

5 Developing skills for the recovery

Anja Meierkord, OECD

Skills shortages are one of the most pressing issues for long-term resilience in the Nordic countries. The COVID 19 crisis highlighted the challenges faced by otherwise high-performing skill development systems in adapting quickly to sudden changes in the labour market. Lessons can be learned from the adjustments countries made during the pandemic to improve their responsiveness to changes in skills demand and supply and to strengthen skills matching in the long term. This chapter provides an overview of the demand for and supply of skills in the Nordic countries, their adult education and training systems and patterns of participation in training. It then discusses the measures taken in the context of the pandemic, namely: i) the mechanisms used to stimulate demand for training and their impact; ii) the support provided to ensure training supply and take-up; and iii) the role of the social partners as negotiators, advisers, and decision-makers.

In Brief

Key findings

The focus of the initial policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic across the Nordic region was firmly on securing incomes and adapting employment services. Yet, enabling individuals to develop skills for the recovery quickly gained importance as the pandemic drew out. At that point, Nordic countries were able to build on well-established and highly developed adult education and training systems in their pandemic response.

All Nordic countries implemented measures to stimulate the demand for and ensure the supply of training during the pandemic, although levels of activity and investment varied strongly. Levels of activity in this policy area were arguably highest in Denmark and Finland and lowest in Sweden. The vast majority of measures implemented targeted individuals and education and training providers.

Most initiatives undertaken in Nordic countries in the context of the pandemic aimed to maintain or even increase the demand for training by individuals. Governments did so by adapting or expanding information and guidance on training, supporting individuals in accessing training online, as well as making time and money for training available.

- Most Nordic countries introduced or adapted **financial support measures** during the pandemic. They facilitated access to financial incentives for training participation and expanded free training opportunities for individuals. Most of these measures targeted unemployed individuals for whom it would usually be unattractive or impossible to train while receiving unemployment benefits.
- Many countries introduced measures that allow for the **reduced working time under job retention schemes to be used for upskilling**. Finland and Sweden stand out as providing subsidies to enterprises that train workers on reduced working hours and Denmark relaxed waiting times for unemployed individuals to take part in free education and training measures.
- **Information and guidance** during the pandemic in Nordic countries was mostly provided in the context of job search support and educational guidance offered by Public Employment Services. Social distancing requirements complicated the delivery of these services that usually take place face-to-face.
- Support to access **training online** was rare despite the significant increase in online learning opportunities for adults in Nordic countries. Iceland expanded the provision of digital skills courses during the pandemic and Norway provided funding to municipalities to provide digital equipment to refugees and asylum seekers, so that they could continue Norwegian language courses during the pandemic.

Alongside these demand-side measures, Nordic countries took action to maintain – or in some cases increase – the supply of training opportunities during the pandemic. These measures targeted education and training providers, and to a much lesser extent enterprises, with the view to enable them to continue to offer training under the constraint of social distancing measures.

- All Nordic countries **increased the funding** for providers with a great flexibility on how to use it. Providers used the opportunity to increase the number of training places to cover more target groups, develop new learning offers for skills in demand and online learning offers. The measures covered many levels of education: short vocational education courses (Denmark),

upper secondary courses (Iceland) and higher education courses (Iceland, Finland, Sweden). Norway increased funding for all levels of formal and non-formal learning.

- **Moving training online** was smooth in all Nordic countries, building on a high degree of digitalisation prior to the pandemic. Most countries increased the provision of information and support for teachers and trainers. Denmark was the only country to make a number of legislative and regulatory changes necessary for providers to move training online.
- **Building the capacity of employers** to design and deliver training was less common. Denmark expanded its pool of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) co-ordinators who connect and support the dialogue between educational institutions, job centres and social partners to develop education and training for employed and unemployed individuals. Finland provided additional funding to hire lifelong learning co-ordinators in their Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment.

Social partners traditionally play a strong role in training systems in all Nordic countries. During the crisis, too, they strongly supported actions to develop skills for the recovery. Their involvement included participation in decision-making in the area of skills, negotiation of agreements and roles as mediators and consultants.

In all Nordic countries, the crisis hastened structural changes in the labour market, causing the emergence of significant skill shortages. Adult upskilling and reskilling will be key to address these structural changes in the medium to long term, alongside tackling health-related inactivity, other activation policies, supporting people to work for longer and targeted migration policies.

5.1. Introduction

Nordic countries have high-performing adult skill development systems according to international comparisons (OECD, 2019^[1]), yet there is scope for improvement. With the COVID-19 crisis having accelerated structural changes in the labour market (see Chapter 1), upskilling and reskilling opportunities for adults will need to be optimised, up-scaled and made more inclusive. Reviewing actions taken during the crisis can provide important insights on how to advance towards these objectives.

This chapter gives an overview of the changing supply and demand for skills in Nordic countries, before highlighting key characteristics of current skill development systems for adults. It then discusses measures taken during the pandemic to maintain – or even stimulate – training opportunities for adults. It highlights the role of social partners in doing so. The chapter closes with some lessons for adult learning policy, based on the experience of the pandemic on which to build a resilient and inclusive recovery.

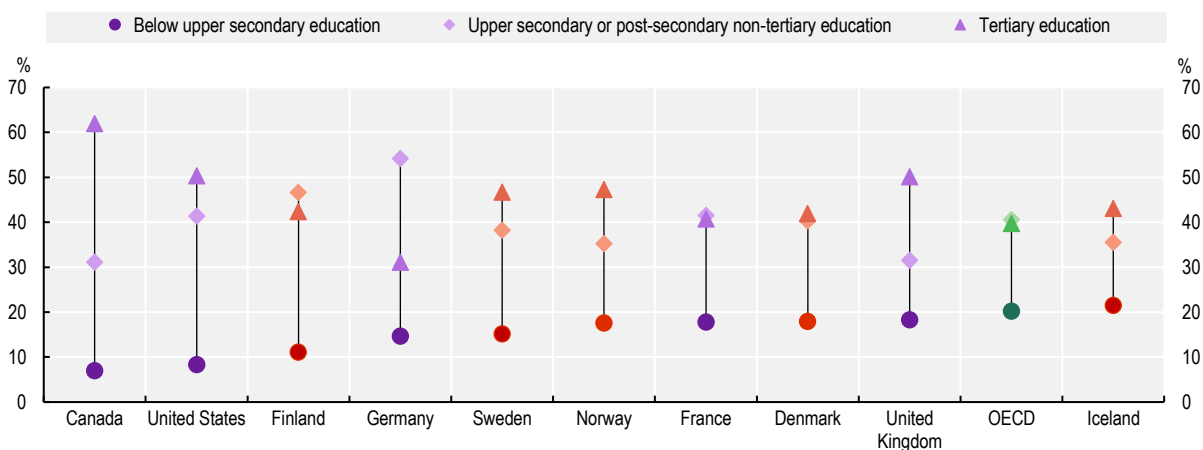
5.1.1. Nordic countries have a highly skilled population by international standards

Data on educational attainment levels of the adult population show that Nordic countries have a high-skilled population by international standards, with Finland standing out as top performer (Figure 5.1). In Finland, only 11% of the adult population aged 25-64 do not hold an upper secondary degree, compared to 20% of adults on average across the OECD. Shares of adults with low educational attainment are higher in other Nordic countries, i.e. 15% in Sweden, 18% in Norway and Denmark and even as high as 21% in Iceland. All Nordic countries have higher shares of adults with tertiary degrees than the OECD average (40%), although the data also highlights differences in the relative importance of (vocational) upper secondary education versus higher education in different Nordic countries. While in Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden larger shares of the adult population hold tertiary rather than upper-

secondary/post-secondary non-tertiary degrees, shares of adults with both types of degrees are balanced in Denmark, which has a strong vocational education and training system at the upper secondary level.

Figure 5.1. Most Nordic countries only have a small share of adults with low qualifications

Share of population by educational attainment, adults aged 25-64, 2021



Note: Data are based on the ISCED 2011 classification.

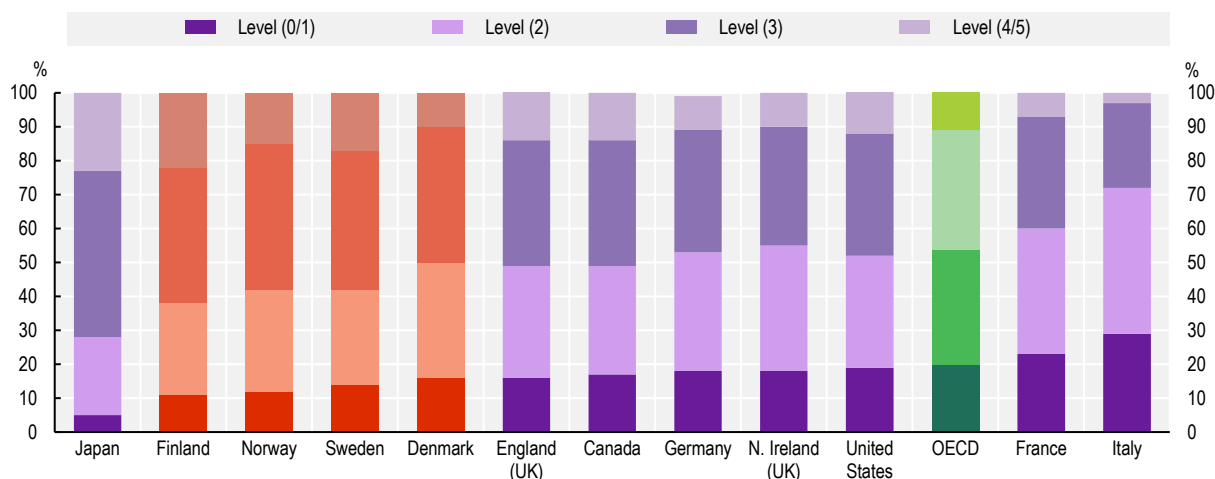
Source: (OECD, 2023^[2]), *OECD Dataset: Educational attainment and labour-force status*, <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=93189>.

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The high level of educational attainment is reflected in high levels of proficiency in foundational skills in Nordic countries compared to the OECD average, although there are cross-country differences. Data from the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), which assesses the proficiency of adults in the foundational skills of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving, shows that most Nordic countries have substantially smaller shares of adults with low levels of foundational skills and substantially higher shares of adults with high levels of foundational skills than the average OECD country (Figure 5.2). For example, 20% of adults across the OECD display low proficiency in literacy, but this figure is only 11% in Finland, 12% in Norway, 14% in Sweden and 16% in Denmark. By contrast, only 11% of adults across the OECD display high proficiency in literacy, but 22% in Finland, 17% in Sweden and 15% of adults in Norway do. However, the share is lower in Denmark (10%). Patterns for numeracy skills are broadly similar, although Denmark along with the other Nordic countries also performs above the OECD average on this dimension (numeracy is not displayed on Figure 5.2).


Figure 5.2. Proficiency levels in foundational skills in Nordic countries are high by international comparison

Share of population by literacy proficiency level, adults aged 25-64, 2012



Note: No data available for Iceland. Proficiency levels 0/1 refer to low levels of foundational skills, levels 2 and 3 refer to medium level of foundational skills, levels 4/5 refer to high levels of foundation skills.

Source: (OECD, 2023^[3]), *Educational attainment and labour market outcomes by skills*, <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=74265>.

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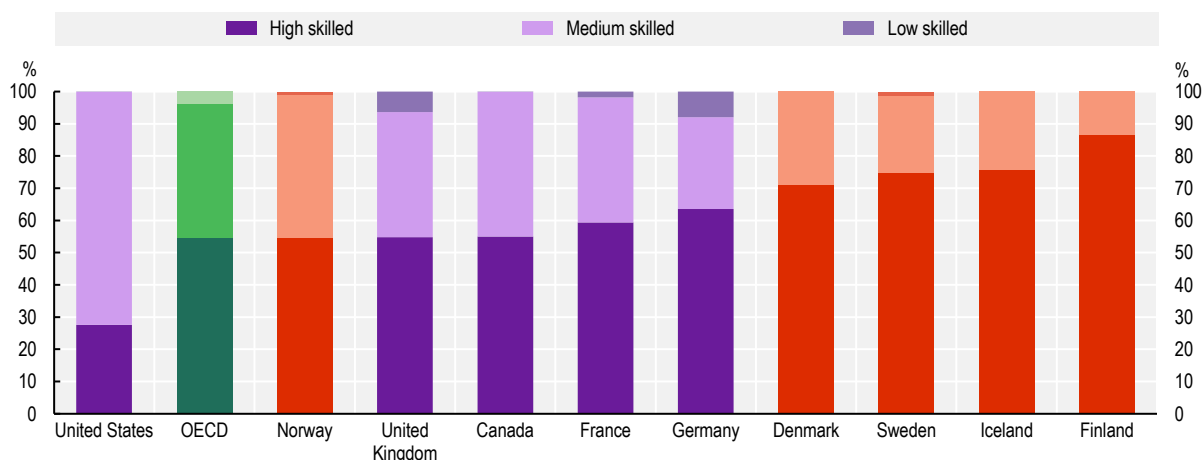
5.1.2. Following the pandemic, large labour shortages in Nordic countries intensified further

Labour markets in Nordic countries were already undergoing deep structural changes prior to the pandemic, due to digitalisation, decarbonisation and increasingly also demographic changes (Alsos and Dølvik, 2021^[4]). While the picture is nuanced, the overall direction of change prior to the pandemic was skill-biased, i.e. employment growth was primarily seen amongst high-skilled occupations, with growth in low- and medium-skilled occupations either stagnating or declining (OECD, 2017^[5]).

In line with this development, **labour shortages in Nordic countries prior the pandemic primarily occurred in high-skilled and – to a lesser extent – medium-skilled occupations**, according to the OECD Skills for Jobs database (Figure 5.3). Finland displayed the largest shortages in high-skilled occupations pre-COVID, such as managerial or professional occupations, and nine in ten jobs in shortage fell to this category. Shortages in Denmark and particularly in Norway were somewhat more balanced between high-skilled and medium-skilled occupations, such as skilled craft workers, office clerks or shop salespeople. According to the OECD Skills for Jobs database, shortages in low-skilled elementary occupations were negligible in Nordic countries. By contrast, on average across the OECD countries analysed, just over half of the employment shortages was in high-skilled occupations, 41% was medium-skilled and 7% was low-skilled occupations.

Figure 5.3. Prior to the pandemic, Nordic countries experienced shortages primarily in high-skilled occupations

Share of employment in occupations in shortage by skill level, 2019



Note: High-, medium- and low-skilled occupations are ISCO occupational groups 1 to 3, 4 to 8 and 9 respectively. Shares of employment in each skill tier are computed as the corresponding employment in each group over the total number of workers in shortage in each country. Data refer to 2012 (Iceland), 2017 (Germany, United Kingdom) and 2020 (Canada).

Source: (OECD, 2023^[6]), *OECD Skills for Jobs 2022*, <https://www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org/#FR/>.

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As Nordic countries emerged from the pandemic, labour shortages have intensified even further.

This increases inflationary pressures and risks holding back economic and employment growth in the medium term. The picture of shortages by sectors, occupations and skills varies across Nordic countries, but shortages in education, health and care professions, as well as skilled craft workers with vocational qualifications, stand out across the region:

- **Danish** companies report significant shortages in the manufacturing industry, construction and service sectors. They state the lack of qualified employees being by far the biggest growth challenge overall and across sectors and regions (Dansk Industri, 2021^[7]).
- **Iceland's** labour demand has increased in the construction industry and in public-sector related services, according to Statistics Iceland's Job Vacancy Survey. The highest job vacancy rates in 2022 were in professional, scientific and technical activities; administrative and support service activities, followed by construction, wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; transportation and storage; accommodation and food service activities (Statistics Iceland, 2022^[8]; Central Bank of Iceland, 2021^[9]).
- **Finland** recorded the highest number of open job vacancies in 30 years in 2021, with the biggest shortages being in health, care, education and social work professions. The number of open vacancies is high across sectors, including in construction, manufacturing and services (JOTPA, 2022^[10]).
- **Norway** faces strong shortages, in particular in health and social services (notably nurses), as well as occupations in building and construction, traditional trades and skilled crafts and manufacturing (Norwegian Directorate of Labour and Welfare, 2021^[11]; Cappelen, Dapi and Gjefsen, 2020^[12]; McGrath, 2021^[13]).
- **Sweden** has a long-standing shortage of health care workers from many education programmes such as doctors and nurses of several specialisations, according to the Labour Market Tendency

Survey 2021 released by Statistics Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2021^[14]). Shortages of teachers and other types of educators as well as recent graduates from vocational programmes in upper secondary education are also reported (Swedish Public Employment Service, 2022^[15]; Statistics Sweden, 2021^[14]).

5.1.3. Nordic countries stand out for having well-funded and flexible adult learning systems

Adult learning systems in Nordic countries provide diversified, integrated and flexible learning opportunities, with high public funding and a strong reliance on public providers. There are also similarities when it comes to the outcomes of adult learning systems in Nordic countries, notably high learning participation rates and comparatively large shares of adults who obtain their highest qualifications through adult education (Desjardins, 2017^[16]; Nordregio, 2020^[17]; Desjardins, 2020^[18]).

In Nordic countries, formal and non-formal learning opportunities fall broadly in the following categories. While most categories are common to other OECD countries, there are some regional specificities such as the strong tradition of adult liberal education. Learning opportunities within each category share some key characteristics, such as the types of providers, level of qualifications that can be obtained and mode of learning. It should be noted, however, that there is considerable integration of different types of learning opportunities in Nordic countries and that these categories can overlap:

- **Adult Basic Education** includes a large number of non-formal learning opportunities for adults who lack basic skills including literacy, numeracy and IT. They may be equivalent to primary education (ISCED 1) and may or may not lead to a certificate. Adult Basic Education can be provided in the workplace in Denmark, Finland and Norway. Learning opportunities are often flexibly adjusted to each person's needs, focusing on their motivation, and the curriculum can be aligned to activities related to the environment in which they work.
- **Adult General Education** gives adults the opportunity to obtain formal degrees at the levels of lower (ISCED 2) and upper secondary (ISCED 3) education in the form of second-chance education. In Nordic countries, the same providers typically offer Adult Basic and Adult General Education and the distinction between these two types of programmes is blurry in some countries.
- **Adult Vocational Education** is a complex category, which subsumes a range of learning provision, from courses leading to formal vocational qualifications at upper secondary and post-secondary levels (ISCED 3-5) to non-formal shorter courses that allow employees to improve their competences at work but may not be certified. Adult Vocational Education is typically delivered through a combination of on-the-job and classroom-based theoretical training, although systematic information on this across Nordic countries is missing. Comparative data of initial vocational systems in Nordic countries suggests that 100% of vocational students in Denmark take part in combined work- and school-based programmes, followed by Norway (70%) and Iceland (55%). By contrast, in Finland and Sweden school-based programmes are dominant, with 85% and 95% of students enrolled in school-based vocational education and training (OECD, 2020^[19]).
- **Adult Higher Education** takes place at higher education institutions such as universities, university colleges, or universities of applied sciences. Provision includes Short-Cycle Tertiary, Bachelor's and Master's degree studies, which may be indistinguishable from educational pathways for young people, as well as specialised non-formal adult education offers such as credit-granting courses depending on the country.
- **Adult Liberal Education** has a strong tradition in Nordic countries and includes a wide variety of non-formal learning opportunities offered by adult education centres, folk high schools, associations, social partners, and commercial and non-profit private providers in Nordic countries. Provision is traditionally oriented towards leisure, culture and democracy education, but also

includes literacy and foundational skills courses as well as vocational education. In many Nordic countries, knowledge acquired in these courses can be recognised in the formal system.

In Nordic countries, adult learning is primarily delivered by a range of public providers (Table 5.1). This is a specific feature of Nordic countries, compared with most other OECD countries where training markets are more fragmented and involve a large number of private providers. In addition to general educational institutions, Nordic countries have learning infrastructures specifically for adults, including dedicated Adult Education Centres, Folk High Schools or Lifelong Learning Centres. Providers are typically fully public institutions or private in receipt of public funding. Partnerships to provide training are common, e.g. collaborations of associations with schools and universities, training providers with companies, adult education centres with universities in the area of Open University education, or counties with adult learning associations and distance education institutions. Local and regional actors play an important role in designing and delivering training according to local needs.

Table 5.1. A wide range of providers offers formal and non-formal adult learning in Nordic countries and they are primarily public

Basic education	General education	Vocational education	Higher education	Adult liberal education
Adult Education Centres (DNK, FIN, NOR, SWE) Regional lifelong learning centres (ISL) Folk High Schools (DNK, FIN, SWE)	Adult Education Centres (DNK, FIN, NOR, SWE) Folk High Schools (FIN, SWE)	Adult Education Centres (DNK, SWE)		Adult Education Centres (FIN) Adult Education Associations (NOR) Regional lifelong learning centres (ISL) Folk High Schools (DNK, FIN, ISL, NOR, SWE) Folk Universities (DNK, NOR)
Vocational colleges (DNK) Specialised schools for adults (FIN)	Vocational institutions (FIN) Upper Secondary Schools (FIN, NOR) Specialised schools for adults (FIN) Schools and lifelong learning centres (ISL)	Vocational colleges/institutions (DNK, FIN, NOR, SWE) Labour Market Training Centres (DNK) Upper secondary education institutions (FIN, ISL, NOR) Private vocational providers (DNK, FIN, ISL, SWE)		Vocational institutions (FIN) Evening Schools (DNK)
		University Colleges (SWE) Universities of Applied Sciences (FIN)	Universities (DNK, FIN, ISL, NOR, SWE) University Colleges (DNK, ISL, NOR, SWE) Universities of Applied Sciences (FIN) Business Academies (DNK)	
Private providers (NOR) Study associations (NOR) Private and public enterprises (NOR) Industrial organisations (NOR)	Study associations (NOR) Distance education institutions (NOR)	Private and public enterprises (DNK, ISL, NOR)		(Education) Associations (DNK, NOR) Study centres (FIN)

Source: OECD elaboration, based on Desjardins (2017^[16]), *The Political Economy of Adult Learning Systems*; informationsverige.se (2021^[20]), *Adult education*; Cedefop (2019, pp. 38-39^[21]), *VET in Iceland*; Eurydice (2022^[22]).

The distinction between youth and adult education and training is more pronounced in some Nordic countries than in others. In Finland, both groups typically learn alongside each other with the exception of some primary and lower secondary education that is offered in Adult Education Centres. In Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on the other hand, adult education is organised separately from general education for youth. Exceptions are some joint offers in higher education in Sweden and Denmark and vocational upper-secondary education in Iceland. All countries have measures in place to facilitate learning access for adults and to ensure flexibility especially for working adults. These include the recognition of prior learning and shortening study times accordingly, distance learning, credit-based or modular courses, part-time education and training, as well as study opportunities in the evenings and on weekends.

Despite their strong performance, Nordic adult learning systems are not without weaknesses, as highlighted in the OECD *Dashboard Priorities for Adult Learning*, which facilitates comparison of the performance of adult learning systems across OECD countries (Table 5.2). On the positive side, skill challenges in Nordic countries are less pressing than in many other OECD economies, primarily due to higher levels of adult skills, slower rates of structural change and better old-age dependency ratios. Compared to the OECD average, participation in adult learning is generally high and adult learning systems are well funded. However, some issues remain. For example, there are large participation gaps between different socio-economic groups in Finland (OECD, 2020^[23]) and that share of adults who consider that adult learning was useful to them is below the OECD average in Norway and Sweden. In addition, delivering training that is aligned with labour market needs and has a tangible impact on people's employability constitutes a challenge in several Nordic countries.

Table 5.2. Adult learning systems in Nordic countries perform relatively well but there is room for improvement

Performance of Nordic adult learning systems, compared to the OECD average

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
How urgently do skill challenges need to be addressed?	Less urgently	Less urgently	Less urgently	Less urgently
How good is the coverage of provision?	Average	Average	Very good	Very good
How inclusive is the system?	Very inclusive	Not very inclusive	Very inclusive	Very inclusive
How flexible is the system?	Very flexible	Average	Not very flexible	Not very flexible
How high is the perceived impact of training ?	Average	Average	Not very high	Not very high
How aligned is the system with labour market needs ?	Very aligned	Average	Very aligned	Not very aligned
How well is the system financed ?	Very well	Very well	Average	Average

Note: No data available for Iceland; all data refers to job-related adult learning only. *Urgency of training need* summarises a range of contextual factors relevant to the skills development needs of the adult population. It includes indicators on population ageing, automation and structural change, adult skill levels and globalisation. *Financing* assesses the degree to which investments are made at individual, employer and public level, and costs of training as a limiting factor to employers' provision and individuals' participation. *Coverage* captures the level and intensity of participation in and provision of training activities by both individuals and firms. *Inclusiveness* assesses the extent to which different groups of the population take part in adult learning by analysing participation gaps of selected disadvantaged groups. *Perceived impact* captures the self-reported usefulness and effectiveness of training, the effectiveness of adult learning in terms of producing useful skills and improving labour market outcomes and wage returns to participation in adult learning. *Alignment with skills needs* includes labour market imbalances, whether firms assess future skill needs, the extent to which training is provided in response to the identified needs, and the participation in training by workers at risk of skills obsolescence. *Flexibility and guidance* includes time and distance as barriers to participation, the availability of distance learning and the availability and use of guidance.

Source: OECD Dashboard Priorities for Adult Learning, in: OECD (OECD, 2019^[11]), *Getting Skills Right: Future-ready Adult Learning Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>.

5.1.4. Participation in continuing education and training fell during the pandemic but recovered quickly

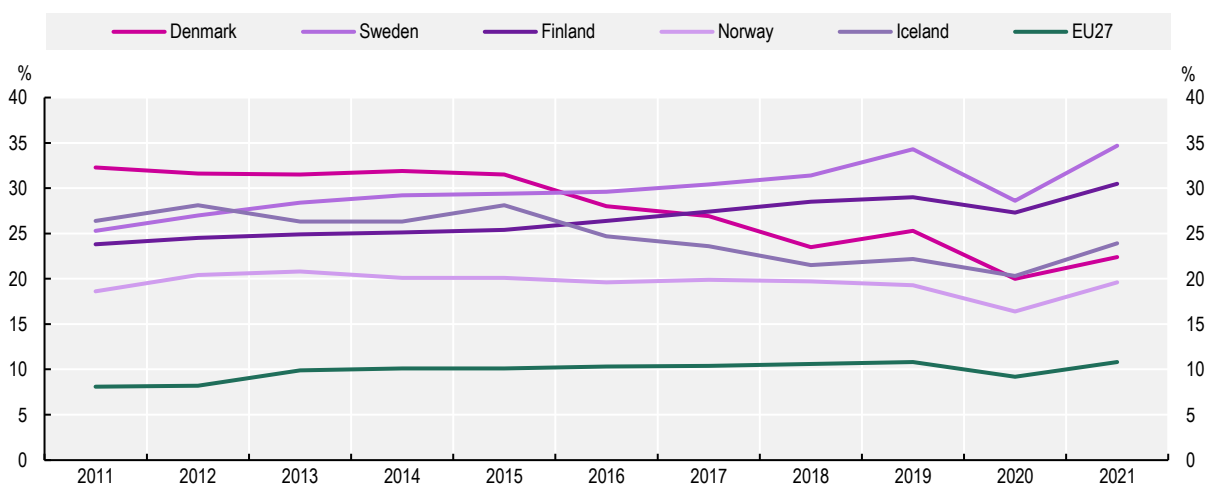
Participation rates prior to and during the pandemic were some of the highest in Europe, according to European Labour Force Survey data, although there are some cross-country differences (Figure 5.4). Prior to the pandemic in 2019, Sweden (34%), Finland (29%), Denmark (25%) and Iceland (22%) displayed the highest participation rates of adults in education and training in a 4-week period in Europe, rivalled only by Switzerland (32%) and well above the EU-27 average (9%). Participation rates in Norway are slightly lower (19%), but still more than twice the EU average.

During the pandemic in 2020, Nordic countries experienced a drop in learning participation, as did most other European countries. This drop was most pronounced in Denmark, which saw a 21% decline in training participation, and least pronounced in Finland, which only recorded 6% lower training participation in 2020 than in 2019. These drops in training participation are likely the result of a complex interplay between an overall decline in the demand for training by individuals, for example because they had a preference for face-to-face learning or were facing productivity pressures in essential services, and a decline in the supply of training by enterprises and training providers, which were affected by shut-downs and had to shift training provision online. The relative share of workplace-learning in a country, in comparison to classroom-based learning, likely plays an important role in explaining cross-country differences, as work-place learning was more difficult to move online. In parallel, differences across countries may reflect a varying reliance on online learning during the pandemic.


With the exception of Denmark, participation in adult learning in Nordic countries had returned to pre-pandemic levels or even surpassed it by 2021. Denmark stands out for experiencing the sharpest fall and weakest recovery. In 2021, participation in adult learning in the country was still 2.9 percentage points lower than in 2019 (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. Adult learning participation fell in all Nordic countries in the pandemic but has since recovered

Participation rate in education and training in the last 4 weeks, adults aged 25-64, 2011-21



Source: (Eurostat, 2023^[24]), *Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and age (dataset)*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFSE_01_custom_794119/default/table?lang=en.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, adult learning participation across the European Union decreased more strongly for some groups than others (Table 5.3): Women experienced larger drops in participation than men (-1.9 vs. -1.5 percentage points); employed individuals larger drops than unemployed or inactive individuals (-1.9, -0.2 and -1.1 percentage points respectively). Those with higher education levels experienced larger drops in percentage points than those with medium- or low-level education (-2.8, -1.5 and -0.9) respectively.

The impact of the pandemic on learning participation of different socio-economic groups in Nordic countries is broadly in line with the European picture. Considering employment status, employed individuals experienced the largest decline across the Nordics, with the exception of Finland. Looking at education levels, those with a high education level experienced the sharpest decline, with the exception of Iceland (although percentage point differences are small and likely insignificant). Only when looking at gender do the Nordic countries show more deviation from the European pattern: women experienced smaller declines than men in Finland and Iceland.

In line with the overall recovery, participation rates of most socio-demographic groups have returned to their pre-pandemic levels. Denmark is an exception where the slow recovery of adult learning participation among the employed remained below its 2019 level (not shown in Table 5.3).

Table 5.3. Employees are the group most affected by a decline in learning participation

Percentage change in participation rate in education and training in the last 4 weeks (2019 vs. 2020), adults aged 25-64

	Total	Gender		Employment status			Education level		
		Men	Women	Employed	Unemployed	Inactive	Low	Medium	High
EU-27	-1.6	-1.5	-1.9	-1.9	-0.2	-1.1	-0.9	-1.5	-2.8
Denmark	-5.3	-4.3	-6.4	-5.8	-5.6	-3.0	-3.5	-4.3	-7.4
Finland	-1.7	-1.8	-1.6	-1.9	-2.7	-0.2	-2.1	-1.5	-2.4
Sweden	-5.7	-4.2	-7.4	-6.6	-5.4	-1.4	-1.8	-5.0	-7.9
Iceland	-1.9	-2.0	-1.6	-2.2	-2.1	0.0	0.0	-2.3	-2.2
Norway	-2.9	-2.7	-3.1	-3.5	-1.2	-0.6	-2.4	-2.5	-3.8

Note: Highlight refers to group in each category that saw the largest percentage point decline in participation.

Source: (Eurostat, 2023^[24]), *Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and age*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFSE_01_custom_794119/default/table?lang=en, (Eurostat, 2023^[25]), *Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and labour status*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_lfse_02/default/table?lang=en and (Eurostat, 2023^[26]), *Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by sex and educational attainment level*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_lfse_03/default/table?lang=en.

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5.2. Nordic countries took several actions to stimulate the demand for training

At the beginning of the pandemic, policy measures in the area of education and training were not a priority for policy makers in many Nordic countries. Instead, governments grappled with the adaptation of unemployment benefits, job retention schemes and the rapid influx of clients to public employment services (PES) (see Chapters 2 and 3). As the crisis progressed, Nordic Governments and social partners increasingly focused on enabling individuals to upskill and reskill for a post-pandemic economy.

Most initiatives undertaken in Nordic countries in the context of the pandemic aimed to maintain or even increase the demand for training by individuals. Governments did so by adapting or expanding

information and guidance on training, supporting individuals in accessing training online, as well as making time and money available for training. Table 5.4 provides an overview of demand-side measures taken by Nordic countries and highlights if these were: a) entirely new measures; b) measures that were adapted during the pandemic, e.g. by changing eligibility rules; or c) measures that were expanded, i.e. existed prior to the pandemic, but saw increased funding or scope. The following section describes the implemented measures in further detail.

Table 5.4. As the crisis progressed, Nordic countries adapted and expanded demand-side measures to support training participation

Measures taken to stimulate the demand for training, March 2020-March 2022

		Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Information and guidance	Awareness campaigns and outreach		Adapted			
	Counselling and career guidance		Adapted	Expanded		
Support to access training online	Basic digital skills support and training	Newly introduced		Expanded	Newly introduced	
Financial support measures	Financial incentives for individuals	Adapted	Adapted	Newly introduced	Newly introduced	
	Free access to training	Expanded	Adapted	Newly introduced	Adapted and expanded	Expanded
Measures to make time for training	Paid training leave / other time-related measures	Adapted	Adapted			
	Opportunity to train while covered by job retention scheme		Adapted		Expanded	Newly introduced

Source: Information provided by national authorities through questionnaires and qualitative consultations.

5.2.1. Most responses to the pandemic were built on pre-existing measures

Skills policy in Nordic countries during the pandemic typically built on pre-existing measures and initiatives, which were adapted or expanded to address the specific challenges of the crisis. This approach allowed for swift development and implementation of measures, rather than having to start from scratch. It may also reflect the extremely high uncertainty of such an unprecedented situation as the pandemic, where the duration and overall impact in the longer term were hard to foresee, making the introduction of and investment in entirely new measures particularly risky.

Most Nordic countries introduced or adapted financial support measures

Several Nordic countries introduced or adapted financial incentives for training participation during the pandemic (see Chapter 3). These measures typically targeted the unemployed and some involved regulatory changes that had previously prevented individuals from taking part in regular education and training, while in receipt of unemployment benefits:

- **Denmark** increased benefit levels for unemployed individuals above the age of 30 who took up vocational education and training in shortage occupations in 2020-22 (Box 5.1). For employees with vocational degrees, Denmark increased the funding available through the Transition Adjustment Fund (*Omstillingsfonden*) by DKK 10 million (approx. EUR 1.3 million). The Adjustment Fund covers participant fees for certain adult higher education programmes up to DKK 10 000 per person (approximately EUR 1 300) (Dansk Erhverv, 2020^[27]; Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2020^[28]).

- **Iceland** temporarily changed legislation to allow long-term unemployed individuals to take part in one semester of full-time study at vocational or higher education institutions (30 ECTS points), while continuing to receive unemployment benefits (UB). Subsequently, they could continue their study as a regular student (not supported by UB) or study part-time (12 ECTS) for the remainder of their eligibility for unemployment benefits. Studies were restricted to in-demand skills, including STEM, health and social care and education. This measure was part of Education as an Opportunity (*Nám er tækifæri*), which was designed and implemented by two ministries (Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020^[29]).
- **Finland** temporarily expanded the rights of certain unemployed individuals to take part in higher education courses in the context of Labour Market Training. Those with bachelor and master's degrees were given an opportunity to start a two-year study programme towards a higher education diploma to change profession and keep on receiving unemployment benefits. The temporary legislation was valid until 2022, while individuals need to complete their diploma by 2024. An evaluation of the measure is outstanding.
- Similarly to Iceland, in April 2020 **Norway** introduced a temporary legal exemption to the principle that an entitlement to unemployment benefits is incompatible with being in education and training (Government of Norway, 2020^[30]). This allowed laid-off and unemployed individuals to receive unemployment benefits, while pursuing education and training. No prior approval by the public employment services was needed. Approximately 1 800 and 1 400 people in receipt of unemployment benefits took advantage of this education pathway in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The ability to combine unemployment benefits with education and training was made permanent from October 2022 with some adjustments: unemployed individuals now need to apply to the PES and meet certain criteria to be able to pursue education and training while receiving UB. The new measure primarily targets those without primary or upper secondary education (NAV, 2022^[31]).

Most Nordic countries also expanded free training opportunities for individuals during the pandemic. Free training opportunities can both be understood as a financial incentive for individuals, as they constitute a 100% subsidy to individual training costs, or a measure to stimulate the supply of training by increasing funding for education and training providers to offer training.

Box 5.1. Denmark: Increased benefits for unemployed when taking up vocational education

Prior to the pandemic, Denmark gave unemployed individuals above the age of 30 with no or outdated vocational qualifications the opportunity to upskill through vocational education and training. During the training, they received a reduced UB of 80% from the maximum unemployment benefit rate (*erhvervsuddannelse på dagpenge*). Any training was to be agreed with the job centre.

From 1 August 2020 until the end of 2022, Denmark offered a more generous benefit rate of 110% when training for occupations that were in shortage or in an area with in-demand skills (*uddannelse på forhøjede dagpenge*). Occupations in shortage were defined according to a positive list issued by the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment, as well as vocations related to green and digital transition. The increased benefit co-existed with the regular benefit for vocational training during unemployment. Close to 400 individuals benefitted from the new measure in 2020 and 1 600 in 2021.

Beneficiaries were allowed to continue their vocational education beyond the time that they were eligible for UB. Following the end of their eligibility for UB, they could continue their training using other benefit entitlements or under the adult apprenticeship scheme (*voksenlærlingeordningen*).

Source: Folketing (2020^[32]), *Ordinance on the education and training incentive pool*, BEK No. 1 122, 03.07.2020; Folketing (2020^[33]), *Act amending the Act on Active Employment, the Unemployment Insurance Act, the Act on Preparatory Adult Education and Dyslexia Education for Adults and the Act on the Travel Guarantee Fund*, Law No. 1 054, 30.06.2020; STAR (2020^[34]), *Information on laws and decrees implementing initiatives from two agreements on upskilling*, <https://star.dk/media/14477/orienteringskrivelse-om-udmoentning-af-opkvalificeringsaftaler.pdf>.

Measures to make time for training involved increasing training opportunities under job retention schemes

Most Nordic countries acknowledged that reduced working time could be used for upskilling and increased opportunities to train in the context of job retention schemes. Due to uncertainties surrounding the duration of temporary lay-offs and, linked to this, the likely reluctance of employers and individuals to engage in training, participation was sometimes incentivised through additional training subsidies to individuals and employers (Drahokoupil and Müller, 2021^[35]). Table 5.5 summarises the different provisions made by countries to allow and incentivise training in the context of job retention schemes.

Finland and Sweden stand out as providing subsidies to enterprises that train workers on reduced working hours. In **Finland**, adults who were covered by job retention schemes had the opportunity to take part in labour market training activities. For this target group, 40-60% of training costs were covered by the public purse, while the remainder was paid by enterprises. Company representatives and PES staff planned training opportunities jointly. In **Sweden**, employers could receive compensation for employees on short-term leave for training purposes (*kompensationsordningen*) (Box 5.2).

Focusing on the unemployed, **Denmark** relaxed waiting times to take part in free education and training measures. Notably, unemployed individuals could: i) take up six-week job-focused education from the first day of unemployment (previously: after five weeks); ii) become adult apprentices after three months of unemployment (previously: after six months); and iii) start a short vocational education and training course if they had a statement of intent to hire from an employer (Danish Ministry of Employment, 2020^[36]).

Table 5.5. Training opportunities under job retention schemes were expanded in Nordic countries during the pandemic

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Existence of possibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date of introduction	31 August 2020	16 March 2020	15 March 2020	20 April 2020	1 January 2021
End of measure	ongoing	End of 2021	31 May 2021	End of September 2021*	ongoing
Coverage	Private sector employees	Private sector employees	Private sector employees	tbc	Private sector employers
Subsidies to employer provided training while covered by job retention schemes	/	40-60% of actual costs	/	/	60% of actual costs up to SEK 20 000 per employee

*The measure was replaced by new permanent legislation from 1 October 2021, which increased the possibility to combine education and unemployment benefits.

Source: Information provided by national authorities and Drahokoupil and Müller (2021^[35]), *Job retention schemes in Europe, a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic*, ETUI working paper 2021.07, www.etui.org/publications/job-retention-schemes-europe.

Box 5.2. Sweden introduced employer incentives to provide training to employees on short-time work

In 2021, Sweden introduced training initiatives (*kompetensinsatser*), a measure aimed to incentivise employers benefitting from short-time work support to offer training to employees working reduced hours. The initiative covered employers' training costs up to 60% and encompassed both internal and external initiatives. Internal initiatives related to training and associated costs provided by the enterprise itself, while external initiatives referred to training that was purchased from an external provider. Subsidies could be received for:

- Purchasing services related to training or validation,
- Course or lecturer fees, costs of course materials and other aids,
- Fees for the validation of prior learning,
- Employee allowances,
- Travel costs, accommodation for employees,
- Rental of premises.

To receive the subsidy, a written agreement with details of the competence initiatives was required. Such agreement should include the aim of the competence initiative (e.g. upskilling or skill validation), the content of the initiative, if employees take part in the initiative during paid leave or unpaid working hours and that the employer is responsible for the costs of the initiative.

Source: Berglund (2021^[37]), *Job retention schemes in Europe: Annex Sweden*; Tillväxtverket (2022^[38]), *Competence initiatives during short-term work*, <https://tillvaxtverket.se/om-tillvaxtverket/information-och-stod-kring-coronakrisen/korttidsarbete/kompetensinsatser-under-korttidsarbete.html> and information provided by national authorities.

Regular paid and unpaid leave entitlements for the purpose of education and training remained unchanged throughout the pandemic. This is likely explained by the fact that time was not a key constraint to training. Hence, measures were largely focused on engaging those who already had time for training, e.g. those temporarily laid off and the unemployed.

Increasing information and guidance on training was not a priority in Nordic countries during the pandemic

In most Nordic countries, information and guidance were not a key area for intervention during the pandemic, the exception being job search support and counselling services offered by Public Employment Services (see Chapter 3). Strengthening these services may have stimulated the demand for training among those who found themselves with more time to train due to reduced working hours, short-time work and (temporary) unemployment. However, guidance services are frequently delivered face-to-face, in particular when they target vulnerable groups, which was not feasible in the context of social distancing requirements. Finland and Iceland stand out as the two countries to proactively adapt or expand existing guidance services during the pandemic:

- **Finland** adapted its one-stop-shops that provide guidance to young job seekers under 30 years of age (*Ohjaamot*). Ohjaamot centres offer low-threshold guidance and are run by the Finnish Public Employment Service in collaboration with municipalities. They bring together public, private and third-sector service providers in one physical place with the objective to provide holistic guidance to young people in the areas of employment, education, social and health services (Mikko Valtakari, 2020^[39]). During the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, these centres offered additional psychosocial support for young jobseekers. Ohjaamot centres (*one-stop guidance centres*) also increased their public awareness and outreach campaigns through the use of new social media formats (TE-live).
- **Iceland** increased funding for career guidance through their Lifelong Learning Centres, upper secondary education institutions and universities between early January 2021 and June 2022. The additional funding was used to expand the guidance offer to individuals who lost their job or were at risk of losing their job. Additional funding for the services was provided by the public employment services through the Education as an Opportunity initiative (*Nám er tækifæri*, see below).

Support to access training online was rare despite the significant increase in online learning opportunities for adults in Nordic countries

The pandemic led to a significant increase in online learning opportunities for adults, as education and training providers adapted to social distancing requirements (OECD, 2020^[40]). Digital skills, access to computer equipment and the Internet were preconditions for accessing this training online. Basic digital skills support and training may have helped individuals with low digital skills to access learning online and so stimulate the demand for training. Yet only Iceland and Norway took explicit measures to improve access to digital training in the pandemic:

- **Iceland** expanded the provision of digital skills courses during the pandemic in the context of their Education as an Opportunity programme, by making additional contracts with additional private education providers to provide courses to the unemployed. This additional private provision was found necessary, as IT courses at public Lifelong-Learning Centres were perceived by unemployed individuals as lacking relevance, according to stakeholders.
- **Norway** provided funding to municipalities to provide digital equipment to refugees and asylum-seekers, so that they could continue Norwegian language courses during the pandemic.

It should also be noted that **Denmark** set up a fund amounting to DKK 50 million (approximately EUR 6.5 million) to support initiatives of municipalities, enterprises, unemployment insurance funds, social partners and providers that aimed to increase the basic skills of individuals with dyslexia and/or reading and writing challenges. However, digital skills and increasing the participation in IT courses were a small component of the measure (STAR, 2021^[41]).

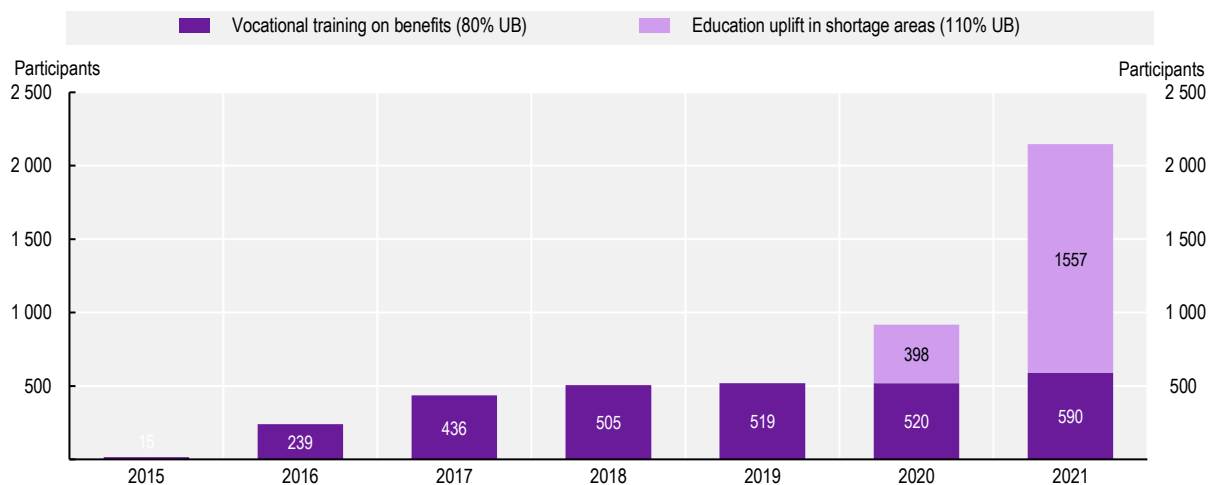
5.2.2. Information on take-up is sparse but the emphasis on measures that reduced institutional barriers to train may have been misplaced

Information on the take-up of demand-side measures to stimulate training is extremely sparse at the time of writing, let alone assessments and evaluations of the many measures that the Nordic countries put in place during the crisis. The data that exists provides only a very limited picture of the extent to which these measures reached their target group.

Measures that allowed (long-term) unemployed individuals to combine training and the receipt of unemployment benefits had mixed success according to the stakeholders consulted in the context of this study. In **Denmark**, for example, around 2000 individuals made use of the increased benefit levels for unemployed individuals who trained for shortage occupations in 2020-21 (*uddannelseløft*, Educational Lift in shortage areas, Figure 5.5). These participation numbers were substantially higher than in earlier measures with lower benefit receipt (*erhvervsuddannelse på dagpenge*, vocational training on benefits) but still disappointing given a target group of more than 20 000 unemployed individuals above the age of 30 with at most primary education in 2020.¹ An evaluation of this policy change was published by STAR (the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment) in May 2021. The evaluation found that, as a result of the initiative, local authorities (who deliver employment services in Denmark) have had an enhanced focus on guiding jobseekers towards education (BDO, 2021^[42]; Eurofound, 2022^[43]). In addition, municipalities have noticed an increased incentive among jobseekers to engage in such opportunities.

Figure 5.5. Take-up of the Danish measure “Educational Lift in shortage areas” was relatively high

Number of participants in the legacy and COVID-specific measure



Note: Beneficiaries of Vocational training on benefits received 80% of their unemployment benefit while training; beneficiaries of the Educational Lift in shortage areas received 110% of their unemployment benefit while training.

Source: Danish Ministry of Employment.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/h3lw4i>

Similarly, in **Iceland**, it was expected that the initiative Education as an Opportunity (*Nám er tækifæri*) would engage around 3 000 participants in formal and non-formal learning opportunities over a time period of 1.5 years – but take-up proved much lower in reality (approx. 1 100 participants in 2021 and 323 in the first semester of 2022). Overall, this suggests that Nordic countries may have underestimated the importance of attitudinal and situational barriers, such as individuals’ perceptions around learning,

language barriers or care responsibilities. As a result, removing institutional barriers to participation in training did not address the key barriers.

5.2.3. Key takeaways

Most Nordic countries were relatively quick to introduce measures to stimulate the demand for training, typically following an initial period where training activities were on hold due to uncertain outlook. Measures primarily focused on expanding existing measures, such as financial incentives for training, including through providing free training opportunities, as well as allowing individuals on unemployment benefits or with reduced working hours to train. Information and guidance measures, which may have increased individuals' awareness of training opportunities, and support to access online training, were not implemented widely.

A key challenge for policy makers looking to maintain the demand for training was the uncertain duration of the pandemic and the stop-and-start nature of social distancing measures. The extensive use of job retention schemes – rather than dismissals for example – constituted an additional challenge for engaging individuals in training. Many individuals expected to return to their previous position and saw little incentive to upskill or reskill while covered by job retention schemes. Similarly, from the point of view of policy makers, job retention schemes aim to temporarily protect jobs that are meant to survive but are at risk for liquidity issues. In some countries, notably Iceland, it was an explicit expectation by policy makers that individuals on job retention schemes would not participate in education and training, according to stakeholders interviewed in the context of this study. Nevertheless, upskilling for existing jobs, to adapt to changes in job content, would have been within the scope of job retention schemes. Providing subsidies to enterprises to train staff with reduced working hours – such as in Finland and Sweden – was a promising approach to maintain training activity of this group. In fact, a similar model was discussed in Norway but did not materialise.

Measures taken in the pandemic have reminded policy makers of the difficulty of engaging those furthest from the labour market in training. While expanding the rights of (long-term) unemployed individuals to take part in education and training was a step in the right direction, this needs to be accompanied by outreach, information and guidance services to be effective. Furthermore, implemented measures usually expanded access to formal education and training programmes, which take multiple years to complete. This is not a feasible learning pathway for those furthest from the labour market. Language requirements for formal education and training schemes, for example in Iceland, constituted an additional barrier for the group of workers with migrant background to participate in training. Shorter and modular programmes, including in English language, may provide more realistic learning pathways for this group.

Pandemic response also helped governments identify gaps in the coverage of existing support schemes. In Iceland, for example, individuals have access to financial support for lifelong learning either through sectoral vocational training funds, where eligibility is based on the number of years worked, or via public employment services if not employed. During the pandemic, it emerged that these two channels left some immigrants and women not active in the labour market without access to financial support for lifelong learning.

Shift to online learning may have been more effective if additional support had been provided (Ramboll Management Consulting, 2021^[44]). On the one hand, online learning may have provided better access to learning for those with bad experiences with (classroom) learning and those with disabilities or health issues. On the other hand, most countries provided limited support and training for accessing online learning, risking leaving vulnerable groups behind. Other challenges would also need to be addressed if online learning was to be used more widely. First, motivating online learners is key to training completion which was quite poor prior to the pandemic. Broadening the range of online courses would also be crucial

to make online learning more inclusive. Finally, despite significant upscaling during the pandemic, courses available online still tend to focus on the skills needed in white-collar jobs (OECD, 2020^[40]).

5.3. Nordic countries introduced measures to boost the supply of training during the crisis period

Nordic countries took action to maintain – or in some cases increase – the supply of training opportunities during the pandemic, alongside the demand-side measures described above. These measures targeted at education and training providers, and to a much lesser extent enterprises, with the view to enable them to continue to offer training under the constraint of social distancing measures. Measures also aimed to support providers to deal with potential increases in demand from jobseekers and those temporarily laid off. Notably, supply-side measures were less prevalent across Nordic countries than measures targeting individuals. Finland is an exception; it implemented a comparatively large number of measures to support the supply of training.

Examples of supply-side measures included increased funding for providers, other support for providers to move training online and capacity-building for employers to provide training. Table 5.6 gives an overview of these measures and highlights if these were: a) entirely new measures; b) measures that were adapted during the pandemic, e.g. by changing eligibility rules; or c) measures that were expanded, i.e. existed prior to the pandemic, but saw increased funding or scope. The following section describes these measures in further detail.

Table 5.6. Nordic countries often expanded existing measures to support the supply of training

Measures taken to support the supply of training, March 2020 to March 2022

		Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Increased funding for providers	For existing learning offers	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded
	To develop new learning offers	Newly introduced	Expanded		Expanded	
Support to move training online	Regulatory changes	Newly introduced				
	Support leaders, teachers and trainers		Expanded	Newly introduced		Newly introduced and adapted
Building capacity of employers		Expanded	Newly introduced			

Source: Information provided by national authorities through questionnaires and qualitative consultations.

5.3.1. Responses to the pandemic focused on funding, online training and capacity building

The most common supply-side measure across Nordic countries was the provision of more funding to education and training providers to develop new and expand existing learning opportunities. In contrast to other OECD economies, there was limited support to prevent private providers from exiting the market, which may be explained by predominantly public training provision in the Nordic countries.

Increased funding was allocated for providers with a great flexibility on how to use it

In most Nordic countries, the dominant measure to maintain the supply of training during the crisis was to channel additional funding to education and training providers. This increase in funding aimed to achieve

multiple objectives including: i) increasing the number of training places to cover more target groups (those on job retention schemes and the unemployed); ii) developing new learning offers for skills in demand (including in essential services); and iii) developing online learning offers. In some cases, providers were given clear directives on how the additional funding was to be used. Overall, however, a trust-based approach dominated and in many Nordic countries there is limited evidence on how the funding was actually used.

All Nordic countries provided additional funding to expand existing learning offers with the objective to cater to an expected increase in demand from unemployed individuals and those on job retention schemes:

- In **Denmark**, regional training pools provide subsidies for municipalities to purchase short vocational education courses for the unemployed. In 2021, funding for these pools was increased from DKK 100 million to DKK 300 million (EUR 40 million) and was intended to cover 80% of the operating expenses for the purchasing of short, business-oriented courses in areas with increased labour demand (STAR, 2020^[45]; STAR, 2020^[46]).
- The **Icelandic** initiative “Summer Education for All” (*sumarnám*) increased the range of free courses at upper secondary and higher education institutions between June-August 2020 and again June-August 2021 (Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021^[47]). Target group of these courses were individuals preparing for university, but also individuals who wanted to improve their employability. Additional funding provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture amounted to ISK 800 million (approx. EUR 5.8 million).
- In 2020, **Finland** provided additional financing for higher education institutions with the aim to increase the supply of open higher education courses in specific shortage areas, including science, technology, data processing, telecommunications and medicine. The amended 2020 budget included additional funds of EUR 10 million to be shared equally between universities and universities of applied sciences. Target groups of these measures included individuals who were temporarily laid off, the unemployed and those excluded from university training, who could participate in the training free of charge (normally a small nominal fee applies) (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020^[48]). Additionally, a number of universities and universities of applied sciences offered free access to online training for the unemployed or laid-off individuals. This was a bottom-up measure and not initiated by the Finnish Ministry of Education.
- **Sweden** built on its existing “Knowledge Boost” initiative (*kunskapslyftet*) to expand study places during the pandemic (Swedish Ministry of Education, n.d.^[49]; Swedish Prime Minister’s Office, 2021^[50]). Since 2015, government has provided grants to providers to increase permanent study places in vocational adult education programmes, higher vocational education, education at folk high schools, universities and colleges (Government Office of Sweden, 2016^[51]). Between 2015 and 2020, 160 000 additional study places were created with the funding, more than half of which between 2020 and 2022. In addition, funding was increased to strengthen the capacity and develop work on distance learning in higher education institutions. This included an expansion of short higher vocational education courses and programmes, many of which can be pursued on a part-time basis.
- **Norway** funded additional study places at higher education institutions (4 000) and in higher vocational education (1 500), according to data provided by national stakeholders.

In some countries, education and training institutions received additional funding to develop entirely new training offers for expanded target groups, notably adults who were on job retention schemes, who had lost their job or were at risk of job loss during the pandemic. This also included the development of rapid retraining schemes in essential sectors:

- In 2021, **Denmark** provided DKK 40 million (approx. EUR 5.4 million) to higher education institutions to develop new programmes for adults who had lost their jobs or were at risk of job loss

due to the COVID-19 crisis. A specific focus was on individuals with vocational education and training degrees, but also those with higher education degrees who wanted to change profession. The funding covered the development, organisation and operation of training courses (Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2021^[52]).

- Between 2020 and 2021, **Finland** allocated over EUR 50 million for projects and experiments that support continuous learning, test new forms of co-operation between education and employment actors, help people develop skills and address skill demands of the labour markets (*Jatkuvan oppimisen avustukset*). While the funding scheme was conceived prior to the pandemic, the crisis provided further impetus for the development of short-term training opportunities, new modes of co-operation and measures for the inclusion of underrepresented groups in training. Grants were awarded to a wide range of organisations, including liberal arts institutions, vocational training providers, universities and universities of applied sciences (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022^[53]; Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021^[54]; Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021^[55]).
- **Finland** also developed rapid training schemes for temporarily laid-off and unemployed individuals to work in the agricultural sector. In the sector, labour from abroad was scarce due to travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic.
- **Norway** expanded the tripartite sector programs for skills development (*treparts bransjeprogram*) by providing additional funding of NOK 280 million in 2020 and 2021 (approx. EUR 27 million) (Box 5.3).

There is little evidence that Nordic countries supported private providers during the pandemic to prevent them from exiting the market. This may be due to the fact private providers were covered by generous business support and job retention schemes (see Chapter 2) and not in need of targeted intervention. One exception is **Sweden**, where the semi-private provider Lernia AB received a capital injection of SEK 150 million to continue its activity during the crisis (Swedish Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2020^[56]).

Box 5.3. Norway: expanding sectoral skill development programmes

In 2019, Norway introduced a tripartite industry programme for competence development (*treparts bransjeprogram*) in two sectors, notably the municipal health and care sector, as well as the construction industry. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, nine additional sectoral programmes were established in 2020, covering the tourism industry, retail, renewable and power industries amongst others.

These programmes constitute a public subsidy for the development and implementation of industry relevant education and training programmes. They provide funding for employers and employees to jointly define the skill and training needs in their particular industry. Subsequently, education and training providers can respond to calls for funding issued by public authorities to develop offers that respond to these needs.

The final training offer is free for individuals. Tripartite industry programmes specifically target those with low levels of formal skills and little incentive to participate in education and training.

Source: Aspøy et al. (2022^[57]), *Evaluation of the tripartite industry programme for competence development*, www.fao.no/images/pub/summaries/2022/20803-summary.pdf

Moving training online was smooth, facilitated by increased information and support for teachers and trainers

The transition to offering learning online was therefore comparatively smooth for Nordic education and training providers and governments did not offer specific support to providers to move training online. Nordic societies were highly digitalised prior to the pandemic, both in terms of the connectivity of individuals and the provision of public services online (OECD, 2020^[58]; European Commission, 2021^[59]). Legislative and regulatory frameworks were generally already in place to facilitate the transition, including when it came to the assessment and certification of online participation.

Only **Denmark** made a number of legislative and regulatory changes that were necessary for providers to move training online. It relaxed the legislation for providers at upper secondary level (including VET providers), which are normally required to deliver training in person. The government also increased funding levels for online education through their Taximeter system, which allocates funding to providers, based on activity levels and results.

Some countries developed measures to support leaders, teachers and trainers within education and training providers to adapt to the challenges of online learning:

- **Iceland** established various platforms for open dialogue and information for headmasters of upper secondary schools, rectors in universities, guidance counsellors in schools, and managers of Lifelong Learning Centres amongst others. These groups met virtually on a weekly basis, where they received information from the Ministry of Education and discussed various challenges.
- The **Finnish** Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education developed joint information materials to support teachers and trainers during the pandemic. Information was provided on a dedicated website and continuously updated.²
- In **Sweden**, the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) expanded in-service training programmes for teachers by adding a 15-hour online course on the topic of remote teaching and learning.³ Course content included issues of pedagogy and didactics in distance education, technology and organisation.
- Additionally, the Research Institutes of **Sweden** (RISE) developed and operated the website *Skolahemma.se*, which provided resources, information and inspiration for teachers and others working in the Swedish school system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The website was operated in co-ordination with various partners, including the National Agency for Education, SKR, Swedish Edtech Industry, the Swedish Council for Higher Education, the School Research Institute, the Swedish Agency for Special Needs Education, the Gothenburg region, the Prince and Crown Princess Foundation and the Swedish Polytechnic Authority.

Building the capacity of employers to facilitate a dialogue between actors in the training landscape

Across the OECD area, employers are one of the key providers of education and training for adults (OECD, 2021^[60]). The pandemic constituted a significant challenge for training in enterprises, due to social distancing requirements on the one hand and productivity pressures in some sectors on the other. This, along with the uncertain outlook, may explain why **Nordic countries engaged with employers only to a very limited extent on the issue of training during the pandemic** and decided to focus their attention on maintaining the supply of training through education and training providers. Exceptions were Finland and Denmark, where governments implemented some small-scale measures to increase the capacity of employers to train:

- **Denmark** expanded its pool of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) co-ordinators during the pandemic. CVET co-ordinators are individuals who connect and support the dialogue

between educational institutions, job centres and social partners to develop education and training for employed and unemployed individuals.

- **Finland** provided funding of EUR 20 million to hire lifelong learning co-ordinators in the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, called “ELY centres”.

5.3.2. *The limited information available suggests a good take-up of the supply-side measures*

There are limited data on the take-up of supply-side measures, providing only a partial picture of the reach of these types of interventions.

Measures that increased the provision of free training courses experienced relatively high take-up.

Stakeholders in Iceland, for example, consider the participation of more than 5 500 individuals in summer courses at the upper secondary and university level in 2020 an unprecedented success. In line with general participation patterns, 67.5% of those who participated in summer courses at the university level were women. 20% of participants used the summer course offer to learn Icelandic. The expansion of the Norwegian tripartite industry programmes from two to 11 industries engaged more than 23 000 individuals in training in 2020-21.⁴ An evaluation of the programmes finds that they reached their target group, i.e. adults with low formal skills who do not regularly participate in education and training (Aspøy et al., 2022^[57]). The evaluation also highlights that participation varied considerably between programmes, with the tourism programme – perhaps unsurprisingly – recording the highest number of participants. Similarly, additional funding for regional training pools in Denmark attracted 22 411 participants in 2021, compared to 8 353 in 2019 and 9 369 in 2020.

While the take-up of expanded education provision may seem like a success, the evaluation of the **Norwegian Education Boost initiative** (*Utdanningsløftet*, Box 5.4) raises some concerns about the value for money of such initiatives (Høst, Sevaldson Lillebø and Solbue Vika, 2022^[61]). Focusing on the take-up of upper secondary education opportunities by adults and young people, the evaluation finds that few participants took part in training relative to the money allocated. It attributes this to the fact that municipalities struggled to convert the funds received into outputs. Other countries may have experienced similar challenges, although evaluations of implemented measures are still not available.

Box 5.4. Norway implements a comprehensive package to boost education

Many Nordic countries started to consider skill policies only some time into the pandemic, as they were dealing with arguably more pressing issues of ensuring health and safety, teleworking and wage replacements in early 2020. Norway stands out for developing skill measures early in the pandemic and launched their **Education Boost Initiative** (*Utdanningsløftet 2020*) in mid-2020. The initiative was a large-scale skill investment package, funded with NOK 3.5 billion (approx. EUR 340 million), which aimed to increase the capacity of the entire education and training system to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

It included a wide range of competence-oriented measures in the county municipalities, competence development for the laid-off and unemployed people, an increase in the number of study places in vocational colleges and higher education, as well as measures to help more laid-off and unemployed people to complete upper secondary education.

Large investments of this initiative were overseen by new governance structures, including a group of directors, a head of operations group and a secretariat function, which ensured the co-ordination between different actors. The group of directors included director generals of the agency Skills Norway, the Norwegian Agency for International Co-operation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education,

NOKUT (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.

Some elements of the measure have been evaluated. The evaluation shows that measures targeted at low-skilled adults to obtain upper secondary qualifications had limited success, with low participation numbers. Municipalities struggled to make use of the funding received, due to the narrow definition of the target group. Changeable pandemic situation also meant that the target group was smaller than initially anticipated.

The implementation of the Education Boost Initiative will continue into 2022, as the measures for adults are maintained to a large extent.

Source: Ministry of Science Norway (2021^[62]), *Fullføringsreformen – med åpne dører til verden og fremtiden, Melding til Stortinget*, www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/581b5c91e6cf418aa9dcc84010180697/no/pdfs/stm202020210021000dddpdfs.pdf; Høst, Håko et al (2022^[61]), *Evaluering av Utdanningsløftet 2020: Tiltakene rettet mot videregående opplæring [Evaluation of the Education Promise 2020: The measures aimed at upper secondary education]*.

5.3.3. Key takeaways

Education and training providers in Nordic countries were quick to move classroom-based training online during the pandemic. There was comparatively limited government intervention to enable this shift: Denmark adapted some regulations and Finland, Iceland and Sweden provided training and online resources for leaders, teachers and training providers to move training online. As most countries expanded funding to education and training providers during the pandemic, often with few conditions attached, it can be expected that some of this funding was used to move training online.

Maintaining the provision of adult vocational education and training was challenging in most countries, due to difficulties of moving work-based and practical training online (see also (Ramboll Management Consulting, 2021^[44])). Those countries with more school-based vocational education and training systems generally fared better in maintaining the supply of training. Finland, for example, stands out as having recorded the smallest decline in training participation during the pandemic. Their extremely flexible approach to delivering vocational education and training, both when it comes to learning location and assessment methods, may have helped to maintain provision during the pandemic.

The pandemic was an opportunity for education and training providers to develop new learning offers for expanded target groups and changing skill demands of the labour market. Some Nordic countries, notably Denmark, Finland and Norway, strategically invested in the development of shorter, more labour market relevant education and training programmes by public or publicly funded providers. The experience of Iceland highlights the limit of this approach: Many jobseekers sought training at private learning providers, as some publicly funded life-long learning centres struggled to develop new and applied learning programmes that met the demand of individuals.

Supporting enterprises to provide training was not a priority in the Nordic region during the pandemic. Exceptions were Denmark and Finland, which invested some limited funding in in-kind support measures for employers to develop training in line with their needs. This low focus on employers by international comparison may be explained by the particular difficulties of delivering training in workplaces in a socially distanced setting, but also by the strong reliance on public sector provision of education and training in Nordic countries.

5.4. The traditionally strong role of social partners in Nordic countries was important in developing skills for the recovery

Social partners played an important role in shaping skill policy during the pandemic in most Nordic countries, as was the case in other policy areas (see Chapters 2 and 3). There was substantial variation in the types of actions taken and level of involvement between different Nordic countries (Table 5.7).

Table 5.7. Social partners were very active in the area of skills during the pandemic

Actions taken by national social partners in the area of skills, March 2020-March 2022

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Negotiating agreements	Yes				Yes
Managing and funding programmes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Participating in decision-making	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Advising policy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Raising voice and informing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Information provided by social partner organisations through questionnaires and qualitative consultations.

5.4.1. Social partners have historically paid an important role in managing and funding training programmes

In most Nordic countries, social partners have an institutionalised role in managing and funding education and training, which they continued to exercise during the pandemic. An exception is Finland, where social partners have no such institutionalised involvement.

In Denmark, Iceland and Norway this involvement primarily takes place through **bipartite Training Funds**, which have a dedicated budget for skill development outside the usual public budgetary channels. The dedicated budget is usually established through levies imposed on employers and employees (co-financing):

- In **Denmark**, sectoral Training Funds (*Uddannelsesfonde, Kompetenceudviklingsfonde*) are very common and have been included in all collective agreements since 2007. Their primary role is the (re-)distribution of funding to cover both direct and indirect costs of training. Depending on the Fund, individual employees, employer or both can apply for funding. Some funds also provide in-kind support in the form of funding consultants to support employers with the organisation and planning of training. Certain funds also support the training of specific groups, e.g. training for the low-qualified or Danish language training (Eurofound, 2021^[63]; Danskindustri, n.d.^[64]).
- **Iceland** has several social partner-run Training Funds for different types of workers (e.g. unskilled workers or government employees) and geographic areas (inside and outside the capital area), but these do not cover all sectors of the economy. Their role is to fund grants and financial incentives for vocational education, as well as to support employers and education and training providers in the development of training (Cedefop, 2008^[65]; SGS, 2022^[66]).
- **Norway** has a limited number of Training Funds, which can be sectoral or cross-sectoral in nature and are enshrined in bilateral collective agreements (Cedefop, 2008^[65]). Unilateral Training Funds of Trade Unions are also common. The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), for example, operates an Education Fund (*Utdanningsfond*) to implement and support training measures among its members. Support includes scholarships for obtaining full qualifications, short courses, as well as the development of training measures (LO Norge, 2019^[67]).

Swedish social partners are responsible for operating Job-Security Councils in different sectors. These Councils provide an early-intervention mechanism in the case of company restructuring and large-scale dismissals (Box 5.5).

Box 5.5. Sweden: Facilitating transitions during the pandemic through job security councils

Swedish Job Security Councils (JSCs) provide support and guidance to displaced workers in the case of plant closures and mass layoffs, even before displacement occurs. JSCs are actively involved in all stages of the process of restructuring, including by providing advice to employers and trade unions at an early stage in the process. They provide transition services and guidance to workers who are made redundant, through individual counselling, career planning, job search assistance, outplacement services and retraining. The JSCs' upskilling services are partly based on a skills barometer that they run twice a year and that allows the JSCs to anticipate skills needs.

The JSCs are jointly run by employers' organisations and unions (the government has no role). Their funding (which comes entirely from employers) is negotiated in collective agreements along with wage increases and unions frequently hold back on the latter to safeguard JSC funding. The JSCs illustrate the advantage of sectoral bargaining, that allows distributing the risks and the accompanying costs of displacement over an entire sector. All workers covered by a collective agreement are covered by the JSC, including non-union members. To be eligible, workers need to have worked in their company for at least 12 months. The JSCs are a complement to the PES. They can provide a top-up to unemployment benefits as well as additional services. Once workers are dismissed, the PES becomes responsible for them.

The JSCs appear to make a significant contribution to the unusually rapid re-employment rate of displaced workers in Sweden, although some concerns about inequality between blue- and white collar JSCs and the co-operation with the PES remain.

Building on the model of the Job Security Councils, a public transition organisation became operational in October 2022. The transition organisation provides basic transition support for employees not covered by a collective agreement, which previously did not have access to a Job Security Council. The organisation was established in the context of a wide-ranging Transition Package for more flexibility, transition capacity and security in the Swedish labour market.

Source: OECD (2019^[68]), *Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1fd2da34-en>; OECD (2015^[69]), *Back to Work: Sweden: Improving the Re-employment Prospects of Displaced Workers*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264246812-en>; Swedish Government (2022^[70]), *Flexibility, adaptability and security*.

5.4.2. Social partners participate in decision-making in all Nordic countries

In all Nordic countries, **social partners have an institutionalised role on boards of decision-making bodies in the area of skills development**, including public employment services, social insurance institutions, national education and training agencies, as well as boards of education and training providers at the local level. Representation on decision-making bodies exists in virtually all Nordic countries, but notable examples include:

- In **Finland**, the work of the newly established Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment (*Jatkuvan oppimisen ja työllisyyden palvelukeskus, JOTPA*) is overseen by a board that includes representatives of the Ministries for Education and Culture and the Economy and Employment, as well as representatives from various social partner organisations (Finnish Ministry

of Education and Culture, 2021^[71]). The agency's mandate is to promote the development of skills of working-age people and ensure the availability of skilled labour.

- Similarly, the **Icelandic** Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC, Fræðslumiðstöðin) is a tripartite body that co-ordinates Iceland's efforts to increase learning opportunities for low-skilled adults (Box 5.6Box 5.6.).
- In **Sweden**, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan*) ensures the quality of higher vocational education programmes. The agency's advisory council for labour market issues includes social partner representatives. The council is responsible for making recommendations on which training programmes should receive state funding, based on inspections and an assessment of labour market needs.

Box 5.6. Iceland: Tripartite ownership of the Education and Training Service Centre

Established in 2010, the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) Iceland has been a leading actor in analysing, validating and increasing the competences of low-skilled adults in working life. The centre is a co-ordinating body of the 14 regional lifelong learning centres in Iceland, who are in direct interaction with the target group. In line with the 2010 Law of Adult Education and Regulation 1163/2011, activities of ETSC include:

- Curricula and programme development;
- Strategic development of the validation for prior learning system in Iceland;
- Provision of learning pathways based on the competence analysis/validation process;
- Development of information, advice and guidance services.

During the pandemic the role of the ETSC was to adjust measures according to societal situation in co-operation with other stakeholders.

The ETSC is a limited private company, which is jointly owned by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ), the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (SA), the Federation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB), the Ministry of Finance and the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland.

Source: FRAE (2023^[72]), The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC), <https://frae.is/fraedslumidstodin/about-us/>; information provided by national authorities through questionnaires and qualitative interviews.

5.4.3. In the context of the pandemic, social partners were regularly consulted and new exchange formats were established

In all Nordic countries, social partners at the national level were consulted by relevant public authorities on legislative and regulatory issues in the area of skills throughout the pandemic.

This often took place through established fora of communications, such as committees, high-level groupings or other consultative bodies, or through ad hoc bilateral conversations building on previously established relationships. In all cases, the frequency of the consultations was increased, with up to daily communication in some cases.

In some countries, **new exchange formats were established to monitor the COVID-19 situation**. In **Finland**, for example, ministries established informal round-table discussions with social partners. Similarly, in **Iceland**, a temporary Co-ordination Committee for Employment and Education ensured a co-ordinated policy response. The Committee included representatives of the Ministries of Education and Employment, social partners, public employment services, as well as representatives from schools and students. It concluded its work with a report in May/June 2020, which formed the basis for further actions

and funding decisions. Following the report a smaller Action Committee monitored the implementation of the proposed policy responses, while the Co-ordination Committee was dissolved.

5.4.4. Social partners were important mediators between their members and policy makers throughout the pandemic

Employer organisations in all Nordic countries engaged in informing their members about government policies throughout the pandemic. This sometimes took place through the provision of structured information online, but more often on an ad hoc basis through direct interaction with members. Skill policy only played a minor role in such requests, according to the stakeholders consulted in the context of this report.

A small number of social partner organisations implemented mutual learning exercises between their members. In **Finland**, for example, a Digital Game Changer project brought together enterprises in different sectors to discuss issues related to digital working and data security issues.

Some social partner organisations conducted **regular surveys** to understand the support needs of their constituents in the pandemic and used the results in their lobbying efforts with governments.

5.4.5. Social partners were strongly involved in negotiating agreements during the pandemic

Social partners in several Nordic countries signed agreements during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the patterns observed for government action, agreements made early in the pandemic typically focused on securing the income of workers, while education and training measures came more into focus over time:

- In **Denmark**, adult education and training started to come into focus in tripartite agreements in August 2020. Prior to this, agreements had related to wage compensation schemes and emergency support for apprenticeships. In August 2020, a tripartite agreement extended the existing short-time working scheme in the private sector and introduced the possibility for individuals to take part in continuing education while receiving unemployment benefit (STAR, 2020^[73]). This agreement was extended again in November 2020, making further provisions for education or retraining. In October 2021, the government, the social partners and Local Government Denmark (KL) concluded a tripartite agreement on the issue of labour shortages, which focused on matching, activation and migrant labour, rather than on education and training.
- In **Finland**, where there are no regular bargaining rounds between the social partners, a collective agreement on the furlough scheme was negotiated in 2020. According to the stakeholders involved, there was a discussion about including opportunities to train during furlough in the agreement, but this idea did not make it into the final agreement.
- **The Swedish** social partners concluded an agreement on improving the staffing situation in elderly care in May 2020, including through education and training measures. The agreement was made between the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and the Municipal workers union (*Kommunal*), but a wider tripartite reform Elderly Care Boost (*Äldreomsorgslyftet*) was launched at the same time. The initiative included paid training leave for those working in the sector, yet participation is likely going to have lagged behind expectations due to productivity pressures during COVID-19 in the sector.

In some Nordic countries, such as **Denmark**, the pandemic seems to have provided new impetus for tripartite agreements. Previously seen as lengthy processes with limited agreement between the partners, tripartite agreements during the pandemic allowed legislation to pass quickly through parliament. Similarly,

in **Finland** the pandemic provided opportunities for bilateral negotiations between employer organisations and trade unions.

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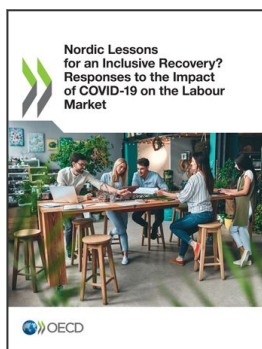
Notes

¹ A direct comparison of the number of participants and size of the target group is challenging, because the target group includes individuals with “no or outdated vocational qualifications”.

² Opetustoimi ja koronavirus, Opetushallitus (oph.fi), <https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-ja-tutkinnot/opetustoimi-ja-koronavirus>

³ <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/kurser-och-utbildningar/fjarrundervisning--webbkurs>

⁴ Data provided by the national authorities.



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