIUR (2015), Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale. Available at: http://www.istruzione.it/scuola_digitale/allegati/Materiali/pnsd-layout-30.10-WEB.pdf

- The 2015-2020 National Research Plan, with an overall budget of EUR 9.4 billion. Among the six pillars, the one targeting improvements in human capital has the lion's share (42%, i.e. EUR 3.9 billion).[33]

Moreover, while Italy remains a relatively centralised country when it comes to labour market policies, regional governments have seen their role in devising training policies substantially increase since the beginning of the year 2000, also thanks to the financial contribution of the ESF in three main fields:

1. enhance vocational training at all educational levels with a focus on: unemployed people, disadvantaged groups, laid-off workers and workers with retraining needs. The most relevant VET courses are provided by the Istituti di Formazione Tecnica Superiore (IFTS), established in 1999;
2. smooth school-to-work transition. Three types of apprenticeship schemes are available in Italy, and two of them (Professional training apprenticeships and apprenticeship contract for advanced training and research), target adults below 29 years of age;[34] and
3. develop lifelong learning opportunities targeted primarily at employees. Specific budget lines are available for employees above 45 years old and for laid-off employees.[35]

Narrowing down the scope to UP, since the end of 2014 adult education has been provided at provincial level mostly through the CPIA (Provincial centres for adult education, previously CPT – permanent territorial centres), a network of educational institutions funded by the Ministry of Education aiming at the provision of basic literacy skills and technical/professional ones.[36] These took over the previous Permanent Territorial Centres (centri territoriali per l'impiego, CPT), with a renovated approach to adult learning and further responsibilities.[37]

This is the background against which 2014 CSR N°.6 should be interpreted and that informed part of the 2014-2020 ESF programming, stating that Italy should "Implement the National System for Evaluation of Schools to improve school outcomes in turn and reduce rates of early school leaving. Increase the use of work based learning in upper secondary vocational education and training and strengthen vocationally-oriented tertiary education. Create a national register of qualifications to ensure wide recognition of skills. Ensure that public funding better rewards the quality of higher education and research."[38] As it can be seen from the text, at the time adults were not the focus of the CSR.

This recommendation also echoes that of the Partnership agreement that focuses, amongst other priorities, on "Increasing labour market participation, promoting social inclusion and improving the quality of human capital in particular by increasing access to employment of the most vulnerable groups in society (young, women, older workers,

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[32] Law 13 July 2015, n. 107, Riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti, available at: http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/07/15/15G00122/sg

[33] MIUR (2016), Programma nazionale per la Ricerca 2015-2020. Available at: http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2016/PNR_2015-2020.pdf

[34] Leg. Decr. 81, 15 June 2015, available at: http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/06/24/15G00095/sg

[35] S. Destefanis (2012), Skills for Competitiveness: Country Report for Italy. OECD.

[36] V. Gallina, "Educazione in età adulta: una opportunità e una scommessa per il sistema educativo italiano". Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/educazione_in_eta_adulta_articolo_vgallina-epale.pdf

[37] Amongst other, CPIAs have autonomy as schools and lie at the centre of educational networks that are appointed with capturing the educational needs of their respective areas.

[38] Full text available at: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2014/csr2014_italy_en.pdf .

migrants and people at risk of social exclusion and poverty), improving the quality of education and training and modernising and strengthening labour market institutions".

Concerning the Italian response to the New Skills Agenda and Upskilling Pathways recommendation, these two initiatives are fully aligned with the path traced by CSR 2014 N°· 6 mentioned above, and further expand its aims to cover also the adult population.

Cohesion policy support plays a key role in this respect, given that Italy's ESIF allocation for 2014-2020 includes EUR 4.3 billion for promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility, and EUR 4.2 billion for investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning.[39]

5.2.2 Evidence from field analysis

Introduction

This section is based on the evidence gathered through 11 interviews covering three categories of stakeholders identified for this study, namely: managing authorities (both at regional and national levels) and intermediate bodies, agencies in charge of skills developments and line ministries, and beneficiaries.

As for the first group, the research team interviewed representatives of two ministries and five regions. The former were representatives of the Italian ministries of Education (MIUR, acronym for Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca) and Employment and Social Policies (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali). The representatives from regions covered: Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria (more developed regions), Campania and Puglia (less developed regions). The research team also consulted with a representative if INAPP (formerly ISFOL), the Italian public research centre on vocational training, social policies, and employment. Finally, three interviews were carried out with (potential) ESF beneficiaries and included: the representative from a Public Employment Centre, the Manager of a regional program on digital basic skills for adults and the Director of an adult education centre.

To provide some context for the Italian case, it is important to have in mind that ESF budget lines are used in Italy by both PONs (Italian acronym for the National Operation Programmes) and PORs (Regional Operational Programme). The former are managed by the national Government through its ministries and cover all Italian regions, while the latter by the Regional governments.

Italian PORs have a rather standardised structure, derived from a strong strategic programming effort carried out at the national level, and worked on in close contact with relevant local stakeholders. In general, they tend to focus more on the "employment" aspect of skills support. All regional OPs have one Priority Axis for each of the 4 ESF TOs.

As for the two most relevant national Operation Programmes: PON Education backs the regional programmes as a complementary instrument to the regional plans in supporting skills support by focusing on the education aspect, i.e. enhancing the education level and competences for the labour market of students, and focusing on preventing early school-leaving and adult education. The National Program on Active Labour Market Policies (PON SPAO), managed by the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs who are also the chef de file of ESF in Italy, carries out systemic actions for the Italian labour market and offers specific support to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Italy. Through the interviews, none of the OPs analysed in depth or specifically focused on adult education per se, while this objective is taken up the National OP on Education.

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[39] European Commission, Summary of the Partnership Agreement for Italy, 2014-2020, 2014.

Coherence, relevance and awareness

The Italian MAs and stakeholders interviewed confirmed the findings of the desk research, i.e. that there is a broad alignment between the ESF and the NSA in terms of strategies and actions. This is particularly the case for the following NSA actions.

- **Interventions aimed at improving basic skills for adults**. Adult education is a specific priority of the National OP in Education, for which a specific call has been recently published; furthermore, although low skilled adults are not a priority target, some relevant actions are also foreseen by the regional OPs within their broader aims of enhancing labour market opportunities of those furthest from the labour market, including unemployed adults.
- **Interventions aimed at improving the labour market relevance of vocational skills and qualifications**, especially with regard to promoting internships and apprenticeships for VET learners (covered by all regional OPs interviewed).
- **Initiatives aimed at supporting the revision of the European Qualification Framework**. This is an action with a strong systemic component and is particularly in line with the actions foreseen by the NOP on ALMPs – however several regional MAs are working on improving and fine-tuning their local systems which in the end should further strengthen the drive towards a unified framework.

The awareness of the New Skills Agenda among Managing Authorities is mostly circumscribed to the key elements of the overall strategy; furthermore knowledge about the UP goals and three-step approach seems to be somewhat weaker.

A presentation of the NSA was held at the annual review meeting in Ostuni in November 2016 between Italian MAs and the European Commission[40]. This event has contributed to raising the awareness on the NSA and has played an important role in disseminating information on the agenda to MAs and spurring dialogue among them on its contents and how the ESF could possibly support it. However, no specific evidence of follow up to this presentation has been gathered during our field research. **At the same time, MAs showed in general a high interest in NSA, and are in principle open to promote a better alignment between OPs and the NSA, although a need for further guidance on how to better integrate the new objectives within the ESF actions and support the NSA and UP has been expressed** (more on this in the section on flexibility). On average, regional OPs are more focused towards policies supporting employment (including activities on human capital). The national OP on education includes among its objectives those recommended by the above mentioned CSR 2014 N°. 6 (namely: improve school outcomes, reduce early school leaving, increase work based learning in upper secondary and tertiary VET).

In more detail, below, a list is provided of the most NSA relevant interventions funded by the Italian OPs as they have been identified during the field research:

- Umbria is finalising its regional system of qualification to guarantee a high level of acknowledgement of certifications and skills;
- Emilia Romagna is developing paths for the development of new skills for adults, especially through the regional VET system;
- Puglia carries out skills assessment and provides adults with a training endowment for trainings included in the regional catalogue;
- the implementation of a regional digital strategy in Umbria and Emilia Romagna. This may be relevant for the development of a National Plan for Digital Schools, responding to relevant NSA action (number 4);

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[40] http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/Notizie_e_documenti/eventi/2016/novembre/Documento_0002 .

- the implementation in the Umbria and Puglia regions of projects tackling the "brain drain". The Umbrian project is actively working to improve pupils key competences, as well as working to ensure higher and more relevant level of skills across the board (again with a broader target group in comparison with NSA and UP); in Puglia during the past programming, a successful initiative was implemented supporting students undertaking tertiary education abroad (through bursaries) and encouraging them to return upon completion of their specialisation pathway;
- the introduction, in Campania region, of a skills assessment tool within Piano Lavoro (Employment Plan). The programming document seems more ambitious and adheres more to the NSA and UP in comparison to its current implementation status, according to the feedback received by the interviewer;
- PON SPAO[41] co-funds the Excelsior survey, since 1997 it has been one of the main sources of information on labour market forecasting in Italy and steers VET and ALMPs; also, within the framework of the PIAAC survey it funds a large initiative to carry out the analysis and evaluation of adult skills; and
- at national level, PON Education recently launched a call on adult education, foreseeing as recipients the newly created local centres for the education of adults and secondary education providers dealing with adult education (see in the next paragraph under "operationalisation and delivery" a focus on "Adult Education call from the Italian Ministry of Education"), including skills assessment, flexible learning modules and certifications for adults with low level of basic skills."

It is important to mention that both actions were already planned before the NSA.

Table 5.1below gives an overview of the Italian MAs interviewed, highlighting the ones carrying actions broadly tackling the three strands of the NSA. In general, comparing the activities realised by the stakeholders interviewed, it appears that they are in line with the NSA, especially with Strand One. On Strand Two and Three, some activities have been carried out which are indirectly relevant or are in line with the general objectives of NSA and UP. A good example here are all the actions being implemented concerning the revision of the qualification framework, which will be available for revision by the EQF, proposed by the European Commission through NSA action five.

Table 5.1 - List of Italian OPs, among those interviewed, carrying out actions relevant for the 3 strands of the NSA

OP name	Strand 1 - Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation	Strand 2 - Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable	Strand 3 - Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices
POR Umbria ESF	X	X	X
POR E-R ESF	X	X	
POR Liguria ESF	X	X	X
POR Puglia ESF	X	X	
POR Campania ESF	X	X	
PON Education	X		

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[41] For context, PON SPAO earmarked 4.95% of its total budget to specific objectives 10.i, 10.iii, and 10.iv aggregated the closer ones to NSA agenda as seen in table 1.

OP name	Strand 1 - Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation	Strand 2 - Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable	Strand 3 - Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices
PON SPAO	X		X

It is also relevant to mention that are activities matching the strategy set out by NSA and UP, but are financed with not-ESF European budget lines. Among them there is P.R.A.L.I.N.E. (Peer Review in Adult Learning to Improve formal end Non-formal Education), an Erasmus+ project of the Umbria region. The project aimed at training experts in adult teaching and introducing them to a new ad hoc created methodology, and pilot peer-reviews. On basis of this, they then adjusted the methodology via an incremental approach. It is therefore particularly aligned with NSA strand 1 of actions.

It is important to keep in mind that in this case the close alignment with the two European Initiatives is more related to their long-term regional strategy. For instance, Umbria built on a series of regional initiatives on skills certification starting in 2007 and continuing throughout the years. In more detail, the NSA objective of making skills more visible and relevant incorporates the existence of national and regional strategic policies for lifelong learning as foreseen by Article 165 TFEU, especially in relation to the 2014-2020 ESI funds. The Umbrian region adopted the framework on skills organisation, its management, skills monitoring, skills evaluation and validation and skills validation with regional decree n.834 in July 2016, abiding with previous national laws.[42] Moreover, the regional integrated system of skills certification is in line with previous legislation, made at regional level.[43]

The field research confirms that the most relevant Investment Priorities for the NSA fall within TO10 (10.i, 10.iii, and 10.iv). IP 10.iii in particular (i.e. "Strengthening the equality of access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, informal and non-formal contexts updating knowledge, skills and competences of the manpower and promote flexible learning paths also through VET mentoring and validation of acquired competences") is most in line with the UP objectives and is the only one taken into account by the Ministry of Education call on activities on adult education (see box "Adult Education call from the Italian Ministry of Education"). It should, however, be noted that several NSA-relevant actions are funded through other Thematic Objectives, namely number eight and number nine (this is the case of Umbria among the regional MA interviewed).

Flexibility

During the interviews a general openness emerged from the MAs about the scope to fine tune or adjust activities foreseen by the OPs, or even to plan new pilot actions, so as to promote a better alignment of the ESF with the NSA. MAs are convinced that within the OPs there exists enough flexibility/room of manoeuvre to this end – also in the light of the broad alignment between the ESF and NSA - without resorting to (cumbersome) renegotiations.

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[42] Legislative decree of 16 January 2013 n. 13 (Definizione delle norme generali e dei livelli essenziali delle prestazioni per l'individuazione e validazione degli apprendimenti non formali e informali e degli standard minimi di servizio del sistema nazionale di certificazione delle competenze) and ministerial decree of 30 June 2015 (Definizione di un quadro operativo per il riconoscimento a livello nazionale delle qualificazioni regionali e delle relative competenze, nell'ambito del Repertorio nazionale dei titoli di istruzione e formazione e delle qualificazioni professionali).

[43] Regional legislative decree number 51 of 18 January 2010 "Direttiva sul sistema regionale degli standard professionali, formativi, di certificazione e di attestazione", Regional legislative decree number 1429 of 3 September 2007 "Direttiva Crediti", and Regional legislative decree number 181 of 25 February 2008 "Prime misure di attuazione della Direttiva regionale di riconoscimento dei crediti formativi nella formazione professionale".

In this regard, a general request has been expressed by the MAs for receiving clearer guidance from the national and/or EU level as to how the ESF could be re-oriented to better support the NSA. This guidance is generally perceived to be missing. For the time being, however, no MA has devised a strategy to this end, either by planning activities which were not initially programmed or by fine tuning already existing/programmed ones.

Therefore, there is still room for alignment, on top of a general willingness to collaborate. Some of the interviewees clearly declared their willingness to take up initiatives and are open to introduce innovative measures and pilot actions to test activities relevant for the NSA and the UP.

In general, the MAs stressed that the OPs incorporate a sufficient degree of flexibility to adapt to the objectives and actions of the NSA. The skills and job fair "Costruiamoci il futuro",[44] organised by Liguria region in November 2016 is a small but fitting example of how current ESF activities can be easily adapted to the needs of the NSA. The fair contributed to the dissemination of information, raising awareness in the skills field, contextualised with respect to different occupational groups. In other words there is a margin of flexibility within the broader actions that have already been identified within the OPs.

What is lacking, perhaps, is a clear direction to follow, guidance, and also targets to achieve. Several MAs mention as a best practice in this respect the coordination and synergy that was achieved with the Youth Guarantee. **The guidance needs to be operationalised, otherwise there is a risk that NSA and UP remain "on paper" and do not translate in concrete actions on the ground.**

The perception of the research team is that the level of implementation of the Italian OPs is somewhat hampering a more thorough analysis of the actual contribution of the ESF to NSA as most OPs have just entered their full implementation phase. Delays were caused by late approval and by the administrative hurdles linked with the start of the new programming as the previous one was about to close (end of March 2017). More time is needed to assess the whether the OPs will adjust to the NSA and the relative easiness or difficulty in doing so. On the basis of what has been observed so far, radical changes are not on the agenda, while adjustments and testing of innovative approaches linked to the NSA are more likely to materialise.

Operationalisation and delivery

This section will examine whether and how the ESF is directly or indirectly contributing to the objectives of one specific action of the NSA in the Italy, namely the Upskilling Pathways, i.e. whether the OPs are providing low skilled adults with learning opportunities through: i)skills assessments, ii)personalised learning and iii)validation of skills as indicated in the relevant Council Recommendation.

Although none of the OPs analysed are implementing or planning to implement interventions that are fully compliant with the UP Recommendation there are several actions, both on going or planned, that show important synergies.

As a general principle, it should be said that all OPs, especially under TO8 and TO9 implement some sort of skills development actions for adults by providing support to workers affected by company crises, to long term unemployed people or other disadvantaged groups such as migrants or older workers in terms of training/apprenticeship opportunities leading to a qualification, or some sort of validation

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[44] The fair was organised by Regione Liguria with a EUR 0.5 M budget. Its aim was to raise awareness on the benefits of upskilling, making available information on existing guidance, as well as providing guidance and mentoring services. For further information visit the page: http://www.costruiamocilfuturo.eu/ .

of the competences acquired. Yet, these measures differ in several aspects from what foreseen by the UP because they:

- are not specifically targeted at low skilled adults;
- are focused on helping recipients to (re)enter the labour market, rather than helping them to achieve a basic education and qualification level; and
- seldom foresee a three-step approach while focusing on specific milestones.

Still, some actions showed some interesting synergies with the UP. These are illustrated in the following paragraphs.

The PES adult package – ESF OP Umbria

In Umbria, the ESF OP is funding, through the regional PES network, a measure targeting unemployed adults (so called "*pacchetto adulti*") and envisaging a two-step pathway. The financial allocation is earmarked for three categories of recipients: (i) above 30 years old; (ii) above 40 years old; and (iii) at risk of social exclusion.

1. Following a registration on the PES portal, the individual undergoes a first assessment which leads to the registration of a so-called service pact. This is followed by a second meeting (in-depth counselling: one to two hours in line with the mentoring mentioned in recommendation 13 of the UP)[45]) at the end of which the individual is presented with either or both of the following options: i) training endowment i.e. a voucher that the individual can spend with any accredited training organisation, within a predefined range of sectors/thematic fields according to her/his inclinations/competences, and choosing from the regional training register(which results in a validation through a qualification); ii) a traineeship opportunity among a predefined selection leading to a certification of acquired competences. The endowment is paid to the beneficiary in two instalments: the first upon leaving the training or traineeship; the second upon entering employment.

2. The measure additionally foresees a hiring incentive for the employer in the form of a tax rebate.

Outreach measures foreseen rely on: notices published on the website, social media, and standard information provided to PES registered individuals. The measure was launched in September 2016 (i.e. before the launch of UP) and also includes a "youth package" targeting young people under Youth Guarantee.

Adult education measure – ESF National OP for Education

The OP of the Ministry of Education has recently launched an open call on adult education (see box "Adult Education call from the Italian Ministry of Education"), aimed at raising the skills level of adults registered with the recently opened provincial centres for adult education (CPIA). The CPIAs deliver first-level programmes leading to qualifications and certifications of basic skills.

The call aims at reducing adults learning deficit through the provision of training and the completion of degrees. The call foresees the adoption of tools for skills certification and also targets adult migrants (who were roughly the 50% of the people attending the classes offered by CTP, the centres that have been replaced by CPIA). The OP foresees the adoption of tools for the certification of non-formal and informal competences, in line with recommendation nine of the UP. As the call is still open no information on the types of interventions funded is available, nor on outputs and results. It will, however, be interesting to monitor its development and contribution to the consolidation of the UP. As

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[45] "Provide guidance and/or mentoring services to support learners' progression through all steps of the upskilling process.". Full text at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001

confirmed by an interview with a "potential beneficiary", in fact, the call is likely to fund innovative actions, complementing the standard activities of the CPIA funded through national funds of the Ministry of education.

Training for basic digital skills

Another interesting initiative is the "Pane e internet" (literally bread and internet) measure funded by Emilia Romagna, aiming at the providing basic training in digital skills and targeting mainly people between 45 and 75 years old. The project was launched in 2009 and is financed through national budget lines, though the possibility of receiving funding under the regional ESF OP is currently being considered.

Against this background, there are a number of formative lessons that can be drawn to date by Italian MAs about the delivering actions that can be put to good use in the near future to properly face the challenges ahead:

1) interactions with local social partners is key in order to shape the training classes and the qualification framework according to the needs highlighted by the local context;
2) the training of the trainers is pivotal to provide VET and training of high quality to the people enrolled. Taking stock of the experience gathered in other project (e.g. Youth Guarantee) can speed up the process;
3) the aim should be to provide a flexible formative offer in order to help people who have abandoned formal education to reach basic skills (ideally up to EQF 4). Also the validation methods should be flexible enough, taking into consideration informal and non-formal training.

Monitoring and evaluation

No NSA specific M&E tools have been detected and, for ESF OPs, this relies on the standard ESF tools. In Italy several databases are present on the territory and they do not always interact among each other, although important efforts are been undertaken at the central level in order to tackle this problem. The Employment Ministry aims at having a unique source of information instead of the several regional systems, based on the immediate registration of every pupil to track his training.

Puglia is developing a new system, called SINTESI, for tracking directly the people attending the training at provincial level so to have them directly on a common database and be able to follow their careers. Umbria has its administrative placement, in use since 2009).

A key database with potential is the so called Compulsory Communications administrative dataset, registering all contractual changes at the provincial level since 2008. This database offers the possibility to track individual career pathways with precision and through the unique identification code of each individual it provides the possibility to link this to ESF and other administrative databases.

Expected and actual achievements

In general, following the policies implemented in relation with TO 8, 9, and 10 and ESF actions most aligned with NSA and UP, an improved matching between labour market supply and offer is expected (linked with work strand 1 of NSA), as well as an improved system of validation and certification of skills (especially for low skilled adults and migrants, complying with work strands 2 and 3). The actions carried out within the investment priorities 10.i, 10.iii, and 10.iv are likely to produce outcomes in line with the NSA, given that they are the ones most aligned with it. From this point of view, some have already good results. Emilia Romagna above all has a regional validation that covers EQF levels from 3 to 7. The validation of skills includes not only formal education and training, but also informal and non-formal training. As for the UP, among the 25 recommendations included in the Council recommendations, the ones best fitting with

the activities undertaken in Italy are 1-2-3-6-8-9-11. Overall, the system has still margin for improvements, and it aims at reaching greater flexibility also thanks to ESF role.

5.2.3 Conclusions and formative lessons

The Italian skills landscape has revealed positive achievements over the last decade. Yet, the indicators depict a country situation which still lags behind the European average on several aspects. The Italian MAs and stakeholders interviewed confirmed the findings of the desk research, i.e. that there is a broad alignment between the ESF and the NSA in terms of strategies and actions. This is particularly the case for the following NSA actions:

1. interventions aimed at improving basic skills for adults;
2. interventions aimed at improving the labour market relevance of vocational skills and qualifications, especially with regards to promoting internships and apprenticeships for VET learners; and
3. initiatives aimed at supporting the revision of the European Qualification Framework.

A general request has been expressed by the MAs of receiving a clearer guidance from the national and/or EU level as to how the ESF could be re-oriented to better support the NSA. This guidance is generally perceived to be missing.

For the time being, however, no MA has devised a strategy to this end, either by planning activities which were not initially programmed or by fine tuning already existing/programmed ones. Although none of the OPs analysed are implementing or planning to implement interventions that are fully compliant with the UP Recommendation there are several actions, both on going or planned, that show important synergies.

As a general principle, it should be said that all OPs, especially under TO8 and TO9 implement some sort of skills development actions for adults by providing support to workers affected by company crises, to long term unemployed or other disadvantaged groups such as migrants or older workers in terms of training/apprenticeship opportunities leading to a qualification or at some sort of validation of the competences acquired.

Still, some actions showed some interesting synergies with the UP were detected, such as the PES measure targeted at unemployed adults and offering them a two-step pathway to employment, implemented in the Umbria region, and the Adult education measure launched by the National OP for Education.

5.3 Romania

5.3.1 Policy Context

Romania is faced with important labour market challenges rooted in diverse phenomena connected to poverty, quality of education and past public policies. The last Romanian census, in 2011, revealed that only 14.4% of the Romanian population had attained a higher educational level, 41.4% a medium one, and 47.2% a lower one. Early school leaving has been a permanent problem over the last decade - particularly for marginalised categories such as those living in rural and poor areas and amongst Roma people. Between 2008 and 2010 it rose from 15.9% to 18.4%. In the case of digital skills and ICT use, in 2012 85% of the population had not used a computer over the last three months.

Recent statistics show a slight improvement regarding the population with at least upper secondary educational attainment. Among those aged 25-64 years, the percentage with at least upper secondary education increased from 75% in 2015 to 76.5% in 2016 and is

now close to the EU-28 average (76.9%). The percentage of early leavers from education and training remained in 2016 at approximately the same level (18.5%) as in 2014, after a slight increase in 2015, but it is way above the EU-28 average (10.8% in 2016). Regarding literacy, in 2012 37.2% of pupils were at level 1 or below of the PISA combined reading literacy scale (much higher than the EU-average of approximately 20%). 2015 data show a certain progress, but Romania remains behind the OECD average (the mean score of 434, one of the lowest, compares with that of the OECD mean of 493). Improvements of 6 and 10 points, respectively, were registered in 2015 compared with 2012 regarding mathematics and science skills. Computer use remains low, although the number of persons aged 16-74 years who used a computer daily in the last three months slightly increased to more than 66% (for both men and women). The participation rate in education and training (over the last 4 weeks for those aged 18-64 years) has deteriorated over recent years and is far below the EU28 average (6.6% in Romania, versus 16.6% in the EU). The trend is similar for both men and women. The situation is better in terms of persons attaining upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3 and 4) – after a slight deterioration in 2014 and 2015 – the situation picked up again in 2016 (56.6%). Every year since 2012, Romania has performed well above the European average (EU-28 – 46.3%) for those with this level of educational attainment.

Another challenge for Romania is related to vocational education and training (VET) which is insufficiently developed (after being partially dismantled in 2009) and adapted to the demands of the labour market. Participation in VET programmes is low (1.5% in 2014, after a slight increase to 1.8% in 2013 - much lower than the EU average). The non-completion rate in VET is also much higher compared to the academic pathway (i.e. 7.9% in VET compared with 2.8% in the general/academic pathway in secondary education).

In this context, both of the 2014-2020 ESF-financed Operational Programmes in Romania (Human Capital and Administrative Capacity) targeted skills-related measures under different Investment Priorities. While the Operational Programme on Administrative Capacity (OPAC) focuses on strengthening the capacity of relevant institutions to, e.g. set up and implement adequate public policies, the Operational Programme on Human Capital (OPHC),[46] in coherence with the provisions of the Partnership Agreement, plans a series of interventions closely in line with most of the 10 priorities of actions set up by the NAS. As presented in detail in section 2.3, particularly PAx 3 "Jobs for all" and 6 "Education and skills" of OPHC target skills improvement. In both cases development of basic skills for low skilled adults is either provided for specific groups (narrowed down to some specific target groups, e.g. low skilled adults from rural areas) or embedded in the logic of the interventions. Upskilling is seen as a policy priority from an active labour market policy perspective, but the linkage between the education system and skills acquisition is permanently put forward and taken into account. Where ALMPs are planned, these follow the UP's three-step approach as the core odes of OPHC is "integrated, customised" packages based on skills analysis and the recommendation of solutions tailored for each individual, as these have proved to be the most effective in the past. A high degree of attention is given to digital skills, as well as to validation of non-formal and informal learning, quality of university education and support to teachers, in line with the NSA.

The OPHC strategy and planned interventions are grounded in different National Strategies (National Employment Strategy 2014-2020, National Strategy on Early School Leaving 2015-2020, National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015-2020, National VET Strategy 2016-2020, National LLL Strategy 2016-2020). Some of them represented ex-

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[46] With a total budget of approximately 5 billion €. The budget is allocated relatively even between to Employment Promotion (TO8), Social Inclusion (TO9) and Education (TO10).

ante conditionalities and were drafted in parallel with the OPs as such and adopted after the OP was approved, which posed some challenges to the programming process.

Further details on actions to be undertaken under the different areas should be available in Applicant Guides publicised for the open call; however, little progress has been recorded in this area. Immediate action is needed as the 2017 CSR under the European Semester shows the situation has not much improved compared with previous years: difficulties with recruiting and retaining higher-skilled employees in fast-growing sectors persist and are a challenge to growth. Additionally, the provision of quality education is uneven and undermines the human capital potential, while a high share of students do not possess an adequate level of basic skills (not addressed by OPHC), the share of early school leavers continues to be on the rise (19.1% in 2015, the third highest in Europe) and participation in lifelong learning continues to be one of the lowest in the EU, due to limited cooperation between the ministries and institutions carrying out educational activities for adults and despite the national strategy and ESF funds being in place/available.

5.3.2 Evidence from field analysis

Coherence, relevance and awareness

At this moment, in Romania, the ESF is considered to be a relevant instrument for providing support to the actions included in the NSA. As key stakeholders from the country have pointed out, the three main pillars of the NSA are included in Romania's national strategies targeting employment and skills development, specifically in the Partnership Agreement modified in 2016 and implicitly, through financed actions, in the OPHC. The NSA is perceived as an additional strategic document which brings a new layer of priorities and actions to be taken into consideration while the implementation process is unfolding. As such, the NSA is not mentioned in the OPHC as a distinct initiative, as the OP was approved in 2014, and because of this awareness among stakeholders less involved in the programming process and which await implementation (Interim Bodies, beneficiaries) seems to be rather low. Stakeholders such as the MA know more about the NSA in-depth and think that the ESF can contribute greatly to its implementation. Skills development and upskilling opportunities for low-skilled adults are considered important elements of the OP as both register significant effects in terms of employment.

In particular, the Romanian OPHC for the ESF implementation in the period 2014-2020 addresses identified challenges in three main areas: employment, social inclusion, and education.

Regarding employment, the needs analysis underpinning the programme identifies challenges addressed by the NSA such as low level of ITC use, low participation in VET programmes of employees (or employees to be), inadequate qualification of the labour force, and a poor system to forecast labour/skill demand. Although private enterprises invest in labour force training, such actions are still considered insufficient. The OPHC's strategic answer to this challenge is the support given to private enterprises to enhance employees skills (under PA 3). Enterprises in competitive economic sectors in Romania as identified in the National Competitiveness Strategy 2014-2020 and the National R&D&I Strategy 20014-2020 are eligible under the OPHC. These enterprises are found, for example, in the following sectors: automotive, ICT, food and beverages, health and pharmaceuticals, tourism and eco-tourism, textiles/leather, wood and furniture, creative industries, energy and environmental management, bio-economy, space and security. With the exception of maritime technology and, partially, defence, the OPHC is in line with the 9th NSA priority of action (Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills).

Digital literacy and the need to increase it are explicitly mentioned by the needs analysis of social inclusion matters in the OPHC while, at least at this stage, targeting skills is implicitly part of efforts to be undertaken to lift persons out of poverty though

employment. Strengthening social economy, targeted by the programme, might play an important role in this context.

As an intermediate conclusion at this level it is noteworthy that most priorities of actions are embedded in the OPHC needs analysis, except N°·6. Early profiling of migrants' skills and qualifications" and "brain drain". The latter has apparently changed since the programme was approved, as the 2017 CSR notes that "Measures to encourage the return of Romanians from the diaspora were launched with EU funding support."

The OPHC needs analysis is based on and coherent with four major strategies in the area of employment and education: National Employment Strategy 2014-2020, National Strategy on Early School Leaving 2015-2020, National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015-2020, and the National VET Strategy 2016-2020. Also relevant is the National LLL Strategy 2016-2020, not in place when the OPHC was developed. Strategic Action N°·5 of this strategy envisages to support 45,000 adult early school leavers with a low qualification level to acquire basic and horizontal skills (to be financed under OPHC PAx 6) and signals the challenges faced in the process of non-formal and informal learning validation, i.e. insufficient capacity to measure this type of learning (no specific action to counter this challenge was identified in the OPHC).

Overall, awareness of the 10 NSA actions and of the way the ESF can support them varies among different stakeholders: with some exceptions, all interviewed parties were aware of the existence of the NSA, and even on the overall coherence between the OP and its provisions, but only stakeholders closely involved in the programming process or in employment related matter knew details.

Flexibility

The key stakeholders interviewed consider that the OPHC is well aligned with the NSA and the "Upskilling Pathways" and its three-step approach. Moreover, as implementation of the planned interventions has not started, it is difficult to point out particular points for improvement which could be taken up through OP modification. The OPHC interventions are formulated so as to allow some particularisation and additional details to be inserted in the Applicant Guides but this will not set aside the need for flexibility. As experienced in the previous programming period, implementation will prove that changes are needed in the logic of the intervention and/or implementation of the programme and a degree of flexibility is welcome. As experienced in the past, modifying OPs, although possible, is a cumbersome process which takes time, when MA are already experiencing delays in contracting and overall advancement with existing programme implementation.

Operationalisation and delivery

In the third area of "Education and skills" that is addressed by the OPHC, attention is focused on matters of access, participation in all types of education including early school leaving, but also on matters of quality of educations systems which have a direct impact on level of skills and their relevance to the labour market demands. The matter of skills is covered more in-depth under VET-related analysis. In this area, Romania is struggling with reduced capacity of the education system, including the VET system to supply the labour market with an adequately skilled workforce, while demand for labour cannot always be well formulated in the absence of an improved skills and qualifications framework.

In this area, the OPHC targets an increased use of ICT and aims to build a system to better evaluate skills and the extent to which different education levels (tertiary, VET) lead to skills gains (coherent with PAx NAS 10). The OPHC emphasises the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the context of VET, and it stresses the importance of strengthening the capacity of education and training institutions to develop and deliver programmes relevant for the labour market, including on basic, horizontal, and ICT skills improvement. Among measures envisaged under PA 6 of OPHC different interventions on

improving tertiary education and supporting teachers are also planned. The PAx 3 "Jobs for all", 4 "Social inclusion and combating poverty" and 6 "Education and Skills" tackle the issue of skills in general and/or of basic skills for low skilled adults in the respective needs analysis, while this issue is not included in the needs analysis of PAx 1 Initiative "Jobs for Youth" and 2 "Improving the situation of NEETs category", which focus on young people not in education, employment or training (young NEETs).

Under PAx 3, SO 3.12 specifically aims to improve the level of knowledge, competencies and skills of employees in priority economic sectors as identified in National Competitiveness and R&D strategies. The programme refers to levels 2-4 in the national (and European EQF) thus it covers "basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study" but it does not cover level 1 "Basic general knowledge". Although the programme description does not specifically refer to "validation of non-formal and informal learning", the related result indicator refers to persons entering and finalising this process, as per IP 10iii, thus most probable such actions are envisaged, too.

Under IP 8i, SOs 3.1, 3.2 and 3.2 aim to increase employment among unemployed and inactive persons, particularly long-term unemployed, older employees (55-64), disabled persons, persons with a low educational level (3.1), Roma (3.2) and persons from rural areas (3.3). More importantly, under the same IP, SOs 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6 focus on improving the skills and competences level of the same target groups, through evaluation and validation of non-formal and informal learning/competencies acquired in such settings.

Under PA 4, IP 9ii, SO 4.1 and 4.2 aim to decrease the number of persons facing the risk of social exclusion, in vulnerable Roma and non-Roma communities through integrated projects targeting training with a view to employment but also through the return to school of early school leavers. The programme is not very precise as regards these two types of measures as part of the "integrated package" but the applicant guides add measures such as "second chance", "school after school" programmes (from an educational perspective), apprenticeships, internships, information and counselling, skills assessment and recommendations on tailored training, implementation of tailored training, labour market placements (from a labour market perspective). The two perspectives are interrelated as persons not graduating from primary school (ISCED 1 level) may not enter training programmes. No specific actions for low skilled adults or basic skills acquisition are provided for in the guide but neither are they specifically excluded – the only limitation refers to the ISCED 1 level of education mentioned before.

Nonetheless, SO 4.3 particularly refers to improving the digital literacy of the population in these vulnerable communities through training to be delivered in existing community information centres. Apparently other types of training will be delivered as well under this SO, including Training of the Trainers, but no further information is available on this matter at this point (i.e. there is no applicant guide). The same is valid for SO 4.4 which targets various vulnerable groups and aims to decrease their vulnerability including through the use of ALMPs.

Several of the measures planned under PA 6 "Education and Skills" of OPHC relate to different priorities of actions of NAS, but less to basic skills for low skilled adults.

Under IP 10i, measures envisaged aim to increase the number of education programmes centred on skills acquisition (in teaching – SO 6.5), on supporting teachers to offer qualitative educational services to pupils (SO 6.6), and students (SO 6.9), and improving tertiary education, its quality and relevance to the labour market (SO 6.8, 6.10) and participation at this level.

Under IP10iii VET participation of pupils/apprentices is particularly encouraged (SO 6.11 levels 3-4 of EQF). It is particularly important to note that this also applies to the , participation of adults with low level of skills and over 40 years old from vulnerable rural areas in continuous education programmes. Measures to reach this goal include the validation of non-formal and informal learning (SO 6.12, including basic and horizontal

skills, professional, non-professional and entrepreneurial skills, much of it in line with the EU's three-step approach).

Overall, elements of the UP are clearly visible through the current ESF programming, while there may be room for further alignment.

Monitoring and evaluation

The OPHC indicator system (as part of the monitoring system) is composed of roughly 135 result indicators and 91 output indicators. Only some of the indicators, as exemplified, reflect the OP interventions coherent with the NSA and may be used for the NSA monitoring. The same is valid for the result indicators. In some cases the surveys are planned to be carried out under programme evaluations.

Expected and actual achievements

The new ESF-funded HC-OP has made only a few positive steps; the first calls have been recently closed and applications are under appraisal. Even so, both the beneficiaries and stakeholders who have the task of implementing the Operational Programme trust that employment and VET projects can impact upon larger categories of people under risk of marginalisation from the labour market with new elements of upskilling and improvements of digital skills for a wider range of the adult population. However, as limited progress was recorded for the actual implementation, it is too early to speak about actual achievements.

Sustainability and added value

At the moment, there is positive feedback coming from the stakeholders and the ESF is seen as a guarantee for achieving the NSA objectives and the related general effects on beneficiaries and on the socio-economic context

If the ESF were not supporting the objectives of the NSA, they could not be achieved and sustained, further actions and projects would be needed, while the implementation of national strategies in place is slow and heavily based on the OPHC. Stakeholders also outlined the role of endogenous resources, and their trends, in ensuring long-term sustainability.

5.3.3 Conclusions and formative lessons

Overall, the NSA is known by most stakeholders involved in the preparation of this study but the level of awareness varies, from MAs/SPO who are familiar with the detail of the NSA, to IBs who know about its existence but not about its detailed provisions, and potential beneficiaries focused on calls and concrete actions on the ground but not paying too much attention to high level strategies.

The feedback on the ESF/OPHC as the instrument in place for the implementation of the pillars of the NSA is largely positive. The PAx and the programmes, as well as the underpinning national strategies, are coherent with most of the NSA priorities (although the NSA was adopted after the OP and some of the relevant national strategies were adopted). Of particular relevance are "Strengthening the foundation: basic skills" (PAx3, PAx4, PAx6), "Building resilience: key competences and higher, more complex skills" (PAx 3 and PAx 6) and "Improving transparency and comparability of qualifications" (particularly the need for an improved QF) (PAx 3 and particularly PAx 6), "Making VET a first choice" (PAx 6), "Getting connected: focus on digital skills" (PAx3, PAx4, PAx6),, "Better information for better choices" (mainly brain drain, lately addressed), "Boosting skills intelligence and cooperation in economic sectors" (particularly the first part, PAx 3) and "Better understanding the performance of graduates" (PAx 6). The priority for action not covered by the OP is the "Early profiling of migrants' skills and qualifications".

Where ALMPs are planned, these follow the UP's three steps approach as the core odes of OPHC is "integrated, customised" packages based on skills analysis and

recommendation of solutions tailored for each individual, since these proved to be the most effective in the past.

Romania's top priorities for the next period remain the improvement of the level of skills of the adult labour force and the implementation of better social inclusion for marginalised categories (people with lower educational attainment, Roma, elderly, disabled, rural) through the upgrading of skills (including basic skills) leading to employment .

The alignment between the OPHC and the NSA may be enhanced if implementation yields experiences which recommend the modification/improvement of the programme's intervention logic and if these elements are adequately and timely captured by the monitoring and evaluations system. However, due to the significant delays recorded in the contracting process, as well as due to the M&E system, such modifications may not be triggered. Such modifications will prove more difficult as the implementation period approaches the finish line. The need for more flexibility in this respect is acknowledged, however, it is uncertain whether flexibility will also be applied given the current context. A cleared "roadmap" on to integration of the NSA in the OPs and a faster pace of programme implementing might have been useful.

One of the formative lessons mentioned by both beneficiaries and key stakeholders from institutions who implement ESF-funded programs (especially the HC-OP) is the lack of previous counselling for the targeted categories in VET programs. This is one of the reasons why the usefulness of competencies and skills obtained are questioned. So before the alignment to a VET programme the target-groups should benefit more from psychological and professional counselling during and after the training programmes. Both stakeholders and beneficiaries pointed out the need for more flexible communication between the several levels of the governance system, as the high level of bureaucracy leads to delays in projects being evaluated, monitored and implemented. They mostly based their view on the experience of the previous programming period for Sectoral Operational Program on the Development of Human Resources (2007-2013).

More specifically, based on experiences from the previous programming period, a series of elements may negatively impact the expected effectiveness: (1) the attitudes to learning of the different target-groups for VET programmes hampers their integration in the labour market and therefore counselling is considered to be a crucial step in the upskilling of adults and the formation of new skills; (2) relevance, quality, genuine effectiveness of and follow-up on training measures. The planned interventions will bear effects if they reflect real needs of qualifications and skills, if qualification/training programmes are adequately implemented and do not remain formal exercises with a diploma as the only result, and if follow-up measures are implemented to ensure that skills acquired are used in the labour market and that created jobs are maintained; (3) over-centralisation may affect the projects effectiveness as their monitoring (and support) is not adequately carried out due to overburdening of central structures and physical distance; (4) insufficient capacity at all levels due to several institutional changes which hampered capitalisation on previous experiences; (5) existence, or the lack of it, of data for particularising the interventions needed, i.e. datasets regarding the data for the population and economy that were provided by the local administrations were out-of-date.

5.4 The Netherlands

5.4.1 Policy background

Performance on education indicators

The Netherlands performs relatively well on several education indicators such as intergenerational educational mobility (the education level of persons is higher compared to that of their parents) and tertiary educational attainment. Young people generally have comparatively strong foundation skills (compared with the EU average).

Participation in adult education and training in the Netherlands is high compared with most EU countries. Those with lower levels of education and skills are, however, less likely to participate in adult education than their higher skilled counterparts. Around a million employees in the Netherlands are working without a qualification at EQF level 1 or above. Adults from immigrant backgrounds also have comparatively low proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving.[47]

National Policy goals and priorities within the domain of skills development

In the Netherlands, several policies and initiatives are already in place that are relevant in the light of the New Skills Agenda and Upskilling Pathways (assuring basic skills, upskilling the workforce, reducing skills mismatches, and increasing transparency of qualifications and earlier working and learning experiences).

In general, government policies in the field of education show that attention is primarily given to guidance that concentrates on improving students' choice of courses and encourages students to complete their studies (thereby reducing early school leaving). To tackle youth unemployment, the government has spent EUR 50 million extra to stimulate young people at VET schools, to choose to study longer and persuade them to choose educational programmes that are likely to be relevant to the labour market of the future. Since 2014, initiatives have been taken to increase the amount of work-based training in vocational education and training programmes by offering incentives for employers to provide both more and better quality internships and more opportunities for students' personal development, including doing more to avoid students dropping out. Further initiatives are going on to attract ICT specialists and technicians by stimulating young graduates to choose professions within the technology sector.

Adult education is legally covered in the 'The Adult and Vocational Education Act' (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs: WEB[48]), introduced in stages between 1996 and 2000. This act is mainly devoted to initial vocational education, but describes how adult education, focusing on basic skills, is organised as well. Recently (2010), the rules for determining the learning outcomes for education (language and numeracy) have been implemented by law.[49] Second chance education (voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs: vavo), aimed at obtaining a secondary education qualification is covered by the Adult and Vocational Education Act and the Secondary Education Act (Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs: WVO, 1968; revised in 1998).

The current national policy priorities and initiatives in the field of adult learning and lifelong learning in the Netherlands focus on the low skilled / low literacy and establishing a learning culture that are further discussed in the sections below.

Low literacy /low skills

In the Netherlands, 1.3 million people have difficulties with reading and writing.[50] A recent mapping exercise on low-literacy revealed that one in nine persons in the Netherlands has a low level of literacy, having severe consequences for society and the economy.[51] 70 percent of those with low literacy are not migrants. Adults facing these

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[47] OECD (2017), Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report, the Netherlands
[48] Adult and Vocational Education Act' (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs: WEB: http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0007625/2016-08-01 [accessed 18-07-2016].
[49] Wet van 29 april 2010 tot vaststelling van regels over referentieniveaus voor de taal- en rekenvaardigheden van leerlingen (Wet referentieniveaus Nederlandse taal en rekenen)
[50] Algemene Rekenkamer (2016). Aanpak van laaggeletterdheid. Link: http://www.rekenkamer.nl/Publicaties/Onderzoeksrapporten/Introducties/2016/04/Aanpak_van_laaggeletterdheid
[51] De Greef, M., Nijhuis, J., Segers, M., (2013), Feiten & cijfers geletterdheid, Overzicht van de gevolgen van laaggeletterdheid en opbrengsten van investeringen voor samenleving en individu: http://lezenenschrijven.nl/algemeen/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/LS_literatuurstudie_170x240_def.pdf

difficulties also have more difficulties finding and maintaining a job. Half of those who have low literacy are unemployed or inactive. Reading difficulties can also lead to health problems, for instance when adults cannot read medical instructions.[52] Given this background, the policy priorities for adult education and adult skills development in the Netherlands focus mainly on basic skills education and combating low literacy rates. The Dutch government sees mastery of Dutch as a precondition to fully participate in further learning, employment and society at large. The costs of low-literacy for the society are estimated at EUR 556.4 million (EUR 550 Euros per person with low-literacy).[53] There are a number of national initiatives related to this policy area. In relation to low-literacy, as a follow-up of the previous plan to combat low-literacy,[54] in 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science published the Action Plan 2012-2015.[55]

The Action Plan strived to improve the literacy level of adults. This plan contained the following actions: 1) Focus adult education in language and numeracy; 2) Increasing the quality and effectiveness of courses; 3) Improving the transparency concerning price and quality of courses; 4) Testing new innovative approaches in pilot-projects; 5) Improving mobilisation strategies to reach people with low-literacy; 6) Monitoring the progress and effectiveness of the Action Plan. In addition to the Action Plan, the pilot programme Language for Life (Taal voor het Leven)[56] was initiated. This pilot programme helps communities and organisations to organise language training for people who with low literacy and who want to improve their reading, writing, speaking, numeracy skills, or use a computer.[57] In this pilot, the Language-test (Taalmeter[58]) is developed to assess persons' literacy levels. As a follow-up to the Action Plan and the pilot programme, in 2016 a new programme was initiated and is currently being implemented. The Action programme 'Tel mee met Taal'[59] is a recent new policy programme that is developed in cooperation with several departments, including the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, the Ministry of Health, Welfare & Sport, and the Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment. The overall aim of the programme is to combat the perception that people with a low level of literacy do not count in society and to prevent people with limited language skills from becoming marginalised.

Establishing a learning culture

Although adult education policy is focusing on basic skills, in the framework of lifelong learning and sustainable employment over recent years, many strategic documents have been produced focusing on developing the learning culture in the Netherlands. The Policy Brief *Leven Lang Leren. Brief van de regering* (Lifelong learning. Letter from government)[60] mentions several policy initiatives aimed at increasing the flexibility of

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[52] See: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Ministerie van OCW) (2016), dossier Aanpak laaggeletterdheid:
https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/volwassenenonderwijs/inhoud/laaggeletterdheid

[53] PwC (2013). Laaggeletterdheid in Nederland kent aanzienlijke maatschappelijke kosten

[54] Ministerie van OCW (2005), Aanvalsplan Laaggeletterdheid 2006-2010.

[55] Ministerie van OCW (2011), Geletterdheid in Nederland, Actieplan laaggeletterdheid 2012-2015;
http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/richtlijnen/2011/09/08/bijlage-1-actieplan-laaggeletterdheid-2012-2015-geletterdheid-in-nederland.html

[56] Taal voor het leven: http://www.taalvoorhetleven.nl/

[57] See: Taal voor het Leven (2016), Factsheet Slim samenwerken loont: Het ondersteuningsprogramma Taal voor het Leven helpt gemeenten en organisaties die aan de slag willen met de aanpak van laaggeletterdheid:
https://taalvoorhetleven.nl/uploads/bestanden/Factsheet_Taal_voor_het_Leven_%28dec_2015%29_A4.pdf

[58] Taalmeter: http://www.taalvoorhetleven.nl/over/de-aanpak

[59] Ministerie van OCW (2016), Actieprogramma 'Tel mee met Taal';
https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/volwassenenonderwijs/documenten/kamerstukken/2015/03/06/actieprogramma-tel-mee-met-taal [accessed 18-07-2016]

[60] Tweede Kamer (Second Chamber) (2014), Leven Lang Leren. Brief van de regering (Life long learning. Letter from government). 2014-2015.
https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2014/10/31/kamerbrief-leven-lang-leren Tweede Kamer (Second Chamber) (2015), Voortgangsrapportage Leven Lang Leren (Progress Life Long Learning

higher education provision and (Continuing) VET, providing financial support (vouchers), strengthening validation processes, and reducing hampering factors in legislative frameworks. The Policy Brief is based on a high number of reports that generally recommend taking policy action to improve the position of post-initial education and to better stimulate the enrolment in post-initial (CVET) education to maintain a sustainable work-force. The policy initiatives indicated in the Policy Brief on lifelong learning focus on improving the flexibility and access to HE/VET provision for adults; stimulate the supply and take-up of adult learning, in particular CVET.

Other existing policies / measures to support adult learning

In addition to these more specific programmes, the government provides general funding to the VET and higher education system which adults can benefit from. Furthermore, the government facilitates second chance secondary education for adults (voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs: vavo).[61] Finally, the government has a number of financial incentives in place to stimulate education and training[62] such as tax incentives for both companies (Wet vermindering afdracht (WVA) Onderwijs (payment reduction for education tax credit)) and individuals (study costs are tax deductible).[63] An important funding source for adult learning, and in particular CVET, is the sectoral Labour Market and Training Funds (Arbeidsmarkt en Opleidingsfondsen or Opleidings- en ontwikkelingsfondsen). They are owned by employers and employee organisations and are spending around EUR 1 billion a year on the training of employees (and future employees), but no exact figures are available. Some funds are quite big and have budgets of tens of millions of Euros, whilst others are working for very small branches of industry and have smaller budgets.[64]

Recent discussion / initiatives

Recently several reports and strategies have been published providing concrete recommendations that are relevant in the context of the New Skills Agenda and the "Upskilling Pathways" initiative.

Currently, the Dutch government (responsible ministries and the Social Economic Council), in cooperation with the OECD, is developing a National Skills Strategy. The main goal for this joint project is to provide a strategic assessment of the national skills system in the Netherlands and the way skills are acquired and deployed. The result helps to build effective skills policies and strategies to meet the Netherlands' future skill needs and to improve the match between supply and demand for skills, nationally as well as within regions. The final report (published in April 2017) identified the following priorities for the Netherlands: (1) fostering more equitable skills outcomes; (2) creating skills intensive workplaces; and (3) promoting a learning culture.[65]

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policies). 2015-2016. http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2015/10/26/kamerbrief-over-voortgang-leven-lang-leren

[61] VAVO is covered by the Adult and Vocational Education Act and the Secondary Education Act (Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs: WVO, 1968; revised in 1998)).

[62] The Cedefop study 'Financing adult learning' identified a number of financial instruments for the period 2010-2013. A number of them do no longer exist (saving schemes: spaarloonregeling, levensloopregeling), or are not specifically targeting adults, but students in initial education between 18 and 30 years of age (student loan), or are not governed by the State, but by social partners through collective labour agreements (payback clauses, educational leave). See: Cedefop (2013), Study on financing the adult learning sector. See for the database: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/FinancingAdultLearning/ [accessed 18-07-2016]

[63] See for an evaluation of both: Regioplan (2012), Evaluatie van de afdrachtvermindering onderwijs 2006-2011: http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/bestanden/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2012/09/18/evaluatie-van-de-afdrachtvermindering-onderwijs-2006-2011/evaluatie-van-de-afdrachtvermindering-onderwijs-2006-2011.pdf [accessed 18-07-2016]

[64] Panteia (2015), CVET in the Netherlands "Cooperation" Project Czech Republic – Netherlands: http://www.panteia.nl/Over-Panteia/projecten-en-publicaties/Overzicht-publicaties/765650145%20CVET-in-the-Netherlands [accessed 18-07-2016].

[65] OECD (2017), Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report, the Netherlands

Synthesis

With these initiatives, the Dutch government addresses several elements of the New Skills Agenda (NSA), by increasing the basic skills for adults, including key competences for lifelong learning, validation of prior learning and working experience, as well as contributing to the Upskilling Pathway (addressing target groups with low levels of skills, knowledge and competences with a training offer), including establishing effective outreach strategies, guidance, and supporting measures.

The interviewees within the ministries of Education, Culture and Science, as well as the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, indicated that they are generally aware of the New Skills Agenda and the Upskilling Pathway Initiative, since they are involved in EU-level working groups, but at the same time they indicate that this awareness is not widespread amongst colleagues (detailed knowledge is often only available amongst those who participate in EU-level working groups / events). It was indicated that such agendas are sometimes not extensively communicated within the ministry. Most of the time the ministry checks whether current policies are already in line with the European agendas and initiatives and, if this is not the case, work out how the EU agenda can be used to influence the national policy agenda or set things in motion. It was indicated by the interviewees that policies in the Netherlands are generally well aligned regarding the New Skills Agenda and the Upskilling Pathway and that is has policies / instruments in place on all elements proposed. The interviewed beneficiary was not aware of the strategy and initiative.

Nevertheless, that does not mean that all objectives are achieved in full. There are still several challenges, as expressed in a recent report of the Court of Audit,[66] concluding that policies tackling low-literacy by the Ministers of Education (OCW), Social Affairs (Social Affairs) and Health (VWS) are not proportional to the size of the problem. In order words: the policy is not capable of making a substantial contribution to solving the persistent problem of low-literacy and low basic skills in general (including low numeracy) both in budget and approach. Moreover, the policy only covers a part of the problem. Interviewees indicated that even more effort can be made to validate learning outcomes of non-formal learning and accreditation of prior learning and work experience (to provide access to education and jobs). Systems are in place, but the greater challenge is that the instruments become accepted and used by both schools and employers. Moreover, the supply of learning offer is still fragmented in the Netherlands, not being transparent for the learners, and there is a need for providing one central information point for learners.

5.4.2 Evidence from field analysis

Coherence, relevance and awareness

The Operational Programme 2014-2020 has a focus on *Active Inclusion* and targets those people who find themselves distanced from the labour market. This is also aligned with the Country Specific Recommendation of the Council of the European Union to increase the labour market participation in the Netherlands, particularly for people at the margin of the labour market. Another focus of the Dutch ESF OP is on active ageing of employees, also complying with the Country Specific Recommendation to increase the employability of older workers.

From analysing the Dutch ESF programme for the period 2014-2020 one can conclude that the programme is indirectly addressing some of the areas and actions as formulated in the New Skills agenda. As indicated, the focus of the Dutch ESF programme is on (1)

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[66]   Algemene   Rekenkamer   (2016),   Aanpak   van   laaggeletterdheid:
http://www.rekenkamer.nl/Publicaties/Onderzoeksrapporten/Introducties/2016/04/Aanpak_van_laaggeletter
dheid [accessed 18-07-2016]

realising active inclusion of disadvantaged target groups, (2) adaptability and active ageing of employees, as well as (3) labour market integration of the unemployed / inactive population. To achieve these objectives, the Dutch ESF programme supports skills development of ESF participants, as well as active ageing strategies at company and sector levels, addressing skills development of employees (including skills assessment, providing a learning offer, and validation of learning outcomes), and reducing skills mismatches. In this way, the Dutch ESF programme implicitly addresses NSA priorities by increasing the skills supply, tackling mismatches, and partly improving labour market intelligence (such as monitoring studies on active ageing at sectoral level). Nevertheless, the Dutch ESF programme does not contributed to the NSA aim for improving transparency and comparability in measuring, validating and certificating the skills.

Since the Netherlands receives only a relative small amount of ESF funding[67] (compared with other MS), the ESF is not about introducing sweeping changes and cannot contribute to all NSA objectives. Clear choices were made from the start to focus on areas where ESF provides most added value, closely aligned with the Country Specific Recommendations at the time. Moreover, as stated by the ministry responsible for the ESF (Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs), current budgets are already allocated for 80%, not allowing for much change / adjustments in programming. Nevertheless, at the same time it was indicated that "upskilling" is still a central element in ESF support, with ESF focusing its support on the most disadvantaged groups (showing most added value), acknowledging that there are already several government initiatives in the field of basic skills and adult learning.

Flexibility

The Dutch Operational Programme for 2014-2020 focuses on TO8 (IP8.i and 8.vi) and TO9 (IP 9.i) related IPs, and there is no budget allocated to thematic objective 10: *'Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning'*. Under TO 9 'Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination' measures include elements of training. Actions exist for a range of instruments aimed at reintegration. Primarily job coaching/training is deployed which includes aspects such as providing skills assessments (a basic skills quick scan) obtaining new skills through a workshop or other forms of guidance. All actions are focused on getting people into employment.

According to interviewees no major changes to the OP are expected in order to better align it with the NSA. Nevertheless, the types of action seem to contribute to the objectives of the NSA indirectly. Given the relatively low budget for ESF for the Netherlands, there is less room for expanding the ESF support towards other areas. Moreover, since budgets are already allocated for the most part in 2017, there is limited room for manoeuvre to react on new policy agendas and policy priorities. Interviewees indicated that the ESF programme was carefully planned and negotiated, as well as beneficiaries being lined up to apply for funding, so changing the programme is not considered feasible. It was thought that adding new policy priorities would harm the principle of concentrating the budget on a limited number of areas. Nevertheless, it was indicated that within calls for proposals, the programme could steer more on complying with the three distinct steps of the Upskilling Pathway: skills audit, learning offer, and validation (which is also done for certain interventions, like for detainees as explained in the next section).

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[67] The Netherlands receives a relatively limited budget (487 million EU support, excluding TA), and therefore has focused their budget only on a few IP (to provide most added value).

Operationalisation and delivery

The ESF supports relevant actions related to education and training though it does not directly contribute towards the objectives of the Upskilling Pathways. Indirectly financed actions, especially under TO 9 and partly TO 8, include projects with measures related to education and training. The text below describes in more detail the place of education and training has in the Operational Programme 2014-2020.

Municipalities are the most important ESF applicants and implementers. Projects under priority axis *Active Inclusion* need to have a focus on the following target groups:[68] benefit recipients, unemployed people who do not receive benefits, disabled persons, older persons (50 years and older), young persons under 28 years, permit holders (refugees), (former) students of secondary special education/practical education from 15 years and up, (former) prisoners and *TBS* prisoners, and young people in juvenile detention centres

A good example where the three steps of the Upskilling Pathways Initiative is brought in practice is the project funded for detainees (by the Ministry of Safety and Justice). This project (and 40 sub projects) supports interventions focused on pathways to employment (and intermediary steps like qualification gained, placement in an internship etc.) and thereby avoiding recidivism. Interventions include an assessment of a person's competences (integrated in the detention and integration plan), provision of a target learning offer, and certification afterwards. One interviewee indicated that the increasing focus on results in the current programming period means the project is more focused on achieving results such as obtaining qualifications and labour market status (civil effect of certificate) compared with the previous programming period.

Finally, interviewees indicated that the added value of ESF is that more personalised support can be given to the target group given the needs and competences of the person (addressing step 2). Without ESF, the interviewees indicated that less individualised / target support will be given. As a result, ESF contributes towards the integration of the three-steps of the Upskilling Pathways.

Monitoring and evaluation

The defined ESF objectives are not well aligned with the NSA, meaning the ESF monitoring system is not suitable to track the progress of the NSA's objectives. The indicators do, however, show the number of participants who took part in education and training measures which might be indirectly related to upskilling pathways.

Expected and actual achievements

Indirectly the ESF seem to contribute to aspects of the NSA through training actions for low-skilled people. There are no specific objectives related to one of the objectives of the NSA which means that it is rather unclear how ESF actually contributes to the achievement of the NSA objectives because there are no specific actions directly related to the NSA. Also, the financial volume of ESF is limited to achieve a huge impact.

The programme-specific indicators focus on the results of participants in completed projects. The SFC-database shows that for 2015 a total of 93,538 individuals participated in ESF under PA 1 Active inclusion. This means that the target (of 72,500 participants before 2023) has already been exceeded by 29%. An explanation for this is that low-cost instruments such as training and counselling was frequently used and higher-cost

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[68] Agency of Social Affairs and Employment. Kernpunten subsidieregeling ESF 2014-2020 voor AMR's (thema actieve inclusie). Link: https://www.agentschapszw.nl/subsidies-en-regelingen/a/actieve-inclusie-esf-2014-2020/documenten/publicaties/subsidies/actieve-inclusie-esf-2014-2020/toolkit-gemeenten/kernpunten-subsidieregeling-esf-2014-2020-voor-amrs-thema-actieve-inclusie

instruments such as wage subsidies were used less frequently. As a result, a relatively large number of people could participate.[69]

A first in-depth study of ESF Active Inclusion covering the period 2014-2015 reports about the effectiveness of integration instruments that they are relatively effective for people who are at a distance from the labour market. Using a combination of employment counselling, intensive guidance and skills training contributes to the labour market reintegration of people who are at a distance from the labour market. Reintegration instruments, such as education, are most effective for young people who are at a distance from the labour market and particularly regarding (former) special education students.[70]

Sustainability and added value

Investment priorities that envisage activities that may be relevant for upskilling pathways are measures that include training or gaining a qualification within the ESF programme. It is expected that these activities will have a positive outcome. As of April 2017, no programme results have been reported.

5.4.3 Conclusions and formative lessons

The following conclusions and formative lessons can be drawn.

1. The Dutch government has addressed several elements of the New Skills Agenda (NSA), by increasing the basic skills for adults, including key competence for lifelong learning, validation of prior learning and working experience, as well as contributing to upskilling pathways (providing target groups with low levels of skills, knowledge, and competences with a training offer), including outreach strategies, guidance, and supporting measures. There are still several challenges to better align policies with the NSA and the Upskilling Pathway.

2. The interviewees in the ministries indicate that they are generally aware of the New Skills Agenda and the Upskilling Pathway, since they are involved in EU-level working groups, but at the same time they indicate that this awareness is not common amongst colleagues.

3. Reviewing the priorities and specific objectives of the Dutch ESF Programme 2014-2020 reveals that they do not focus directly on relevant activities mentioned in the NSA.

4. Within the details of the programme, it can be noticed that measures/activities for target groups can include training and/or further schooling and might have a focus on improving basic skills.

5. Interviewees indicated that ESF support helped provide a more targeted approach to individuals (such as providing personal guidance and support and providing a targeted learning offer) that would have otherwise not been possible within existing budgets.

6. Given the relatively small budget for ESF in the Netherlands, there is limited room for expanding the ESF support towards other areas.

7. Interviewees indicated that the ESF programme was carefully planned and negotiated, and beneficiaries are lined up to apply for funding, so changing the programme is not considered feasible or a good idea.

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[69] Eindrapport Verdiepend onderzoek ESF Actieve inclusie 2014-2015 (page34). Link: https://www.agentschapszw.nl/documenten/publicaties/subsidies/esf-2014-2020-algemene-informatie-europees-sociaal-fonds/onderzoek-en-evaluatie/eindrapport-verdiepend-onderzoek-esf-actieve-inclusie-2014-2015

[70] Eindrapport Verdiepend onderzoek ESF Actieve inclusie 2014-2015 (page34). Link: https://www.agentschapszw.nl/documenten/publicaties/subsidies/esf-2014-2020-algemene-informatie-europees-sociaal-fonds/onderzoek-en-evaluatie/eindrapport-verdiepend-onderzoek-esf-actieve-inclusie-2014-2015

8. The defined ESF objectives are not well aligned with the NSA, which means that the ESF monitoring system is not suitable for tracking the progress of the NSA's objectives. The indicators show the number of participants who took part in education and training measures which might be indirectly related to upskilling pathways.

5.5 Spain

5.5.1 Policy Context

National strategies in education and employment have paid attention to the three work strands of the New Skills Agenda for Europe[71] (NSA) and particularly to the Council Specific Recommendation "Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for adult learning"[72] for several years. These strategies have aimed to address the high early school leaving rate: 19.4% in 2016, higher than the EU-28 average in the same year (10.8%), but considerably lower than values in the past (31.7% in 2008). Another challenge addressed has been the low educational attainment of part of the population, with the share of population holding less than primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0-2) in 2015 reached 43.5%, much higher than the EU-28 average (26.9%), but also lower than past values (50.9% in 2006).[73] The quality of the skills provision is an additional challenge, as Spain's scores in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) show. The percentage of adults scoring low (at or below level 1) in literacy is 27.5% compared to 20% at EU-28 level; the percentage of adults scoring low (at or below level 1) in numeracy is 30.6% compared to 24% at the EU-28; and the percentage of persons aged 16-74 without basic digital skills is 46% compared to 41% in the EU-28.[74]

In addition to the high unemployment rate in Spain, these challenges have motivated the NSA, and upskilling related policies have been seen as a policy priority from both the active labour market policy and the education perspectives for years. Several strategies and actions have been developed, many of them supported by the ESF:

1. The Law for the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) aims to reduce early school leaving rates through easing access to regular Vocational Training and developing Basic Vocational Training pathways.
2. The Law regulating the Vocational Training system for employment (2015[75]) states that training provision must respond to and anticipate the skills demanded by the labour market. In order to put this principle into action, a new information system that links labour market demands, skills of registered unemployed and training provision is being currently developed by the national PES. This system is being articulated in coordination with the regional PES.
3. The strengthening of the Vocational Training system is focused on adaptation of training contents to labour market demands and the development of Dual Vocational Training.
4. The Training for Employment System (*Sistema de Formación para el Empleo*), funded through corporate social security contributions and provided in response to companies' demands, also aims to continuously update the existing skills and to improve its matching with labour market demands, whilst responding often to technological change.

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[71] Improve the relevance and quality of skills formation; 2. Make skills more visible and comparable; 3. Improve skills intelligence and information for better carrier choices. For further information see http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-2020_en.htm , available in all languages
[72] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001, available in all languages
[73] Source: Eurostat.
[74] Source: OECD and European Commission.
[75] Ley 30/2015, de 9 de septiembre, por la que se regula el Sistema de Formación Profesional para el empleo en el ámbito laboral.

5. The Spanish Strategy for Employment Activation 2014-2016 (*Estrategia de Activación para el Empleo*), which gathers the main national and regional Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) in Spain, has a sound focus on training and validation of skills. Although not funded by the ESF as a whole, many measures included in this broad strategy are funded by the ESF. The forthcoming Spanish Strategy for Employment Activation, from 2017 onwards, is currently being designed and will pay special attention to screen and monitor workers' skills in order to improve customised guidance and forecasting of training needs.

6. According to the Royal Decree 1128/2003, the Spanish National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications *(Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales, CNCP)* must be updated every five-years, including the contents of the already included qualifications as well as the inclusion of new qualifications.[76]

Additional relevant actions are:

1. The validation of professional skills acquired through work experience, regulated by Royal Decree 1224/2009.[77] Online training schemes for validation of skills acquired through work experience have also been in force since 2015.

2. Public schools for adults, at no cost. These schools train, amongst other skills, basic digital skills.

3. Online life-long learning schemes. One example is "Aula Mentor" (*Mentoring classroom*), which focuses on online skills training for adults and is managed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports.

These strategies and actions respond to recent CSRs, which shaped the ESF 2014-2020 programming period, such as (CSRs 2013) "Reinforce the effectiveness of re-skilling training programs for older and low-skilled workers", "continue with efforts to increase the labour market relevance of education and training, to reduce early school leaving and to enhance life-long learning, namely by expanding the application of dual vocational training beyond the current pilot phase", or (CSRs 2014) "reinforce the coordination between labour market and education and training policies."

Indeed, most of the national and regional ESF OPs of the current programming period have a specific skills focus, and several of the previous period (2007-2013) had it as well. The next table summarises the OPs of the current period 2014-2020 that have programmed actions under the NSA / Upskilling related SOs.

Table 5.2 - List of Spanish ESF OPs that have actions programmed under NSA / Upskilling related SOs

OP NAME	8.i.2	10.ii.1	10.iii.1	10.iii.2	10.iv.1	10.iv.3
ASTURIAS	■	■				
ANDALUCÍA			■	■	■	■
ARAGÓN		■				
BALEARES		■			■	
CANARIAS		■				
CASTILLA LA MANCHA	■	■	■	■	■	■
CASTILLA Y LEÓN					■	■
CATALUÑA	■		■	■		
EXTREMADURA	■	■	■	■	■	■

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[76] Royal Decree 1128/2003, of 5th of September that regulates the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications (Real Decreto 1128/2003, de 5 de septiembre, por el que se regula el Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales).

[77] Royal Decree 1224/2009, of 17th of July, of validation of professional skills acquired through experience. Real Decreto 1224/2009, de 17 de julio, de reconocimiento de las competencias profesionales adquiridas por experiencia laboral.

OP NAME	8.i.2	10.ii.1	10.iii.1	10.iii.2	10.iv.1	10.iv.3
GALICIA	■	■		■	■	
MADRID	■	■			■	
MELILLA	■	■	■			
MURCIA			■	■		■
LA RIOJA	■		■			■
COMUNIDAD VALENCIANA	■	■			■	■
PAÍS VASCO	■					
EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING	■	■	■	■	■	■
SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL ECONOMY	■					

Source: OPs of the ESF 2014-2020.

5.5.2 Evidence from field analysis

Coherence, relevance and awareness

In broad terms, the ESF in Spain is considered a coherent and relevant instrument to provide support to the New Skills Agenda. As detailed below, ESF funds interventions whose objectives are aligned with any of the working strands of the NSA and/ or provide upskilling opportunities for low-skilled adults.

ESF implementing actors are cognisant to very different degrees of what is prioritised under the 10 NSA actions and of the ways ESF can support them. Whereas some actors closely follow the evolution of the NSA and its details, others have a general idea of the strategy and its main points, while some (actually most of them) had not heard about the NSA until they were invited to the interview. High-level actors, such as the MA or the Ministries for Education and Employment, are fully aware of the NSA and have been implementing most of its contents through their ESF funded or non-ESF funded policies for several years. Some of these implementations have been made in response to previous recommendations from the Commission. The NSA is regarded as a continuation of the policies that have been already in place for some years, thus several NSA related actions are already being implemented, especially regarding IPs 8.1, 10.3 and 10.4. Actions under SO 8.1.2 are particularly relevant for upskilling adults. In the opinion of other actors, such as the public PES, the NSA logic is already embedded within the policies of training for employment.

A quite different vision has been offered by other agents, who believe that the NSA is a shift from previous policies in that it contains a transversal and mainstreaming focus on the provision of digital skills, instead of considering digital skills provision as just one branch of skills among many. This shift is highly valued in the face of the current and coming technological change. As a matter of fact, some agents consider that the provision of digital skills in schools today, is crucial to fighting against the social exclusion of adults in the future.

At the same time, other interviewees expressed the view that the NSA is exclusively focused on regular training (i.e. training that follows the standard formal education pathway established by the Ministry for Education), mainly regular VET. Since these agents provide ESF funded non-regular training, they feel that the NSA has no relationship with their activities and roles. This may also be down to a need for a better interpretation of the NSA.

Flexibility

Although ESF 2014-2020 programming was agreed before the NSA approval, in broad terms, the ESF in Spain is considered by interviewees to address the needs identified by the NSA and to be already aligned with what is foreseen by the "Upskilling Pathway" recommendation. The national and regional OPs are already based on previous Commission's Recommendations that had many points in common with the NSA. Thus, the current ESF programming is suitable to fund interventions that provide upskilling opportunities for adults, shaped in ways that are consistent with the Upskilling Pathway recommendation and with the NSA. In the previous programming period (2007-2013) several aligned actions can be found.

Therefore, in the opinion of several agents (including the MA), there is actually no need to change the OPs' contents to adapt to the NSA in general and to the "Upskilling Pathway" in particular. OPs re-programming is foreseen in the future; the soonest date could be after the 2017 evaluations, if not later. It is not foreseen that the re-programming will take place with the main purpose of strengthening the alignment of OPs to the NSA, but that it will mainly respond to budget adjustments and other operational issues. However, some changes might be considered when this re-programming takes place, such as strengthening dual VET or training in digital skills. Still, some interviewees have mentioned that the inclusion of NSA related issues in the future ESF re-programming, should only be made once the NSA procedures and implementation plans are fully approved and with adequate additional funding.

In contrast, other agents, particularly within Red.es, public department devoted to the implementation and dissemination of the use of ITC in Spain, consider that a re-programming of OPs is needed to include the mainstreaming of digital skills provision as stated in the NSA and to reinforce provision of digital skills. Digital skills are stressed under the NSA as indeed basic skills, with nearly all jobs requiring their ever-growing use. Thus, Red.es believe that taking full stock of such renovated emphasis on digital skills may call for additional funding, by way of reprogramming of some Spanish OPs. However, they also consider that there is not enough funding or time for this; the NSA structure is not yet fully approved and parts of the ESF are already finishing (the YEI funds 80% of OP Youth Employment and finishes in December 2018). A solution would be to extend the current programming period of some OPs.

Additionally, other agents consider that the ESF should provide more funding for technical assistance, research and identification and dissemination of good practice to improve its potential to address NSA goals. Whilst the national PES suggests that ESF should fund a platform of skills profiles, linked with an online portal, in order to improve skills forecasting, planning and intelligence. The EOI (Industrial Organisation School) suggests strengthened support to identify and disseminate good practice that inspire and guide IBs and beneficiaries in the design of effective and efficient actions. Fluent communication with local and regional social partners could also improve the matching between skills provisions and changing labour market demands. A last suggestion is the setup of working groups that gather IBs and beneficiaries to work on the NSA adaptation (or other strategies led by the EC).

Operationalisation and delivery

The ESF 2014-2020 is contributing to progressing towards the objectives of the Upskilling Pathways in Spain. For example, the approach of the OP Employment, Education and Training is similar to several NSA principles. The OP identifies three main challenges: early school leaving, low level of adults' skills (PIAAC) and inefficient transition from education to the workplace. Because of this, 75% of the OP's funding focuses on improvement of basic skills, including the improvement of education quality,

access to life-long learning for all age groups and validation of professional competences. About 10% of the OP's budget is devoted to the SO 8.1.2, relevant for the "upskilling adults" goals. In addition, many of the regional OPs also focus on relevant actions. Further detail of the OP can be seen in the table above.

In more detail, several ESF funded actions that are relevant for the NSA and the Upskilling Pathways that have been highlighted by interviewees are:

1. support for dual Vocational Training;
2. development of regular Basic Vocational Training;
3. validation of professional skills acquired through working experience. This strategy plays a key role in upskilling as it motivates adults to enrol in secondary education courses (required) in order to obtain a VET diploma. The validation is acquired through an individual process. At present ESF supports this action, although it also existed before its funding;
4. training for workers to adapt to technological change in response to labour market demands, under training programmes for the digital transformation of SMEs, in rural areas or in green or blue sectors. These actions gather workers from diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from persons with just primary education to university graduates. This training is not part of the regular pathway, although a diploma is provided after the training programme, and thus does not involve an improvement of the educational attainment level;
5. training actions for workers organised through entrepreneurship support programmes. These programmes also include mobility support for entrepreneurs across the EU;
6. development of medium and high degree VET schemes. Regional OPs have often developed this action in line with their regional specialisation strategies (RIS3);
7. Vocational Training competitions have been organised that allows for students and potential students to realise the possibilities of VET and motivates them to improve their performance and skills. These competitions also improve skills matching with labour market demands as private companies participate in the organisation of the competitions;
8. secondary education for adults;
9. basic training programs for young people in foreign languages and ICT; and
10. specific courses for fishermen and sea related occupations to response to changes in technology and international regulations.

Other ESF funded actions focus on children/teenagers and contribute indirectly to the objectives of the Upskilling Pathway through a preventative approach. These actions prevent early school leaving and promote access to higher (VT) education levels:

1. support to basic competences of students to prevent early school leaving. Actions to reduce school absenteeism; and
2. new secondary education itineraries that enable higher flexibility of choices between VT / university and thus reduce early school leaving.

Monitoring and evaluation

The current ESF monitoring system is considered adequate for tracking progress towards the objectives of the NSA. The programmed quantitative indicators, as well as relevant qualitative information, shall be used to this end. Yearly evaluations are performed through the AIRs and intermediate evaluations are planned. No changes regarding monitoring and evaluation are foreseen in response to the NSA or Upskilling Pathway. Some IBs carry out their own internal evaluations in addition to those required by the ESF procedures. Several of the compulsory ESF outputs and result indicators that monitor and evaluate some ESF actions under TO 10 relevant to NSA objectives are seen as inadequate.

Expected and actual achievements

According to the interviewees, the ESF is expected to play a positive role in helping the NSA achieve the objectives that are already embedded in the ESF programmed actions. The ESF is also considered to have positive general effects on beneficiaries and on the socio-economic context.

Most of the operational programmes envisage activities that may be relevant for the NSA under IPs 8.1, 10ii, 10iii and 10iv. According to the programmed result indicators, the expected achievements include an increase of the number of persons whose skills have been validated, who gain a qualification, or who access to an employment. However, regarding the actual achievements, the interviewees have reported that it is still too early to assess how the planned actions are progressing. The NSA has not been reported to be a key factor for the improvement of the expected results of the OPs.

Sustainability and added value

It has been reported that it is still too early for the ESF 2014-2020 to assess concepts such as added value or effectiveness with clarity. However, in broad terms the ESF is seen as a key instrument for NSA purposes.

In particular, the ESF is considered an important instrument in Spain regarding the NSA objectives in the context of highly regionalised education and active employment policies. Thus, the ESF serves to align these policies across the different regions as the funds delivered must be used for a specific purpose, so that better performance and increased coherence at the regional level is expected.

More concretely, the ESF funds have been used to improve prevention of early school leaving and active labour market policies. It also leads to an improvement in policy implementation by transferring the lessons learnt in one programming period to the next. This learning is enhanced by transnational platforms as well. ESF added value comes also from its potential to develop synergies through partnerships. In some sectors, such as fisheries and sea related occupations, the role of ESF funding has been labelled as essential for training activities.

ESF achievements relevant for the NSA and the UP are largely sustainable. Validation of professional skills, education for adults and VET diplomas would last even if in the next period ESF did not consider these actions.

5.5.3 Conclusions and formative lessons

In general terms, the perception of the interviewees is that the main objectives of the NSA are already embedded within the Spain ESF 2014-2020 strategy; they are also embedded, outside the scope of ESF, in the policies of education and training for employment, especially with regard to the "Upskilling Pathway". Indeed, there are plenty of related actions across the national and regional OPs. Therefore, re-programming of the OPs in order to adapt to the NSA is not considered necessary, though changes inspired by the NSA could be included when re-programming. One exception is the case of the digital transformation and mainstreaming of digital skills, which, in the opinion of some IBs, is an NSA feature which is not included in the OPs and that requires an adaptation of ESF programmes. This adaptation would require further funding and time.

The interviewees mentioned that it is too early in the implementation of the ESF 2014-2020 to find any formative lessons or best practices to highlight. However, several lessons and suggestions have appeared which serve the purpose of improving the adaptation of the ESF to the NSA. These suggestions are related to the very complexity of addressing NSA objectives in the context of ESF bureaucratic requirements, which are regarded as an obstacle for the implementation of NSA and UP's objectives with ESF funding. Financial shortages have also been identified as a factor that has delayed the

implementation of OPs, leading to the overlapping of programming periods and to administrative confusion. It is also seen as an obstacle for the adaptation of the ESF to NSA goals and for the efficient implementation of the ESF. Consequentially, more financial resources and time is required.

Finally, further dissemination of the New Skills Agenda is needed to facilitate the adaptation of ESF funded activities towards NSA goals.

6 Summary and conclusions

6.1 The Study

The aim of the thematic report is to assess the contribution of the ESF 2014-2020 to the objectives set out in the New Skills Agenda (NSA) with respect to both its potential impact and its actual implementation. The study has addressed the following broad questions.

1. How do ESF operational programmes tackle challenges and objectives identified and subsumed by the NSA, and to what extent is the ESF likely to contribute to achieving the main challenges/development needs in terms of skills development?
2. To what extent are Member States / Managing Authorities adapting ESF implementation to contribute to the NSA? Are adjustments possible and made when needs change or new needs emerge? (What is the ESF's response to the NSA?)
3. What has been the actual contribution of ESF to the NSA (in terms of achievements and implemented actions)?
4. What are the main criticalities identified and what lessons can be drawn for the remaining of the programming period? (Lessons learned).

The study was conducted shortly after the NSA was first announced in June 2016. Therefore, the research on which the findings of this report are based was carried out at a time when many ESF actors were only just coming to terms with the implications of the NSA for their programmes and only some actions has been launched, with some others being about to be launched and some still subject to further changes. Also, and most importantly, it should be kept in mind that responses collected during the field work might be to some extent dependent on the specific country situation vis à vis ESF implementation, with some countries being relatively more advanced than others.

As such the findings from the study provide an early insight – perhaps at a particularly critical juncture – into the way in which the ESF can support the NSA.

6.2 Understanding how the ESF can support the NSA

The New Skills Agenda provides a basis for developing a range of interventions that will optimise skills supply in the EU. With this in mind, the evidence presented in this report **demonstrates potential for the ESF, over the 2014-2020 programming period, to support the realisation of the New Skills Agenda.** It demonstrates the extent to which plans are already in place to implement the NSA with the support of the ESF and, bearing in mind that the NSA is a relatively recent development, the potential support that the ESF might afford the NSA over the short- to medium-term.

The NSA calls for a wide range of activity across a number of domains (e.g. sectors, basic skills, accreditation, etc.). Because there is an interest in identifying specific actions that have been, or might be, implemented, there was a need to narrow the scope of the study. Accordingly, the study was designed so that it provides a broad overview of the ESF's support for the NSA in general, but then adopts a particular focus on the NSA's Upskilling Pathway (UP) when looking at specific actions. In this way there is the best of both worlds: provision of a comprehensive overview which, at the same time, contains particular examples of actions or likely actions with respect to the UP.

The UP was selected as a specific focus for the study because, in many respects, it addresses one of the most critical issues which European policy makers within the remit for employment and skills are addressing: that of ensuring that EU citizens possess the

skills that will allow them to gain and retain a job. Without a basic level of skill in literacy, numeracy and the use of digital tools, it is recognised citizens who struggle with these skills will face an increased risk of unemployment and social exclusion.[78] The UP addresses this issue by assisting adults acquire the minimum levels of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and / or acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent. As such, for purposes of this study, it was regarded as a particularly important element of the NSA with respect to the scale of the issue which it attempts to tackle. And one which, as will be demonstrated below, the ESF is perhaps particularly well placed to support given the number of OPs and IPs over the recent past that have had a basic skills focus.

Although not the scope of our analysis nor the object of analysis during our fieldwork, it is also worth mentioning that the simplification of actions and the increased use of Simplified Cost Options encouraged by the ESF could further contribute to channel ESF actions towards NSA policy objectives. This is an element that was not explicitly addressed by the present study, nor brought up during the fieldwork during interviews with Managing Authorities and beneficiaries, and could deserve further exploration.

6.3 Where the aims of the ESF and the NSA coincide

The starting point for the study was to identify, in detail, where there was scope within the ESF to support the NSA. Consideration was given to the three broad strands of the NSA:

1. improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
2. making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and
3. improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices.

The preliminary analysis revealed that there was substantial scope within the existing structure of the ESF to support these activities. At a preliminary stage of the analysis it looked as if Thematic Objective 10 (TO10) - Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning –was the most relevant TO with respect to the types of NSA-like activities that the ESF might fund. That said, TO8 (Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility) and TO9 (Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination) were considered important too, especially if consideration is given to the specific objectives of the UP. In more detail, the analysis of the ESF Specific Objectives showed that:

- it was 'improving the quality and relevance of skills formation' that accounted for most SOs that are relevant to the NSA;
- among this Work Strand, there are qualitative differences between SOs linked to the initiative 'Upskilling Pathways' and those linked to action 2 and 3 which are ultimately less innovative or too broad to result in concrete initiatives pursuant to the respective NSA action within the frame of the NSA;[79]
- although TO10 (Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning) accounted for the largest share of relevant SOs, it was also

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[78] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224&langId=en

[79] While 'Upskilling Pathways' is a fully new and fairly specific initiative promoted by the European Commission and endorsed by the Council, the initiative on VET (action 3) consists ultimately in placing stronger emphasis on the 2015 Riga Recommendations. Their significant breadth, especially in terms of target groups addressed and interventions encouraged, makes that a large number of ESF SOs reflects their aims. Also the figures on action 2, namely the 'EC proposal for a review of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning', should be considered in light of the fact that this is still in an early/preparatory phase of the action, its issue date being set for late 2017. With the current state of the information, as anticipated, it seems to transpire that the focus of the action is more concentrated on the EU level. In addition, the objectives of the actions are described in a broad and somewhat vague fashion, consequentially dilating the scope of SOs that are assumed to be relevant within this analysis, eventually boosting their number.

apparent that actions relevant to the NSA were spread out across the other thematic objectives as well;

- while TO 10 remains overall the most relevant thematic objective in the ESF to the NSA, it tends to be 10iii (Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings, etc.) and 10iv (improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems, facilitating the transition from education to work, etc.) that show the highest levels of relevance (40 % to 60 % of SOs, respectively, are aligned with specific NSA actions;
- where actions are being undertaken which are aligned with the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathways much of this would appear to be funded under TO10 – mainly 10iii – but there is also a significant amount of activity under TO 8 and 9.

The implication of the above is that one cannot simply assume that the NSA aligns solely with TO10. The issue of skills is, to a large extent, a transversal issue stretching across several TOs. This was confirmed also in the analysis of common and specific ESF indicators for the 2014-2020 programming period. A second, crucial implication is that the Upskilling Pathways is, due to its specificity as well as the widespread presence of relevant SOs across the ESF, the NSA action whose aims are more clearly supported by the current ESF programming.

The analysis of Specific Objectives also allowed identification of a sub-set of OPs and IPs the appear as most relevant for the NSA/Upskilling Pathways, thus allowing to retrieve estimates the share of NSA-relevant IPs for each OP, the corresponding financial allocation, as well as relevant targets set on common and specific indicators.

In terms of financial allocation, this analysis suggests that UP relevant ESF funding equates to EUR 6.86 billion, distributed across 13 Member States[80] and 57 OPs. This is a somewhat conservative estimate, in that it only takes into account IPs in each OP where a Specific Objective related to the Upskilling Pathways was found. The countries with the highest share of funding are the UK, FR, RO, IT and HU.

Overall, based on the estimates of common and programme specific output indicators, it is expected that around 10 million participants with low-level of skills will take part in ESF interventions by 2023, particularly in Italy, Spain, the UK and France, with Ireland, Poland and Romania to follow.

Overall, this analysis suggests that under the current framework of targets and indicators there is room to provide substantial support to low skilled individuals, especially in countries such as IT, ES, UK, FR, IE, PL and RO. However, it appears too early to tell how relevant indicators fare against others.

6.4 Results from the fieldwork

6.4.1 Coherence, relevance and awareness

The evidence from the e-survey demonstrated that:

- all MAs were in principle aware of the NSA, but tended not to know much about the details;
- very few MAs had a detailed knowledge of the UP.

Despite a relatively low level of awareness on the NSA details, the e-survey revealed that MAs considered the OPs for which they were responsible as relevant tools for achieving the goals of the NSA in general and the UP in particular. These goals are likely to be attained by using the implicit flexibility of OPs and without resorting to renegotiations of programmes. With regard to relevant activities that are already being

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[80] Sorted by amount of funding, starting with the highest: UK, FR, RO, IT, HU, PL, DE, IE, PT, BG, AT, ES, GR.

carried out (or plan to be) by the MAs, WS1 is confirmed as work strand that is more broadly mirrored in ESF activities. The e-survey also provided an interesting insight into which IPs are considered more relevant for the NSA and the UP by the MAs themselves. Results make it clear, even beyond what emerged from the analysis of the SOs, that while TO10 and especially IP10iii are the most suitable to support relevant interventions, TO8 is expected to provide crucial support to the aims of the NSA. TO8 was selected as the most relevant investment priority by a substantial share of MAs, reaching up to 45% when considering solely the UP.

With regard to the UP, nearly 70 % of respondents reported that they were currently engaged in interventions aimed at improving the basic skills of adults (especially in BG, LU, LV, PL, PT and RO). In addition, nearly 50% of respondents selected "initiatives aimed at improving the skills of low skilled adults" as the activity, within the scope of the NSA, in which they were mostly involved. Although this cannot be considered as strictly adhering to the requirements set out in the UP, it gives a good idea of what is already being carried out in this field by the ESF.

A more detailed insight into awareness surrounding the NSA and the UP was obtained from the interviews with MAs and other stakeholders. The general impression emerged was that they were aware of the NSA and had, for the most part, a general understanding of its content. Often it was personnel in government ministries that had the most detailed understanding of the NSA's objectives rather than the MAs, which seems logical given this is a policy initiative. For the most part, MAs and those organisations that might be involved in the implementation of activities to support the NSA had a more general understanding of the NSA (e.g. at the general work stream level rather than with respect to specific actions that might be required to support those work streams).

It was apparent that the ESF had, in the past, been used to fund programmes that had similar goals to those contained in the NSA. Accordingly, developing skills as foreseen in the NSA was very much seen as being within the ESF's remit and, to some extent, a continuation of previous practice. In Spain, for example, it was noted that there had been programmes in place for many years that have sought to address many of the same issues which the NSA sought to address. This was also observed in other countries, especially with regard to the UP, as the case for France demonstrates. In France, interviewees considered that the new comprehensive approach towards VET that had been recently introduced - combining guidance, skills assessment, training, and validation - was in line with both the NSA as a whole and the UP in particular.

In general, countries pointed to the NSA being consistent with national policies and existing ESF supported activities. In this sense, the NSA was seen to be working with the flow of existing policy and ESF activity.

Finally, the issue of relevance and coherence of the NSA and the ESF may be observed from an additional angle, that is, by triangulating ESF activities that are being or will be carried out in the domain of the NSA, Country Specific Recommendations that are relevant to the NSA and contextual indicators. This can provide a rough idea of where it is possible to find some room for further improvements at the MS level, especially where CSRs and the NSA overlap but ESF activities are somewhat less intense.

This is the objective of Table 6.1 below, which presents:

- on the left-hand side of the table, the CSRs that are relevant for the NSA Work Strands (and for the UP in particular), categorised by their degree of relevance (the darker the colour the higher the relevance of the issue), by MS;[81]

[81] For a more detailed summary of each CSR please refer to section 3.1

- in the centre columns of the table, key indicators on skills development and mismatch, by MS; and
- on the left-hand side of the table, the results of the E-survey on ESF MAs indicating whether they are engaged or expect to be engaged in activities that are relevant for the NSA, by Work Strand and MS. The percentages included in these columns show the relative frequency of responses 'yes, currently' or 'yes, in the future' to the question 'are you involved/will you be involved in the provision of activities relevant for any of the following activities relevant to the NSA', by Work Strand.

Although no one-to-one correlation should be drawn from this table, this overview can help identify areas to be further investigated.

Table 6.1 – Triangulation among CSRs, e-survey analysis and contextual indicators

MS	CSR				Contextual indicators				ESF current and planned activity, from e-survey			
	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3	% of employed graduates	% Adult participation to E&T	% Adults with at most ISCED 2	% employers struggling to find the right skills	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3
AT	●		●		87,2	14,9	15,5	63,3				
BE	●	●			79,8	7,0	24,9	59,7	63%	50%	50%	83%
BG	●	●		●	71,8	2,2	17,7	53,9	75%	100%	0%	33%
CY	●			●	73,3	6,9	20,4	20,2	50%	0%	50%	0%
CZ	●	●			86,5	8,8	6,6	44,4	0%	0%	0%	0%
DE	●				88,7	8,5	13,5	51,2	63%	80%	10%	7%
DK	●	●			82,8	27,7	19,3	33,4	75%	0%	0%	0%
EE	●	●			76,4	15,7	10,9	69,0	100%	100%	33%	0%
ES	●			●	65,6	9,4	41,7	23,8	50%	100%	50%	0%
FI	●	●			77,0	26,4	11,9	47,6				
FR	●	●			70,1	18,8	21,9	50,2	92%	86%	0%	29%
GR					49,3	4,0	28,2	21,8	70%	100%	0%	27%
HR	●	●			72,0	3,0	16,9	20,2	100%	100%	50%	33%

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MS	CSR				Contextual indicators				ESF current and planned activity, from e-survey			
	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3	% of employed graduates	**% Adult participation to E&T**	% Adults with at most ISCED 2	% employers struggling to find the right skills	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3
HU	●	●	●		84,4	6,3	16,6	56,8				
IE	●	●			79,3	6,4	19,9	32,4				
IT	●	●			52,6	8,3	39,9	29,5	54%	60%	21%	14%
LT	●	●			81,9	6,0	5,4	63,7	100%		50%	100%
LU	●	●			81,4	16,8	21,6	45,8	100%	100%	50%	0%
LV	●	●			80,9	7,3	9,3	64,8	75%	100%	50%	0%
MT	●	●			96,0	7,5	54,8	53,5				
NL					87,7	18,8	22,9	31,0	25%	100%	0%	0%
PL	●	●			79,5	3,7	8,7	35,4	79%	100%	0%	13%
PT	●	●		●	71,7	9,6	53,1	38,7	82%	100%	17%	0%
RO	●	●		●	69,1	1,2	23,3	38,7	100%	100%	0%	33%
SE	●		●		86,5	29,6	15,0	50,4	25%	0%	50%	0%
SI	●	●			76,7	11,6	12,7	30,1				

MS	CSR				Contextual indicators				ESF current and planned activity, from e-survey			
	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3	% of employed graduates	**% Adult participation to E&T**	% Adults with at most ISCED 2	% employers struggling to find the right skills	WS1	UP	WS2	WS3
SK	●	●			79,5	2,9	8,1	40,5	75%	100%	25%	0%
UK	●	●			83,7	14,4	20,5	25,6	80%	100%	0%	0%

Although it would be hard to identify clear and robust patterns across Table 6.1, by and large the following elements could be outlined:

- the higher WS1 "intensity" in ESF is mirrored by CSRs in this area;
- where the CSRs focus on upskilling for low-skilled workers, high NSA intensity is mirrored in the same field, with the exception of DK and CZ;[82]
- SE, having received a country recommendation relevant to WS2, is also one of the most engaged in the ESF activities relevant for WS2.

Such elements should be however assessed more in detail to draw conclusive findings in the future.

6.4.2 Flexibility of the ESF in accommodating the NSA

The e-survey revealed that due to a lack of clarity on the details of the NSA and the fact that OPs were already considered partly in line with the latter, the issue of flexibility could be discussed only in preliminary terms. Most MAs believed that the NSA will only influence their OPs modestly, and that this had occurred to date albeit on a small scale. As a result, the overwhelming majority declared that, at present, they had not developed new actions nor amended existing ones to support the NSA. When looking to the future, two in three respondents expected new activities to be developed, and one in three expected existing ones to be amended. On average, it was expected that supporting the NSA will present difficulties mainly because funding has already been committed and that OPs may not be flexible enough to allow changes. One needs to bear in mind here the targets set and approved at the onset of the programming period. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the OPs was considered sufficient enough to provide support to the NSA by two-thirds of the e-survey respondents who believed that some adaptation will be needed. Focusing on the UP, the results remain similar. The expected impact of the UP on ESF OPs was considered modest, primarily because: 1) existing plans may be binding; and 2) activities in place are already aligned with the UP. The adaptation of the ESF OPs to the requirements of the UP is considered somewhat harder than usual activities because there may be little support from stakeholders to develop actions coupled with a lack of awareness of the NSA in policy communities. These two reasons are found across all countries.

Evidence from the interviews largely coincided with that from the e-survey. In the detailed interviews with MAs, the ESF was regarded by them as a tool that allows for some adaptations. In Italy for example interviewed MAs were convinced that within the OPs there existed sufficient room for manoeuvre without resorting to (cumbersome) re-negotiations. It is important to note here that there was a general request, expressed to receive clearer guidance from the national and/or EU level as to how the ESF could be re-oriented to better support the NSA. This guidance was generally perceived to be missing. For the time being however, MAs were not in the process of developing plans to support the NSA that were not already initially programmed or that required anything more than fine-tuning already existing programmes.

Whilst there was a general view that the ESF encompasses some flexibility to adapt to changing priorities, respondents pointed to the competition for funding allocations at the national level in some countries. Given that funding had already been allocated, problems could be faced in trying to (re)allocate funding to new actions;

In Romania, for example, it was noted that there was a substantial demand for the type of support that the NSA, in general, and the Upskilling Pathway (UP) in particular, will provide. The NSA was seen as offering potential to improve Romania's human capital

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[82] This may be also be due to the fact that some Czech MAs have not participated in the e-survey

and ensure that skills supply better meet skills demand. Without the assistance of the ESF, it was noted, it would be unlikely that much progress would be made in achieving the goals of the NSA / UP. At the moment, however, there was little detailed knowledge of the NSA amongst the various authorities responsible for the ESF. But even if there was detailed awareness, it might prove difficult to amend existing actions to include those relevant to the NSA, because funding had already been allocated.

6.4.3 Operationalisation, delivery, and expected outputs from the NSA

As to the operationalisation of the UP, evidence from the e-survey clarified that, at present, little is being done as MAs await more details to be presented. Expectations for the future are to carry on with existing activities that are relevant for the UP (nearly 40% of respondents), followed by the revision of existing actions and initial consultation with policymakers. Only around 10% of respondents expected to be developing new actions to support the UP. This confirms, once more, how the UP is not expected to bring substantial changes to the current structure of the ESF though some adaptations may prove necessary.

In looking at how much of the current upskilling for low skilled adults aligns with the UP requirements, it seems that part of the three-step approach has already adopted or will to be adopted throughout the EU, especially for step 2 – provision of ad-hoc/modular training. Some countries such as CZ, DK and LV, have more consistently declared that they will not be involved in any of this. In addition, in appraising this result it should be considered that the UP Recommendation views the upskilling provision as that of an integrated path which comprises all three steps, along with accompanying measures such as outreach measures and guidance, use of digital tools etc. In the e-survey MAs were allowed to select each step also singularly, and the interviews later confirmed that the entire three-step process is not widespread among EU countries. Furthermore, very few countries across Europe declared that they use ESF to provide support to staff in the adult learning field, which is one of the enabling principles of the UP. Among 'no' respondents were NL, UK, GR, ES and LT, in addition to CZ, DK and LV.

Concerning the case studies, countries signalled different levels of operationalisation of the UP. In Italy for example although none of the OPs analysed are implementing or planning to implement interventions that are fully compliant with the UP Recommendation there are several actions, both on going or planned, that show important synergies. These measures differ in several aspects from what was foreseen by the UP in that they are not specifically targeted at low skilled adults; are focused on helping recipients to (re)enter the labour market, rather than helping them to achieve a basic education and qualification level; and seldom foresee a three-step approach while focusing on specific milestones. These elements are consistent with the mission of the ESF.

6.4.4 Sustainability and added value

According to the e-survey results, MAs deemed the ESF as necessary to achieve the aims of the NSA to a much larger extent to their previous answers on the relevance of their ESF OPs as well as their awareness of the NSA itself. This suggests that the ESF is considered crucial to achieving the goals set out in the NSA. In other words, without ESF support the goals of the NSA would not be achieved. The general view across all countries was that actions introduced under the NSA would also be sustainable because, for the most part, they were in keeping with the longer-term national strategies of the case study countries. According to the interviewees in Spain, the ESF was expected to play a positive role in helping the NSA achieve the objectives that were already embedded in the ESF programmed actions, but that it was too early to assess concepts

such as added value or effectiveness with any clarity. In broad terms, however, the ESF was seen as a key instrument for NSA purposes.

In the case of the Netherlands, it was pointed out that the contribution of ESF funding in promoting various actions in relation to skills is relatively small and this needs to be borne in mind when considering the impact of ESF funding. There was a sense in which the NSA added value with respect to the emphasis given to: digital transversal skills; and labour market intelligence, especially with respect to career guidance. In this way, the NSA contributed to expanding the scope of skills policy in some countries.

6.4.5 Monitoring and evaluation

At this stage, the evidence points to countries reporting that monitoring systems were already in place and suitable to track progress of activities for the NSA. According to the e-survey, the majority of MAs (around 60%) collected data in addition to those that are mandatory in order to monitor and evaluate interventions that they deemed relevant to the NSA. The most frequently additional data collection method was ad-hoc questionnaires/surveys, followed by administrative sources and general statistics.

As regard monitoring of the UP, again around two thirds of MAs declared monitoring interventions were relevant to this end, especially with regard to the validation of skills acquired, but similarly for all other activities except outreach measures and guidance. This means that, amongst other things, overall the analysis of the contribution of the ESF to the NSA will need to be complemented, in future, by additional sources of information.

Through the analysis of the questionnaires it was not possible to gather more details as to NSA-relevant monitoring and evaluation actions, and in-depth interviews with MAs did not provide additional information in this regard. Hence this could be an area of further scrutiny for improving the synergy between NSA and ESF.

6.5 Formative lessons

There is a substantial degree of alignment between the aims of the NSA and the activities funded by the ESF. Yet this study found that there is scope to facilitate the materialisation of ESF support to the NSA. It is by identifying formative lessons from both the introduction of ESF backed measures similar to those envisaged by the NSA, and views of MAs and key stakeholders about the ESF's capacity to support the NSA, that one can begin to understand how the ESF might bring about the realisation of at least some of the ambition set out in the NSA. From the country case studies, it is possible to identify a number of formative lessons:

- in general, there is recognition across countries that the way in which the ESF is programmed allows a degree of flexibility;
- where that NSA is articulated with respect to existing policy measures – currently funded via either the ESF or national programmes - MAs thought that it would be easier to accommodate NSA originated requests for funding;
- to have credence with those responsible for ESF funding, any measures stemming from the NSA will need to address the problems similar policy measures have faced in the past;
- the capacity of MAs and other stakeholders to develop measures to realise the NSA through the use of ESF funding is dependent upon them having access to information and guidance with respect to the specific actions that might be required to support the NSA;
- whilst ESF programming encompasses a degree of flexibility that allows new challenges to be addressed, if substantial changes to ESF programming are required this is likely to be burdensome and time consuming with no guarantee of success.

The points made above are elaborated on below.

6.5.1 The flexibility inherent in ESF programming

In the detailed interviews with MAs, the ESF was regarded by them as a rather flexible tool. Within its overall planning there was scope to adapt existing actions or, to a more limited extent, develop new ones to meet emerging policy priorities. The example of Spain demonstrates this feature (see panel). In several countries, it was noted that as more detail about the actions that might be introduced to fulfil the NSA become apparent, then some re-programming of the ESF may be required. If that occurred then there might be funding issues which need to be addressed. Moreover there was also recognition that some aspects of the NSA – such as the emphasis on digital skills – were not as established in previous ESF programming periods as were those related to the UP.

Need for re-programming: The example of Spain

In broad terms ESF in Spain is considered by interviewees to address the needs identified by the NSA and to be already aligned with what is foreseen by the "Upskilling Pathways" recommendation. The national and regional OPs are already based on previous Commission's Recommendations that had many points in common with the NSA. Thus, the current ESF programming is suitable to fund interventions that provide upskilling opportunities for adults. Therefore, in the opinion of several interviewees there is no need to change the contents of OPs to adapt to the NSA in general and to the "Upskilling Pathways" in particular.

OP re-programming may not take place until after 2017. This is likely to relate mainly to a need for budget adjustments and other operational issues rather than developing new programmes. That said, some changes might be required to strengthen dual VET and / or training in digital skills. For some interviewees, it was in relation to digital skills that re-programming might be welcome. Some interviewees mentioned that the inclusion of NSA related issues in future ESF re-programming should only be made once the NSA implementation plans are fully approved with adequate additional funding.

Source: Country fiche for Spain

Similarly, in the case of Italy, during the interviews with the MAs there was a general openness to fine tune or adjust activities in existing in OPs, or even to plan new pilot actions, so as to promote a better alignment of the ESF with the NSA.

6.5.2 Consistency with existing ESF and national actions

It was apparent that the ESF had, in the past, been used to fund programmes that had similar goals to those contained in the NSA. Accordingly, developing skills as foreseen in the NSA was very much seen as being within the ESF's remit and, to some extent, a continuation of previous practice. This was especially the case with respect to the UP where all case study countries already had programmes that bore some similarity to what is envisaged under this initiative. The example of France, expanded in the panel below, illustrates this. Here there were already several national initiatives that were dealing with the same issues highlighted in the NSA. This was typical across all the case study countries with respect to the UP where the ESF had been used to address the problem of relatively poor skill development amongst relatively disadvantaged groups in the labour market. And in the case of the Netherlands, there were national rather than ESF funded programmes in place.

Consistency of existing policies: The example of France

The national policies, the employment policy and the vocational training policy are fully in line with the content of the NSA and of the UP, especially the following strands of the NSA: (i) improving the quality and relevance of skill formation; and (ii) improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices. In this regard, French authorities have been and continue to be involved in reforming the vocational education and training system based on the idea that guidance, training and employment are closely linked. In reforming the system there has been an aim to create "personal training accounts" and the "National Growth, Competitiveness and Employment Pact" which were regarded as consistent with the NSA. Following these initiatives, the French government has set up a new VET governance system to improve the access of low skilled people

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to training. Interviewees considered that this new comprehensive approach combining guidance encompassing skills assessment, training, and validation was in line with both the NSA as a whole and the UP in particular**.**

Source: Country fiche for France

Whilst the overall direction of policy is important in understanding how the ESF can support the NSA there would appear to be other factors that need to be in place for this to materialise. These are considered next.

6.5.3 Adding value to existing or past measures

There was an emphasis that if measures such as the UP are to prove effective then they will need to demonstrate how they might tackle the shortcomings of previous initiatives. In the case of Romania, for example, whilst MAs and other stakeholders are positively inclined towards the NSA, some of the measures that might be undertaken under the NSA generally or the UP in particular will need to tackle problems faced by previous initiatives (see panel).

Learning from past interventions: The case of Romania
Based on experiences from the previous programming period there are elements that might inhibit the expected effectiveness of interventions that might take place under the NSA. These relate to being able to persuade target groups to participate in a UP type initiative. A need for counselling is considered to be a crucial step in persuading adults to engage in upskilling and develop new skills. Additionally, attempts to upskill or provide new skills need to meet a genuine demand for those skill in the labour market. In Romania, the effectiveness of policies can sometimes be affected by over-centralisation. And there needs to be sufficient capacity in place to ensure that the goals of the intervention are realised.

Source: Country fiche for Romania

A similar situation is found in the Netherlands where national rather than ESF programmes have supported skills development amongst low skilled adults (see panel).

Improving upon existing policy: The case of the Netherlands
The Dutch government has already addressed several aspects of the New Skills Agenda (NSA) by increasing the basic skills for adults, validation of prior learning and working experience, as well as contributing to upskilling (i.e. addressing target groups with low levels of skill, knowledge and competence through training). It was indicated by the interviewees regarding the New Skills Agenda and the Upskilling Pathway Initiative that the Netherlands is generally well aligned and has policies / instruments in place on all elements. But there are challenges in effectively aligning policies with the NSA in general and the UP in particular. A recent report of the Court of Auditors (Algemen Rekenkamer), which focus on the Dutch situation, concluded that policies tackling low-literacy were not proportional to the size of the problem. In order words: the policy was not capable of making a substantial contribution to solving the persistent problem of low-literacy and low basic skills (i.e. the budget was insufficient and the overall approach was not fully appropriate in terms of structures and systems, including outreach). It was noted that existing policy covered only a part of the problem and interviewees indicate that even more efforts could be made to validate outcomes from non-formal learning and accreditation of prior learning and work experience.

Source: Country fiche for the Netherlands

The implication here is that policies that might be initiated under the aegis of the NSA will need to demonstrate that can address the problems that previous initiatives have faced.

6.5.4 Additionally, while the focus of the present report is the ESF important synergies clearly emerge for the NSA from the combined implementation of ESF and other programmes and initiatives, namely the YEI and Erasmus+ and their interaction and complementarities represent a value added

for a European skills agenda. In particular YEI funds quality apprenticeships, traineeships and jobs, while Erasmus+ supports mobility for apprentices as well as teachers and trainers in VET (Key action 1), exchange of good practice and innovation through the Strategic Partnership, Sector Skills Alliances and Knowledge alliances (Key action2) and support to policy reform (Key action 3).

In some countries, such as Italy, the YEI has also contributed to the setting-up of individualised upskilling paths whose complementarity with the aims of the UP is apparent. With regards to Adult education Erasmus+ supports capacity building of adult education organisations and the improvement of teaching and learning provisions. The programme fosters the inclusion and employability of specific adult target groups with poor basic skills by supporting provisions for enhancing their basic skills and key competences. Again, this is fully aligned with the UP, and the associated synergies with the ESF should be fully exploited. Information and Guidance

As noted elsewhere in this report there was a general awareness amongst MAs and other stakeholders about the content of the NSA. However for the most part this was at a general level. The example of Italy is instructive here (see panel).

Effective dissemination of information: The case of Italy

The awareness of the New Skills Agenda among Managing Authorities was mostly limited to the key elements of the overall strategy; furthermore, knowledge about the UP goals and three-step approach seemed to be somewhat weaker. That said, steps had been taken to ensure that awareness of the NSA was raised. A presentation of the NSA was held at the annual ESF review meeting in Ostuni in November 2016 between Italian MAs and the European Commission. This event contributed to raising the awareness on the NSA and has played an important role in disseminating information on the agenda to MAs and spurring dialogue among them on its content and how the ESF might support it. No specific evidence, however, of any follow up to this presentation was gathered during the field research for the study. Nevertheless, the MAs show, in general, a high interest in the NSA, and are, in principle, open to promoting a better alignment between OPs and the NSA. But a need for further guidance on how to better integrate any new objectives emerging from the NSA – either in general or in relation to the UP - within the ESF was expressed.

Source: Country fiche for Italy

The example of Italy highlights the gains to be obtained from raising awareness about the NSA and providing guidance about how the ESF might supports its implementation. In general, there was a demand across all case study countries for more information and guidance relating to the NSA and its potential link to the ESF.

6.5.5 The limits of flexibility

If it were possible to develop NSA relevant actions which could be funded by the ESF, there is a question about whether the ESF would actually fund those activities. In general the answer was yes, as the section on flexibility above demonstrates. But some MAs gave a word of caution. Whilst there was a general view that the ESF encompasses sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing priorities, respondents pointed to:

- the competition for funding allocations at the national level in some countries. Given that funding had already been allocated, problems could be faced in trying to (re)allocate funding to new actions;
- there was a degree of bureaucracy involved in adapting the ESF to new priorities which has implications for the speed with which the ESF might respond to the NSA. Being able to bring about changes in programming of the ESF was considered to be difficult.

An important qualification was mentioned in the case of Romania (see panel).

> **Additional actions will require additional funding: The case of Romania**
> There was concern that if the NSA resulted in additional demands being made on ESF funding, this may have negative implications for the overall operation of the ESF in Romania. In other words, more activity might be required with the same level of funding which could result in outputs / outcomes being diluted. It was noted that EU sources of funding have a strong positive impact on the sustainability of activities in Romania. So, when actions specific to the NSA are decided upon there will be a need to consider the funding implications of those actions.

Source: Country fiche for Romania

Mention was made of the fact that if changes to ESF funding then this might prove a problem as it might require ESF reprogramming which would be unlikely to prove straightforward. But, as the example of Spain illustrates, this should not be overstated. (see panel).

> **Funding new activities: The example of Spain**
> In general terms, the perception gained from interviewees was that the main objectives of the NSA were already embedded within the Spain ESF 2014-2020 strategy. Indeed, there are plenty of related actions across the national and regional OPs germane to the UP. Therefore, re-programming of the OPs in order to adapt to the NSA is not considered necessary, though timely changes inspired by the NSA could be included when re-programming takes place. Finally, some specific areas may require further attention, as pointed out by Red.es, public department devoted to the implementation and dissemination of the use of ITC in Spain. Digital skills are stressed under the NSA as indeed basic skills, with nearly all jobs requiring their ever-growing use. Thus, Red.es believe that tacking full stock of such renovated emphasis on digital skills may call for additional funding, by way of adaptation/ reprogramming of some Spanish OPs.

6.6 Recommendations

6.6.1 Information and guidance

There was general awareness of the NSA amongst many MAs and stakeholders but much less so in relation to the detail of the measures which might be taken in support of the NSA and which the ESF might contribute to. As more detail about specific measures becomes available this may well provide MAs and other interested parties with the information they require, **calling for clear signposting of MAs as to their role in the NSA** within the boundaries set by the European treaties in the area of employment education and training policies.

That said, **there is merit in gaining a clearer overview of the governance structure of the NSA, or of its various strands/actions, at MS level**. This would help the EC monitoring implementation of NSA, different stakeholders and resources at play (including role of ESF MAs in the process) and at the same time channelling relevant information and guidance. The **Annual Review Meeting**, following the example mentioned for of Italy, represents one potential "entry point" and important means of conveying information to ESF interested parties. Another option that could be considered is the use of ex ante conditionalities for post 2020 with a view to ensuring that national models for the implementation of the UP are in place.

6.6.2 Learning lessons from the past

There is, perhaps, a need for any new measures, especially those related to the UP, to ensure that they pay heed to the obstacles previous similar measures encountered. This may well increase the likelihood of existing ESF programming to be fine-tuned to meet the needs of the NSA. In other words, if ESF support is sought for the UP, for instance, it would do well to tackle the obstacles that previous, typically ESF funded, programmes aimed at improving basic skills development have encountered.

6.6.3 Supporting new initiatives and flexibility of ESF Programming

If there is a preference to use ESF funding to support new initiatives that, to some extent, represent a break with the past with respect to the types of activity that have been funded, then there may be a need to **ring fence resources to support that activity**. Additional means of supporting new initiatives could be to foresee a "**financial reserve**" that could be used to adapt OPs to new needs emerged during the programming phase. By setting aside a separate resource this may facilitate a broader range of actions being taken. The issue to be explored is what type of reserve could be envisaged, such as

- at the EU, national or OP level;
- through centralised, decentralised or shared management, or also budget support, and
- according to what type of activating mechanisms (e.g. relevance to the CSR?).

The funding of the Youth Guarantee might provide some interesting insights: although it is not in the nature of NSA to adopt such a structured pathway, it might be worth exploring elements/tools/practices of the YEI that might be transferred to the NSA. It was mentioned, for example, that if ESF funding was required to support some types of digital skills initiatives, then this might require more than fine-tuning of existing OPs or IPs.

A point for discussion might also concern the adequacy of the seven-year programming period, which add an element of rigidity to the ESF as they may well exist policy priorities that become 'compelling' on a different timescale than that of the 7-year programming period. The in-itinere monitoring on the achievement of ET2020 targets may have highlighted a certain need for corrective actions in specific ET areas (such as adult learning, after much emphasis being placed on youth upskilling etc). This may well be a case for a "mid-term" initiative such as the NSA. The length of programming is an issue however which has bigger policy and political implications that fall out the scope of the present report. Perhaps a lesson to be learnt is to ensure that initiatives such as the NSA – if they are to be reliant on ESF funding for their implementation – are developed over a period that is consistent with ESF's programming cycle, rather than the other way around (i.e. decreasing the seven-year programming).

6.6.4 Monitoring and evaluation

The current 2014-2020 programming has introduced several innovations with regards to the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the ESF, including a key set of common indicators and reinforced evaluation provisions. These could facilitate the M&E of NSA-relevant achievements of the ESF. These shall provide MS and the EC with a valuable tool to, amongst other things: i) follow up the implementation of the NSA; ii) measure the effectiveness of ESF actions in this regard (vis à vis for example other types of interventions/measures), iii) identify remedial actions; iv) increase transparency and accountability of EU funding; and v) provide MS with a benchmarking tool to measure their performance vis à vis other countries (and incentivise through "peer pressure" efforts towards the implementation of the NSA and a better use of existing funds to this end).

The question is what kind on M&E tools could be devised, with a view not to further increase the burden on MAs and beneficiaries. Possible options could be as follow:

- use already existing M&E provisions to track the contribution of the ESF to the NSA, also in line with what has been outlined in this report (see section 5): e.g. measure low-skilled participants and relevant results in terms of training and qualifications; track expenditure/investment on NSA-related themes (e.g. investment in ICT for digital skills); monitor implementation of Ex ante conditionality on LLL;

- encourage MAs and MS to report on NSA-related achievements in AIR or Progress Reports (specific guidance as to which indicators/elements should be considered should be provided to this end, including which NSA actions deserve more attention – see below for a tentative list of relevant indicators for tracking the UP);
- encourage MAs and MS to implement thematic evaluations on NSA-relevant themes (e.g. quality of VET; Adult learning; etc).

Most, if not all MS, have a substantial proportion of their population that have poorly developed basic skills. It is linked to both social exclusion and competitiveness. Clearly it is in the interest of Member States to consider how they are performing on a range of indicators compared with a relevant comparator. It is in the interest of no MS to fall behind in the types of activity envisaged in the NSA. If benchmarking is to be undertaken then this will need appropriate indicators to be developed (and data collected). At the moment the data are somewhat muddy with respect to the extent to which existing monitoring processes will collect data that is directly relevant to assessing progress in the implementation of the NSA (in those areas in scope of ESF funding).

In relation to the UP optional indicators might well include, for example:

- amount of ESF funding allocated;
- % of target population participating in the UP;
- % completing each step of the UP;
- % of target population achieving a higher level qualification;
- % employment position of those completing UP at three months, six months, and one year after completion;
- % of population with low skills (plus year-on-year change);
- unit cost per successful intervention.

These are purely illustrative but indicate the type of input, output and outcome data that might need to be collected.

6.7 A final comment

It needs to be borne in mind that the ESF has funded several interventions related to actions of similar nature and objective with the ones to be implemented as part of the NSA. This is particularly the case with respect to the types of intervention that the UP might well lead to. On the basis of this finding, there is substantial potential for the ESF to support activities that might be initiated as a consequence of the NSA. The data collected from both the e-survey and the semi-structured interviews with Managing Authorities and other stakeholders is consistent with this finding: i.e. the ESF is well-suited to delivering programmes that will support the achievement of the NSA's goals. It is not, however, totally clear what specific actions the ESF is expected to support and what the nature of that support should be.

Annex I: Overall Methodology

I.1 Approach to the Study

The study was carried out in two distinct phases:

1. Phase 1- 'Interim': background on skills, analysis of the NSA structure, preliminary desk research at the EU-28 level, identification of a focus for the study, and specification of data collection tools; and
2. Phase 2 – 'Final': field research (e-survey and case studies) and drafting of the report's overall conclusions.

The data sources used in conducting the study are out in Table I.1.

Table I.1 – Geographical scope of the analysis and sources

Method	Source	EU-28 Analysis	In-depth analysis (case studies)
Desk Research	**SFC2014**	**X**	**X**
	General statistics and indicators	**X**	**X**
	CSR	**X**	**X**
	Additional programming documents and national skills strategy		**X**
Field Research	**E-survey**	**X**	**X**
	Interviews		**X**

I.1.1 Phase 1 – 'Interim'

The rationale that guided the first phase of the study can be summarised as follows.

1. Set the scene by analysing the most relevant challenges facing Europe in the field of skills and how Europe is geared to tackle them.

2. To thoroughly analyse the information contained in the Communication 'A NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE – Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness' (hereafter 'the NSA Communication') in order to better understand its alignment with the ESF and how it will lead to specific actions within the EU. This led to a distinction being made between:

    a. three general objectives/work strands of the NSA (or "level 3" of analysis)

    b. nine specific objectives of the NSA ("level 2")

    c. ten actions promoted by the NSA ("level 1")

    These levels are further explained below.

3. To identify specific activities that are directly or indirectly supported by the NSA, differentiating:

    a. activities that are relevant at the level of: general objectives/work strand (level 3); NSA's specific objectives (level 2); and actions (level 1);

    b. activities under the NSA actions that are likely to be relevant for funding under the ESF, and those that are not.

4. To categorise Specific Objectives within ESF OPs according to their relevance to the objectives of the NSA and how these match with the three-level structure of the NSA (as described above).

5. To carry out an analysis of the OPs' Specific Objectives that are relevant for the NSA and specifically to the UP in order to:

   a. look into how and to what extent the operationalisation of the ESF is relevant to the NSA and the UP; and

   b. investigate how the ESF is set to contribute to skills development.

The need to start by analysing thoroughly the structure and intervention logic of the NSA stems from the fact that, as anticipated, the NSA communication deals with a broad set of issues and sets out an equally wide scope for the objectives to be pursued in order to address them. The 10 specific actions set out by the NSA lead on to, respectively, specific activities that are often much narrower in scope or employ a more focused approach. Thus, a clear distinction between what is specifically prioritised within the NSA and its specific and general aims is provided in this report to accurately identify the extent to which the ESF is contributing to or will contribute to:

1. the general objectives of the NSA (hereafter level 3 of the analysis);

2. the specific objectives of the NSA (hereafter level 2 of the analysis);

3. the even more specific actions promoted by NSA (hereafter level 1 of the analysis).

Once the link between specific elements of the NSA and its potential for support under the ESF had been undertaken, the next stage of analysis undertaken was to assess the extent to which ESF funds have been allocated to date – under various thematic objectives – to activities that are germane to the NSA. This showed that activities have been funded under various TOs, to differing degrees by the MS, which are relevant to the NSA.

When looking in more detail at the capability of the ESF to contribute to the NSA, consideration is also needed for different national contexts. The recent use of ESF funds to support activities relevant to the NSA varies by MS, as do the specific skill issues which individual MS need to address (reflected to some extent in their CSRs – Annex V: CSR on skills development).

Carrying out in-depth field work with various ESF stakeholders / beneficiaries required the selection of countries that faced differing skill challenges. This has led to the identification of five Member States for the in-depth analysis, namely France, Italy, Romania, The Netherlands and Spain.

The last step of desk analysis was to analyse ESF common and specific indicators, as well as their progress, so as to gain estimates of how much the ESF is expected /has already proved to contribute to progress towards the objectives of the NSA.

I.1.2 Phase 2 – 'Final'

The second phase of the study consisted mainly of fieldwork by way of:

1. an e-survey for all ESF MAs at the EU-28 level; and
2. case studies in selected MS (mainly interviews and some additional desk research).

While details on how the consultation plan are set out in 'Annex IV: Consultation Plan' a brief overview of the two main data collection tools for the field research is provided below.

As a general note, it was expected and recognised that the survey and interviews have taken place at an early stage of the ESF adapting to the NSA. As such many actions and activities were found in the early stages of formation. Nevertheless, the findings from the field research indicate the extent to which responses are being formulated.

E-Survey for Managing Authorities

An online survey was undertaken of MAs in each of the 28 MS.[83] It was designed using standard online survey software and was addressed to all MAs and respondents were reminded up to three times to complete the survey. The e-survey took around 15 minutes to complete. It primarily used closed questions (where there were series of tick boxes based for pre-codes), though some open-ended questions were included. The e-survey was structured so that first it asked some general questions about the NSA and then it focused on the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathway. The questionnaire addressed issues relating to: coherence, relevance and awareness; flexibility; operationalisation and delivery; monitoring and evaluation; and sustainability and EU added value. The complete text of the e-survey is available in Annex VII: E-Survey of Managing Authorities) and a full set of results is available in Annex VIII.

Interviews

For drafting the case studies a range of stakeholders were interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The list of stakeholders included:

1. Managing Authorities;
2. Intermediary bodies (i.e. those agencies / organisations responsible for implementing ESF funded actions on behalf of Managing Authorities);
3. Main beneficiaries (i.e. institutional ones);
4. The national organisations with a responsibility for skills development in the county (and thereby a responsibility for the NSA).

The semi-structured interview schedules were tailored to the interests and responsibilities of the organisation the interviewee represents.

I.2 Identifying a focus for the study

In order to obtain a detailed insight into the way in which the ESF and NSA might work together it was decided to focus particular attention on a particular aspect of the NSA – the Upskilling Pathway and to conduct case studies in selected countries. The rationale for this is set out below.

I.2.1. A flagship initiative for the NSA: The Upskilling Pathways

As indicated above, the **NSA has a wide-ranging remit** to ensure that the EU's skills base can bring about both increased competitiveness and foster social inclusion. It is important to ensure that an understanding is obtained of how the ESF has, and will continue to, support the NSA in general, but also how it has contributed to specific areas of the NSA. The need for a more targeted, in-depth assessment of how the ESF contributes to a particular element of the NSA will ensure that both practical and useful information is provided for policymaking. This has led to a two-layer analysis, comprising:

1. a wide-ranging assessment of how the ESF has contributed to the overall implementation of the NSA; and
2. an in-depth analysis, including national case studies, with a focus on a particular aspect of the NSA. By focusing upon a particular aspect of the NSA, interviewees were able to talk concretely about specific actions that might be supported by the ESF, and more detailed information could be retrieved through the e-survey to ESF MAs. Without such a focus there was a danger that respondents would

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[83] The questionnaire has been developed by the FGB team in English and then translated in the language of the country in which it was implemented where needed.

discuss generalities rather than considering in more a detailed sense about how the ESF might actually support the NSA in practice.

The analysis carried out in section 2 and 3 highlighted the suitability of the Council Recommendation **'Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for adult learning'** (UP) (the former **Skills Guarantee)** to provide a focus for the study.

First of all, in the previous chapter, the evidence revealed that the UP is well aligned with TO10 (Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning), and especially ESF investment priority 10iii - to enhance equal access to lifelong learning – which funds activities that are directly relevant to the UP. The analysis in section 3 also showed that the issue of basic skills needs cuts across different themes and investment priorities, ranging from education to employability, adaptability and social inclusion. In other words, it is an area of activity where there is much to observe. As well as the UP being relatively well aligned with the ESF, one of the most important reasons for selecting it as a focus of the study is the potential scale of the task if proposes to address. For example, just over a quarter of people in the EU aged 15 to 64 years, have a level of educational attainment at ISCED level 2 or lower (27 % in 2016). And it is estimated that 70 million Europeans lack basic reading and writing skills. This has been identified as a major constraint on the growth of the EU economy, and restated as priority in the mid-term evaluation of the ET2020.

Amongst other reasons for focusing on the UP are the following:

1. from a timing perspective, it is one of the NSA actions that is most developed and refined, having already been adopted by the Council on 19 November 2016;
2. its scope, in terms of type of support promoted and target groups addressed, are well defined and allow for a better demarcation of relevant ESF activities;
3. it is one of the most relevant NSA actions with respect to the number of ESF specific objectives that are aligned with its purpose; and
4. it is innovative, as it strongly encourages MS to address issue of basic skills especially for low-skilled adults, an area where existing EU upskilling initiatives had not directly focused.

By selecting the UP one is able to observe the way in which the ESF has contributed, or is likely to contribute to a major area of skills policy.

But what is the intervention logic of the UP?

As anticipated, the **UP** tackles the issues relating to basic skills but will do so in a way that people will acquire labour market relevant skills. It will help adults with low levels of skill to **acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills** and/or progress towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent (EQF level 3 or 4 according to the country). It will achieve this **through three steps**:

1. **Skills assessment**

   An individual assessment of skills to enable low-qualified adults to identify their existing skills and their upskilling needs.

2. **Learning offer**

   An offer of education and training tailored to the specific needs of each individual (as identified by the skills assessment) and the needs of the labour market.

3. **Validation and recognition**

   Validation and recognition of the skills acquired.

In order to ensure effectiveness of the interventions, the UP recommendation also sets out key enabling principles, which include:

5. **Coordination and partnership** among relevant bodies and stakeholders in the field of active labour market policies and adult learning, to ensure an effective and holistic approach to meeting low-skilled needs;

6. **Guidance, outreach and support measures** to find them, inform them about the opportunities available within the Skills Guarantee and get them engaged, through practical guidance and support (also financial where needed and appropriate) in the upskilling process; and

7. **Monitoring and evaluation** to fine-tune interventions, including on outreach, guidance and support measures, and track progress.
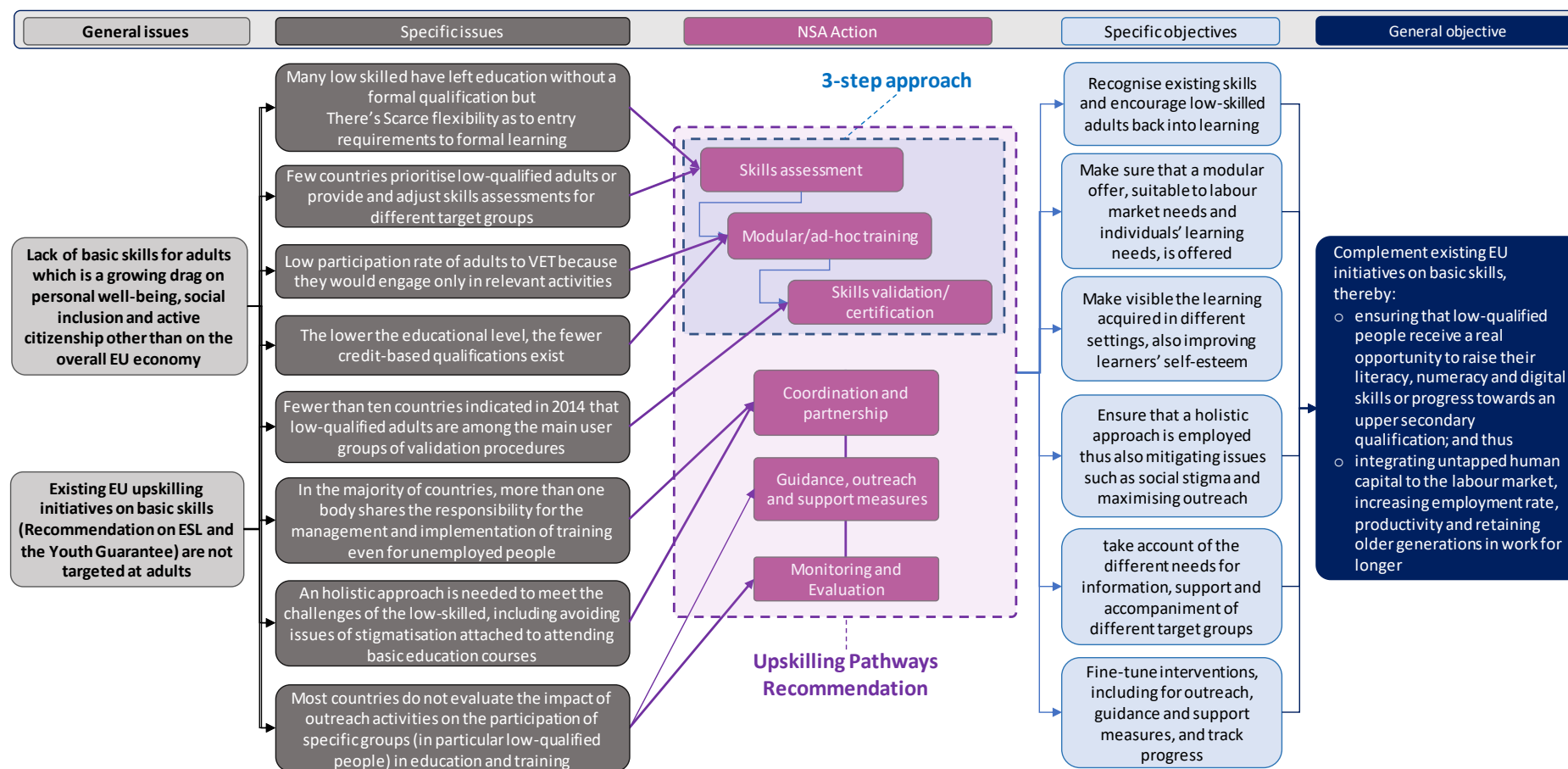
Whilst the UP Recommendation acknowledges that there is substantial work carried out by MS, also by means of ESIF, that is relevant to the UP, the main idea of the UP is that it seeks to coordinate existing offer at national, regional and local levels and target this towards defined groups of low-skilled. These should be encouraged back into learning through outreach measures and practical support, and because the opportunity for learning offered is particularly suitable both to their needs and to those in the labour market.

It is recommended that Member States outline measures for the implementation of the UP by mid-2018.

Error! Reference source not found. below illustrates the intervention logic of the UP, including the specific issues it seeks to address, its specific and broader objectives. This is based on an elaboration of the UP Recommendation, of the proposal of the EC for establishing a skills guarantee and relevant accompanying documents.

Figure I.1 - Intervention logic of the UP

General issues	Specific issues	NSA Action	Specific objectives	General objective

3-step approach

- Skills assessment
- Modular/ad-hoc training
- Skills validation/certification

- Coordination and partnership
- Guidance, outreach and support measures
- Monitoring and Evaluation

Upskilling Pathways Recommendation

General issues

- Lack of basic skills for adults which is a growing drag on personal well-being, social inclusion and active citizenship other than on the overall EU economy
- Existing EU upskilling initiatives on basic skills (Recommendation on ESL and the Youth Guarantee) are not targeted at adults

Specific issues

- Many low skilled have left education without a formal qualification but There's Scarce flexibility as to entry requirements to formal learning
- Few countries prioritise low-qualified adults or provide and adjust skills assessments for different target groups
- Low participation rate of adults to VET because they would engage only in relevant activities
- The lower the educational level, the fewer credit-based qualifications exist
- Fewer than ten countries indicated in 2014 that low-qualified adults are among the main user groups of validation procedures
- In the majority of countries, more than one body shares the responsibility for the management and implementation of training even for unemployed people
- An holistic approach is needed to meet the challenges of the low-skilled, including avoiding issues of stigmatisation attached to attending basic education courses
- Most countries do not evaluate the impact of outreach activities on the participation of specific groups (in particular low-qualified people) in education and training

Specific objectives

- Recognise existing skills and encourage low-skilled adults back into learning
- Make sure that a modular offer, suitable to labour market needs and individuals' learning needs, is offered
- Make visible the learning acquired in different settings, also improving learners' self-esteem
- Ensure that a holistic approach is employed thus also mitigating issues such as social stigma and maximising outreach
- take account of the different needs for information, support and accompaniment of different target groups
- Fine-tune interventions, including for outreach, guidance and support measures, and track progress

General objective

Complement existing EU initiatives on basic skills, thereby:
- o ensuring that low-qualified people receive a real opportunity to raise their literacy, numeracy and digital skills or progress towards an upper secondary qualification; and thus
- o integrating untapped human capital to the labour market, increasing employment rate, productivity and retaining older generations in work for longer

Source: own elaborations based on the text of the UP Recommendation, of the proposal of the EC for establishing a skills guarantee and its relevant accompanying documents

I.2.2. Identification of MS for the in-depth analysis

In order to glean further insights on the contribution of the ESF to the NSA, this study focuses on a number of MS which can be representative of the EU-28, whilst still allowing a more thorough analysis. Hence, a rationale was required for selecting countries for in-depth analysis. With part of the focus of the study being on the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathway, then there was an interest in identifying countries where there is a sizeable basic skills problem relative to the EU average. One way of addressing this is to look at:

- the extent of the basic skills problem in the EU; and
- the extent to which ESF funding has been used to tackle this problem.

In Figure I.2 an assessment was made of total ESF allocation on those IPs in OPs with selected Specific Objectives fully relevant to the initiative 'Upskilling Pathways'. In other words, an allocation on IPs in OPs aimed at equipping adults with low educational attainment with the skills to compete in a fast-changing labour market. Such an allocation may be intended as a proxy of the funding that may be used to achieve the objectives of the UP, which correspond, by and large, with upskilling of adults with low educational attainment. By using that information cross-classified by, respectively, participation in training and educational attainment an indication is provided of the inter-relationship between ESF activity and the demand for upskilling. **Error! Reference source not found.** I.2 shows ESF spending on upskilling by percentage of the working age population with relatively low educational attainment, and Figure I.3 by percentage of people who engaged in training in the last four weeks, and Figure I.4 by percentage of the population aged 18 to 24 years who are early leavers from the education system (as a proxy measure of those who are likely to have relatively less well developed basic skills). The United Kingdom, France and Romania stand out as spending relatively large amounts on activities of high relevance to the 'upskilling pathways' but with relatively modest levels of people with low levels of educational attainment, and in the case of France and the UK, both countries have relatively high shares of people engaged in training.

Figure I.2 - ESF funding of high relevance for the action 'Upskilling Pathways' by educational attainment
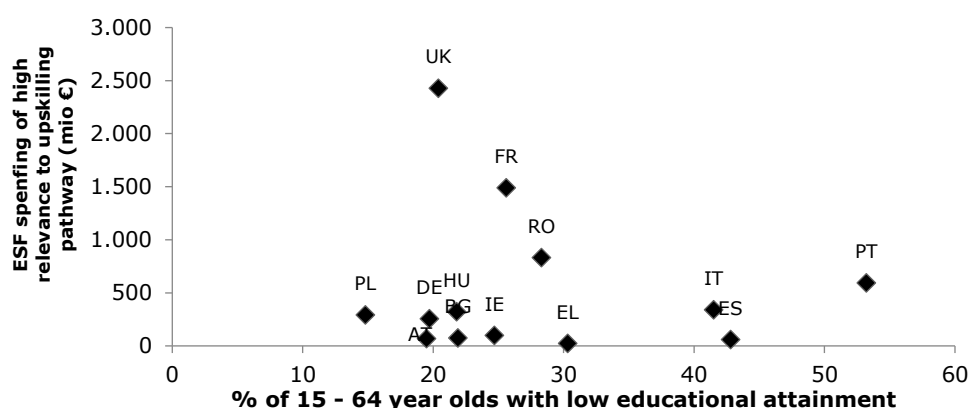
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014 and Eurostat edat_lfse_03

Figure I.3 - ESF funding of high relevance for the action 'Upskilling Pathways' by participation in training
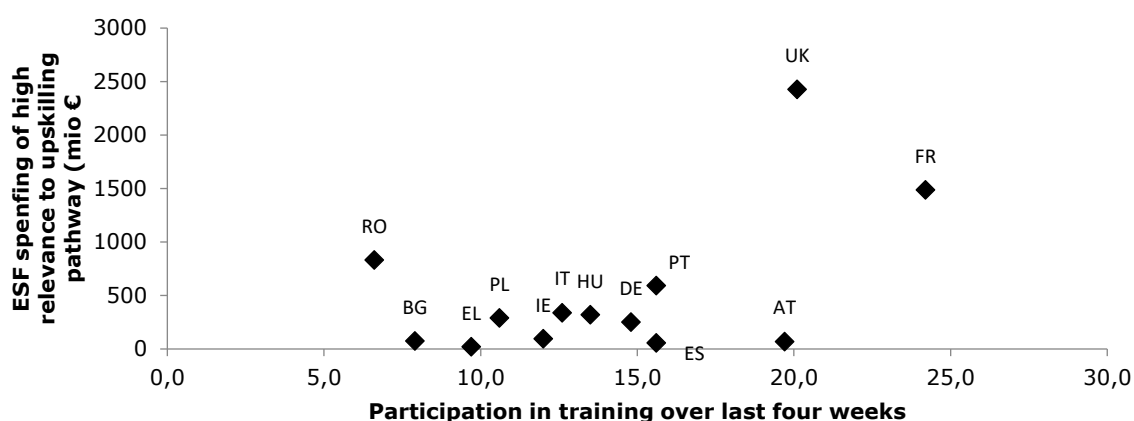
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014 and Eurostat trng_lfs_04

Figure I.4 - Level of early leaving from the education system
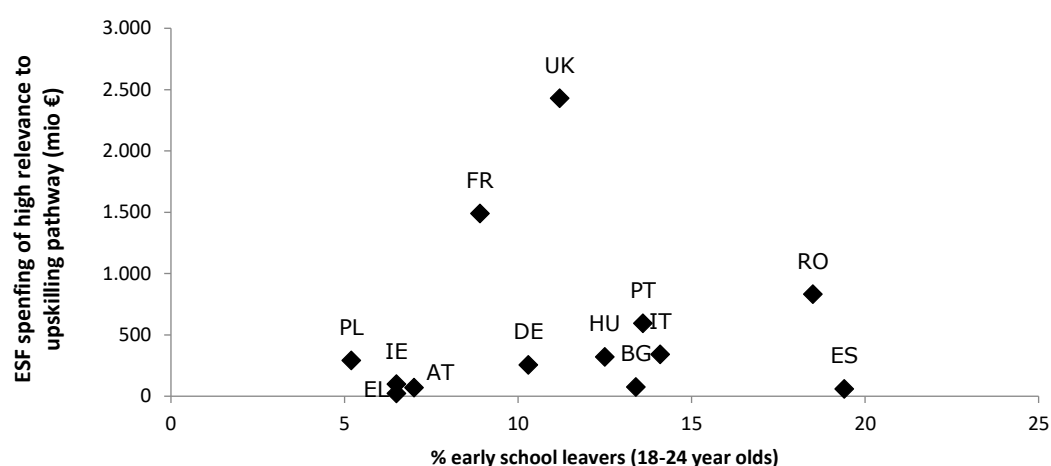
Source: own elaborations based on SFC2014 and Eurostat edat_lfse_edat_14

From a comparative perspective, it is useful to find a mix of countries that have used the ESF to different degrees to support skills – especially the upskilling pathway – and which face differing levels of engagement in skills development (measured with reference to educational attainment and participation in training). On this basis, the following countries are suggested:

1. substantial use of ESF but relatively high levels of educational attainment and training: **France**;
2. substantial use of ESF but relatively low levels of educational attainment / participation in training: **Italy, Spain and Romania**;
3. Limited use of ESF: the **Netherlands**.

The Netherlands is included as an example because it also allows an opportunity to confirm whether there are, or are not, activities funded under the ESF that are relevant to the Upskilling Pathways in a country where ESF resources are more limited and practice on adult learning is very well developed.

Annex II: The skills debate

II.1 Why skills matter

Skills may be regarded, in many respects, as a derived demand.[84] In other words, the demand for skills results from, amongst other things, the nature of the products and services produced in an economy (countries producing relatively high value-added, complex products and services will have a relatively high demand for skills, and vice versa). How one drives up the demand for skills might well lie largely outside the purview of skills policy. But there are important caveats to add:

1. countries often compete on their relative stocks of skills. In an age when countries have access to more or less the same technologies, often what differentiates their economic performance, other things being equal, is the quality of their human capital. In this way they are better placed to attract global investment and drive up their competitiveness;[85] and
2. where the skills system is not able to respond to the demand for skills, this can act as a drag on growth as a consequence of skill shortages.[86]

It is also apparent that individuals typically compete for jobs based on their skills. In general, individuals with relatively high levels of skills (however measured), tend to have a higher probability of being in work and, additionally, in receipt of relatively high wages. Where individuals lack the basic or minimum level of skills required by employers, their risk of being unemployed or being socially excluded is likely to be greater.

It is also increasingly apparent that individuals need to have access to lifelong learning – in its many guises – to avoid their skill sets becoming obsolescent. Young people entering the labour market today will be expected to spend longer in the labour market than their counterparts from 20 or 30 years ago. And because technical change is likely to transform the nature of work over the period they will be active in labour market, their skills will need to be periodically updated.

This places a number of challenges on national skills systems:

1. being able to ensure that the skills demand is at a sufficiently high level;
2. ensuring that people possess at least the basic skills to enter the labour market;
3. encouraging participation in lifelong learning; and
4. being able to anticipate skill demands to avoid costly skill mismatches occurring.

Therefore, one can say skills matter because not only are they an essential ingredient in the mix of policies that will bring about economic growth, but also because they are one of the means by which the benefits of that growth are shared amongst the population. Where individuals struggle to acquire at least basic skills, for whatever reason, they will be disadvantaged in making the transition into employment and in sustaining employment. But if the EU is to make the most of the potential stock of skills available to it – and in that way, make a contribution to economic growth – then it needs to ensure that it can equip people with the skills that the labour market demands in order to avoid skills mismatches.

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[84] Green, F. (2013) Skills and Skilled Work: An economic and social analysis. Oxford: Oxford University Press

[85] Jorgenson, D. W.; Fraumeni, B. M. (1992). Investment in Education and U.S. Economic Growth. *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 94, Supplement, pp. 51–70; Brown, P. et al. (2011) *The Global Auction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

[86] OECD (2015), "Relationship between skills and economic growth", in Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain, OECD Publishing, Paris; Aghion P, Boustan L., Hoxby C., and Vandenbussche J. (2009), "The causal impact of Education on Economic Growth: Evidence from U.S.", Brooking Papers on Economic Activity, spring; Hogarth, T. and Wilson, R.A. (2002) 'The demand for skills in England: from product market strategies to skill deficiencies', Oxford: ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance

II.2 Europe and its framework strategy in the area of skills

Skills policy is an important strand in the overall policy mix that aims to improve the EU's economic performance and bring about increased levels of social inclusion / cohesion. In particular, skills policy at the European level has, amongst other things, addressed:

1. how to increase levels of educational attainment;
2. bringing about higher levels of participation in lifelong learning;
3. how to better match skills demand to skill supply;
4. enhancing geographic mobility (given the emphasis on learning a second language); and
5. managing the challenges to employment posed by technical change and increasing digitisation.

There is evidence of these policy priorities in various flagship initiatives over recent years: the ET2020 targets;[87] New Skills for New Jobs;[88] and the New Skills Agenda.[89] The European Social Fund (ESF) has played an important role in funding projects that have tackled the issues highlighted above and is likely to continue to do so in the future. Although much progress has been made in, for instance, increasing levels of educational / skill attainment in the labour force, it is recognised that much remains to be done in this domain, as is recognised by the New Skills Agenda.[90]

Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) is the EU's framework for cooperation in education and training. It has set a number of benchmarks to be achieved by 2020 that all relate to boosting skills supply as follows:

1. at least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) should participate in early childhood education
2. fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science
3. the rate of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 should be below 10%
4. at least 40% of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education
5. at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning
6. at least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have had an experience abroad; and
7. the share of employed graduates (aged 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education 1-3 years ago) should be at least 82%.

If one takes the ET2020 targets then it is apparent that educational attainment levels are increasing. The percentage of early leavers from education has gradually declined and many countries have surpassed the target of reducing the level of early leaving to 10% or lower. There are, however, many countries where the percentage of early school

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[87] http://ec europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework_en
[88] European Commission (2008) New Skills for New Jobs Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs {SEC(2008) 3058}
[89] European Commission (2016) A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness {SWD(2016) 195 final}
[90] For a review of the current state of skills in the EU, see: DG EMPL (2016) 'Supporting skills development and matching in the EU' in Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2015. Luxembourg: Commission of the European Communities.

leavers is relatively high compared with the target of 10% or in comparison with the EU-average (see Figure II.1).

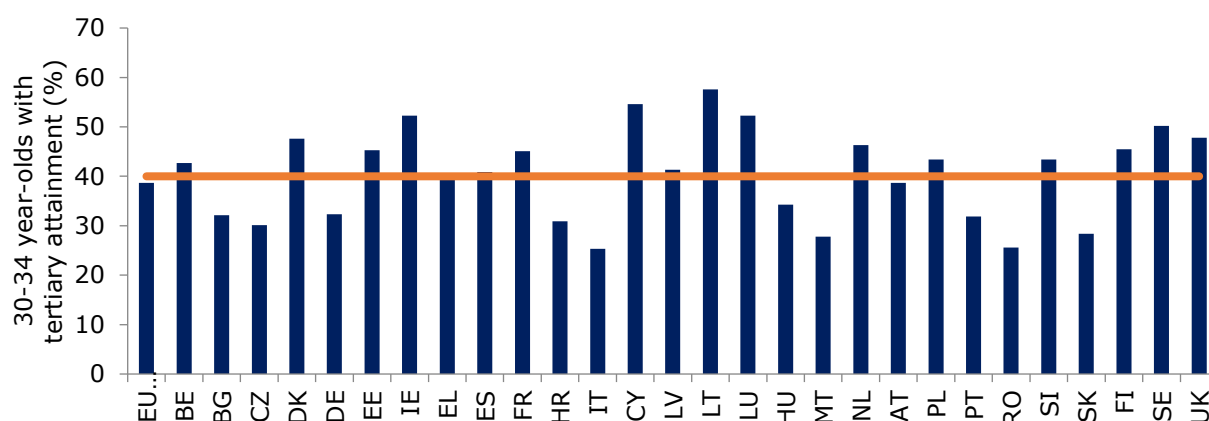Figure II.1 - Percentage of early school leavers, 2015
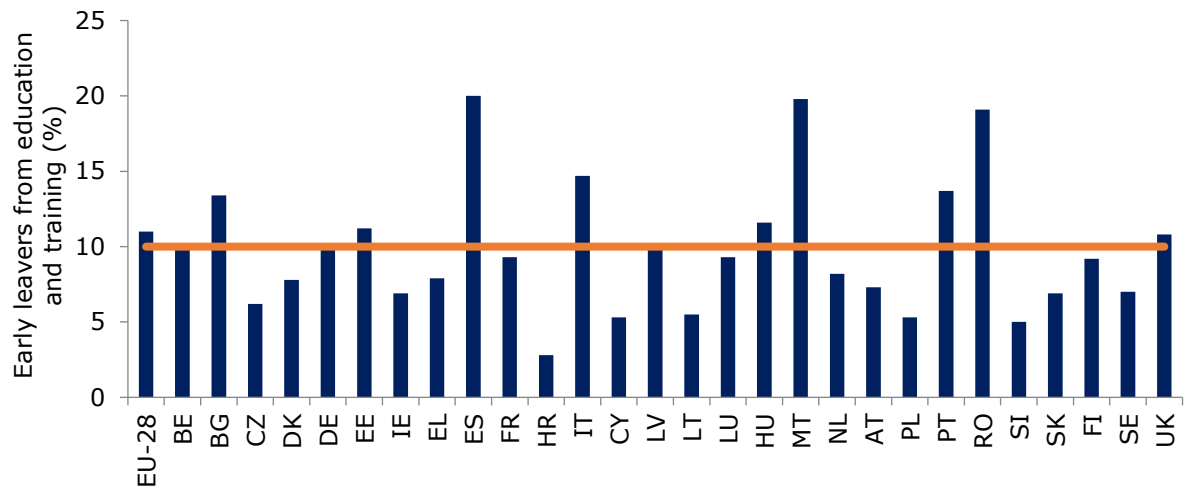
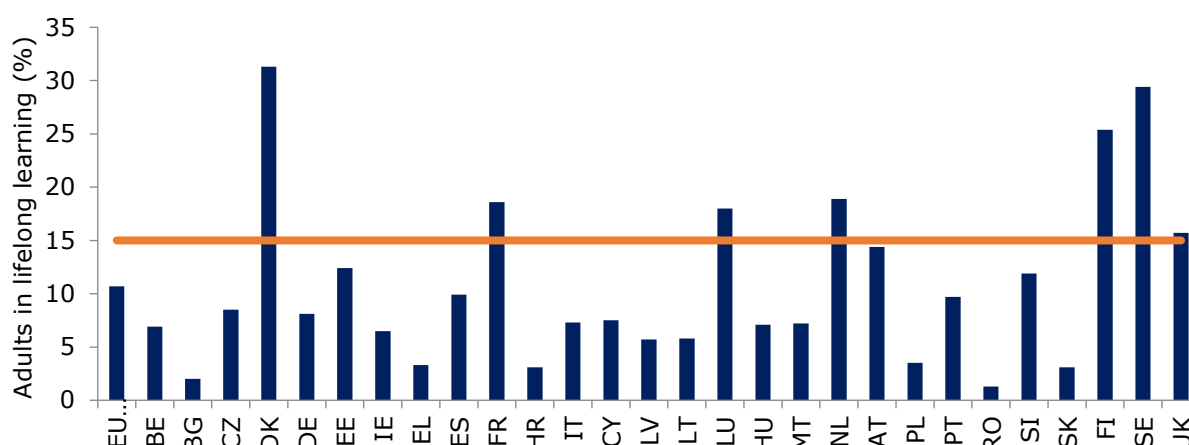*Source: CEDEFOP Way to 2020 workbook taken from EU-LFS*
Note: Percentage of the population aged 18-24 who have completed, at most, lower-secondary education and are not involved in further education or training

The above indicates that whilst there have been substantial improvements in raising levels of educational attainment in the EU – and thereby the stock of human capital – it remains the case that there is significant variation on a range of indicators and much still remains to be achieved if the EU is to meet its own targets. Hence the need for continued policy interventions to ensure that the EU has the skills it needs. It is important to mention, in this regard, the findings from PISA 2015. The European Commission's number one finding in relation to the PISA results was as follows:

'*When it comes to progress towards the 2020 benchmark of less than 15% low achievers, the EU as a whole is seriously lagging behind in all three domains and has taken a step backward, compared to the PISA 2012 results (science: 20.6%, +4.0 percentage points; reading: 19.7%, +1.9 percentage points; maths: 22.2%, + 0.1 percentage point). Low achievers cannot successfully complete basic tasks that are required in modern societies and the consequences of this underachievement, if it is not tackled successfully, will be eminent and costly in the long run for them individually, but also for societies as a whole*'. (PISA 2015: EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe, p. 3).[91]

Available data suggests that a substantial percentage of people in the EU who have low levels of educational attainment remains (see Figure II.2). There is also substantial variation across the EU with countries such as Malta and Portugal recording levels much higher than the EU-average.

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[91] European Commission (2016) PISA 2015: EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/pisa-2015-eu-policy-note_en.pdf

Figure II.2 - Adults with lower level of educational attainment (%), 2015
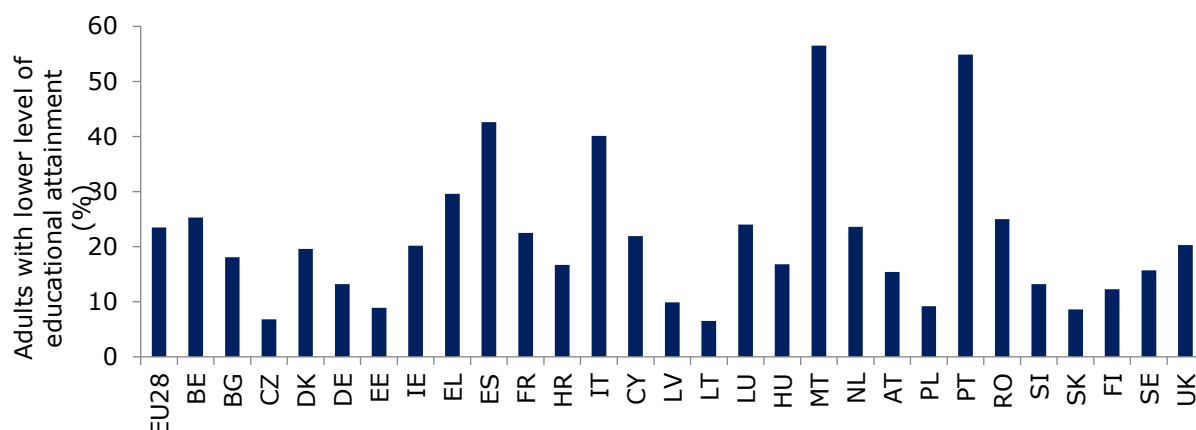
Source: CEDEFOP Way to 2020 workbook taken from EU-LFS
Note: Percentage of the population aged 25-64 who have completed, at most, lower-secondary education (ISCED 97 levels 0-2).

Returning to the ET2020 targets, the percentage of people who have attained a tertiary level education has been increasing but still lags behind the ET2020 target of 40% (see Figure II.3). Again, there is substantial variation among MS.

Figure II.3 - 30-34 year-olds with tertiary attainment (%), 2015

Source: CEDEFOP Way to 2020 workbook taken from EU-LFS
Note: Percentage of the population aged 30-34 who have successfully completed tertiary-level education. Tertiary education is defined as ISCED 5 and higher.

Finally, Figure II.4 shows the percentage of people who participate in lifelong learning. It shows that few counties have exceeded the ET2020 target of 15% of adults participating in lifelong learning. Only Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, and the UK have done so.

Figure II.4 - Adults in lifelong learning (%), 2015

Source: CEDEFOP Way to 2020 workbook taken from EU-LFS
Note: Percentage of the population aged 25-64 participating in education and training over the four weeks prior to the survey.

Many of the measures contained in ET2020 are concerned with boosting skills supply across the EU. Even the briefest perusal of the figures presented above shows that the state of skills supply remains uneven across the EU and that some countries still have much to do in order to achieve the benchmark targets by 2020. As will be seen in the following sections, the NSA directly addresses boosting skills supply through, for instance, the UP and the emphasis it gives to boosting the supply of digital skills. However, the NSA also stresses the importance of skills supply meeting labour market demand, hence the emphasis it places upon improving the provision of labour market intelligence in order that skills supply is better able to meet skills demand. This is important as there is a substantial evidence base pointing to substantial skill mismatches accruing across the EU.[92] The value added, therefore, of the NSA is the way in which it looks to increase further skills supply (thereby contributing to the ET2020 targets) but simultaneously looks to ensure that in boosting the skills supply, it will boost the supply of skills that are in demand in the labour market. The next section looks at the NSA in more detail.

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[92] Cedefop (2015) Skills Shortages and Skill Gaps in European Enterprises: striking a balance between vocational education and training and the labour market. Luxembourg: Publications Office; Cedefop (2015) Skills Qualifications and Jobs in the EU: the making of a perfect match? Luxembourg: Publications Office

Annex III: Data Collection Matrix

Table 1 below provides a combined overview of all analytical techniques and data sources that will be employed over the course of this study. These are linked to the issues identified for this study. This will provide you with an overall picture of how the evidence gathered for this study will be collated.

Table III.1 – data collection matrix

Issue	Research question	Method/Tool General	Method/Tool Specific	Source	Geographical scope
Coherence, relevance and awareness **(is the ESF, at present, relevant for providing support to the NSA? Are ESF implementing actors sufficiently cognisant of NSA actions and the way to support them?)**	To what extent do ESF OPs in MS support/promote activities in line with the objectives of the NSA, broken down in its three work strand, and of the UP in particular? Are National funds being used instead? If so, why?	Desk Research	Analysis of Specific Objectives, Common and Specific Indicators, Narrative sections (i.e. 3.1) of the AIRs	SFC2014	EU28
		Desk Research	Relevant national policies and strategies in the field	National documents	**Selected MS**
		Field Research	E-survey B.2, B.5a-g, B.6, B.7, C.2, C.6, C.7, B.3, C.4	E-survey	EU28
		Field Research	Interview template for Managing Authorities: 1.2, 1.3 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 1.2, 1.3, 1.6 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES: 1.2, 1.3	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	Which Investment Priorities are the most relevant within ESF OPs for the advancement of the NSA in general and of the UP in particular?	Desk Research	Analysis of SO	SFC2014	EU28
		Field Research	E-survey B.8, C.3	E-survey	EU28
		Field Research	Interview template for MA 1.2	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	Is basic skills development being addressed by ESF OPs/interventions in MS? In which MS is this particularly the case?	Desk Research	Analysis of General statistics, CSRs and SOs	General statistics SFC2014 CSRs	EU28
		Field Research	Interview template for MA 1.3, 3.1, 3.2 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 1.2, 2.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	What is the awareness level of NSA goals and proposed actions among ESF stakeholders?	Field research	E-survey B.1, C.1	E-survey	EU28
		Field research	Interview template for MA 1.1 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 1.1 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 1.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	In what way does the NSA contribute to the fulfilment of CSRs?	Desk Research	Analysis of CSR to triangulate with other information	CSRs	EU28

Issue	Research question	Method/Tool		Source	Geographical scope
		General	Specific		
			Additional programming documents	Additional programming documents	**Selected MS**
		Field Research	Interview template for MA 4.6 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 5.2	Interviews	**Selected MS**
Flexibility (is the ESF flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the NSA?)	Do ESF OPs already foresee/support actions that are aligned with the NSA in general or the UP in particular? Is there room for further alignment? Is there evidence of any adaptation of ESF OPs to NSA goals (with a focus on UP) following its launch? Are plans being made towards this end?	Field research	E-survey B.2, B.9, B.10, B.12 B.15, C.7, C.8, D.3,	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 1.5, 2.1, 2,2 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 1.4, 2.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	If activities under ESF have already been adapted to meet the NSA, how easy or difficult has it been to achieve this and what are the reasons behind any difficulty / ease of adaptation.	Field research	E-survey B.13, B.14	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 2.3, 2.4, 2.5	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	If ESF activity has yet to be adapted to meet the NSA, is this planned (and if not, why not?), and are any problems foreseen in adapting activities? What processes need to be gone through to ensure that activities can be adapted?	Field research	E-survey B.13, B.14, D.1, D.2, D.4, D.5, D.6	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 2.3, 2.4, 2.5	Interviews	**Selected MS**
Operationalisation and delivery (In what way is the ESF contributing to progressing towards the objectives of the UP?)	What activities/typologies of interventions consistent with the UP are planned or may be planned over the next years? (see also below)	Desk Research	Analysis of Specific Objectives, Common and Specific Indicators, Narrative sections (i.e. 3.1) of the AIRs	SFC2014	EU28
		Field research	Interview template for MA 3.7, 3.8, 3.9 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 1.5 (may apply also below) Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 2.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	- Has the ESF assisted/ will it assist with outreach activities to ensure that those people most in need of the support of the Upskilling Pathway actually participate in it? If so, how?	Field research	E-survey B.5a	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 3,3 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 2.7	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	- Is the ESF funding /will it fund Skills Assessment	Field	E-survey B5.a	E-survey	EU28

Issue	Research question	Method/Tool		Source	Geographical scope
		General	Specific		
	activities? If so, in what way? For example, has it helped/will it help in the development of assessment tools, training of assessors, etc? In relation to the Learning Offer, how has the ESF been used / will be used to ensure that it is possible to tailor training to the needs of a specific individual? Has it/ will it, for instance, supported/support institutions in providing that training, developed on-line tools to assist individuals, etc.? What actions are planned over the next years?	research	Interview template for MA 3.4, 3.5 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	- Is the ESF assisting / will it assist with the validation of individual skills? If so, in what way? Is this through supporting a national qualifications framework? Is this through developing an output based training system? Is the ESF supporting / will it support the validation of the individual plan that comes out of the Skills Assessment leading to recognition of the skills the individual acquires by completing the learning provided? Is validation of prior learning part of the process that ESF supports?	Field research	E-survey B5.a	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 3.6 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 2.1, 2.2, 2.4	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	- What formative lessons have been learnt to date about delivering actions (or planning to deliver actions) relevant for present or future support of the Upskilling Pathways? What strategies have been followed to deal with the challenges faced?	Field Research	Interview template for MA 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 4.1, 4.2 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 4.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
Monitoring & Evaluation **(is the current ESF monitoring system suitable to track progress towards the objectives of the NSA?)**	What type of M&E data are available to support evidence on ESF support to NSA/skills development?	Field Research	E-survey E.1, E.2, E.3	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 4.2 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 3.2	Interviews	**Selected MS**
Expected and actual achievements	Which operational programmes – and under which IPs – envisage activities that may be relevant for the UP? Which are the expected key achievements and the main target groups set by these? How are they progressing?	Desk Research	Analysis of Specific Objectives, common and specific indicators from the AIRs	SFC2014	EU28

Issue	Research question	Method/Tool		Source	Geographical scope
		General	Specific		
(what role will the ESF play with respect to the NSA objectives? What are the general effects on beneficiaries and on the socio-economic context?)		Field Research	Interview template for MA 4.1 I(to triangulate with the analysis of Specific Objectives) Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders	Interviews	**Selected MS**
	What are the expected effects of the various ESF activities relevant for the NSA (and for the UP in particular) on beneficiaries and on the socio-economic context?	Desk Research	Additional programming documents	Additional programming documents	**Selected MS**
		Field Research	Interview template for MA 4.3, 4.4 Interview template for Training/Skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 5.1 Interview template for BENEFICIARIES 3.1	Interviews	**Selected MS**
Sustainability and EU added value	What is the added value of the ESF support to the NSA? What would happen if the ESF ceased to support the NSA? Are the expected outcomes sustainable?	Field Research	E-survey B.4, C.5	E-survey	EU28
			Interview template for MA 4.4, 4.7 Interview template for Training/skills agencies/Institutional stakeholders 5.1, 5.3	Interviews	**Selected MS**

Annex IV: Consultation Plan

In undertaking the fieldwork element of the study, it was followed the plan outlined below on a stage-by-stage basis. Certain activities have taken place concurrently.

Stage 1: Identification of key stakeholders

For the e-survey (EU28 analysis), FGB has used the contact list of MAs listed in SFC2014 (under "officials in charge" field of the OP).

For the in-depth analysis (case studies) the three groups of stakeholders consulted have been identified as follows:

- **Managing authorities**, or, where relevant, **Intermediate bodies**:
- **Main beneficiaries** (organisations receiving ESF funds for interventions germane to the NSA); and
- **Ministries and agencies** responsible for ALMPs / skills development.

Managing Authorities are viewed as a key stakeholder as they are in charge of the programming, implementation (including project selection) and M&E of the OPs. They are expected to possess broad knowledge of ESF activities along with specific information on programming choices, current and future interventions, procedures, and monitoring and evaluation tools. Information will be retrieved for all the analytic criteria of the study, thus including relevance and awareness, adaptability, operationalising, monitoring and evaluation. Questions are customised to take full account of the managing role of the MAs.

Intermediary bodies may be concerned with similar tasks, although a lesser involvement at the strategic level is anticipated. Thus, questions may be adapted by the interviewer based on the IB's specific duties.

Main Beneficiaries are engaged in the thematic report as they may provide crucial insight into the operationalisation and implementation of the relevant interventions. Interviews have focused on the UP with a view to assessing to what extent existing interventions are already unfolding along its lines, as well as the impact of the NSA on projects either ongoing or under preparation.

Ministries and agencies responsible for ALMPs/ skills development have provided key information on how national strategies tie in with the NSA (and are mirrored in the ESF). Accordingly, questions to them have focused on the relevance of the NSA considering the national context, as well as its link with the ESF. In case the organisation bears any responsibility in the Monitoring and Evaluation of ESF funds, questions will also investigate this matter.

This categorisation of stakeholders aimed to address those who have a substantial responsibility or interest in the programming, operationalisation, implementation and M&E of the ESF, especially in the domain of skills development. It also ensures that the information extracted is, to a high extent, transparent and unbiased, by contrasting the views of various stakeholders playing different roles in the process and interested in the effective achievement of the NSA objectives.

Country experts in charge of case studies have selected and identified the relevant stakeholders and key individuals to be contacted, in agreement with FGB. Beneficiary organisations to be contacted have been identified as the interviews with Managing Authorities and Intermediary Bodies progressed (i.e. the snowball technique).

The number of interviews carried out for each MS should range from 5 to 10, according to information needs and ESF funding volume/number of OPs in the country.

In MS with multiple OPs MAs have been contacted, so as to cover different categories of regions (more developed, less developed and in transition), and ensure geographic (national/regional) and thematic OP coverage in each country. The Managing Authority in charge of skills development national OPs has always been included.

At least two main beneficiaries have been contacted and at least one training/skills development institutional body has been contacted (where relevant).

Stage 2:   Contact relevant agencies

For the e-survey, MAs has been sent an invitation to conduct the e-survey and provided with a link to the survey and contact details of FGB. The survey has been administered either in English or the national language. All MAs have been offered the possibility to receive a questionnaire in their own language.

For the semi-structured interviews a letter of introduction has been sent to the identified stakeholders/individuals by the country experts outlining the purpose of the interview, along with the interview template with questions to be discussed.

Stage 3:   Design of e-questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule

Drafts of the e-survey questionnaire and the semi-structured interview schedules will be prepared and shared with DG EMPL. These will then be piloted in one country (we propose Italy). Just to be sure that the semi-structured interview template has been interpreted correctly by the country expert, there will be a discussion between the FGB lead team and the national experts to clarify exactly what is being asked in the e-questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews.

Stage 4:   Fieldwork

The fieldwork will be conducted over a four to six-week period. For the semi-structured interviews these will be conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone.

The fieldwork for the e-survey will be undertaken using standard e-survey software package. It will collate the data automatically into a data set.

Stage 5:   Data analysis

To analyse the semi-structured interviews a grid of analysis will be constructed (see Table 3). In a spreadsheet a row will represent each respondent and in each column there will be a particular topic / sub-topic. In each cell a summary of the respondent's answers will be provided in English. This then provides the basic tool for analysing the semi-structured interviews (a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques). This can be used to identify themes arising in the answers to each question. The interview data will be grouped according to: the country in which it was collected and the type of respondent (MA, ministry agency / beneficiary, respectively).

Each country expert will supply their spreadsheet – with entries in English – to lead FGB team so that the results can be analysed by the FGB team.

In order to show what the grid of analysis might look like, an illustrative example is provided below. In practice, the results from the analysis will be fuller than those in the example provided below. FGB will design the grid of analysis that each national research team will produce.

Table IV.1 - Example of grid of analysis

Respondent ID	Country	Type of respondent (MA, ministry, beneficiary)	Example topic			
			Awareness level	Current activities	Planned activities	Etc.
001	UK	MA	Not very aware, has heard of it but not sure about content	None seem particularly relevant given the nature of the ESF	Will probably need to implement actions, as the NSA is likely to be important for country, but at the moment cannot think of how it might be implemented	
002						
Etc.						

For the e-survey, the data will be analysed using a standard software package such as SPSS or Stata.

Stage 6: Reporting

A synthesis report will be prepared by the FGB team. For purposes of analysis it will contain analysis by country and the type of respondent (managing authorities, ministries and agencies, and beneficiaries, respectively). The structure of the final report will be agreed with the Commission in advance.

The initial desk research will have identified the main issues to be explored in the report. It is envisaged that there will be section based on the desk research that identifies key themes to be explored in the interviews and e-surveys. In a separate section, the analysis of the interview and survey data will be used to explore the identified themes in greater detail. Ideally, the e-survey will provide a synthetic, EU level indication of the importance / relevance of a particular issue and the semi-structured interviews can then be used to explore in more detail the factors that might underlie the response identified in the survey. Finally, there will be a section that synthesises the results from the desk research and survey / interviews that gives an insight into how the ESF can support the NSA and UP.

Annex V: CSR on skills development

	2014	2016	Recitals 2016
Belgium	• Address skills shortages and mismatches. • Purse coordinated education and training policies addressing the pervasive skills mismatches.	• Move forward with education and vocational training reforms • Provide training support for disadvantaged groups, in particular people from a migrant background.	Educational inequalities linked to socioeconomic background are amongst the highest in the UE and poor educational outcomes partly explain the observed underperformance on the labour market of people with a migrant background. The education reforms currently being introduced are particularly designed to tackle early school leaving, and improve the provision of early childhood care and early childhood education. The relevant authorities seek to improve the quality and relevance of the vocational system. These reforms could facilitate a smoother transition towards a knowledge-intensive and increasingly service oriented economy and alleviate skills mismatches and persistent labour shortages in certain occupations.
Bulgaria	• Adopt the School Education Act and pursue the reforms of vocational and higher education in order to increase the level and relevance of skills acquired at all levels. • Strengthen the quality of vocational education and training institutions and improve access to lifelong learning.	• Increase the provision of quality education for disadvantaged groups, including Roma	The education system has limited capacity to include vulnerable groups and equip learners with relevant skills (i.e. Roma and pupils from poor families). Removing barriers to the participation in early childhood education of disadvantaged children is essential to increase educational outcomes and prevent dropouts. A new Pre-school and School Education Act adopted by the Parliament in September 2015 is an important step towards a comprehensive reform of the school system. Enrolment and graduation rates in tertiary education are on the rise and the employment rate of recent graduates is recovering slowly, although it remains significantly below the EU average.
Czech Republic	• Ensure that the accreditation, governance and financing of higher education contribute to improving its quality and labour market relevance.	• Raise the attractiveness of the teaching profession	The higher education reform was adopted by the parliament in January 2016. The attractiveness of the teaching profession remains a challenge, with relatively low pay being seen as one of the causes. A new career system for teachers is being developed to increase the attractiveness of the profession, but its implementation has been postponed. Educational outcomes are generally good, but they are strongly influenced by students'

	• Make the teaching profession more attractive.		socioeconomic backgrounds (i.e. the educational outcomes of disadvantaged groups, in particular the Roma community, are very low). Training opportunities for teachers to help them deal with this issue are underdeveloped, with a low proportion of teachers taking part in professional development activities related to teaching mixed groups and inclusive education. A significant number of measures towards inclusive education have been taken and are beginning to be implemented.
Denmark	• Improve educational outcomes, in particular for young people with a migrant background, and the effectiveness of vocational training. • Facilitate the transition from education to the labour market, including through a wider use of work-based training and apprenticeships.	• No specific recommendations	Nothing to report.
Germany	• Improve the employability of workers by further raising the educational achievement of disadvantaged people.	• Achieve a sustained upward trend in education.	Although the overall labour market performance is very strong, ageing-related labour and skills shortages are looming, calling for full use of the existing labour force The labour market potential of certain groups, especially women and people with a migrant background, remains under-utilised and work disincentives, especially for second earners, remain in place.
Estonia	• Improve skills and qualification levels by expanding lifelong learning measures and systematically increasing participation in vocational education and training, including in	• No specific recommendations	Implementation of the Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, together with the Vocational Education and Training programme for 2015-2018, helped increase participation in vocational education and training, and its labour market relevance. The proportion of vocational education and training students in apprenticeships is expected to increase but the dropout rates in vocational education and training remain a matter for concern. Labour and skills shortages may constitute a barrier to greater investment in high

	apprenticeships.		technology sectors.
Ireland	• Advance the ongoing reform of the further education and training (FET) system, employment support schemes and apprenticeship programmes. • Offer more workplace training. • Improve and ensure the relevance of FET courses and apprenticeships with respect to labour market needs.	• No specific recommendations	Skills mismatches remain and skills shortages have emerged in certain areas, while upskilling and reskilling opportunities remain insufficient and the decrease in education expenditure could have a negative impact on educational outcomes in the future.
Spain	• Provide good quality offers of employment, apprenticeships and traineeships for young people. • Effectively implement the new educational schemes to increase the quality of primary and secondary education. • Increase the labour-market relevance of vocational education and training and of higher education, in particular by enhancing the cooperation with employers and supporting the training of trainers and tutors.	• Take further measures to improve labour market integration, by focusing on individualised support and strengthening the effectiveness of training measures. • Take further measures to improve the labour market relevance of tertiary education (including by incentivising cooperation between	The effectiveness of activation and active labour market measures depends heavily on the capacity of employment services to design and offer individualised support to beneficiaries. The implementation of recent reforms of active labour market policies is progressing slowly and the capacity of the public employment services to provide effective, individualised counselling and job search assistance is still limited.

		universities, firms and research institutions).	
France	• Pursue the modernisation of vocational education and training, implement the reform of compulsory education, and take further actions to reduce educational inequalities. • Improve the transition from school to work, in particular by stepping up measures to further develop apprenticeship with a specific emphasis on the low-skilled.	• Improve the links between the education sector and the labour market, in particular by reforming apprenticeships and vocational training, with emphasis on the low-skilled.	The transition from school to work remains challenging and the least qualified young people are the most affected. Recourse to apprenticeship is decreasing among low-qualified categories in a context of differentiated regional strategies and a limited capacity of the system to adapt to new economic needs. The offer of training for the unemployed, less qualified workers and SME employees remains insufficient. The ongoing vocational training reforms, including on governance, incentives and counselling and the new targeted unemployed training plan are still to be fully implemented and should be reinforced.
Croatia	• Mobilise the private sector to offer more apprenticeships. • Implement measures to improve the labour market relevance and quality of education outcomes by modernising the qualification systems, by putting in place quality assurance mechanisms and by improving school-to-work transitions.	• Provide appropriate up- and re-skilling measures to enhance the employability of the working-age population, with a focus on the low-skilled and the long-term unemployed.	The unemployment rate is very high. Youth unemployment remains a key concern, pointing to weaknesses in the education system, and there is still room to improve the effectiveness, monitoring and evaluation of the Youth Guarantee. Long-term unemployment rates have fallen recently but are still about twice the EU average. Participation in lifelong learning remains very low, due to an underdeveloped adult education system.
Italy	• Increase the use of work-based learning in upper secondary vocational education and	• Implement the reform of active labour market policies, in	In 2015, Italy deeply reformed its labour market rules and institutions through the so-called 'Jobs act' reform. Implementing the reform of active labour market policies is key to activating those further away from the labour market, in particular the long-

	training and strengthen vocationally-oriented tertiary education. • Create a national register of qualifications to ensure wide recognition of skills.	particular by strengthening the effectiveness of employment services.	term unemployed and young people.
Cyprus	No document exists	• Enhance the capacity of the public employment services and their provision to the long-term unemployed.	Some measures have been taken in the areas of active labour market policies and public employment services. However, the latter still lack the capacity to meet demand, to deliver quality job-search assistance and counselling and to reach out to the non-registered unemployed. Plans to strengthen the administrative capacity of the public employment services, including the specialisation of, and an increase in, the number of counsellors directly serving customers' needs, have been delayed. Participation of young people in vocational education and training remains low and is characterised by a lack of employer engagement in the education of students. However, measures are currently being implemented.
Latvia	• Step up implementation of the higher education reform, in particular through the establishment of an independent accreditation agency. • Provide career guidance at all education levels, improve the quality of vocational education and training, including by strengthening apprenticeship	• Speed up the curricula reform in vocational education, establish a regulatory framework for work-based learning and increase their offer. • Improve the accessibility, quality and cost-effectiveness of the healthcare system.	While Latvia has made progress in reforming the higher education system, improvements of vocational education and training are necessary, particularly with respect to reforming curricula and setting up a regulatory framework for work-based learning in order to improve their quality and availability. Social partners can play a role in the development of apprenticeship-type schemes, as outlined in the Vocational Education Law.

Lithuania	• Address persistent skills mismatches by improving the labour-market relevance of education inter alia based on skills forecast systems and promote life-long learning. • In order to increase the employability of young people, prioritise offering quality apprenticeships, other forms of work-based learning, and strengthen partnership with the private sector.	• Strengthen investment in human capital and address skills shortages, by improving the labour market relevance of education, raising the quality of teaching and adult learning.	Efforts should be pursued to ensure high quality teaching, which is crucial to tackling underachievement and educational shortcomings. Furthermore, there are weaknesses in the quality of teaching in higher education and its ability to foster innovation. The persistently low level of participation in adult learning is undermining efforts to improve the quality of human capital and increase productivity. There are signs of emerging skills shortages in certain sectors of the economy. Those skills shortages are expected to become more acute in the future. It is therefore important to improve the labour market relevance of education, streamline the structure and funding of the educational system, develop life-long learning and improve the targeting and effectiveness of active labour market policies.
Luxembourg	• Pursue efforts to reduce youth unemployment for low-skilled jobs seekers, through a coherent strategy, including by addressing skills mismatches. • Accelerate the implementation of the reform of general and vocational education and training to better match young people's skills with labour demand.	• No specific recommendations	Nothing to report.
Hungary	• Support the transition between different stages of education and towards the labour market. • Implement a higher-	• Take measures to improve educational outcomes and to increase the	The average performance of Hungarian students in basic skills was below the EU average in the 2012 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the proportion of low-achievers increased between 2009 and 2012. The influence of the socioeconomic background and school location on educational

	education reform that enables greater tertiary attainment, particularly by disadvantaged students.	participation of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma, in mainstream education.	performance is among the strongest in the UE. The lack of equal access to quality mainstream education is particularly acute for Roma. Hungary has introduced a number of measures that aim to address low-achievement more effectively. However, important details on the implementation of these measures are not available, making it difficult to assess their potential impact. A systemic approach to promoting inclusive mainstream education has yet to be developed. The announced implementation plan for the early school leaving strategy has yet to be published. The transition between different forms and stages of education remains difficult and the implementation of recent reforms in vocational education should be targeted at facilitating transitions.
Malta	• Continue policy efforts to address the labour-market relevance of education and training by stepping up efforts on the reform of the apprenticeship system.	• Take measures to strengthen labour supply, in particular through increased participation of low-skilled persons in lifelong learning.	Significant investments have been made, but education and training outcomes are still below target. This affects the quality of labour supply and the labour market participation rate. The educational attainment of Malta's workforce is still among the lowest in the Union. Malta is implementing a comprehensive strategy for lifelong learning, but participation in lifelong learning programmes is still limited, particularly among those with low educational attainment. Challenges in this area include targeted outreach, improved access to training and partnerships between education and training institutions and employers.
Netherlands	• No specific recommendations	• No specific recommendations	
Austria	• Improve educational outcomes in particular for disadvantaged young people including those with a migrant background. • Improve strategic planning in higher education and enhance measures to reduce dropouts.	• Take steps to improve the educational achievements of disadvantaged young people, in particular those from a migrant background.	Education outcomes depend heavily on socioeconomic background. The drop-out rate of pupils with a migrant background is more than three times higher than that of those without a migrant background and there is an additional challenge to integrate young refugees and migrants of compulsory school age and above into the education and training system.
Poland	• Strengthen efforts to	• Increase	The Polish labour market faces significant challenges — an ageing

	reduce youth unemployment, in particular by further improving the relevance of education to labour market needs, increasing the availability of apprenticeships and work-based learning places. • Increase adult participation in lifelong learning in order to adjust skills supply to skills demand.	participation in the labour market, by starting improving the labour market-relevance of education and training	labour force, low productivity and high segmentation of the labour market. These are coupled with shortcomings in the education system. The education system still fails to equip pupils sufficiently with the transversal skills needed for the rapidly changing labour market and innovation. The degree of internationalisation of Polish higher education is very limited, both in terms of the number of foreign students and participation in international scientific collaboration. The financing model of higher education does not promote quality sufficiently. According to employers, graduates lack transversal skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, or teamwork. Participation in lifelong learning is low, and vocational education and training do not correspond to market needs.
Portugal	• Reduce skills mismatches, including by increasing the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training and fostering cooperation with the business sector.	• No specific recommendations	Nothing to report.
Romania	• Increase the quality and access to vocational education and training, apprenticeships, tertiary education and of lifelong learning and adapt them to labour market needs.	• Strengthen the National Employment Agency's services to employers and jobseekers, in particular by tailoring. • Take action to increase the provision of quality education, in	Romania still faces education challenges. Several strategies cover lifelong learning, vocational education and training, tertiary education and early school leaving. However, the early school leaving rate remains well above the EU average, in part due to significant implementation delays of the strategy approved in 2015. Prevention and remedial programmes are limited. Vulnerable groups such as Roma and children from poor families continue to face obstacles in accessing and completing quality education, especially in rural areas. Participation in upper secondary vocational education and training is above the EU average, but the dropout rates remain high. The tertiary attainment rate is increasing, but the quality and labour

		particular among Roma.	market relevance of higher education is limited. Participation in adult education is very low.
Slovenia	• Address skills mismatches by improving the attractiveness of vocational education and training and by further developing cooperation with the relevant stakeholders in assessing labour market needs.	• Increase the employability of low-skilled and older workers, including through targeted lifelong learning and activation measures.	Labour market performance is gradually improving and social conditions have stabilised. Job creation has picked up considerably and unemployment is decreasing. However, participation rates of older and low-skilled workers remain a challenge.
Slovakia	• Take measures to increase the quality of teaching in order to raise educational outcomes. • Reinforce the provision of work-based learning in companies in vocational education and training. • Adopt measures to improve access to high quality and inclusive pre-school and school education for marginalised communities, including Roma, and take steps to increase their wider participation in vocational training and higher education.	• Improve activation measures for the long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged groups, including individualised services and targeted training. • Improve educational outcomes by making the teaching profession more attractive.	Low levels of education and skills and discrimination are factors influencing Slovak poor labour market participation. Measures to address unemployment have been taken in the area of vocational education and training, subsidised jobs and job counselling. However, the successful implementation of most of these reforms will depend on the capacity of the public employment service. Despite reorganisation of the Central Labour Office and improved access to training, there are still difficulties in introducing individualised support to the long-term unemployed and to vulnerable groups.
Finland	• Improve the labour-market prospects of	• Take measures to reduce skills	The arrival of a comparatively large number of migrants and refugees in Finland in 2015 could serve to counter the effects of

	young people and the long-term unemployed, with a particular focus on vocational education and targeted activation measures.	mismatches.	population ageing, but only if they are successfully integrated into the labour market and the education system. There are matching problems in the labour market, partly due to the structural change in the economy, as new jobs are created in geographical areas and industries other than those where jobs have been lost.
Sweden	• Take appropriate measures to improve basic skills and facilitate the transition from education to the labour market, including through a wider use of work-based training and apprenticeships.	• No specific recommendations	
United kingdom	• Ensure employer engagement by placing emphasis on addressing skills mismatches through more advanced and higher level skills provision and furthering apprenticeship offers. • Reduce the number of young people with low basic skills.	• Address skills mismatches and provide for skills progression, including by strengthening the quality of apprenticeships.	There remains scope for improvement in the prospects for inactive, underemployed and low skilled workers. Better labour market progression prospects and clearer routes to upskilling would assist those who find themselves confined to low-wage and/or low-hours of work. It would also address the skills shortages that are apparent in some parts of the economy, such as construction. Successful deployment of the resources arising from the apprenticeship levy will require careful attention.

Annex VI: List of interviewees

Country	Category of Stakeholder	Representing Institution
France	**ESF OP Managing Authority**	General Directorate of Employment and Vocational Training, National ESF OP MA and regional services acting as delegated Managing Authority (MA)
		Regional council of Ile de France, regional ERDF-ESF OP MA
		Regional council of Centre, regional ERDF-ESF OP MA
	Intermediary Body	Departmental council of Oise acting as IB for the National ESF OP
	Beneficiary	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Paris-Ile de France
		AFPA, association for vocational training pf adults
		AGEFOS, vocational training institution
Italy	**ESF OP Managing Authority**	Regional Administration of Liguria, training and education Department, MA of Regional ESF OP Liguria
		Regional Administration of Puglia, Department for Economic development, innovation, education and training department, ESF MA of Regional ESF ERDF OP Puglia
		Regional Administration of Umbria, Department employment and educational policies, ESF MA of Regional ESF OP Umbria[93]
		Regional Administration of Campania, General Affairs Service, MA Regional ESF OP Campania
	ESF OP Managing Authority/Line Ministry	Ministry of Labour, Active labour market policies department, MA NOP SPAO
		Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) Department for International Affairs, MA NOP Education
	Agency for skills development	Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers (ISFOL), department of methods and tools for skills
	Beneficiary	Local Centre for Adult Education, Milan (CPIA Milano)
		PES Perugia
		Project "Pane e Internet", Emilia Romagna Region
Romania	**ESF OP Managing Authority**	Deputy Manager of the Department for Evaluation and Monitoring, MA-POCU (HC-OP)
		Manager of the Department for the Evaluation, Monitoring, and Implementing of the POCU MA-POCU (HC-OP)
		Manager of the Department for the Evaluation, Monitoring, and Implementing of the POCU MA-POCU (HC-OP)
	ESF OP Managing Authority/Line Ministry	Deputy Manager for VET, National Agency for Employment, at the County Office for Labour, Ministry of Labour, Cluj (institution implementing the HC-OP-VET programs)

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[93] Written contribution

	Agency for skills development	Inspector for Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of National Education, Regional Centre-Cluj
	Beneficiary	Manager of the RSC Consulting
The Netherlands	**ESF OP Managing Authority/Line Ministry**	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
	ESF OP Managing Authority/Line Ministry	Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science
	Beneficiary	Ministry of Safety and Justice
Spain	**ESF OP Managing Authority**	UAFSE - MA of ESF in Spain, included in the Ministry of Employment and Social Security
	Ministry / agency responsible for ALMP and / or skills development	Ministry of Education and Culture - Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Vocational Training; Deputy Secretary of Vocational Training
		Red.es, governmental agency for the development of ICT and digitalisation (included in the Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism) - Deputy Director of EU Funds Administration and Finance
		Instituto Social de la Marina (Social Security Institute for Fishermen and Sea Workers) - Chief of Learning Programmes
		Fundación Biodiversidad - Coordinator Empleaverde Program
		Escuela de Organización Industrial (School of Industrial Organisation) - Director of Entrepreneurship Initiative, Innovation and SMEs
		SEPE (central Public Employment Service), OP Employment, Training and Education - Central Public Employment Service, Responsible of ESF programmes.
		SEPE (central Public Employment Service) - Chief of EURES office; Chief of coordination, monitoring and evaluation of ALMP
		Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries, Food and Environment - General directorate of Modernisation of Exploitations
	Beneficiary	Murcia Regional Government - Service of Programmes and Planning, Youth Institute

Annex VII: E-Survey of Managing Authorities

PREAMBLE

Thank you for agreeing to complete this short questionnaire. It will take around 10 to complete. In most cases, all that is required is for you to tick a box. At any time you want to change an answer, simply click on the 'back' button.

The purpose of the study is about understanding how the ESF might support the implementation of the New Skills Agenda for Europe (NSA). The NSA, launched by the European Commission in June 2016, is designed to both ensure that skills supply meets the demand for skills in the labour market whilst increasing overall skill levels, especially by tackling the problem of poorly developed basic skills.

COUNTRY   _____

Operational Programme   _____

A   YOUR ESF OP ACTIVITIES

1. Are the ESF Operational Programme (OP) activities you are involved with concerned with any of the following?
    [PLEASE TICK THE MAIN THAT APPLY]
    - Increasing skills supply
    - Tackling skill mismatches
    - Ensuring that there is transparency and comparability in measuring, validating and certificating the skills held by people in Europe
    - improving labour market intelligence and communicating this effectively to various groups
    - None of the above

B.   THE NEW SKILLS AGENDA

The questions below ask you about the New Skills Agenda that was launched by the European Commission in June 2016.

1. How would you summarise your awareness of the New Skills Agenda and its contents?
    [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

    - I have a detailed knowledge of the New Skills Agenda
    - I know a lot about the New Skills Agenda, but not in detail
    - I know a little about the New Skills Agenda
    - I have heard of the New Skills Agenda but am generally not very aware of its content
    - I have never heard of the New Skills Agenda

The New Skills Agenda for Europe (the NSA)

The new Skills Agenda for Europe launches a number of actions to ensure that the right training, the right skills and the right support is available to people in the European Union. It will aim at making better use of the skills that are available; equip people with the new skills that are needed - to help them find quality jobs and improve their life chances. The Commission invites Members States, social partners, the industry and other stakeholders to work together to:

- *improve the quality and relevance of skills formation*
- *make skills more visible and comparable*
- *improve skills intelligence and information for better career choices*

This is set out in the Communication: A New Skills Agenda for Europe - Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness.

The Commission proposes 10 actions to be taken forward over the next two years, including the recently adopted 'Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for adult learning', a review of the

European Qualification Framework, the 'Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition' to support co-operation among education, employment and industry stakeholders, the "Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on skills' to improve skills intelligence. Subsequent actions include a revision of the Europass Framework, a 'Skills Profile Tool Kit for Third Country Nationals', actions to enhance opportunities and improve visibility of VET, a review of the Recommendation on Key Competences and so forth.
The Commission will support Member States in implementing the New Skills Agenda through a number of funds, including the European Social Fund (ESF).

2. In your view, can the ESF OP provide support to the NSA?
   [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

   - Yes, the OP strategy is fully in line with the NSA priorities
   - Yes, but we will need to use the flexibility available in the OP to do so
   - Yes to some extent, but the OP will need to be revised
   - No
   - Don't know

3. [IF CODE 1, 2 or 3 at B2] To what extent do you believe that the ESF is necessary to achieve the objectives of the NSA?
   [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

   - To a large extent
   - To some extent
   - Only to a small extent
   - No, not much
   - Don't know

4. I would now like to ask you about various interventions to support specific aspects of the NSA in relation to the ESF OP for which you are a Managing Authority.

   a. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to the improvement of basic skills for adults, if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
	Interventions aimed at improving basic skills for adults				
	Skills assessments/skills audits				
	Modular/ad hoc trainings				
	Validation and recognition of skills acquired				
	Outreach measures and guidance (upskilling)				
	Support for staff in the adult learning field				

   b. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to strengthening Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
	Interventions aimed strengthening Key Competences for Lifelong Learning				
	Introduction of a tool for assessing and validating competences				
	Support to acquire a core set of skills, especially entrepreneurial competences				

c. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to improving the labour market relevance of vocational skills and qualifications, if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
Interventions aimed at improving the labour market relevance of vocational skills and qualifications					
	internships and especially apprenticeships for VET learners, also in different settings				
	Promotion of partnerships between learning providers, research and business				
	Improving data availability on labour market outcomes of VET				
	Provision of efficient and integrated guidance services to enhance access to VET				
	Making available validation of non-formal and informal learning				
	Further strengthen key competences in VET curricula or develop these through I-VET and C-VET				
	Training of trainers/mentors/ VET teachers				
	Further development of quality assurance mechanisms in VET in line with EQAVET recommendation and feedback loops in I-VET and C-VET systems				

d. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to the EC initiative 'Digital Skills and Job Coalitions', if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
Activities aimed at supporting the EC initiative 'Digital Skills and Job Coalitions'					
	The establishment of national digital skills coalitions connecting public authorities, business, education, training and labour market stakeholders				
	Measure to bring digital skills to all levels of education and training, supporting teachers and educators and promoting active involvement of business and other organisations				

e. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to the revision of the European Qualification Framework, if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
Initiatives aimed at supporting the revision of the European Qualification Framework					
	Support to the regular update of the national qualifications systems				
	ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are underpinned by common principles for quality assurance and that common principles for credit systems are used when qualifications with an EQF level are built on credits				
	encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers and public authorities to support transparency and the comparison of qualifications				
	promote the comparability of qualifications between the countries covered in the EQF and other countries				

f. Which of the following interventions is the ESF OP supporting or planning to support in relation to assessing the skills of Third Country Nationals?, if any?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes, currently	Yes, in the future	No	Don't know
Initiatives to support the launch of a skills profile tool for assessing the skills of Third Country Nationals					
	Support the training of staff in reception facilities to speed up recognition procedures				
	Promote the sharing of information and best practices on understanding and recognition of skills and qualifications				

g. Can I just check, if the ESF OP supporting or planning to support any of the following?

Action	Name of the intervention	Yes,	Yes, in	No	Don't

		currently	the future		know
Sharing of best practices on the issue of brain drain					
Roll out EU sectoral partnerhips at national and regional level					
Development and implementation of a graduate tracking mechanism					

5. Of all the activities you have just mentioned, which three do you consider to be the most relevant to the aims and objectives of the OP you manage?

1. PLEASE SELECT FROM THE LIST
2. PLEASE SELECT FROM THE LIST
3. PLEASE SELECT FROM THE LIST

6. Just to check, is the ESF OP <u>at present</u> a relevant instrument to support the New Skills Agenda?
    [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

    -   Yes, very much so   CONTINUE
    -   Yes, a little   CONTINUE
    -   No, not really   GO TO B7
    -   Not at all   GO TO B7
    -   Don't know   GO TO B7

7. [IF CODES '1' or '2' AT B5] If so, under which Investment priorities?
    [SELECT 5 IN ORDER OF RELEVANCE WITH THE MOST RELEVANT FIRST]

8. In your view, has the Skills Agenda had much impact to date the ESF OP activities you are engaged in?
    [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]
    -   Yes, to a large extent   CONTINUE
    -   Yes, to some extent   CONTINUE
    -   Only to a small extent   CONTINUE
    -   No   GO TO B9
    -   Don't know   GO TO B9

9. [IF CODES '1', '2' or 3 AT B7] How has the announcement of the NSA affected your ESF OP planned activities?
    [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]

    -   Existing activities have been amended
    -   New activities have been developed
    -   Don't know

10. And looking to the future, in your opinion will the New Skills Agenda affect the ESF activities you are engaged in?
    [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

    -   Yes, to a large extent   CONTINUE
    -   Yes, to some extent   CONTINUE
    -   Only to a small extent   CONTINUE
    -   No   GO TO B13

- Don't know   GO TO B13

11. [IF CODES '1' or '2' AT B9] How do you think it will have an influence?

   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]

   - Existing activities will be amended
   - New activities will be developed
   - Don't know

12. In your view, how easy or difficult do you think it has been/will be to adapt existing planned activities or develop new ones?
   [TICK ONLY ONE BOX]

   - Very difficult   CONTINUE
   - Quite difficult   CONTINUE
   - As hard as any other activity   GO TO C
   - Quite easy   GO TO C
   - Very easy   GO TO C
   - Don't know   GO TO C

13. [IF CODES '1', '2' AT B11] Why will it be difficult?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - There is insufficient flexibility in the OP to make the adjustments necessary
   - Funding has already been committed to other activities
   - Revision of planned activities would administratively time consuming
   - Too little support from key stakeholders
   - Other [write in] _____
   - Don't know

                                                                    [GO TO C]
14. [IF CODES 4 OR 5 AT B9] Why will it not affect your ESF OP activity?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - OP ESF activities are not relevant to skills-related issues
   - ESF OP already carries out the activities mentioned in the Skills Agenda
   - Other [please write in] _____

C.   THE SKILLS GUARANTEE / UPSKILLING PATHWAYS
ASK ALL
   1. I would now like to ask you some questions about the European Commission's Skills Guarantee, which is now referred to as: 'Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults?' How would you summarise your awareness of its contents?
   [PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY]
   - I have a detailed knowledge
   - I know a lot about it, but not in detail
   - I know a little about it
   - I have heard of it but am generally not very aware of its content
   - I have not heard of it

Upskilling Pathways - New opportunities for adults (the UP)

The ESF 2014-2020 and its contribution to the New Skills Agenda for Europe
Final Report

The UP was adopted by the Council on 19 December 2016 to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent. It is aimed at all adults with a low level of skill, knowledge or competence, who are not eligible for Youth Guarantee. Priority groups may be identified at MS level.
The initiative is based on a three-step approach:

- *Step 1 – Skills assessment, to enable adults to identify their existing skills and any needs for upskilling,*
- *Step 2 – Learning offer, to boost skills in compliance with the skills assessment and market needs*
- *Step 3- Validation and recognition, for the beneficiary to have the opportunity to have the skills acquired validated and recognised*

Delivering the initiative will be based upon: effective outreach, guidance and support measures. MS will deliver this in cooperation with social partners, education and training providers, local and regional authorities also building on existing structures.

2. In your view, is the ESF OP you manage relevant to supporting the Upskilling Pathways?
   [PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

   - Yes, very much so   CONTINUE
   - Yes, a little   CONTINUE
   - No, not much   GO TO C4
   - Not at all   GO TO C4
   - Don't know   GO TO C4

3. [IF CODE 1 or 2 AT C2] If so, under which Investment Priorities?
   [SELECT UP TO 5 IPs IN ORDER OF RELEVANCE PLACING THE MOST RELEVANT FIRST]

4. [IF CODE 1, 2 C2] To what extent do you believe that the ESF is necessary to achieve the objectives of the UP?
   [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

   - To a large extent
   - To some extent
   - Only to a small extent
   - No, not much
   - Don't know

5. To date, have any of the ESF activities you are involved in developed/carried out actions to support the Upskilling Pathways?
   [PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY]

   - Yes   CONTINUE
   - No, but will do so in the future   GO TO C6
   - No and it is not planned to do so in the future   GO TO C6
   - Don't know   GO TO D

6. [IF CODE 1 AT C4] What activities have you been involved to date to support the Upskilling Pathways?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - Activities already planned by the OP which are relevant to the Upskilling Pathways
   - Developing an action plan

- Initial consultations with policy makers
- Revising/fine-tuning existing actions
- Developing new actions
- Other [please write in] _____

7. [IF CODE 2 AT C4] Why have you not developed/carried out any activities to support the Skills Guarantee / the Upskilling Pathway?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - Too soon to tell what needs doing
   - No support for UP actions
   - Not sure how ESF can fund relevant activities
   - Not relevant to ESF OP
   - Other [write in] _____

D.   FUTURE SUPPORT FOR THE SKILLS GUARANTEE / UPSKILLING PATHWAY
[ASK ALL]
The questions below ask you about how you expect the ESF to support the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathway over the next two years.

1. And thinking about the future, will the Skills Guarantee / Upskilling Pathway affect the activities of the ESF OP you manage?
   [TICK ONE ONLY]
   - Yes, to a large extent   GO TO D3
   - Yes, to some extent   GO TO D3
   - To a small extent   GO TO D3
   - Not much   CONTINUE
   - No   CONTINUE
   - Don't know   GO TO D3

2. [IF CODES 4 OR 5 AT D1] Why will it not have much influence on ESF activity?
   [TICK ONE ONLY]
   - Planned activities are already in line with UP objectives and no further actions needed

   - UP does not really affect the aims and objectives of the ESF OP
   - ESF OP activities not relevant to skills issues
   - Other [please write in] _____

3. Thinking about the next two years, what actions do you expect to be engaged in to support the Skills Guarantee / the Upskilling Pathway?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - Activities already planned by the OP relevant to the Upskilling Pathways   GO TO E
   - Developing an action plan
       CONTINUE
   - Initial consultations with policy makers
       CONTINUE
   - Revising/fine-tuning existing actions
       CONTINUE
   - Developing new actions
       CONTINUE

- Other [please write in] _____
   CONTINUE

4. [IF CODES 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 AT D3] In general, do you expect that fine-tuning existing actions or developing new ones to support the Skills Guarantee / the Upskilling Pathway will be...
   [TICK ONE BOX ONLY]
   - Very easy   CONTINUE
   - Quite easy   CONTINUE
   - Quite difficult   GO TO D6
   - Very difficult   GO TO D6
   - Don't know?   GO TO E

5. [IF CODES 1 OR 2 AT D4] Why do you think it will be easy to develop actions?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - There is already a demand to develop actions
   - There is already a consensus to develop actions among stakeholders
   - Lots of support from various national agencies
   - Already engaged in actions that relevant to the Skills Guarantee / the Upskilling Pathway
   - Other [write in] _____

                                                              [NOW GO TO E]
6. [IF CODES 3 OR 4 AT D4] Why do you expect it to be difficult to develop actions?
   [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]
   - There is likely to be little support to develop actions
   - There is likely to be a lack of awareness in policy community
   - It will not be seen as a policy priority
   - It is unlikely that many ideas for activities will be presented
   - Not seen as relevant to ESF
   - None of the above
                                                              [NOW GO TO E]

E.   MONITORING & EVALUATION
   1. What data sources are you using, in addition to ESF mandatory data, in order to monitor and/or evaluate ESF OP activities relevant to the NSA?

      [TICK ALL THAT APPLY]

      - Yes, ad hoc questionnaires, surveys etc..
      - Yes, from administrative sources (ministries, registers)
      - Yes, general statistics
      - No
      - Don't know
      - Other (please specify)

   2. If so, would it be possible to briefly describe the data (e.g. what administrative sources are you using? What ad-hoc surveys?)

      [PLEASE WRITE IN] _____

   3. What activities are you monitoring relevant to the UP?

[PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY]

- Undertaking of skills assessments/skills audits
- Modular/ad hoc training provision
- Validation and recognition of skills acquired in accordance to existing frameworks
- Outreach measures related to the benefit of skills acquisition
- Support to training providers in the adult learning field
- None of the above

THANK YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES. YOUR TIME AND EFFORT TO ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS IS MUCH APPRECIATED.

PLEASE TICK THE BOX BELOW TO SUBMIT YOUR COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE

Annex VIII: Detailed results of the EU-28 e-survey to ESF MAs

Introduction

As part of the field research carried out for this study an e-survey was submitted to all ESF Managing Authorities across the EU-28 (see Annex VI: List of interviewees).

This has received a satisfactory response rate with 50 completed questionnaires plus 10 that were commenced but not submitted, representing 23 EU countries and nearly a third of all OPs covered.

The questionnaire was structured around the main research questions of this study, and its results will be presented accordingly in the next sections.

The questionnaires that were not fully completed were used when compiling the results as even these can provide useful insights. For example, rather than apathy towards the questionnaire, not finishing could indicate that the participant does not know enough about the initiative to answer all the questions.

A similar caveat should be made when interpreting the entirety of the e-survey results. This is because excluding those less willing to fill out the survey could lead to selection bias as, due to self-selection, it might be the case that the best performers are more willing to answer than worst performers.

Coherence, relevance and awareness

The e-survey starts by posing questions to MAs on their level of awareness of the NSA.

Although the vast majority of these (nearly 9 in 10) have been concerned in recent years with initiatives relating to skills, none stated that they know the NSA in detail and only around 2 in 10 said they know a lot about it, as shown in Figure VIII.1.

Figure VIII.1 – Level of awareness of ESF MAs on the contents of the NSA, by MS
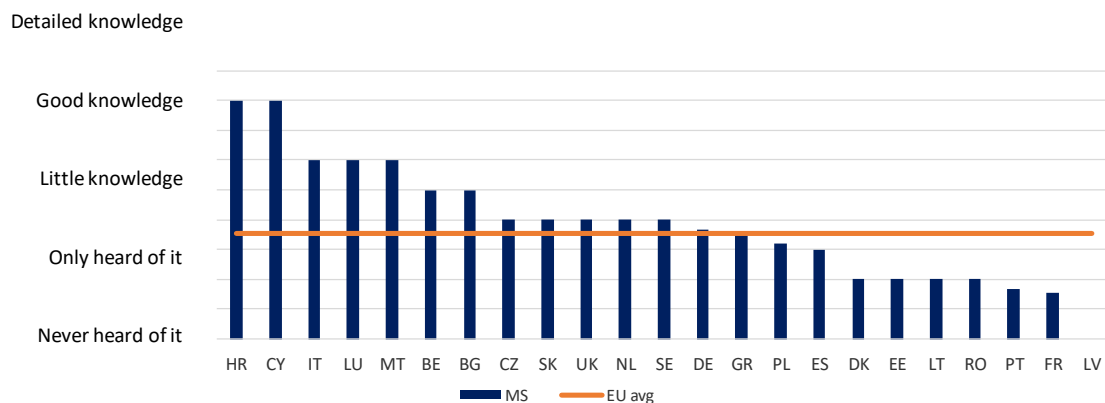
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

This estimation can even have an upward bias, given that it is likely that the group of respondent and non-respondent MAs may not be comparable in terms of relevant characteristics. For example, the decision not to participate in the e-survey may well be down to poor knowledge of the initiative which, in turn, raises doubts that the wider population's knowledge of the programme is even lower than that of the respondent MAs.

The situation worsens when MAs are asked the same question on the Upskilling Pathways; the most frequently selected answer was "I have heard of the Upskilling Pathways but I am generally not very aware of its contents".

However, nearly all of the interviewed MAs confirm that they deem their OP a relevant tool for achieving the goals of the NSA as shown by Figure VIII.2.

Figure VIII.2 – Relevance of ESF OPs for the NSA, by MS
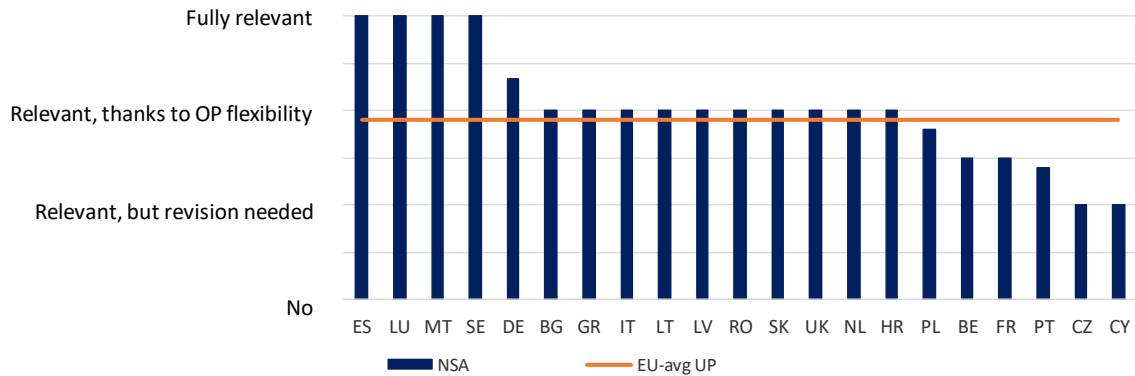
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

This is irrespective of their current knowledge of the NSA (see for examples ES and LU, both persuaded that their OPs are fully relevant despite having nearly opposite levels of awareness of the NSA), meaning they assume that initiatives related to skills can in any event be funded through the ESF.

The e-survey was also aimed at mapping interventions prioritised under the NSA that have been, or will be, supported by ESF. The following graphs show, per each one of the 10 NSA actions, MAs' responses on whether they are currently engaged/will be engaged in the future with activities to support the given NSA action, or otherwise. Figure VIII.3 starts by displaying MAs' answers with respect to interventions aimed at upskilling low-skilled adults, thus highly relevant for the UP.

Figure VIII.3 – ESF activities relevant for the UP, by MS
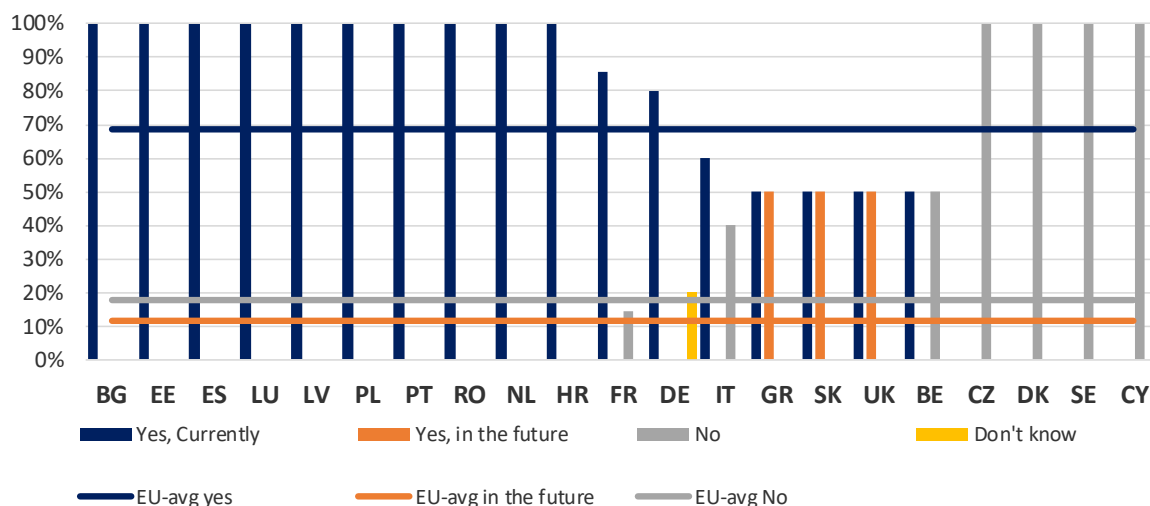
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Firstly, nearly 7 in 10 MAs declared that they are currently engaged in interventions aimed at increasing basic skills for adults, especially in BG, EE, LU, LV, PL, PT, RO, NL and HR. FR and DE follow closely, with over 80% of MAs declaring the same. SK, UK and GR declared that they are either engaged in such activities already or plan to do so in

the future, whereas CZ, DK, SE and CY declare they are not currently and will not be engaged in such activities. Finally, IT and BE feature mixed results as some of the MAs declare that they will not be engaged in upskilling activities for adults.

Figure VIII.4 below goes on to map ESF interventions that may be relevant for the strengthening of key competences for Lifelong Learning.

Figure VIII.4 – ESF activities relevant for the Recommendation on key competences for LLL, by MS
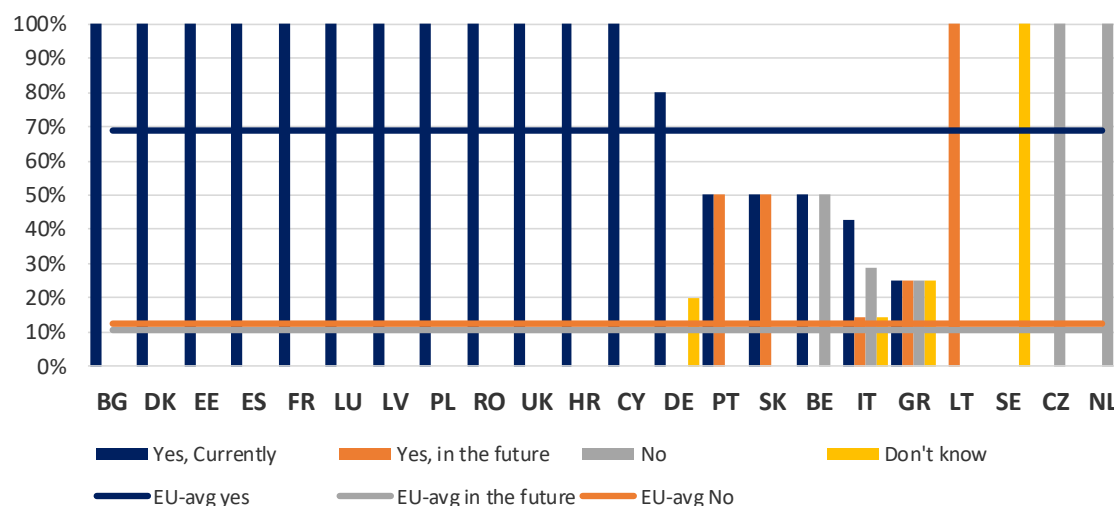
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Again, the EU average for currently funded, relevant interventions is fairly high at nearly 70%. The right-hand side of the graph, where countries with a lower frequency of relevant actions are placed, encompasses BE, IT, EL, CZ and the NL. In reading this graph, however, one should bear in mind that MAs have been asked whether they support activities that are aimed at strengthening Key Competences for Lifelong Learning- including through the introduction of tools for assessing and validating competences and support to acquire a core set of skills - which is not specifically the aim of the actual NSA action. This will be pursued mainly at EU-level, with the revision of the Recommendation on Key Competences for LLL which will be followed at MS level. Thus, the current answers are based on MS providing support in areas relevant to the current KCF, and can be used only as a proxy for future support of the revision (and above all national level implementation) of the revised KCF.

Figure VIII.5 shows the MS support to the third action of the NSA, "making VET a first choice".

Figure VIII.5 – ESF activities relevant for the enhancement of VET, by MS
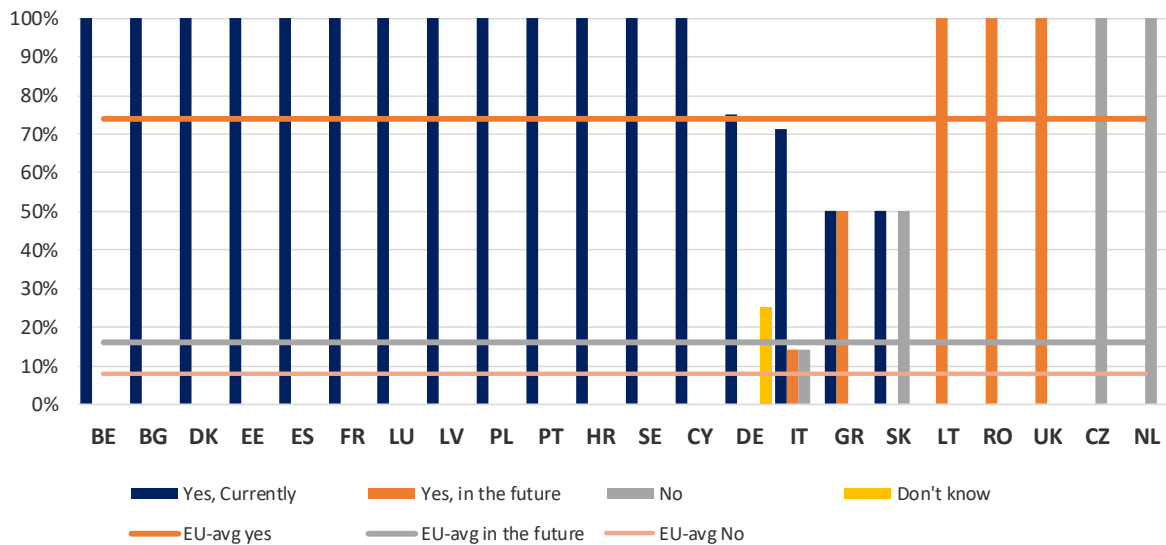
Also in this case, the EU average for currently relevant activities for this NSA action is rather high, in fact, the highest, at nearly 75%. Amongst countries with lower values in this respect there are only CZ, NL and SK, to some extent. For the rest, MAs declared that they are either currently or will be engaged in activities that will enhance their VET systems through ESF.

This triplet of graphs on the first three actions of the NSA tends to confirm the study's findings on their relevance as per the analysis of the Specific Objectives. The situation changes for the last action of WS1, increasing the quality and relevance of skills formation, namely the EC initiative 'Digital skills and Job Coalition', as shown by Figure VIII.6.

Figure VIII.6 – ESF activities relevant for the EC initiative 'Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition', by MS
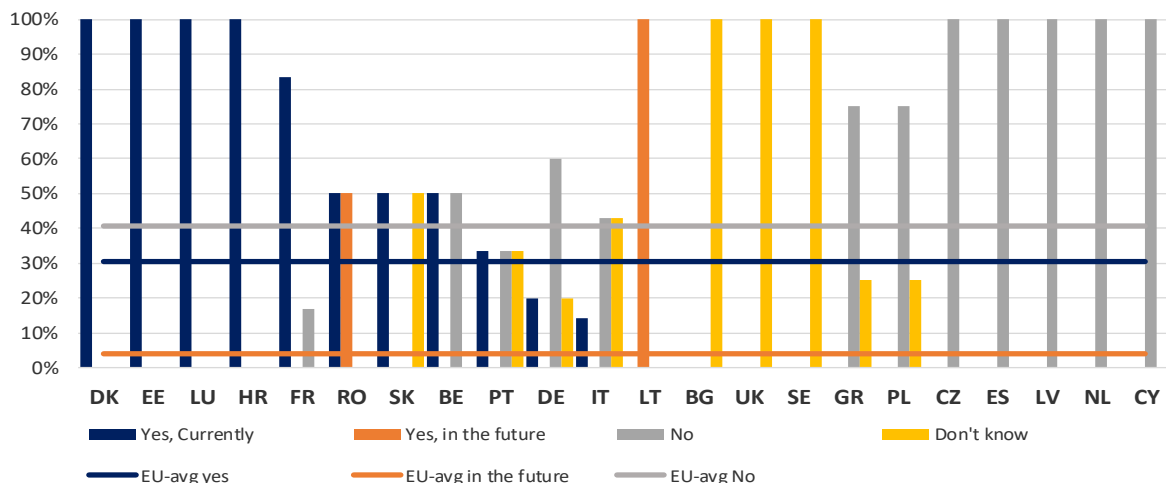
In contrast to previous graphs, the distribution appears left-skewed, that is, MS with MAs declared that they do not carry out actions relevant to the EC's initiative account for more than those who declare to do so. Only in DK, EE, LU, HR, FR, BE, RO and SK did

50% or more of the respondents declare that they are currently engaged in relevant activities.

The pattern changes again when assessing WS2, as shown by Figure VIII.7 and Figure VIII.8

Figure VIII.7 – ESF activities complimentary to the updating and revision of the EQF, by MS
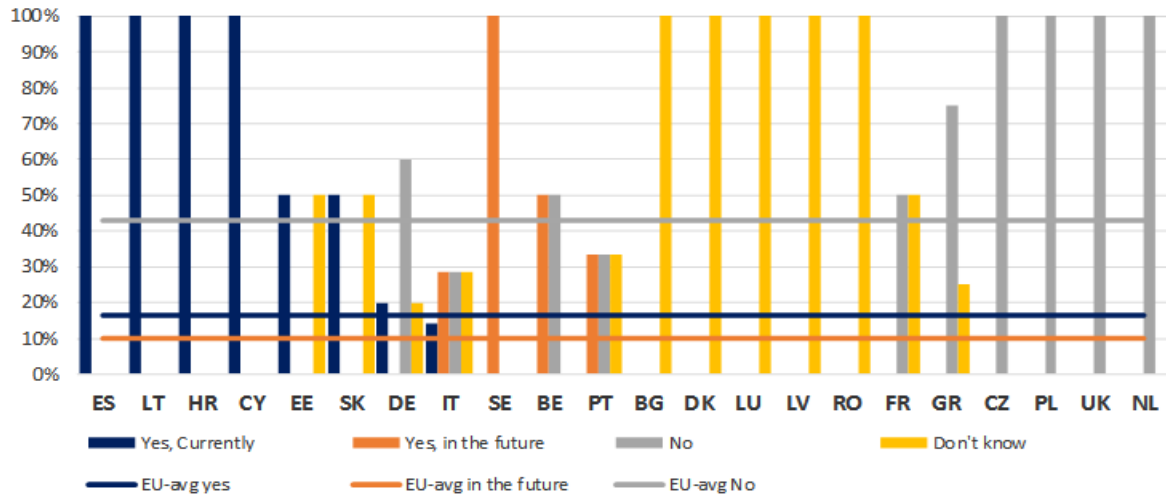
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Figure VIII.8 – ESF activities in relation to assessing the skills of third country nationals, by MS
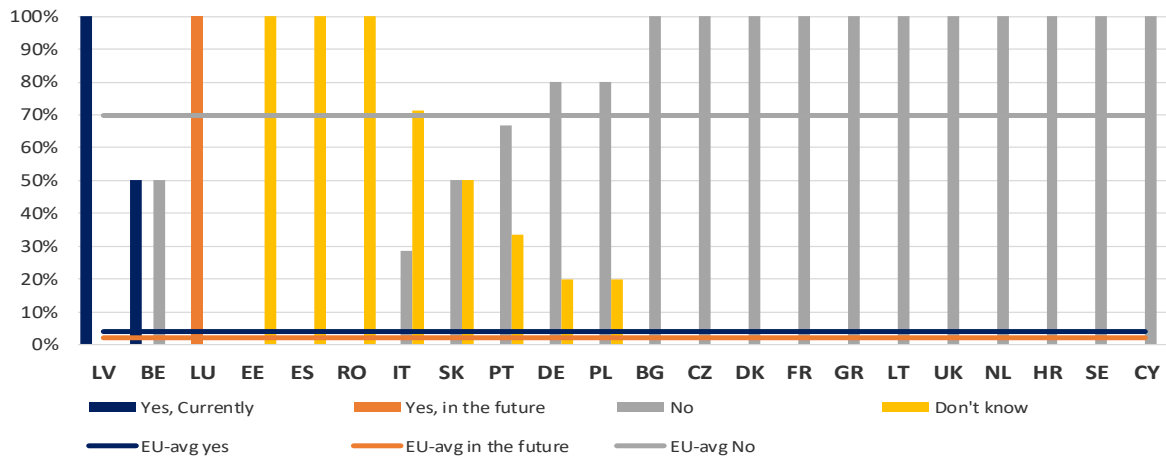
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

What is particularly striking is the much larger occurrence of 'no' and 'don't know' answers. This is somewhat unsurprising if one considers the fact that these actions will either be carried out at EU-level (revision of the EQF) or through other EU funds (tool for assessing the skills of third country nationals, ERASMUS + funds). However, there appears to be a difference between these two NSA actions, with over 25% of respondents declaring to be currently involved or planning to be involved in activities complementary to the revision of the EQF. Additionally, only around 5% of respondents declared that they were involved in initiatives involving a skills assessment tool for third country nationals. Countries that declared they were supporting activities related to the revision of the EQF include ES, LT, SK, HR, CY, BE and IT. Regarding the skills of third country nationals, only LV, BE and LU gave positive responses.

Similarly, NSA actions of WS3 appear less relevant within the analysis of the ESF SOs and results tend to confirm such a finding, as shown by Figure VIII.9 below.

Figure VIII.9 – ESF activities relevant for WS3, by MS
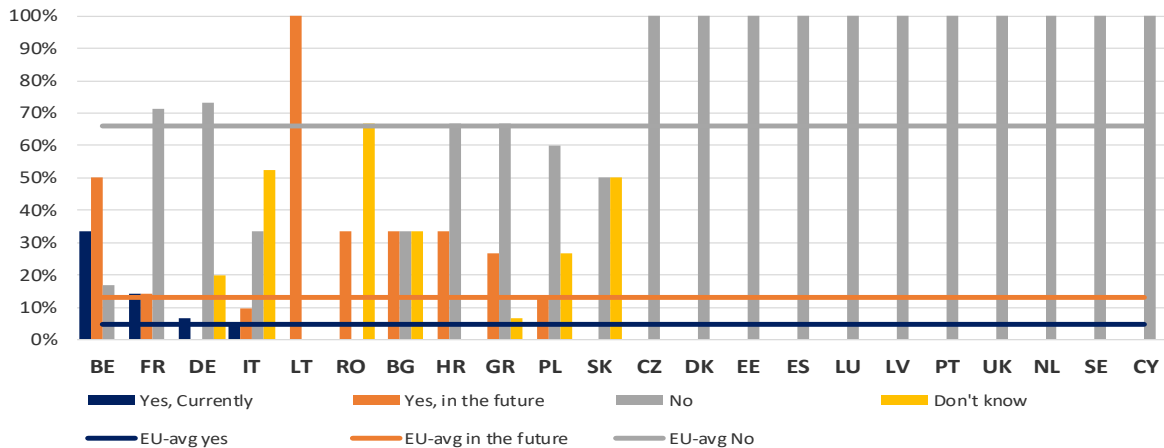
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Again, the distribution is fairly left-skewed and there is a large prevalence of "No" answers amongst respondents; contrary to WS1 results but in line with WS2 results. LT, BE and IT appear to be the countries that cover the broadest range of WS2 and WS3 activities.

Interestingly, within the 10 NSA actions, MAs declare that overall, they are most involved in upskilling initiatives for low skilled adults, with about 48% of respondents selecting this choice. This is a measure of how much is being done in this area, even ahead of the actual roll-out of national measures pursuant to the Council Recommendation on the Upskilling Pathways. As expected, the second and third most relevant initiatives are those of WS1, namely initiatives for VET enhancement (30%) and those aimed at improving key competences for LLL (20%).

Flexibility

The first question relating to the flexibility of the ESF OP with a view to supporting actions relevant to the NSA starts by observing whether at present MAs deem their OPs to be in line with the NSA.

Figure VIII.10 – Relevance of ESF OPs in their current formulation for the NSA and the UP, by MS[94]
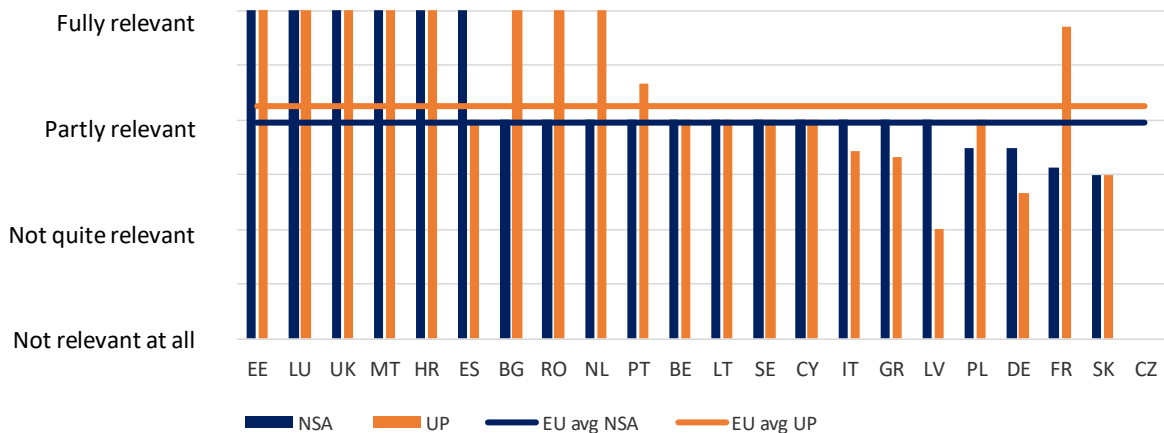
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

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[94] Respondents having answered 'don't know' are not represented within this graph

Again, results show that the majority of MAs believes their OPs are at present capable of giving support to the NSA and particularly to the UP. Additionally, this means that changes to the OPs, and the related need of flexibility, are envisaged to a lesser extent.

Among those who answered positively to this question, the e-survey went on to map the investment priorities that are considered most relevant to this purpose.

Figure VIII.11 – Most relevant Investment Priorities for the NSA, by MS[95]
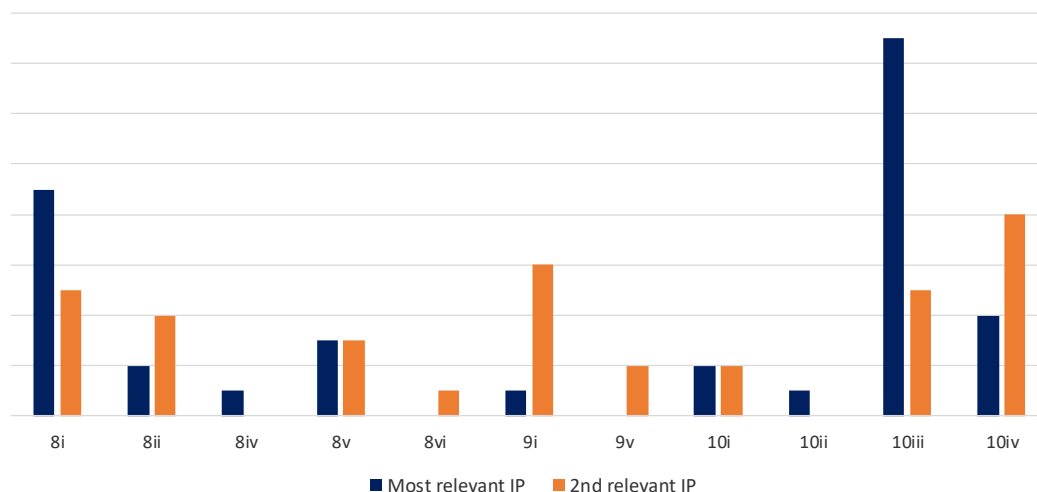
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Once more, most relevant IP results are 10iii – lifelong learning, followed by 8i – access to employment, 10 iv – labour market relevance of ET systems and 8v – adaptability. This finding continues to underline how TO10 interventions are very relevant for the NSA but the agenda remains cross-cutting.

When looking at the UP, the situation appears similar, with IPs 10iii and 8i by far the most relevant.

Figure VIII.12 – Most relevant Investment Priorities for the UP, by MS[96]
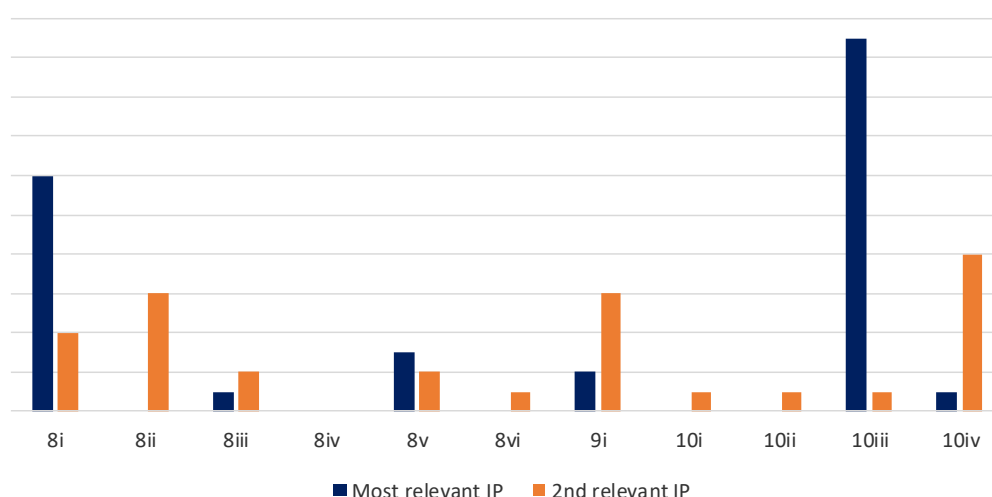
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

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[95] Respondents having answered 'don't know' are not represented within this graph
[96] Respondents having answered 'don't know' are not represented within this graph

Figure VIII.13 allows a closer look at the NSA vs UP comparison, limited to the most relevant IP selected by MAs.

Figure VIII.13 – Most relevant IPs: NSA vs UP comparison
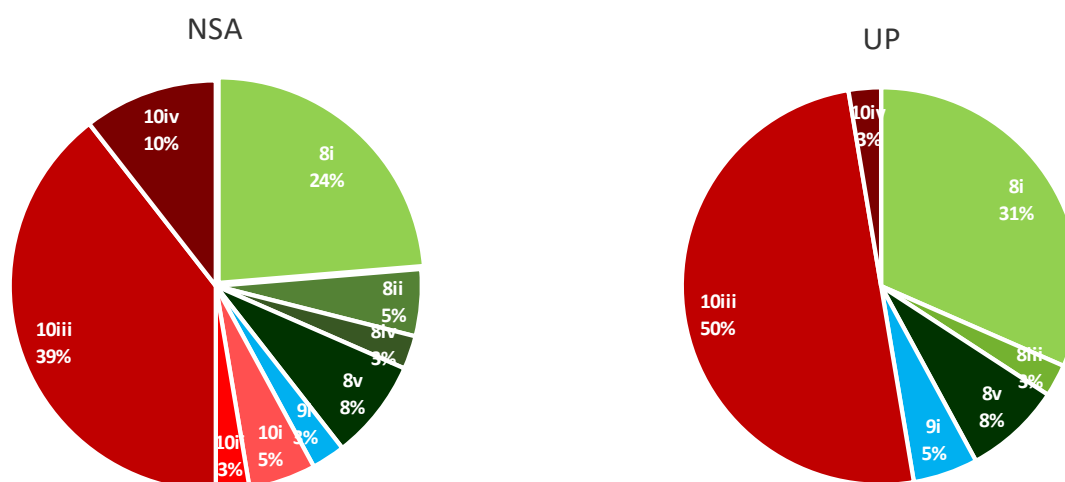
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Indeed, IPs 10iii – lifelong learning and 8i – access to employment have a much larger representation among mostly relevant IPs, as can be seen by Figure VIII.13 when one focuses on the UP, instead of the NSA as a whole, with the frequency of the two aforementioned initiatives increasing and them becoming overrepresented, in contrast to other TO10 priorities that are nearly disappearing from the right-hand side graph. This is a significant result, which further confirms how simply stating that TO10 is the only suitable Thematic Objective for supporting the NSA does not accurately represent the actual ESF support to the NSA. In fact, TO8 accounts for nearly as much as TO10 according to respondents (42% vs 53% of most relevant IPs for the Upskilling Pathways).

Bearing in mind the fact that ESF OPs are already, on average, deemed partly relevant for the NSA, this analysis instead considers what the impact of the NSA Communication and Council Recommendation is on the UP, and particularly how MAs have reacted/adjusted their OPs thereof.

The first question asked MAs for their opinion on the extent to which the NSA has affected or will affect their ESF OPs.

Figure VIII.14 – Extent to which the NSA has affected /will affect ESF OPs, by MS
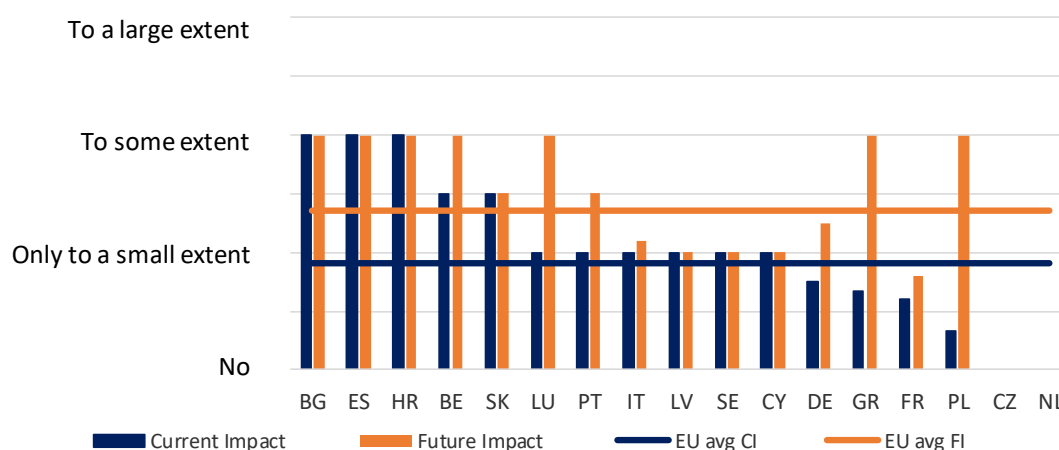
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

According to respondents, the current impact of the NSA on ESF programming is modest, with the EU average being a little lower than 'only to a small extent'. A slightly higher average value is obtained when expectations on the future impact of the NSA on ESF programming are considered, but once again it remains at the level of a modest extent.

Reasons for the lack of current impact were expressed by the few respondents who said that the NSA has not/will not have any impact on ESF programming or that they do not know at the moment, as per Figure VIII.15 below.

Figure VIII.15 – Rationales behind limited impact of the NSA on ESF programming, by MS[97]
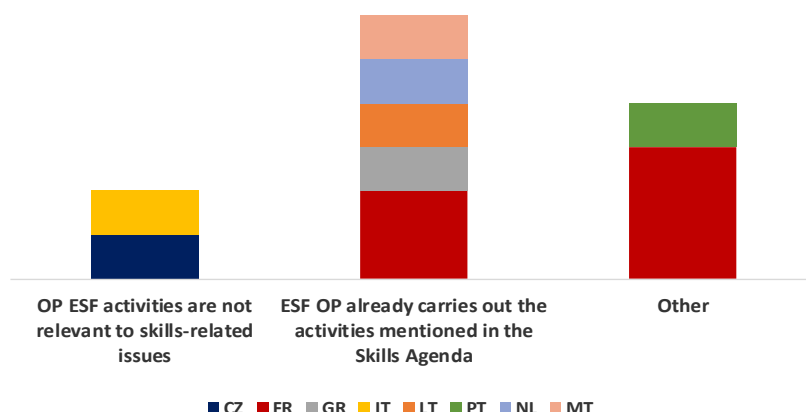
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Among 'other' reasons mentioned, most relevant is the limited familiarity with the details of the NSA, also due to an insufficient formal involvement of MAs in this initiative. Another key element raised is the complexity that revising an OP would bring along; this makes it best to reflect the NSA aims through taking account of that in publishing calls for proposals and other funding initiatives.

When asked how the NSA has affected their OPs, the vast majority of MAs (71%) selected the answer option 'Don't know', and only 7 people selected the other two options.

Figure VIII.16 – Answers on how the NSA has affected ESF activities, by MS[98]
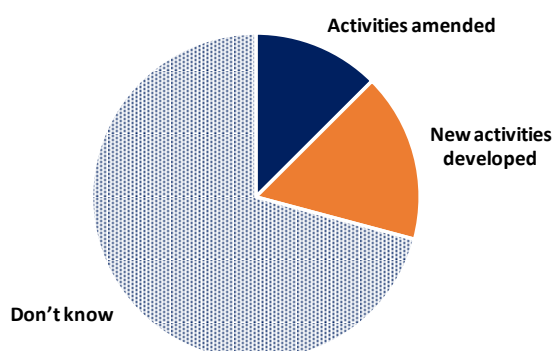
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

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[97] Only respondents having answered 'no impact' to the former question are included
[98] Only respondents declaring that the NSA has had at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

Two MAs from IT and one from HR declared that existing activities have been amended, whereas 2 from BE, 1 from DE and 1 from SE said that new activities have been developed to the end of supporting the NSA.

More telling results were gathered when the same question was asked regarding the future, as per Figure VIII.17.

Figure VIII.17 – Answers on how the NSA will affect ESF OP activities, by MS[99]
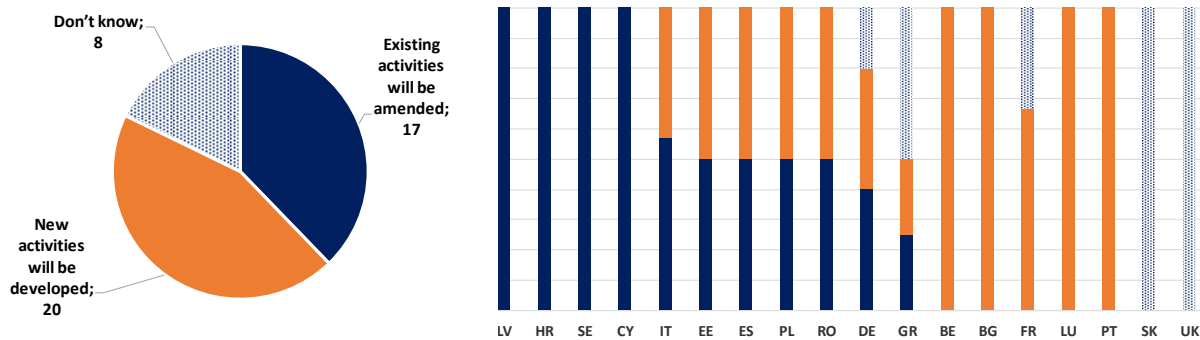
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

This result is consistent with the somewhat higher expected impact of the NSA for the next two years. Countries on the left-hand side, such as LV, HR, SE, IT, EE, ES, PL, RO, DE and GR, to some extent, will tend to amend existing activities where feasible and develop new ones if needed. Countries such as BE, BG, FR, LU and PT, on the other hand, expect to fully develop new activities.

MAs were then asked whether they expect that it will be on average easier or harder to provide support to the NSA, irrespective of its form, as compared to other initiatives they are engaged in.

Figure VIII.18 – How easy or difficult to flex OPs to support NSA, by MS[100]
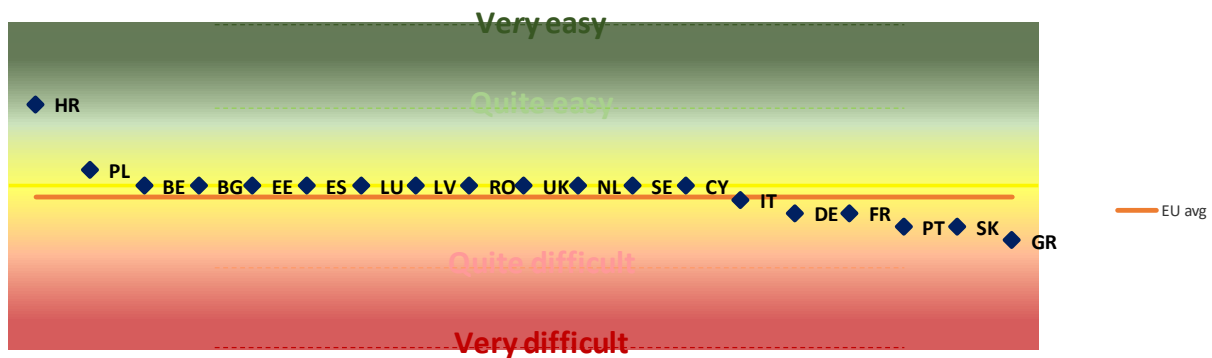
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The most common answer is that it is expected to be as hard as any other activity. For countries such as PT, SK and GR the answer 'quite difficult' tended to appear.

Among those saying it is difficult (DE 1; FR 1; GR 2; IT 1; SK 1). Figure VIII.19 shows the most frequently cited reasons.

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[99] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.
[100] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

Figure VIII.19 – Why is it difficult to have flexibility within OPs to support NSA, by MS[101]
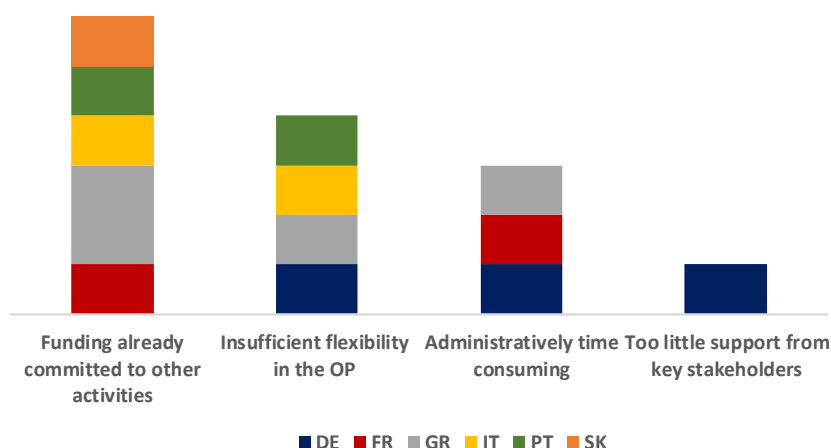
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

All but one of the German respondents highlighted the timing of the initiative, which clashes with the fact that funding has already been committed to other activities.

Finally, among those who believe that the ESF is relevant to supporting the NSA – albeit with some adaptation - some believe that there is sufficient flexibility of the OP to allow the development of appropriate actions, whilst others suggest that a revision may be needed, as per Figure VIII.20.

Figure VIII.20 – Envisaged flexibility of OPs to support NSA, by MS[102]
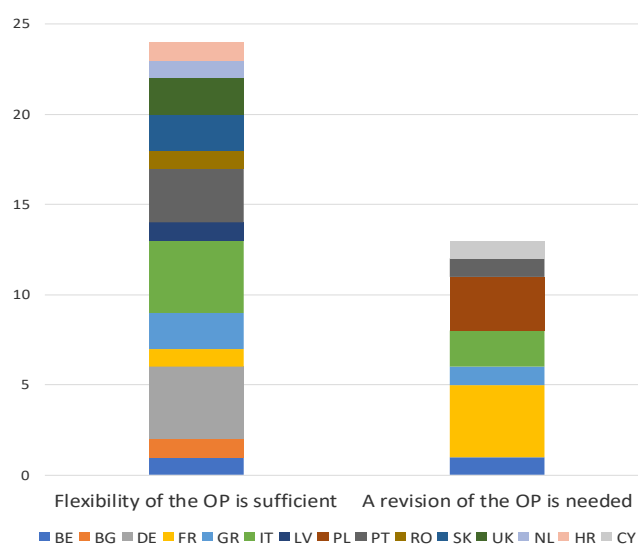
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Nearly two in three respondents opted for the possibility to use the flexibility of their OPs in order to support the NSA without necessarily revising them. Most notable in the remaining third are MAs from France, Poland and Italy.

Moving on to the expected impact of the UP, Figure VIII.21 shows that in the next two years the influence is considered to be in line with, or slightly above, that of the NSA.

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[101] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.
[102] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

Figure VIII.21 – Future Impact of the UP on ESF OPs activities, by MS
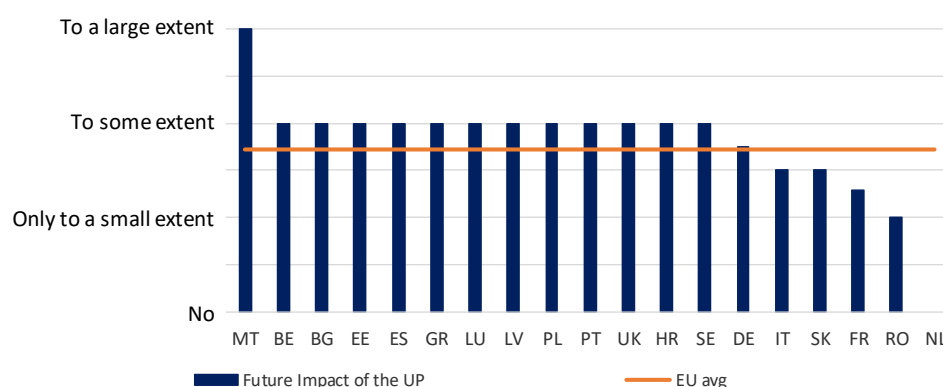
The majority of MS expect the UP to have some influence on their OP activities; for the few who selected 'not much influence' or 'no influence at all', the most frequent reason was that their OPs are not deemed relevant for the UP. Another reason could be that they might be bound to existing plans or their activities are already in line with the UP.

In general, MAs tend to expect that adapting their existing actions or developing new actions that will support the UP will present an element of difficulty. Figure VIII.22 shows how easy or difficult it was to adapt their activities to better support the UP, as compared with other relevant activities they are involved in. The answer 'quite difficult' prevailed for countries such as DE, HR and SE. However, the majority of Managing Authorities believe that it will be equally hard as any other activity.

Figure VIII.22 – How easy or difficult to use flexibility of OPs to support UP, by MS[103]
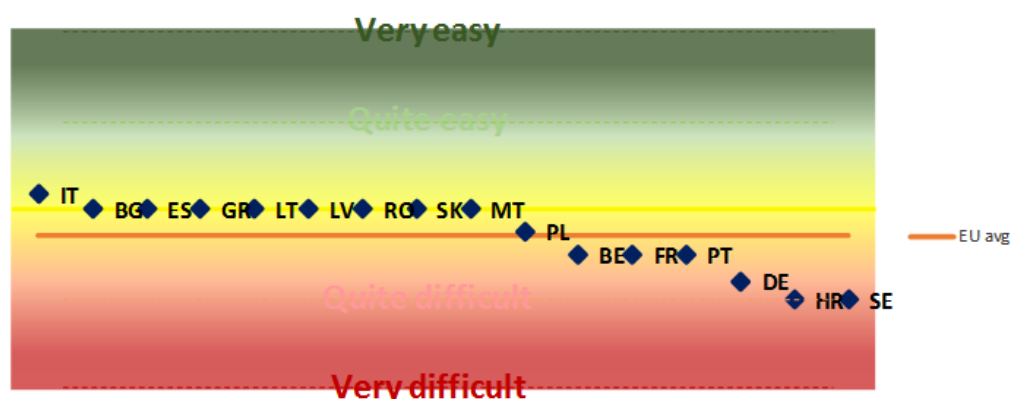
Challenges for ESF's future support to the UP have been selected by MAs, as can be seen in Figure VIII.23.

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[103] Only respondents declaring that the UP will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

Figure VIII.23 – Challenges for ESF support to the UP, by MS[104]
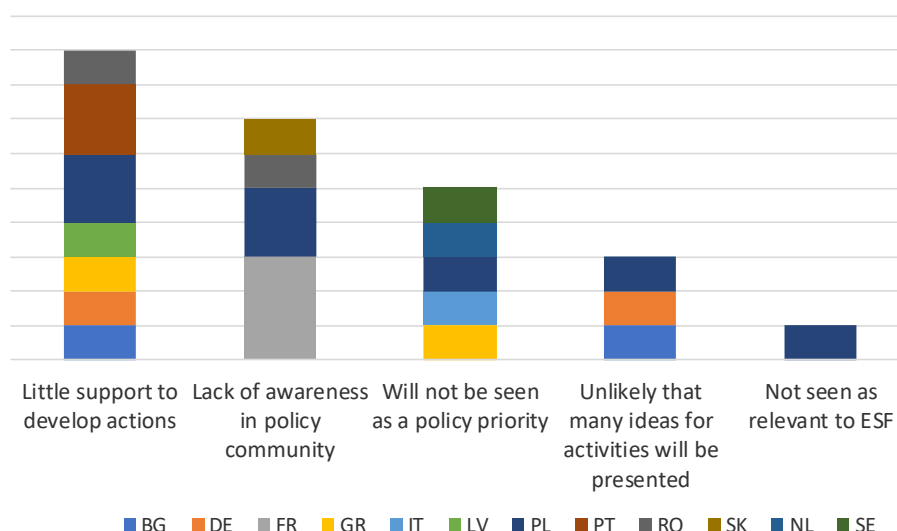
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

More specifically, it is the lack of support from stakeholders for developing new actions which occurs across most MS, coupled with a lack of awareness in the policy communities about the UP, which accounts for the largest share of issues identified.

Conversely, the main facilitating factors were identified as per Figure VIII.24.

Figure VIII.24 – Facilitating factors for ESF support to the UP, by MS[105]
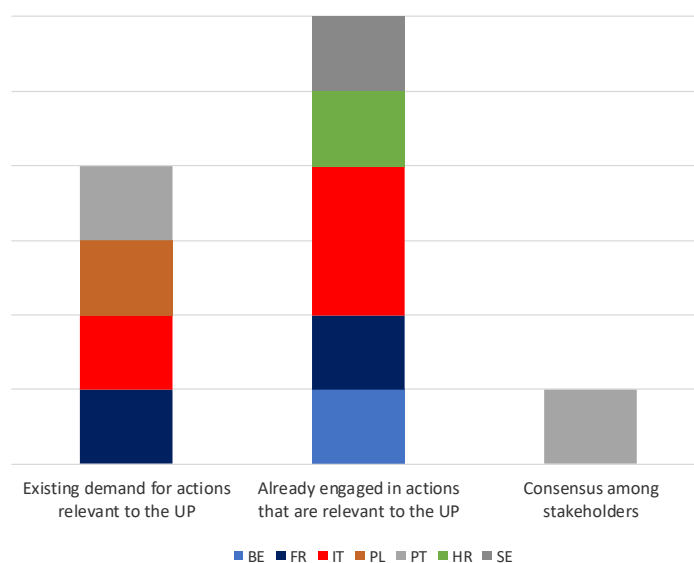
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

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[104] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.
[105] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

Operationalisation and delivery

In terms of the operationalisation of the UP, the e-survey first asked MAs whether they have carried out activities relevant for the UP or if they plan to do so in the future.

Figure VIII.25 – Actions relevant to support the UP, by MS[106]
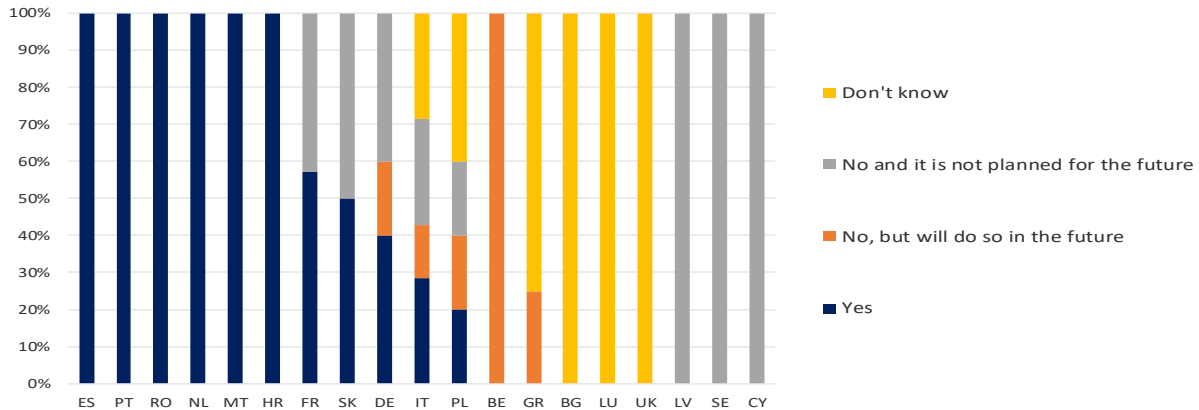
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Over half of all respondents declared that they are or will be carrying out actions to support the Upskilling Pathways - consistent with the previous part of the analysis. Only LV, SE and CY declare that they are not and will not be engaged in such interventions.

The e-survey also asked what sort of activities they are presently involved with that support the UP, as per Figure VIII.26 below.

Figure VIII.26 – Activities in which MAs are presently involved to support the UP, by MS
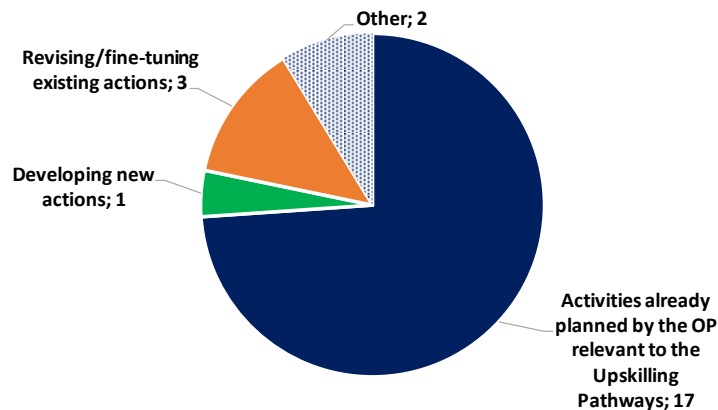
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Given the timescale of the initiative, the vast majority of respondents selected the option 'Activities already planned by the OP which are relevant to the Upskilling Pathways', however, some have started developing new actions or revising existing ones. This is the case in particular for PL, PT and RO.

Among 'Other' reasons, MAs mentioned a lack of knowledge regarding the initiative as a reason that prevents them from gauging whether their activities are already aligned to the UP or in need of adjustments (PT).

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[106] Only respondents declaring that the NSA will have at least a small impact on their ESF OP activities were asked this question.

With regards to the future, Figure VIII.27 below, shows MAs' expectations on activities that are likely to be carried out to support the UP over the next two years.

Figure VIII.27 – Activities in which MAs expects to be involved to support the UP, by MS
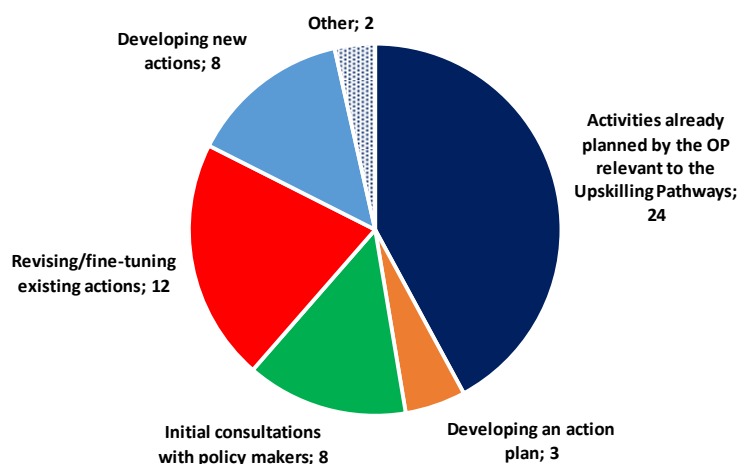
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Again, there is a large share of respondents who expected to continue carrying out activities already planned which are relevant to the UP and another substantial share plan to revise or fine-tune existing actions. Some expect to table discussions and/or consultations with policymakers, whilst a smaller group of respondents expect to develop new actions. This confirms, once more, how the UP is not expected to bring substantial changes to the current structure of the ESF, while it may well reshape some of its interventions.

The following graphs describe to what extent ESF activity, in the field of upskilling for low skilled adult, is aligned or is expected to be aligned with the Council Recommendation on the Upskilling Pathways, in terms of the specific steps and requirements set out by it.

As previously mentioned, the UP recommends adopting a three-step approach that includes:

8. skills assessments/skills audits;
9. modular/ad-hoc trainings; and
10. validation and recognition of skills acquired.

Accordingly, MAs were asked whether they support interventions which carry out skills assessments when providing for the upskilling of low skilled adults.

Figure VIII.28 – MAs declaring they support initiatives to carry out skills assessments/skills audits, by MS
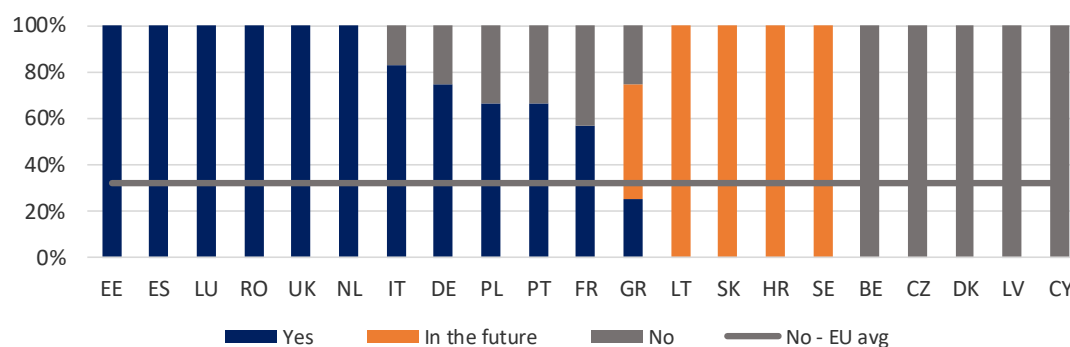
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The next figure shows that this is already the case for nearly half of the respondents and another 10% plan to support interventions which carry out skills assessments in the future. However, 32% of respondents declared that they do not support the actions now and will not in the future, especially in BE, CZ, DK, LV and CY. This means there may be room for a better promotion of this tool.

Next, MAs were asked whether they support activities which provide for modular/ad-hoc trainings.

Figure VIII.29 – MAs declaring they support initiatives to carry out modular/ad-hoc trainings, by MS
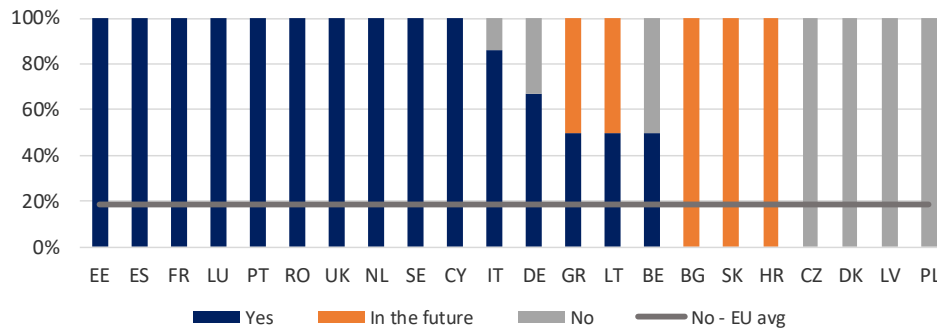
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The percentage of 'No' responses drops by almost 15 p.p. to less than 20%, with over 3 in 5 respondents saying that they currently support modular/ad-hoc trainings for low skilled adults. CZ, DK and LV remain on the right-hand side of this chart, thus among 'No' respondents, along with PL, whereas BE shifts to the left.

Figure VIII.30 – MAs declaring they support initiatives to carry out validation and recognition of skills acquired, by MS
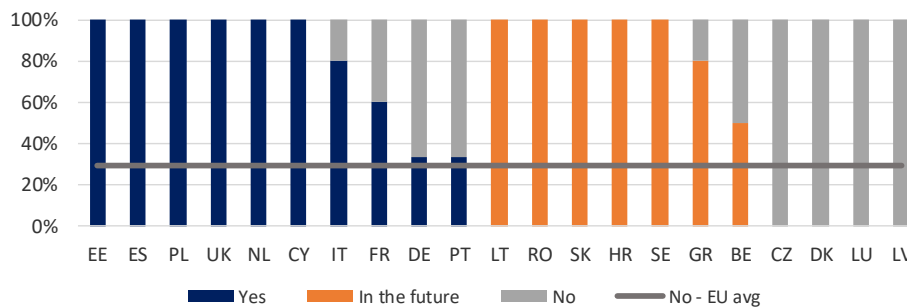
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Regarding the validation and recognition of skills acquired, the percentage of 'no' respondents rose to around 30%, but this time the share of those currently supporting such activities is much lower than for the skills assessment. This is compensated by MAs declaring that they plan to do so in the future. Again, CZ, DK and LV are on the right-hand side of the chart, accompanied by LU in this occasion.

In carrying out this three-step approach, MAs were asked whether they favour the recognition of skills acquired in non-formal or informal learning environments and they provide guidance and accompanying measures. The following two graphs show the respective MAs responses.

Figure VIII.31 – MAs declaring they support initiatives to carry out outreach measures and guidance for upskilling initiatives, by MS
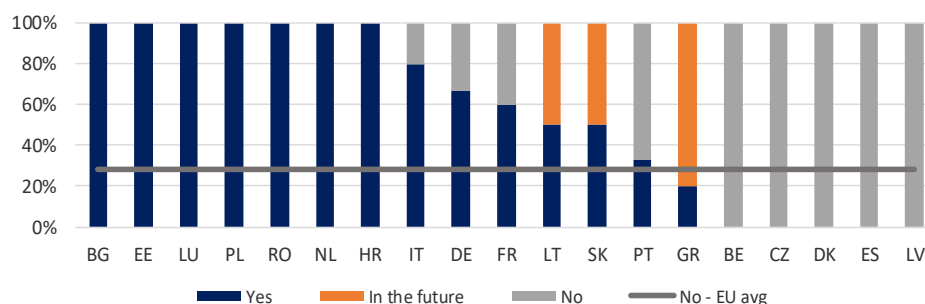
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

When looking at the provision of outreach measures and guidance, the percentage of 'No' answers remains comparatively low at just below 30%. Again CZ, DK and LV are in the left-hand side of the graph, together with BE and ES.

Figure VIII.32 – MAs declaring they fund initiatives to support staff in the adult learning field, by MS
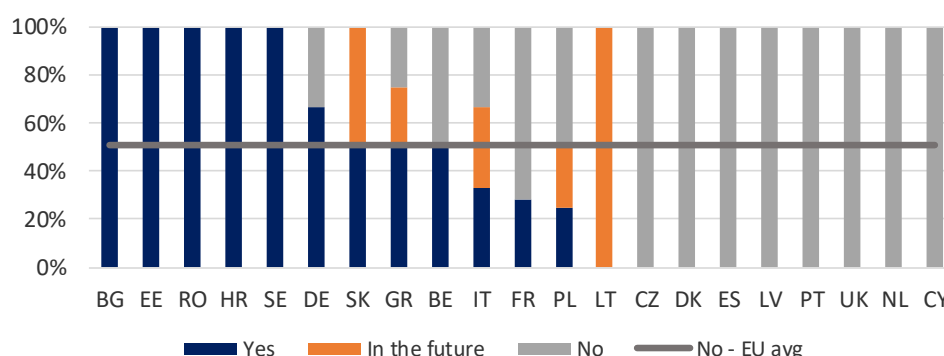
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Interestingly, very few provide support to staff in the adult learning field. The percentage of 'No' answers nearly totalled 60%, with countries such as the NL, UK, EL, ES and LT joining CZ, DK and LV in the left-hand side of the graph.

This clearly shows that despite a generally high level of coherence between the current intervention and what is established by the UP Recommendation, there is room for improvement throughout the EU for better alignment to it.

Monitoring and evaluation

The e-survey was also aimed at gathering information on whether MAs are collecting data beyond what is mandatory within the ESF for activity monitoring, and especially whether they believe some of these may be relevant to monitor NSA support. Figure VIII.33 below shows Managing Authorities' responses to this question.

Figure VIII.33 – Monitoring and evaluation data for initiatives relevant to the NSA, by MS
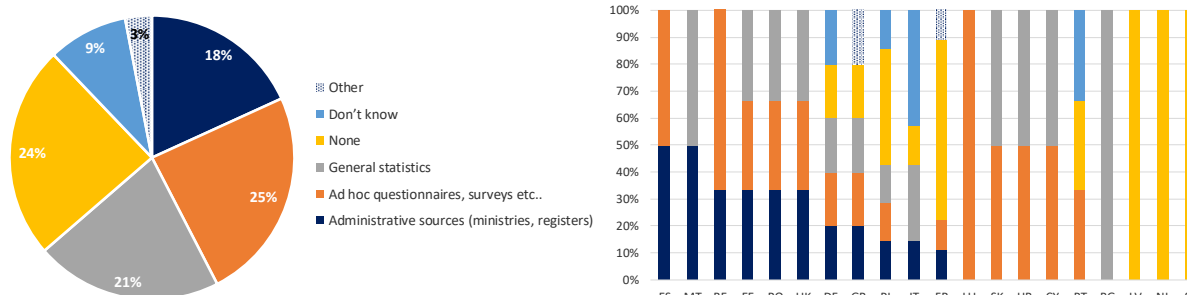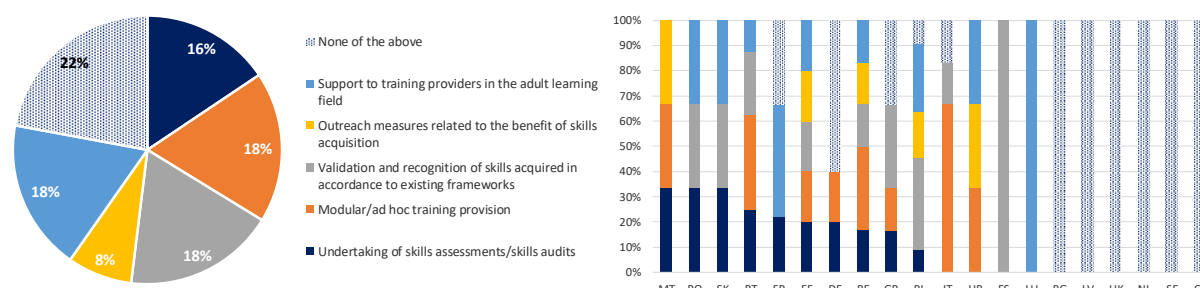
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

The first notable result is that 'none of the above' accounts for only 24% of responses, corresponding to nearly 32% of MAs who declare that they are not collecting any additional data that may be relevant to track progress towards the objectives of the NSA. This is the case for LV, NL and SE, but also FR, PL, PT, IT, DE and EL to a lesser extent. Secondly, ad hoc questionnaires/surveys, administrative sources and general statistics almost evenly represent the remainder of MAs responses, with a slight prevalence of the former. Thirdly, countries like ES, BE, RO, UK, EE, LU and SK appear to have a system in place that uses broader sources that are additional to mandatory ESF data to monitor relevant interventions.

Finally, MAs have been asked whether they track activities that are relevant to the UP. Figure VIII.34 below shows their answers.

Figure VIII.34 – Monitoring and evaluation data for initiatives relevant to the UP, by MS

Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

Again, the relative weight of 'None of the above' responses is comparatively low at 22%, with around 32% of MAs declaring they do not track progress towards any of the activities set out by the UP, especially in BG, LV, UK, NL, SE and CY but also in DE, EL, PL, HR and FR to a smaller degree. The percentage of those tracking progress in the field of skills assessments, ad-hoc trainings and validation and recognition of skills acquired is rather similar, and so is the level of those monitoring support provided to training providers in the adult learning field. Outreach and guidance measures are monitored to a much lower extent. This result is in line with the scarce provision of the above service, and consistent with the gaps identified in the logic of intervention of the UP.

Sustainability and added value

Finally, MAs have been asked whether they deem ESF necessary to achieving the aims of the NSA, which also measures the added value that funding at EU-level brings.

Figure VIII.35 – Added value of ESF funding in supporting the NSA, by MS
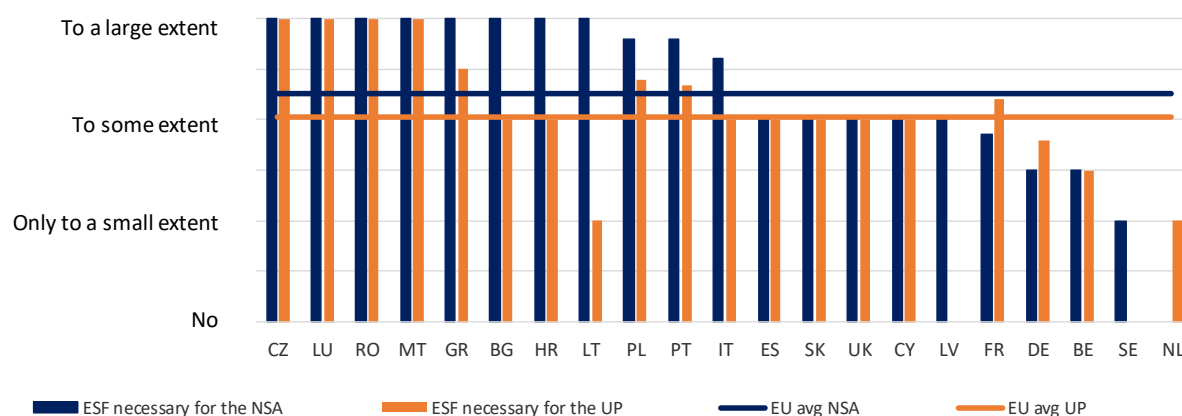
Source: own elaborations based on the e-survey to ESF MAs

This result is higher than what was found by the e-survey in terms of current relevance of the ESF for the NSA or for the UP, meaning MAs still see the ESF as a fundamental tool for providing support to the NSA, despite a certain lack of awareness of the NSA details and the fact that they manage OPs that are not entirely relevant for the NSA. An exception is provided for by NL and SE which deem the objectives of the NSA and of the UP achievable irrespective of the ESF's contribution.