

3

Improving adult skills in Bulgaria

Participation in adult learning has important benefits for individuals, employers and society. Across countries, there is a growing need to upskill and reskill in adulthood in the context of technological change, more frequent transitions between jobs, the lengthening of working lives, and global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter explains the importance of raising participation in adult learning in Bulgaria and improving adult skills and how doing so can contribute to Bulgaria's economy and society. It also describes current policies and practices to improve adult skills in Bulgaria. It then explores three opportunities to improve adult skills in Bulgaria: 1) increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning; 2) making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers; and 3) improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training for adults and employers.

The importance of improving adult skills

Improving adult skills is increasingly important in Bulgaria. Worldwide, automation, demographic changes, climate change and global economic shocks, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, are increasing the need for individuals to upskill and reskill in order to effectively participate in work and society. With Bulgaria's relatively low levels of skills, declining population and high migration rates, as well as forecasts of increased demand for high skills and decreased demand for low skills in Bulgaria in the coming decade, it is increasingly important to equip the population with the skills needed to perform new tasks in their existing jobs or new skills for future jobs. Upskilling and reskilling can be pursued through formal and non-formal adult education and training, as well as informal learning (Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. Definitions of formal and non-formal education and training and informal learning

Formal education and training: Formal education/training is provided in schools, colleges, universities or other educational institutions and leads to a certification recognised by the national educational classification.

Non-formal education and training: Non-formal education/training is defined as an education or training activity that does not necessarily lead to a formal qualification, such as on-the-job training, open or distance education, courses or private lessons, and seminars or workshops.

Informal learning: Informal learning relates to typically unstructured, often unintentional, learning activities that do not lead to certification. In the workplace, this is more or less an automatic by-product of the regular production process of a firm.

Source: OECD (2011^[1]), *PIAAC Conceptual Framework of the Background Questionnaire Main Survey*, [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC\(2011_11\)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC(2011_11)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf).

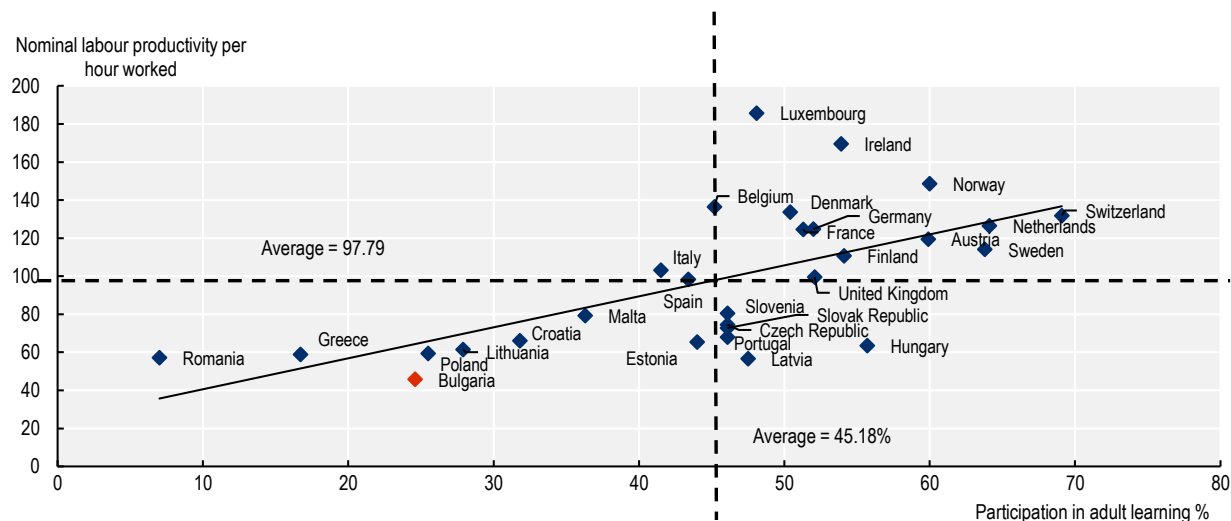
There are many benefits to participating in adult learning for individuals, employers, and society. Individuals may enjoy better employment prospects, higher wages and upward social and/or occupational mobility (Midtsundstad, 2019^[2]). At the same time, ongoing training for employees leads to higher productivity growth for enterprises and spurs innovation (Acemoglu, 1998^[3]; Dearden et al., 2006^[4]; Konings and Vanormelingen, 2015^[5]). The social benefits of participation in adult learning include better health, feeling more included in political processes and having greater trust in others (OECD, 2016^[6]).

Improving adult skills has already been identified as a primary objective in a number of national strategies in Bulgaria, most notably in the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030). Adult education and training also feature prominently in the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030), the Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria (2015-2020), and the Operational Programme for Human Resource Development (2014-2020) (OPHRD), as well as the draft of the latter for 2021-2027. Including adult skills and learning in upcoming relevant strategies, including the National Skills Strategy for Bulgaria, will be important.

Strengthening adult skills can benefit Bulgaria in both the short and long terms. As seen in Figure 3.1, participation in adult education and training in Bulgaria and the country's labour productivity are quite low. In the short term, improving adult skills through ongoing education and training can help to address the skills shortages in many sectors. It can also help Bulgaria recover from the economic shocks of the COVID-19 crisis and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, both of which have slowed the growth of the Bulgarian economy (OECD, 2022^[7]). In the long term, improving adult education and training, and subsequently, adult skills can help Bulgaria prepare for shifting skills demands and improve labour productivity, boosting the Bulgarian economy.

Figure 3.1. Participation in adult education and training and labour productivity, 2016

Percentage of adults aged 25-64 who participated in formal and/or non-formal education and training opportunities in the past 12 months, measured against nominal labour productivity per hour worked



Note: All data are for 2016. Labour productivity per hour worked is calculated as real output per unit of labour input (measured by the total number of hours worked). European Union (EU) average (excluding the United Kingdom) is the base = 100. The unit of measure is the percentage of the EU total based on million purchasing power standards (PPS). PPS is a common currency that eliminates the differences in price levels between countries.

Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (2016^[9]), *Adult Education Survey 2016: Participation rate in education and training by age*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_aes_101/default/table?lang=en; Eurostat (2021^[9]), *Labour productivity per person employed and hour worked*, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem160/default/table?lang=en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/fu5hkn>

This chapter explores opportunities to raise the skill levels of employed adults (aged 25-64) in Bulgaria by improving and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. The analysis assesses Bulgaria's current policies to develop adult skills and discusses policy interventions that target both the supply and demand for adult education and training activities. The chapter touches on a number of issues that will be explored in greater detail in other chapters and are referenced accordingly. Education and training (including for adults) related to the dual vocational education and training (VET) system is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2. Adult education and training, as it relates specifically to the unemployed, is covered primarily in Chapter 4. Finally, data collection on education and training outcomes, which features in this chapter as it relates specifically to employed adult learners, is discussed on the system level in Chapter 5.

Overview and performance

Bulgaria's current adult learning system is driven by a number of major strategies and policies, involves a range of government and non-governmental stakeholders, and is offered by numerous education and training providers. The many strategies and actors concerned with adult education and training demonstrates that improving adult skills through participation in quality education and training is an important policy objective in Bulgaria. Nonetheless, an assessment of Bulgaria's current performance shows that Bulgaria lags behind other EU countries in promoting adult education and training; there is a distance to go to realise this policy objective.

Overview of Bulgaria's current adult learning system

Relevant strategies and policies for improving adult skills

The legal basis for Bulgaria's adult learning system is found in a number of normative acts: the Employment Promotion Act, the Pre-school and School Education Act, the Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA), and the national qualification framework (European Commission, 2017_[10]). The topic of lifelong learning is also present in other legal documents, including the Labour Code, the Employment Promotion Act, the Higher Education Act, the Law on Recognition of Professional Qualifications, the Skilled Crafts Act, and the Community Culture Centres Act (European Commission, 2017_[10]; Eurydice, 2022_[11]; World Bank, 2021_[12]). In addition, adult education and training is present in a number of national strategies, as shown in Table 3.1. These include strategies related to employment, education, demographic changes, and larger economic and development objectives.

Table 3.1. Bulgaria's main strategies and programmes related to improving adult skills

Strategy/policy	Description	Specific objectives related to adult education and training
Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)	Bulgaria's most recent national strategy for learning over the life course, following two previous strategies: the first National Strategy for Lifelong Learning was adopted for 2008-13, and the second for 2014-20. Priority 8 of the Strategic Framework focuses on lifelong learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update and effectively implement a national qualification framework for lifelong learning • Improve mechanisms for the validation of non-formal or informal learning • Provide systematic career guidance to students and adults • Promote lifelong learning among all segments of the population • Provide access to open educational resources for lifelong learning for all • Involve pedagogical professionals in qualification courses to master teaching techniques for youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training • Develop a methodology for quality assurance in adult education and training • Expand the range of learning opportunities by promoting formal education, non-formal learning and informal learning and motivating individuals • Raise awareness among stakeholders of the opportunities offered by lifelong learning • Create attractive and flexible opportunities for the acquisition of skills
National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020)	Bulgaria's previous National Strategy for Lifelong Learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the participation of 25-64 year-olds in education and training in the past four weeks from 1.5% in 2012 to over 5% in 2020 (this goal was not met) • Establish a National Council for Lifelong Learning to implement the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (this council was never established in practice)
Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)	The strategy laying out Bulgaria's commitments in the field of employment, deriving from the need to implement the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a unified digital platform for online adult education, including training for unemployed and employed persons to acquire professional qualifications and key competencies • Develop a mechanism for public funding of the external evaluation of the results of professional qualification training • Update qualification standards and VET curricula to improve the quality of the education process and ensure compliance of the acquired skills with the needs of successful employment and active citizenship • Implement a new model for monitoring the quality of the vocational training provided by VET centres for adults • Increase the share of persons aged 25-64 participating in training in the previous 12 months to 35.4% a year
National Employment Action Plans	Plans that are elaborated and adopted annually to maintain labour market stability and ensure opportunities for acquiring and upgrading the vocational qualifications and skills of the labour force as well as the employment of disadvantaged groups in line with the National Employment Strategy (2021-2030).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund training, especially to raise digital skills, but also in the areas of key competencies for the labour market • Fund training oriented to the reskilling and upskilling of the unemployed, especially for vulnerable groups • Provide support to employers for the organisation of training in areas in which they face a shortage of workers with needed skills, especially for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) • Create a single virtual platform for adult learning for the acquisition of vocational qualifications and key competencies • Modernise the activities of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) in order to provide better quality vocational training services by building a more effective monitoring system

Strategy/policy	Description	Specific objectives related to adult education and training
The Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria (2015-2020)	The main document defining the development of the VET system in Bulgaria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand the application of the modular organisation of VET Fine-tune the VET quality management system Develop a system for updating and supplementing vocational teachers' and trainers' qualifications Provide easily accessible and high-quality career guidance services Establish a system for the validation of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning Enhance adults' enrolment in trainings for the acquisition of professional qualifications and key competencies Boost social partners' involvement in the VET system
The National Strategy for Promotion and Improvement of Literacy Skills (2014-2020)	A strategy to increase the quality, affordability and accessibility of literacy courses and to make functional literacy a national priority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase literacy, with particular attention to vulnerable groups Organise information campaigns about literacy for adults Provide literacy training through innovative methods for adults Strengthen the validation of non-formal training
Operational Programme for Human Resource Development (OPHRD) (2014-2020)	The OPHRD 2014-2020 is a national programme aimed at improving the quality and rate of employment, reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion and modernising public policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of employed persons above 54 years of age with acquired and/or improved professional qualifications and/or key competencies Increase the number of employed persons with secondary or lower levels of education who have acquired new knowledge and skills Increase the number of persons employed in knowledge-based sectors, high technology and information and communications technology (ICT), green economy, "white" sector and personal services sector, processing industry with higher value added from labour, creative and cultural sectors, who have improved their knowledge and skills.

Note: This table is not comprehensive but provides an overview of several key strategies and programmes related to improving adult skills in Bulgaria.

Source: Government of Bulgaria (2022^[13]), *Responses to the OECD Questionnaire for the OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria*; Ministry of Economy and Industry (2022^[14]), *Human Resource Development*, www.mi.government.bg/; European Commission (2017^[10]), *Independent national experts network in the area of adult education/adult skills*, https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-02/17.01.19_ALN_BG-TOC.pdf; European Commission (2008^[15]), *National Programme for Roma Literacy and Qualification*, https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/national-programme-roma-literacy-and-qualification_en; CEDEFOP (2022^[16]), *Bulgaria: National employment strategy 2021-30*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/bulgaria-national-employment-strategy-2021-30#:~:text=The%20National%20employment%20strategy%202021%2D30%20includes%20active%20measures%2C%20among,adult%20participation%20in%20lifelong%20learning; European Commission (2021^[17]), *Education and Training Monitor 2021: Bulgaria*, www.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/bulgaria.html; World Bank (2021^[18]), *Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria*, www.efunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf; Eurydice (2014^[19]), *Bulgaria Lifelong Learning Strategy*, www.eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/lifelong-learning-strategy.

Roles and responsibilities for improving adult skills

Promoting adult education and training requires the involvement of a wide range of government and non-governmental stakeholders. The primary actors that determine policy related to Bulgaria's adult learning system include the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). MES is responsible for developing, promoting, and implementing strategies and policies related to education and training in Bulgaria, including education and training for adults. MES is also responsible for accrediting education and training programmes in the formal education system (including those in which adults participate); determining the number of places for training in public VET institutions; developing Bulgaria's state educational standards (SES) for general education and the national qualification framework (NQF); adopting the SES for acquiring VET qualifications and the official list of professions for VET (LPVET) (both developed by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training [NAVET], as described below); determining the list of priority professions (using the MLSP forecasts of labour shortages); overseeing adult literacy programmes; and collecting data on adult participation in education and training (Eurydice, 2014^[19]; World Bank, 2021^[18]). Within MES, the VET Directorate is the most involved in adult education and training as it is responsible for VET schools for those aged 16+, including

adults. While basic adult literacy is also MES's responsibility, no unit within the ministry is dedicated to developing policy in this area (World Bank, 2021^[18]).

The MLSP is responsible for employment policy in Bulgaria, including training the labour force and integrating disadvantaged groups into the labour market. For example, the MLSP is responsible for programmes and measures to increase employment, including among disadvantaged groups, programmes and measures to provide vocational training to the labour force, and developing methodologies to increase the effectiveness of adult training. The ministry is also in charge of analysing employers' needs for skilled workers, and thus vocational training needs, and for providing vocational guidance and training for job seekers through the National Employment Agency (NEA) (for more on the NEA and adult education and training for unemployed or inactive individuals, see Chapter 4) (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Regional employment commissions are responsible for implementing state policy for employment and adult education and training at the regional level. These commissions are required to provide information to the NEA twice a year about employers' skills needs in order to inform NEA-organised training for employed and unemployed adults. Co-operation councils to the labour offices are local employment bodies responsible for monitoring state employment policy as it is implemented locally (ILO, n.d.^[20]). As set out in Article 58 of the Employment Promotion Act, MES and the MLSP are together responsible for developing and co-ordinating the state policy of adult education and training; creating conditions for assessment and recognition of non-formal education and training and informal learning; and analysing and forecasting future needs to be addressed by adult education and training (ILO, n.d.^[20]).

The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), an independent agency established by the Council of Ministers, is responsible for developing strategies and co-ordinating activities related to improving VET in Bulgaria, including continuous VET for adults. NAVET's mandate from VETA involves: developing the VET SES (which are ultimately proposed to and adopted by MES) and the official LPVET; licensing private VET centres and information and vocational guidance centres (Table 3.2); collecting data on VET providers and graduates; monitoring the activities and overseeing the quality assurance of licensed institutions; proposing improvements for the VET system; and providing methodological support and support for validation processes for VET providers (World Bank, 2021^[18]).

A number of councils were also intended to play a role in Bulgaria's adult learning system. The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) envisioned the establishment of a National Council for Lifelong Learning under the Council of Ministers to co-ordinate the implementation of lifelong learning policies laid out in the strategy. While a National Coordination Group for Lifelong Learning was established instead of a council in 2014, the group has, in practice, been very limited in its ability to develop specific implementation plans and evaluation reports, as was intended (World Bank, 2021^[18]). However, the National Employment Promotion Council does exist in practice. It is responsible for discussing and providing opinions on the implementation of the employment policy of the National Employment Action Plan (Table 3.1) (MLSP, n.d.^[21]). This includes a number of measures and programmes related to adult education and training, for example, discussing the list of professions for which vocational training should be provided to unemployed individuals (World Bank, 2021^[18]).

Additional actors in Bulgaria's adult education and training system include education and training providers, employers, trade unions, enterprise associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local municipalities.

Main providers in the adult learning system

A variety of providers offer formal and non-formal education and training opportunities for employed (and other) adults in Bulgaria, as described in Table 3.2. There are three types of formal education and training available to adults in Bulgaria: continuous vocational education and training (CVET); “second-chance” education (basic literacy or skills courses for adults); and higher education. Given that participation of adults aged 25+ in tertiary education is not high relative to the EU average (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this point in greater depth), analyses related to adult learning in Bulgaria will, in this chapter, primarily concern CVET, second-chance education, and non-formal and informal learning opportunities for adults (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Adult education and training opportunities that specifically target unemployed or inactive individuals are discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 3.2. Bulgaria’s adult education and training providers for employed individuals

Provider	Description	Number of providers	Number of adult (aged 25-64) participants
VET gymnasiums	Provide vocational education and training (VET) at the level of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) 3 and 4, available for individuals aged 16+. These are part of the formal education system under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES).	350 (2021-22)	37 856 (2016)
General schools offering VET programmes	Classes within general schools that provide VET at the level of EQF 3 and 4, available for individuals aged 16+. These are part of the formal education system under the responsibility of MES.		
VET colleges	Provide post-secondary, non-tertiary VET education at the level of EQF 5, available for students aged 19+. These are part of the formal education system under the responsibility of MES.	21 (2021-22)	
Universities and tertiary colleges	Provide tertiary education at the level of EQF 6, 7 and 8. These are part of the formal education system under the responsibility of MES.	54 (2021, 2022)	
Schools offering second-chance adult education	Provide courses to help adults complete qualifications up to the level of compulsory formal education. They are part of the formal education system under the responsibility of MES and can be offered at primary, lower secondary or secondary schools.	Unknown; data not collected by the National Statistical Institute (NSI)	
VET centres	Provide continuing VET to individuals aged 16+. These are mostly private institutions established under the Vocational Education and Training Act and licensed by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training. Learners can obtain vocational qualifications but not educational degrees (individuals can take an additional exam to receive an educational degree).	918 (2021-22) of which: 292 offer full qualifications	82 204 (2021) of which: 9 778 obtained a professional qualification level 72 426 trained for partial qualification
Enterprises	Provide on-the-job training, non-formal and informal training, and are active partners in apprenticeships.	27 960 (2015)	386 858 (2015)
Community cultural centres (<i>chitalishta</i>)	Local community centres that provide non-formal courses in language, arts and culture.	3 321 (2017)	Unknown
Trade unions	Provide non-formal education and training opportunities as part of active labour market policies that are usually also open to people who are not members of the union. Also involved with apprenticeships.	Unknown	14 652 (2016)
Craft chambers	Provide non-formal training to craft trade apprentices, governed by the Commerce Act.	57	36 198 (2016)
Nationally representative employers’ organisations	Provide non-formal education and training as part of active labour market policies.	5	

Provider	Description	Number of providers	Number of adult (aged 25-64) participants
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	Examples include the Znanie Association, an NGO that oversees 30 regional associations that provide adult education and training; scientific-technical associations, which are NGOs that provide VET and continuous vocational education and training in technical occupations; and NGOs that provide literacy and other basic skill courses to vulnerable groups.	Unknown; data not collected by NSI	Unknown; data not collected by NSI

Source: Eurydice (2022^[22]), *Institutions providing adult learning and education: Bulgaria*, www.eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/institutions-providing-adult-education-and-training.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/institutions-providing-adult-education-and-training; NSI (n.d.^[23]), *National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria*, www.nsi.bg/en; NAVET (n.d.^[24]), *Register of Vocational Training Centres (CVT)*, www.navet.government.bg/en/register-of-vocational-training-centres-cvt/; Eurydice (2022^[25]), *Bulgaria: Administration and governance at local and/or institutional level*, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/administration-and-governance-local-and-or-institutional-level/>; EURES (n.d.^[26]), *European Job Days: Bulgaria*, www.europeanjobdays.eu/en/eures-country/bulgaria/; World Bank (2021^[18]), *Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria*, www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf.

Even though participation in non-formal education and training in Bulgaria is quite limited (Figure 3.3), the vast majority of the non-formal education and training that does exist is provided by employers (Eurostat, 2016^[8]). Additional non-formal education and training in Bulgaria typically occurs in local community centres (*chitalishta*) and through trade unions, employers' organisations or chambers of commerce.

Bulgaria's performance in adult skills

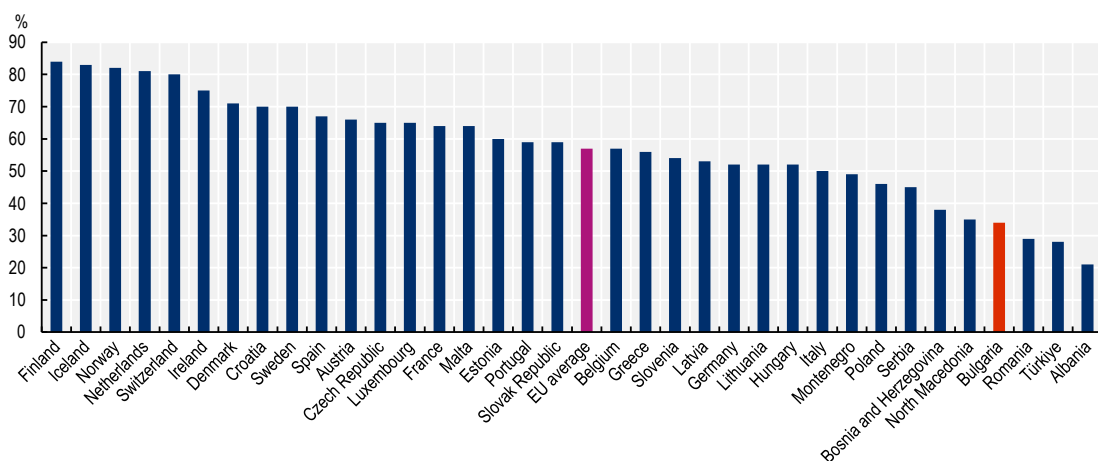
Despite the growing importance of upskilling and reskilling among adults in Bulgaria and the focus placed on improving Bulgaria's performance in this area in a number of national strategies (Table 3.1), adult skill levels remain low, and participation in adult education and training is lower in Bulgaria than in any other EU country. Furthermore, the motivation to participate in adult education and training is very low in Bulgaria, and employers in Bulgaria provide fewer opportunities for adult education and training than most of their EU peers.

Skill levels of adults in Bulgaria

Although some measures of adults' skill levels in Bulgaria are not available, such as data from the Survey of Adult Skills (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC), there are a number of indicators that the skill levels of Bulgarian adults are low, on average, relative to their EU counterparts. This is evidenced, among other things, by the relatively low performance of Bulgarian youth (15-year-olds) on the skills dimensions tested by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2019^[27]). Bulgarian youth score well below the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science and a small share has at least basic or above basic digital skills (see Chapter 2). In addition, while 57% of individuals in the European Union, on average, have basic or above basic digital skills, in Bulgaria, this figure stands at 34%, surpassing only Romania, the Republic of Türkiye and Albania (Figure 3.2). The officials and stakeholders consulted during this Skills Strategy project (hereafter "project participants") also mentioned concerns about the skill levels of adults in Bulgaria, including transversal skills, such as interpersonal skills and public speaking.

Figure 3.2. Basic digital skill proficiency in Bulgaria and selected countries, 2021

Percentage of adults (aged 25-64) with basic or above basic digital skills



Source: Eurostat (2021^[28]), *Digital economy and society 2021: Individuals' level of digital skills (from 2021 onwards)*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21_custom_3206256/default/table?lang=en.

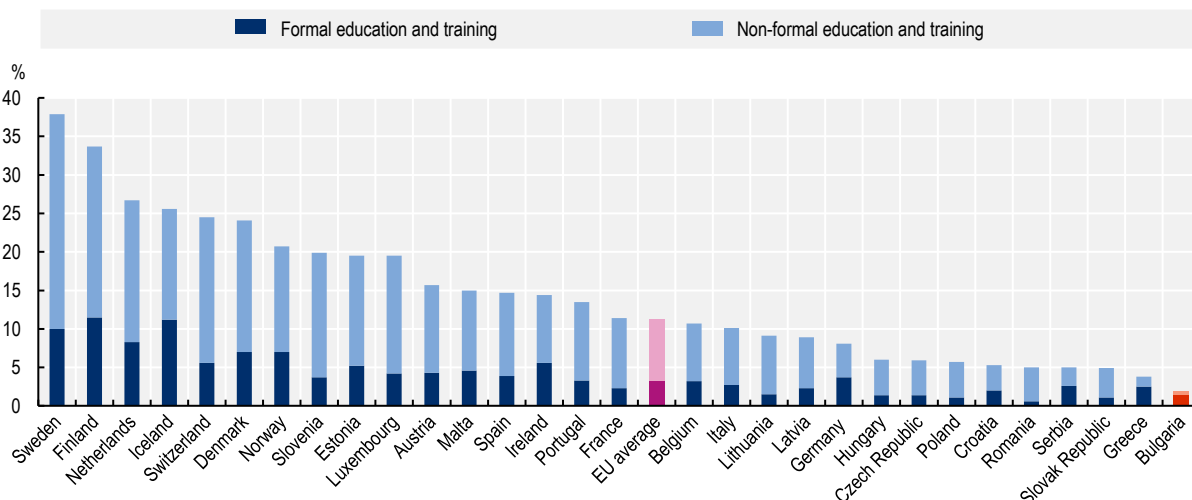
StatLink  <https://stat.link/vhe31b>

Participation in formal and non-formal education

Participation in adult education and training in Bulgaria is the lowest in the European Union (Figure 3.3), with an even larger gap between Bulgaria and other EU countries when it comes to non-formal education than the gap in formal education. In 2021, less than 2% of adults (aged 25-64) in Bulgaria participated in adult education and training, falling well short of Bulgaria's 2020 national target of 5% set in the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020). Even though Bulgaria has had a lifelong learning strategy since 2008, there has been little progress towards the target participation numbers in the above strategies. Furthermore, the participation rate in adult education and training has generally declined since 2018 (2.5%), falling to 1.6% in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and recovering only to 1.8% in 2021 (below Bulgaria's 2013 level) (Eurostat, 2016^[8]). Meanwhile, in the European Union, average adult education and training participation rates had already recovered to pre-COVID levels by 2021.

Figure 3.3. Participation in adult learning in Bulgaria and selected countries, 2021

Percentage of adults (aged 25-64) who participated in formal and/or non-formal education and training in the past four weeks



Source: Eurostat (2021^[29]), *Labour Force Survey 2021: Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFS_09_custom_3502514/default/table?lang=en.

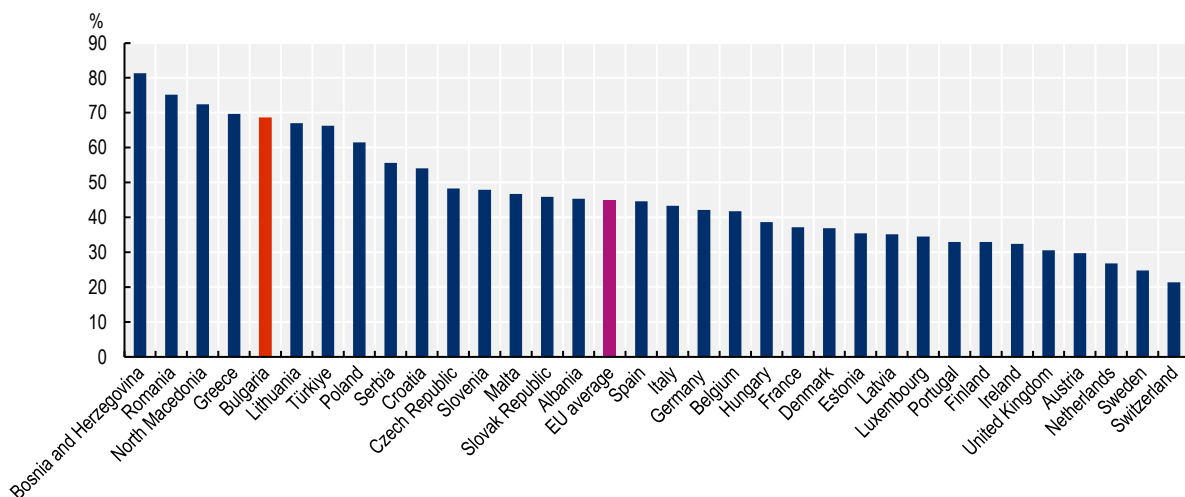
StatLink  <https://stat.link/03rcdl>

As in other countries, participation in adult education and training in Bulgaria is lower for unemployed and minority groups such as the Roma (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4), as well as for individuals with lower levels of education (1.7% for those with below-tertiary-level education versus 2.9% among those with tertiary education, as compared to 8.2% and 18.6%, respectively, in the European Union on average) and older individuals. While older individuals participate less in adult education and training in most countries, in Bulgaria, the share of 25-34 year-olds participating is nearly five times greater than the share of 35-44 year-olds (in the European Union, on average, this is less than double). The share of 45+-year-olds participating in Bulgaria is nearly zero (compared to 5.7% in the European Union, on average) (Eurostat, 2021^[29]).

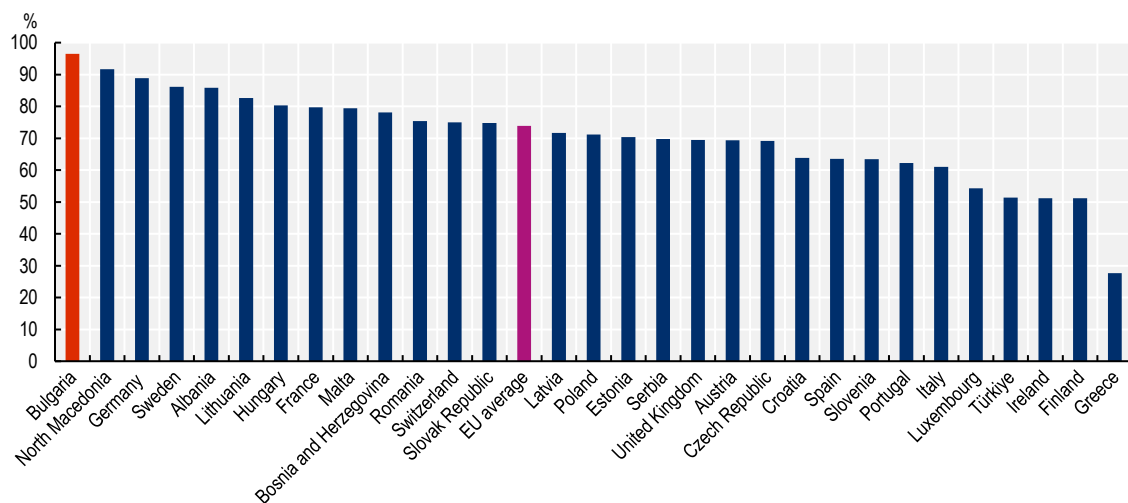
Low participation in adult education and training in Bulgaria is influenced by particularly low motivation to engage in lifelong learning. Survey data shows that 68.7% of adults aged 25-64 do not participate and do not want to participate in education and training, compared to only 44.9% on average in the European Union (Figure 3.4). Furthermore, Bulgaria has the highest share in the European Union of individuals responding that they do not participate in adult education and training because there is “no need” (Figure 3.4), despite low skill levels among adults. Adults in Bulgaria also do not seem to regard training as a way to gain the skills they need for work. In fact, in the European Working Conditions Survey, Bulgaria ranks last of all countries surveyed in responding, “I need further training to cope well with my duties” at work (Eurofound, 2019^[30]).

Figure 3.4. Willingness to participate in adult education and training in Bulgaria and selected countries, 2016

A. Percentage of the population who did not participate and did not want to participate in adult education and training



B. Percentage of the population for whom the main reason for not participating in education and training is "no need"



Source: Eurostat (2016^[8]), *Adult education survey 2016: Population by will to participate in education and training*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_175/default/table?lang=en&category=educ.educ_part.trng.trng_aes_12m3; Eurostat (2016^[9]), *Population not wanting to participate in education and training by main reason and sex*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_195/default/table?lang=en&category=educ.educ_part.trng.trng_aes_12m3.

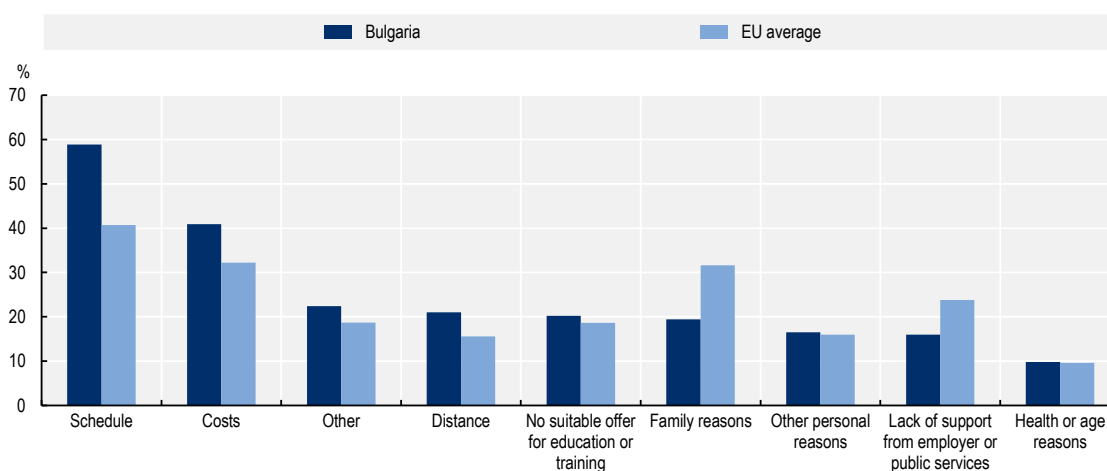
StatLink  <https://stat.link/536xsu>

Project participants confirmed adults' low motivation to participate in adult education and training, citing this as a top priority to address to improve adult skills in Bulgaria. They noted that adults in Bulgaria would be more motivated to participate in adult learning if they saw the benefits of this learning in the form of higher wages or better status in the labour market. Indeed, public survey data support the notion that Bulgarian adults view career progression and better income as central reasons to participate in adult education and training. Some 67% of surveyed adults in Bulgaria completely agree that adult learning and continuing VET are important to progress in a career (compared to 55% in the European Union, on average), and 65% completely agree that these are important to achieve a better income (compared to 49% on average in the European Union) (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]). However, project participants mentioned that motivation remains low as adults do not see such benefits in practice.

Even individuals in Bulgaria who are motivated and want to participate in adult learning face a number of barriers to doing so, most notably time and financial constraints (Figure 3.5). These barriers are more substantial in Bulgaria than in the European Union, on average, with 59% of Bulgarians citing their schedules as a barrier compared to 41% in the European Union, on average, and 41% of Bulgarians citing costs as a barrier compared to 32% on average in the European Union. Project participants shared that the relatively long duration of adult education and training options in Bulgaria make it all the more difficult for individuals to fit learning into their work and personal schedules. Furthermore, while project participants acknowledged that government subsidies help to cover part of the costs of training to individuals, they explained that for employed individuals, although their employers could, in theory, contribute to the out-of-pocket spending not covered by subsidies for their employees, they rarely do so because the mindset of employers is that developing skills is the responsibility of the education system and not of employers. Thus, employees are left to shoulder the remaining costs on their own.

Figure 3.5. Barriers to participation in adult learning, Bulgaria and the European Union, 2016

Percentage of individuals wanting to participate in education and training, by reason for not participating



Source: Eurostat (2016^[31]), *Adult education survey 2016: Population wanting to participate in education and training, by reason for not participating and sex*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_176_custom_3565161/default/table?lang=en.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/ljvz53>

In terms of the quality and relevance of adult education and training, individuals in Bulgaria who are interested in participating in adult learning cite the lack of a suitable offer for education and training (20.2%) slightly more than their peers in the European Union on average (18.6%). Furthermore, when asked about the *main* reason for not participating in adult education and training, individuals cite that there is no suitable

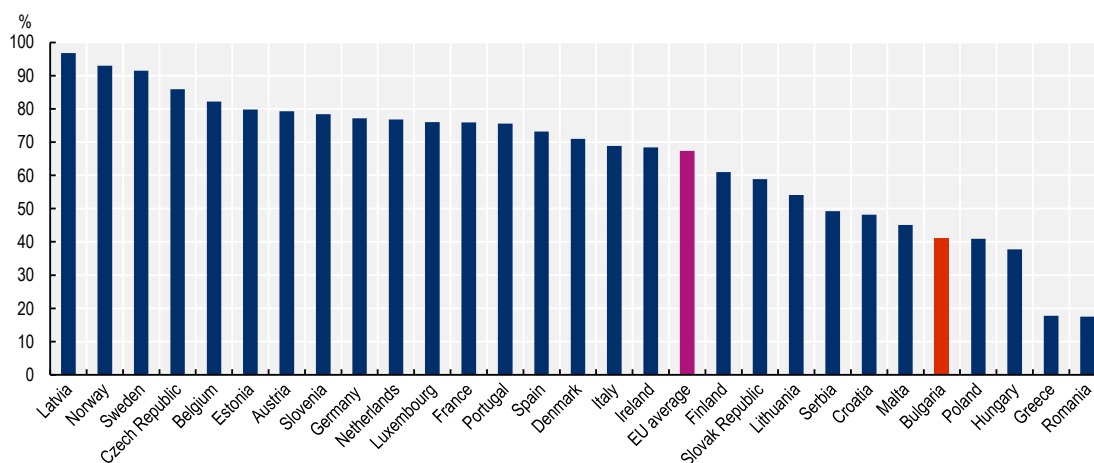
offer – above all other reasons besides schedule and cost. In contrast, in the European Union, on average, family reasons and lack of support from employers or public services rank higher (Eurostat, 2016^[8]).

Participation in training provided by employers

Enterprise involvement in providing or supporting adult education and training in Bulgaria is quite low. For example, only 41% of enterprises provide continuing vocational training (CVT), compared to 67% on average in the European Union (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6. Training provision in enterprises in Bulgaria and selected countries, 2020

Percentage of enterprises providing continuing vocational training (CVT)



Source: Eurostat (2020^[32]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey 2020: Enterprises providing training by type of training and size class - % of all enterprises*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_cvt_01s/default/table?lang=en.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/t93evq>

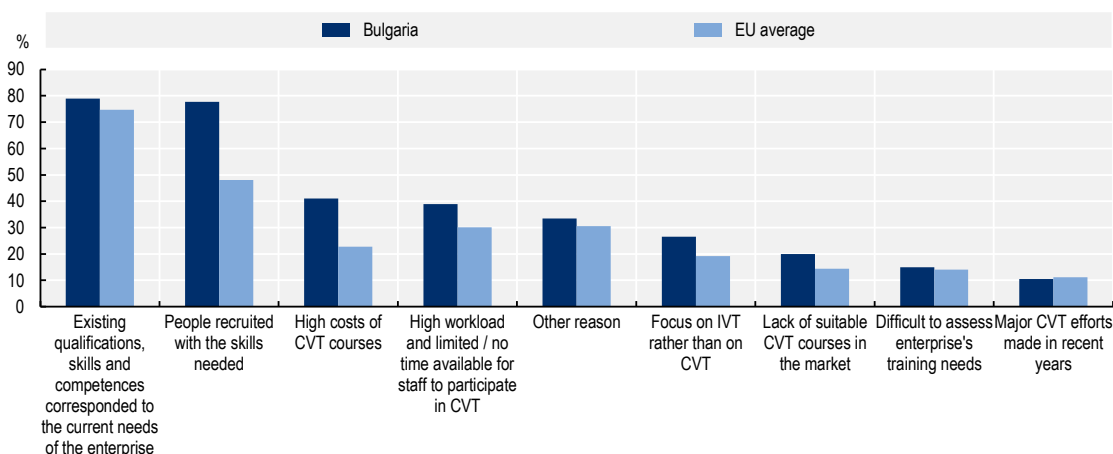
Similar to individuals, motivation among employers to provide or support adult education and training opportunities for their employees appears to be quite low in Bulgaria. Bulgarian companies do not place a high value on training, which is exhibited by the fact that a lower share (29%) rate the value of training as high compared to the EU average (35%) and a higher share rate the value as low (32% versus 25% in the European Union) (Eurofound, 2019^[33]). Within Bulgaria, training is even less highly valued by smaller companies. Companies with 250 or more employees are more likely to place a high value on training (38%) than small (29%) or medium-sized (24%) enterprises. Not valuing training highly may, of course, stem from a number of sources, including low awareness, a feeling that there is “no need” to invest in training, and a perception that available training opportunities are not of high quality (including cost-per-value). During consultations, project participants echoed the notion that employer motivation to have employees participate in education and training is low, especially among SMEs, noting that this is likely also related to practical challenges, such as work cannot continue when one or two workers are absent for training.

Employers, like individuals, report cost and time as important barriers to investing in adult education and training. The main reasons enterprises cite for not providing training – after employees’ or new hires’ skills already meet the enterprise’s needs – are costs and limited flexibility to release staff to participate in education and training (Figure 3.7). These are both greater concerns in Bulgaria, standing at 41% and 39%, respectively, than in the European Union (23% and 30%, respectively). In fact, costs are cited as a barrier for employers in Bulgaria more than in any other country besides Lithuania and Portugal (Eurostat, 2020^[32]). In addition, employers in Bulgaria seem to struggle to find education and training opportunities that meet their needs more than employers in other countries in the European Union.

A higher percentage of enterprises in Bulgaria (20%) report not providing education and training because of a lack of suitable CVT courses in the market than in the European Union, on average (14%) (Eurostat, 2020^[32]). This indicates that, from employers' perspective, there is room to improve the quality and relevance of adult education and training in Bulgaria.

Figure 3.7. Reasons employers in Bulgaria and the European Union do not provide training, 2020

Percentage of enterprises that do not provide training, by reason for non-provision



Note: CVT: Continuing vocational training; IVT: Initial vocational training.

Source: Eurostat (2020^[32]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey 2020: Enterprises providing training by type of training and size class - % of all enterprises*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tmq_cvt_01s/default/table?lang=en.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/6prcje>

Better engaging employers in providing and promoting adult learning could help make lifelong learning a priority in Bulgaria and encourage adults to engage in upskilling and reskilling activities.

Opportunities to improve adult skills

Bulgaria's performance in adult skill levels and participation in adult education and training is affected by many individual, institutional and societal factors. However, three critical opportunities for improvement have been identified for Bulgaria as a result of the analysis above, which synthesises insights from the literature, desk research, input from the Bulgarian Project Team, and contributions made by project participants during the Assessment and Recommendations workshops and group discussions.

The three main opportunities for improving adult skills in Bulgaria are:

1. increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning
2. making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers
3. improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training for adults and employers.

These opportunities for improvement are now considered in turn.

Opportunity 1: Increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning

Adults and employers are more likely to feel motivated to participate in upskilling and reskilling activities if they are aware of the general benefits of lifelong learning and believe that participating in these activities will benefit them specifically and lead to desired outcomes. During consultations, project participants cited low motivation as one of the primary challenges that needs to be addressed to improve adult skills in Bulgaria and noted that without sufficient measures to address motivation, adults are unlikely to participate in adult learning even if other barriers to participation are reduced.

In Bulgaria and other countries, non-financial and financial mechanisms can be used to increase motivation to participate in adult education and training, whether among individuals or employers. For example, raising awareness and improving guidance and support are promising non-financial tools to increase the motivation of individuals and employers alike to invest in upskilling and reskilling (OECD, 2021^[34]). At the same time, targeted and well-designed financial incentives can provide external triggers to motivate participation (OECD, 2017^[35]). Furthermore, non-financial and financial mechanisms can have an even greater effect on increasing motivation when designed to complement one another and are applied in tandem.

Improving non-financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

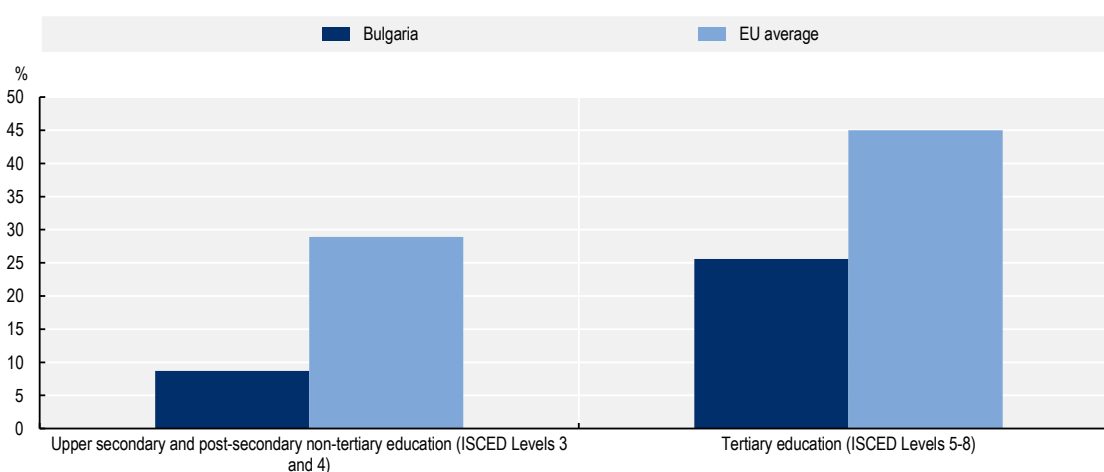
Non-financial mechanisms, such as holistic career guidance, can boost motivation to participate in adult education and training in Bulgaria. As discussed above, motivation to participate in adult learning in Bulgaria is among the lowest in the European Union. However, project participants believe this could be improved if adults and employers were better exposed to the potential benefits of participation. Evidence shows that providing guidance to learners and raising awareness about the benefits of learning are more effective at shaping individuals' dispositions towards learning than direct financial incentives (European Commission, 2015^[36]). In addition to increasing appreciation for the potential *benefits* of continuous learning, guidance for adults can provide up-to-date information on available learning *opportunities* and guidance on how to access *support* to participate in adult learning for which they are eligible (European Commission, 2015^[36]). In OECD countries, career guidance has been shown to be highly effective at improving adults' skills outcomes, with participants reporting progression within their job (25%) and enrolling in adult education and training programmes (19%) within six months of receiving career guidance (OECD, 2021^[34]).

It appears that adults in Bulgaria would benefit from better guidance to increase their motivation to participate in education and training and their disposition towards lifelong learning. One indication of this is that adults in Bulgaria, and low-skilled adults in particular, are less likely than their peers in other countries to actively search for information about adult learning. Some 55% of adults report never having looked for information on learning and training opportunities in the last 12 months, compared to an EU average of 46% (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]). While, in general, individuals may be less likely to look for information where information is readily available, Bulgaria's low participation rate in adult learning would suggest that this is not the case here. While the share of individuals with tertiary education searching for information on adult education and training is nearly twice as high in the European Union, on average than in Bulgaria (45% compared to 26%, respectively), this figure is more than three times greater in the European Union, on average, than in Bulgaria for those with only upper secondary education (29% compared to 9%, respectively) (Figure 3.8). Individuals with low skills tend to have more difficulty identifying their skills gaps and needs, which makes them less likely to actively search for education and training opportunities (Windisch, 2015^[37]). These individuals are most effectively connected with fitting education and training opportunities when provided with information, guidance, or support in their usual contexts, such as in the workplace (OECD, 2019^[38]).

Bulgaria currently has some infrastructure and policies to support adult career guidance, but the system is substantially underdeveloped, making it largely ineffective. Most career guidance measures in Bulgaria focus on students and are provided in initial, general and VET schools, or focus on the unemployed and are provided through employment offices under the NEA. Technically, the NEA employment offices also provide guidance to employed individuals. However, project participants noted that Bulgarian adults associate the NEA with unemployment and are unlikely to take advantage of its services if employed. Indeed only 1.2% of NEA clients are employed individuals (OECD, 2022^[39]).

Figure 3.8. Share of adults who actively search for information on adult learning in Bulgaria and the European Union, 2016

Percentage of adults who search for information on formal and non-formal learning possibilities, by educational attainment level



Note: Data are not available for Bulgaria for the category “Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education [International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Levels 0-2]”; therefore, the category is not shown.

Source: Eurostat (2016^[8]), *Adult Education Survey 2016: Search for information on learning possibilities by education attainment level*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_184/default/table?lang=en&category=educ.educ_part.trng.trng_aes_12m1.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/5h3cws>

The guidance option most available to employed adults at present is the 38 private centres for information and vocational guidance (Частни центрове за кариерно ориентиране) licensed by NAVET. These are spread around the country to provide career guidance to employed and unemployed individuals. However, 38 centres are not enough (38 compared to, for example, the 106 local employment offices and 145 affiliated offices). These centres have, in practice, only provided career guidance to about 3 400 individuals, most of whom were unemployed (OECD, 2022^[39]).

Another possible option for employed individuals to receive career guidance is the ten career centres (Центрове за кариерно ориентиране) operating in the NEA’s regional employment service directorates as part of the Career Development of Employees project. The main activities of the career centres are: providing information about the labour market and employment opportunities; delivering guidance and consulting services concerning career choices; organising and conducting seminars; facilitating meetings with employers; and organising career days. However, only 9 out of 29 districts in Bulgaria have these centres, meaning that over two-thirds of districts are not serviced by such centres. Furthermore, the visibility of these centres is quite low, with almost no relevant information about their services available on line. The 10 NEA career centres provided guidance to 2 856 individuals and 156 groups in 2021, with some services delivered by phone, and no reports of services delivered on line (NEA, 2021^[40]).

It is difficult to assess the degree to which these types of guidance centres are successful as limited evaluations of their effectiveness are available. However, an impact evaluation of Bulgaria's Lifelong Learning Strategy (2014-2020) prepared in 2021 found the implementation of elements of the strategy related to the development of career guidance services not to have met the stated goals (Industry Watch Group, 2021^[41]). Project participants agreed with this conclusion, noting that the adult career guidance system in its current state does not sufficiently motivate adults in Bulgaria to participate in adult education and training.

One factor that greatly impacts the limited take-up and effectiveness of career guidance as part of lifelong learning interventions for employed individuals is low public funding. While BGN 998.5 million (Bulgarian lev) was allocated to work-focused training of employed and unemployed individuals in 2014-20, only BGN 5.2 million was allocated to career orientation in the same period (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Moreover, while funds for work-focused training increased in 2014-20 from those allocated in 2007-13, the funds allocated for career orientation decreased. At the same time, the 38 centres for information and vocational guidance that do provide some form of career orientation are private. Project participants noted that the services provided by the centres must be paid for by the individuals seeking guidance. Thus, career guidance is an element of lifelong learning that is not currently prioritised or sufficiently funded in Bulgaria.

Funding and further support could go towards improving the capacity of career guidance centres to provide guidance services to employed individuals by increasing their staff and resources, broadening access to career guidance, including through promoting various modes of provision (e.g. in person, by phone, on line) and improving the quality of guidance, for example, through methodological guides for career guidance counsellors and evaluating career guidance outcomes to improve provision. Adults in Bulgaria seem to agree that there is room for improving career guidance to encourage them to upskill and/or reskill. In fact, a higher percentage of individuals in Bulgaria (53%) than in the European Union (49%) on average agree that more information and guidance would encourage participation in work-related training (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]).

Given Bulgaria's limited administrative capacity, referenced frequently by project participants, it would be most effective to look to the models of other effective career guidance measures within Bulgaria (Box 3.2) and to strengthen career guidance for employed individuals in Bulgaria through the existing career guidance infrastructure. To maximise the impact of career guidance on improving adult skills, strengthening career guidance services would need to be followed by concerted awareness raising and outreach measures to encourage more adults to take advantage of such services. This may require building on agencies', social partners', and municipalities' existing contacts with individuals and employers.

Box 3.2. Relevant national practice: Improving non-financial mechanisms to increase motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning

Bulgaria: Career Guidance project

The Career Guidance project was active in Bulgaria for two years under the Operational Programme for Science and Education for Smart Growth (OPSESG) (2014-2020). The programme aimed to pilot and develop a comprehensive career guidance system in schools in the formal education system. The project included: access to career guidance centres for students, parents, and teachers; a national portal for career guidance (<http://orientirane.mon.bg>), which includes tools such as questionnaires on students' interests/abilities and information about professions; information on career guidance and learning opportunities; a tool for assessing one's skills relative to various professions; and access to methodological materials for career guidance of students for career counsellors. The programme had an implementation budget of just under EUR 5.5 million and was co-financed by the European Union through the European Structural and Investment Funds.

The Career Guidance project was intended to specifically reach vulnerable groups and reduce rates of early dropouts. Nonetheless, the programme design did not specify how it would reach particular target groups. Data are not available on early dropouts, but students from vulnerable groups who participated in the Career Guidance project, such as Roma or low-income students, were indeed found to continue to further participate in education.

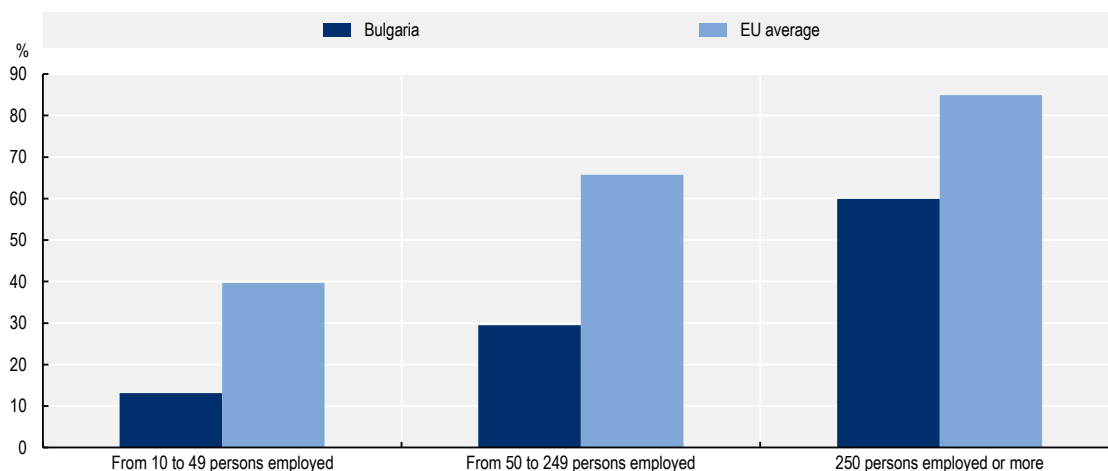
Source: World Bank (2021^[18]), *Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria*, www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf; CEDEFOP (2020^[42]), *Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-bulgaria.

Similar to individuals, employers in Bulgaria do not appear to be motivated to provide or support the provision of adult education and training to their employees. However, it is quite clear that employers would benefit from upskilling their employees. Over one-quarter of Bulgaria's employers – the European Union's highest share – reported that 80% or more of their newly recruited employees did not yet have the skills needed to do their job to the required level (Eurofound, 2019^[33]). At the same time, perhaps driven by the low skill levels of new recruits, employers in Bulgaria rank having all the required skills as the most important characteristic when recruiting new employees (28%), more important than personality fit (14%), having the required qualifications (15%), or having experience in similar positions (25%) (Eurofound, 2019^[33]). In fact, Bulgaria lags behind only Latvia in the importance employers give to recruits with all the required skills. During consultations, project participants reinforced the notion that employers' motivation to invest in adult learning is hampered by not believing this will improve the firm's outcomes and not having the time or capacity to do so, including the time or capacity to understand what training is available and most suited to their needs. The latter, according to project participants, is particularly challenging for SMEs.

The first step to finding training that addresses employers' needs is employers having a better sense of what those needs are based on skill gaps in their firms. However, Bulgarian enterprises do not currently take action to understand their skill gaps or the level of skills and competencies needed to increase their competitiveness. About 48% of enterprises in Bulgaria never assess their future skill needs, falling only behind Poland, Romania, and Latvia (and compared to 33%, on average, in the European Union) (Eurostat, 2020^[32]). According to a 2019-20 technical report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and the European Commission that includes an in-depth analysis of SMEs in Bulgaria, there is a large discrepancy between Bulgarian SMEs' self-assessment regarding the skill competencies in their enterprises and the actual indicators of skills competencies (e.g. reported labour shortages, information on relevant university curricula, quality of education in the country) (PwC, 2020^[43]). The report sheds light on the fact that entrepreneurs in Bulgarian SMEs may not be fully aware of the skills gaps within their enterprises (PwC, 2020^[43]). Most SMEs report that their employees' qualifications are "good enough" (70%) and report that their own awareness of good practices in their sector is "good enough" (77%) despite having very low outcomes on analysed factors of competitiveness (PwC, 2020^[43]). This discrepancy may help explain the low provision of, or support for, adult learning opportunities among enterprises in Bulgaria.

Figure 3.9. Planning for continuing vocational training in enterprises in Bulgaria and the European Union, 2020

Percentage of enterprises with a specific person or unit responsible for organising CVT or having a training plan or budget including CVT, by size of enterprise



Source: Eurostat (2020^[32]), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey 2020: Enterprises with CVT planning by type of planning, type of training provided and size class - % of all enterprises*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_CVT_07S_custom_4115786/default/table?lang=en.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/9jw8>

Not only could employers in Bulgaria be more aware of their skill needs but, unlike in other countries (Box 3.3), little has been done towards supporting employers to assess and address these needs. Only 17% of enterprises in Bulgaria have any sort of plan, budget, or staff responsible for continuous learning, compared to an EU average of 44%. Smaller enterprises are much less likely to have such measures (Figure 3.9).

Box 3.3. Relevant international practice: Improving non-financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

Japan: Career development support centres

In 2020, the Japanese government created career development support centres (37 around the country) to provide career guidance for all adults. There are various ways to receive career guidance, including in person and via Zoom. Workers can also request guidance in various ways, including registering on line or by phone. Guidance is provided to adults free of charge. While the sessions are open to all adults, they are targeted at specific priority groups (young workers, older workers and workers in SMEs). These centres were created through a government programme but are outsourced to private companies.

The career development support centres exist as part of a career guidance context that extends beyond the centres. The centres are complemented by an online portal called Cari-con-Search, which helps adults find career guidance counsellors outside the free system. Furthermore, the centres supplement other career guidance services provided specifically to employed individuals, particularly the “self-career dock system”, which provides guidance and support to employers who implement regular individual and group career counselling and career seminars within their enterprises. Employers who established a self-career dock system by 2018 were eligible to receive a subsidy from the government.

Korea: Training consortiums

Korea undertook a pilot programme in 2001 that organised SMEs in the same sectors into training consortiums (TCs), each of which had a dedicated staff of two training managers hired through public funds to conduct training needs assessments for SMEs and make them aware of the various education and training options that most fit their needs. Each TC also had an operating committee consisting of SME members, representatives from the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, local Ministry of Labour officials and training experts. The pilot had extremely positive results in incentivising SMEs to prioritise skills assessments and make use of available funding for training to upskill and reskill employees (see more on the funding mechanism in Box 3.4). The pilot programme increased the number of SMEs participating in training from 11% to 50% in the areas where the pilot was implemented within a year of the pilot launch. Furthermore, in a 2002 survey, 81% of employers reported improved job performance and productivity; 72% reported that waste and defective products had declined; 88% reported increased use of factory machinery; and 67% reported savings in maintenance and repair expenses.

Source: OECD (2021^[34]), *Career Guidance for Adults in a Changing World of Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a94bfad-en>; OECD (2021^[44]), *Creating Responsive Adult Learning Opportunities in Japan*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/cfe1ccd2-en>; OECD (2019^[45]), *Adult Learning in Italy: What Role for Training Funds?*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311978-en>; ILO (2017^[46]), *Korea Training Levy Case Study*, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-jakarta/documents/presentation/wcms_565074.pdf.

Recommendations for improving non-financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

Recommendations

- 2.1 Strengthen holistic career guidance services for employed adults by expanding the capacity and quality of information and guidance centres.** NAVET, in collaboration with MES and the MLSP, should launch a programme to improve the quality of existing information and guidance centres by providing resources, support and incentives for these centres to provide guidance and registration for guidance through multiple ways (e.g. in person, via phone and on line). Furthermore, the programme should involve targeted outreach and tailored guidance for groups of vulnerable employed individuals such as older Bulgarians, low-skilled workers and individuals working in sectors at risk of automation.
- 2.2 Strengthen support to employers to assess their skills and training needs.** The MLSP, in collaboration with social partners, should strengthen information and support to employers, particularly SMEs, on assessing their skills and training needs (e.g. providing access to online skills assessment tools) and on finding suitable training opportunities to provide to their employees. Skills assessment tools should be developed by the MLSP, and skills assessment support and information could be provided by social partners or by expanded sectoral councils (see Chapter 5).

Improving financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

In addition to employing non-financial mechanisms to increase the motivation of adults and enterprises to engage in learning, Bulgaria can implement financial incentives to encourage participation in adult education and training to reduce costs related to participation. A central reason that individuals invest in

education and training is that they expect higher future returns from participating in such learning. Financial incentives can help amplify future returns by reducing participation costs or attaching financial rewards to participating in adult learning (OECD, 2017^[35]). Similarly, providing financial incentives to employers can help overcome various market failures that firms face when investing in training, which is particularly important when employers are central sponsors of employee learning (OECD, 2017^[35]).

Despite the existence of a number of financial incentives targeted at individuals, costs continue to discourage or prevent adults in Bulgaria from reskilling or upskilling. As shown in Figure 3.5, costs are the second most common reason cited by individuals in Bulgaria (41%) as a barrier to participating in adult education and training. Furthermore, cost is a greater barrier for individuals in Bulgaria with lower educational attainment levels. While the share of those with tertiary education for whom cost is a barrier in Bulgaria is below the EU average (27% compared to 30%, respectively), for those with less than a tertiary education level, costs are a much more significant barrier in Bulgaria (53% compared to 32% in the European Union) (Eurostat, 2016^[8]). While education and training for adults in VET schools is covered by public funds, most of the training in VET centres, where more adults receive education and training, is paid for by learners out of pocket. In fact, 53% of trainings in 2016 and 60% in 2018 were funded by learners themselves (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Project participants noted that while adult education and training costs are completely covered for the unemployed, sufficient measures are not in place to reduce cost barriers for other groups, including low-income employed individuals or those who participate less in adult learning.

The financial incentives currently in place in Bulgaria are not doing enough to address the cost barriers to employed individuals to improve their existing skills and acquire new ones. In OECD countries, mechanisms such as subsidies, tax incentives, loans, study/training leave and individual learning schemes are used to help reduce adult learning costs for individuals (OECD, 2019^[47]). Currently, as shown in Table 3.3, Bulgaria primarily uses subsidies, a voucher scheme, and a form of training leave to strengthen employed individuals' motivation to participate in adult education and training.

Table 3.3. Main incentives for employed individuals in Bulgaria to participate in adult learning

Type of scheme	Name	Target group	Description
Voucher	"Vouchers for employees"	Employed individuals with secondary education or below	Employees and self-employed individuals can apply for a training voucher, managed by the National Employment Agency, for language courses in English, French, Spanish or German and professional training in web programming or accountancy. The voucher covers 50% of the cost, and the individual covers the rest. The scheme reaches 19 984 recipients.
Subsidy	Flexible employment opportunities	Employed, unemployed and inactive individuals	Scheme to enhance the skills of individuals to meet the current needs of business. It reaches 1 541 recipients.
	"Training for employees"	Employed individuals	Subsidy available to employees in micro, small, medium, and large enterprises to improve skills in line with business needs. It reaches 21 631 recipients.
	"Specific training"	Individuals in high-tech and ICT sectors	Subsidy to increase labour productivity and sustainable employment in knowledge-intensive, high-tech and ICT-based sectors. It reaches 2 606 recipients.
	"Support for entrepreneurship"	Aspiring self-employed	Provision of training and support services to both unemployed and employed persons to gain knowledge and skills to launch one's own business or become self-employed. It reaches 10 118 recipients.
Training leave	Leave for studies	Employed individuals	Employees in specific formal education programmes, such as secondary and high school programmes, evening classes in formal education, or part-time doctoral programmes, can receive study leave to attend and/or prepare for exams. This scheme is managed by the General Labour Inspectorate (of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy).

Source: CEDEFOP (2022^[48]), *Financing adult learning database: adaptation credit*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/adaptation-credit; EUMIS (2020^[49]), *All Grant Procedures*, <https://eumis2020.government.bg/en/f93df370/Procedure/Ended>.

The key subsidy/voucher schemes for upskilling and reskilling employed individuals in Bulgaria are laid out under Priority Axis 1 of the Operational Programme for Human Resources Development (OPHRD) (2014-2020) and have different aims and target audiences from one another. Some schemes are more general (“training for employees”) while others are aimed at specific groups, such as low-skilled individuals (“vouchers for employees”) or individuals in specific sectors or employment situations (“specific trainings”, “support for entrepreneurship”).

Bulgaria does not currently employ tax incentives, loans targeted at individuals or individual learning schemes (ILS) (Box 3.A.1) to encourage adult participation in lifelong learning. However, project participants noted that there have been preliminary discussions in Bulgaria about introducing individual learning accounts (ILAs) in the coming years. However, the literature and project participants caution that establishing new types of financial incentives would require substantial administrative capacity, which government stakeholders in Bulgaria have repeatedly noted is limited (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Therefore, at least in the short term, it would likely be most effective to strengthen and expand the subsidy and training leave schemes already in place in Bulgaria and to explore select new mechanisms such as ILAs and sectoral training funds with pilot programmes.

An evaluation of Bulgaria’s existing financial incentives for individuals found them beneficial. Beneficiaries of these schemes reported that the skills they learned in trainings helped them do their jobs better and contributed to their professional development. They generally reported that the trainings met the skill needs of individuals and employers to a moderate or high degree. Individuals participating in the schemes felt that vouchers were the best mechanism for meeting their education and training needs because they provided individuals with the flexibility to choose their desired education and training opportunities. Employers found that training provided and financed by employers best met enterprises’ training needs (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). Furthermore, the evaluation found that participation in training under these schemes tended to lead to employment benefits for individuals, including improved skills and an increase in responsibility and pay in their work. However, they appear to have had little effect on firm productivity (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]).

The evaluation also revealed shortcomings. The biggest shortcoming was low motivation to participate among the schemes’ target groups. For example, the evaluation showed lower participation among older workers (54+) who had very low participation in adult education and training to begin with – in the “vouchers for employees” and “support for entrepreneurship” schemes – indicating that this group is not well targeted by these financial incentives (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). Survey respondents reported that factors affecting their low motivation to participate in adult learning included difficulty combining training with other work and family commitments, the length of the trainings, lack of on-the-job training, logistical and travel difficulties, poor career guidance services and high co-financing rates (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). In 2019, the “voucher for employees” scheme managed by the NEA, which covers the partial cost of training for employed individuals, increased the required co-financing by individuals from 15% of the voucher value to 50%. The reason was twofold: to increase the motivation of individuals to consistently attend and complete the course, and to increase pressure on training providers by participants for the training to be of high quality. However, an evaluation of this policy change revealed a significant drop in individuals’ interest in participating in adult education and training after the introduction of higher co-financing (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). Thus, lowering co-financing rates for the voucher scheme could encourage greater participation.

Bulgaria is planning to introduce ILAs, according to the Human Resource Development Programme (2021-2027) and National Employment Plan for 2022. It should proceed cautiously and strategically with the implementation to ensure its success. First, Bulgaria should consider a variety of types of individual learning schemes (ILS) and not only pure ILAs (Box 3.A.1), which are complex and not very common. In general, ILS seem most effective when they are simple, targeted, generous and integrated with other training supports or incentives (OECD, 2019^[47]). Second, Bulgaria should consider exploring the type of scheme and conditions most appropriate for the country’s context. Given that Bulgaria already has the “voucher for employees” scheme for employed individuals with low education levels, this programme might

be adapted or expanded as a first step towards adopting an ILS, similar to the mechanisms described in Box 3.4.

Enterprises in Bulgaria also cite costs as a central barrier. As shown in Figure 3.7, cost is among the top reasons Bulgarian enterprises do not provide CVT (43% vs 29% in the European Union on average) after feeling that their skill needs are already met.

SMEs in Bulgaria face particular challenges when it comes to engaging with adult education and learning opportunities. Bulgaria ranks among the lowest of the EU countries in employees participating in training sessions during paid work time, and participation is lower for SMEs than for larger companies (Eurofound, 2019_[33]). During consultations, project participants noted the difficulty for all employers in Bulgaria, particularly SMEs, to release employees for training because of the perceived harm that time away from work can inflict on firms' productivity and the bottom line. According to the 2019-20 PwC SMEs Survey, most Bulgarian SMEs report having insufficient funds to provide adequate and high-quality training. At the same time, they often experience additional financial costs related to re-scheduling their business activities and staffing to adjust to training (PwC, 2020_[43]).

OECD countries offer a range of financial mechanisms to reduce enterprises' costs in terms of providing employees with education and training. These include subsidies, tax incentives, loans, job rotation, payback clauses, public procurement and training levies/funds (OECD, 2017_[35]). Table 3.4 shows the main financial incentives Bulgaria employs to encourage enterprises to offer adult learning opportunities.

Table 3.4. Main incentives for employers in Bulgaria to offer adult learning opportunities

Type of scheme	Name	Target group	Description
Tax incentive	Tax incentive related to scholarships	Employers	Enterprises can get a tax deduction if they give a scholarship for secondary or higher education to a student enrolled in the education system and hire the student after completion of the study programme for at least as long as the time during which the student received the scholarship.
Subsidy	Training for SMEs	Enterprises	The National Employment Agency provides financial support for training in key competencies of employed individuals in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The incentive is delivered at the request of employers to encourage them to organise and carry out training for their employees to improve their employability and productivity. The subsidy is enacted in correspondence with the Employment Promotion Act and within the framework of the approved National Employment Action Plan.
	Financial resources for adult learning	Enterprises, preferential treatment given to SMEs	Any company can apply for this grant, managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), to provide fees and other costs related to education and training activities to develop key competencies. Public funding covers 80% (large companies) to 90% (SMEs) of cost.
Payback clause	Payback clause	Employers and employed individuals	Employers and employees can agree to a payback clause in which employees agree to stay in the company for an agreed period of time in exchange for employer-provided or employer-financed education and training or to pay back part or all of the costs of the training should they leave before the agreed-upon time. The legal basis for this is in the Labour Code. The General Labour Inspectorate (of the MLSP) is responsible for managing this scheme.

Source: CEDEFOP (2022_[48]), *Financing Adult Learning Database*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/adaptation-credit.

One measure that is not currently used in Bulgaria but was mentioned by several project participants is training levies/funds. National or sectoral training levies pool together resources from employers, generally through an earmarked tax or voluntary contributions, to be used for expenditure on training. Bulgaria had a national training levy in the 1990s that has since been discontinued. Project participants believe there would be little support among employers to reinstitute a national training levy unless they had confidence that the benefits from training would outweigh the costs of employer contributions to the levy. Having

co-contributions from the government to the levy could help overcome this challenge. A training levy with employer contributions could also help reduce Bulgaria's reliance on EU funds for adult learning, which make it very difficult to achieve sustainability over time.

Sectoral training funds may be an appropriate alternative to a national training fund in Bulgaria, as they would allow for adaptation and experimentation at the sectoral level. Operating at the sectoral level can allow each fund to focus on a more targeted group of employers and skills needs and thus increase employer buy-in (OECD, 2021^[51]; 2017^[35]). Furthermore, levy schemes that are based on sectors are a good mechanism (better than national training levy schemes) for ensuring that training meets labour market needs, as they involve the participation of groups of employers with similar skills needs (OECD, 2017^[35]). In Bulgaria, sectoral training funds could be piloted by the expanded sectoral councils recommended later in this report (see Chapter 5 for more detail). This could have the added benefit of being integrated with awareness raising and skills-mapping support for enterprises implemented through sectoral councils (as described in Opportunity 1).

However, Bulgaria will need to carefully consider the design of any piloted sectoral training funds to ensure they yield the expected benefits for enterprises and workers. While government contributions to the funds may increase buy-in from employers, contributions from employers will also be critical to ensure their buy-in, particularly on a sectoral level. Bulgaria will need to get the balance of the cost-sharing arrangement right and could consider requiring smaller contributions from smaller firms in order to engage SMEs who face greater barriers to investing in education and training. Indeed, one challenge of training levies/funds is that large employers tend to benefit disproportionately from training levies at the expense of smaller employers, and that smaller employers may be at more risk of spending money on training without giving it too much thought, which could result in low-quality provision (OECD, 2017^[35]). For these reasons, it is desirable to test the concept of sectoral training funds with a well-designed pilot programme before implementing this policy more widely throughout Bulgaria.

Box 3.4. Relevant international practice: Improving financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

Singapore: The SkillsFuture Credit

Introduced in 2015, the SkillsFuture Credit in Singapore provided all adults aged 25 or over a one-time training credit of SGD 500 (Singapore dollar) (approximately EUR 310) for education and training. The government can then provide “top-ups” to the voucher at various intervals in order to provide additional funding to target groups requiring more support. For example, a one-time top-up of SGD 500 was provided to all Singapore adults aged 25 or over on 31 December 2020. Furthermore, an additional SGD 500 of training credit was provided for older adults aged 40-60. The voucher can be used for formal or non-formal education and training from a list of eligible programmes. While the SkillsFuture Credit is officially not only for acquiring labour-market-relevant skills, most of the eligible courses are indeed in areas that relate to labour market needs.

The SkillsFuture Credit can be used in conjunction with other financial benefits related to adult education and training in Singapore. Furthermore, information and guidance about the SkillsFuture Credit can be accessed on line via a designated portal, through a telephone hotline and at awareness-raising events. This broad approach aims to reach a wider group of individuals, including more vulnerable groups. The fact that at least the basic subsidy is available for every adult helps to raise awareness about ongoing training, increasing the use of the SkillsFuture Credit over time. A survey of the beneficiaries of the SkillsFuture Credit found that 86% indicated they could perform their work better after participating in a training through the SkillsFuture Credit.

Korea: A training consortium pilot programme

As discussed in Box 3.3, Korea launched a pilot programme in 2001 that organised SMEs in the same sectors into TCs. This pilot programme was initiated in response to the fact that Korea had instituted a training levy scheme in the 1990s to which enterprises were mandated to contribute. However, a very low percentage of SMEs (5%) were providing training funded by the levy as opposed to 78% of large enterprises. Therefore, to encourage the greater participation of SMEs in the provision of adult education and training and make better use of the training fund, SMEs in the same sector were organised into TCs, which were each run by two training managers whose role was to carry out a number of functions, including helping member SMEs conduct skills-need assessments, connecting SMEs to education and training providers, planning activities across the enterprises within the TC, and conducting evaluations at the completion of training courses. Beyond increasing the share of SMEs providing training, the pilot programme also served as a proof of concept, and, as a result, the programme was expanded on a national level in 2003. As a result, between 2001, when the programme was launched, and 2007, the number of TCs in Korea grew from 6 to 69, and the number of participating SMEs grew from 1 to 134.

Source: OECD (2019^[47]), *Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora's Box?*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/203b21a8-en>; OECD (2017^[35]), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>; SkillsFuture (n.d.^[52]), *SkillsFuture Credit*, www.skillsfuture.sg/credit.

Recommendations for improving financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training

Recommendations

- 2.3 Expand individual training vouchers, while differentiating support to better target vulnerable groups.** As a first step towards implementing ILAs in Bulgaria, the MLSP should collaborate with NAVET and MES to better design targeted financial incentives for individuals to participate in adult education and training. This can be done by extending the “vouchers for employees” scheme to all employed and unemployed individuals and reducing the co-finance rate for vulnerable groups, such as those with average or below qualification levels, older workers, low-income Bulgarians and individuals in occupations at risk of automation. Furthermore, to ensure the quality and relevance of this training, the list of courses that are eligible for the training vouchers should be from the areas of adult education and training of national and/or regional importance as determined by Recommendation 2.12 below (e.g. green skills, digital skills, etc.) and subject to the quality assurance mechanisms outlined in Recommendation 2.9.
- 2.4 Better engage small- and medium-sized enterprises in adult education and training by piloting a sectoral training fund(s), with relatively higher support for smaller-sized enterprises.** Bulgaria should pilot sectoral training funds in one or two sectors in order to raise enterprises’ commitment to funding training for workers. Both enterprises and government should contribute to the fund, with smaller contributions from smaller firms. Contributing to the fund could be voluntary for firms in the first instance and, should uptake be low, made mandatory through a levy scheme. A dedicated institution (such as an expanded sectoral council recommended in Chapter 5) should oversee and support the implementation of the pilot, including by monitoring outcomes of education and training.

Opportunity 2: Making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers

Improving the flexibility and accessibility of adult education and training provision is crucial to improving participation in lifelong learning. International evidence supports this, suggesting that flexibility in format and design (e.g. part-time, online, non-formal, micro-credentials) can help overcome time- and distance-related barriers (OECD, 2019^[53]). Implementing measures to make adult learning in Bulgaria more flexible and accessible can help individuals fit education and training around personal and work commitments and make lifelong learning accessible to a broader range of people.

Flexibility is important in Bulgaria, where schedule and distance are among the main barriers cited by individuals who want to but do not participate in adult learning. As discussed in the previous section, time constraints are the primary barrier motivated individuals in Bulgaria face in participating in adult learning. Distance is also among the top barriers keeping interested individuals from participating in adult learning and is a greater barrier than in the European Union (21% compared to 16%, respectively) (Figure 3.5). Most training providers are located in cities and municipal centres, which creates a logistical barrier for individuals residing in smaller and more remote locations (European Commission, 2017^[10]). Adult education and training opportunities that are flexible in the time, place or form in which they are offered can help to address these barriers.

Shortening and simplifying learning pathways through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and easing admission requirements can also make adult learning more accessible to a wider range of individuals, encouraging greater participation. Mechanisms for simplifying processes required to participate in relevant adult learning help adults upskill and reskill by personalising learning pathways to fit learners' individual needs and reducing the time individuals need to spend in a training programme (thus addressing time barriers) by allowing learners to concentrate only on addressing their specific skill gaps (OECD, 2021^[54]). It is also possible that having one's existing skills recognised can build individuals' buy-in and confidence in the lifelong learning system and encourage them to pursue subsequent lifelong learning opportunities.

Improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers

Providing flexible lifelong learning opportunities such as education and training that is shorter in length, delivered in "bite-sized" chunks, and accessed on demand and/or in convenient places make adult learning more accessible to individuals. These types of learning opportunities may include courses offered on line, on-site at an individual's job, in the evenings or on a part-time basis. It may also include courses or learning opportunities that individuals can participate in at their convenience and their desired pace, as opposed to at fixed times. Furthermore, modular courses or partial qualifications allow learners to divide their learning over a longer period of time while still working towards a higher-level certificate or qualification (OECD, 2019^[53]; 2021^[54]).

Flexible learning opportunities could help individuals overcome time barriers related to participation in adult learning in Bulgaria. A higher percentage of individuals in Bulgaria (59%) report time constraints than in the European Union on average (41%); this share is among the highest in the European Union, lagging only behind Malta and the United Kingdom (Eurostat, 2016^[8]). Furthermore, when asked the main reason for not participating in organised training in the past year, Bulgaria was among a handful of countries for which fitting in training with other commitments was a more prevalent reason not to participate than feeling that training was unneeded (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]). Even though time constraints are a central barrier, employed participants who do participate in adult learning in Bulgaria spend more hours in education and training (420) than in the European Union on average (359) (Eurostat, 2016^[8]).

Bulgaria's VETA lays the groundwork for flexible VET for adults. It has provisions that allow for partial qualifications (qualifications for a specific part of a VET profession); allow for flexible forms of vocational training such as distance learning (Article 17); and define the requirements for the validation of prior

learning (NAVET, 2018^[55]), which will be discussed in the following section. One of the most flexible opportunities currently available to adult learners is learning towards a partial qualification. Project participants noted that partial qualifications are preferred by many learners because of the shorter time duration, though even these courses generally last for at least six months (World Bank, 2021^[18]). As a result, participation in learning leading to partial qualifications has grown (63 400 trainees in 2018 compared to 72 400 trainees in 2021) relative to participation in learning leading to full qualifications, which has declined (26 600 trainees in 2018 compared to 9 700 trainees in 2021) (World Bank, 2021^[18]; NAVET, 2022^[56]).

Policy makers could further improve and encourage partial qualifications as a flexible form of learning.

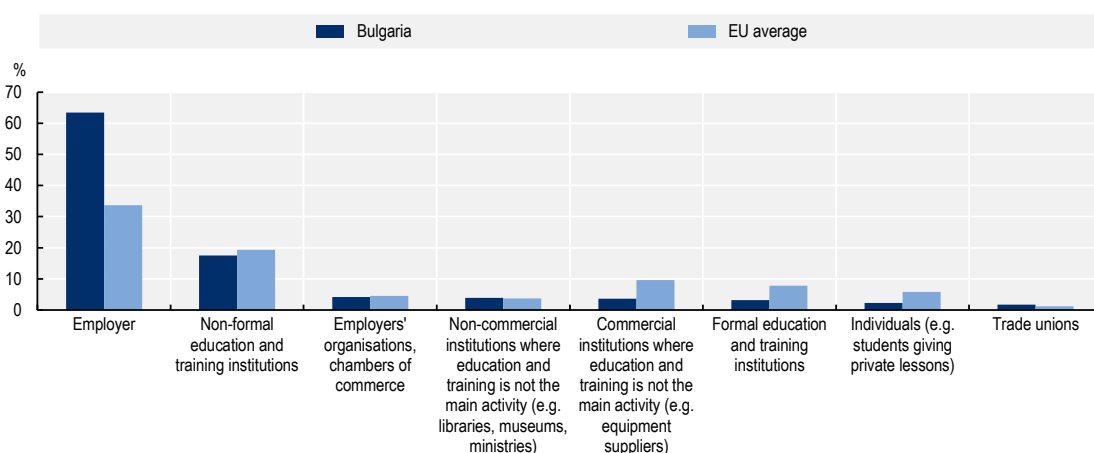
First, partial qualifications could be more widely recognised across professions and institutions to support modular adult learning and individualised learning pathways. Adults' ability to increase their skills and qualifications in Bulgaria is limited because it is difficult to transfer partial qualifications from one learning institution to another or from one field of study to another (World Bank, 2021^[18]). These difficulties arise in part due to the rigid structure of the official LPVET, which designates 588 specialities that are organised into 245 professions and 47 professional areas and does not allow for partial qualifications towards one "profession" to be applied to another "profession" (World Bank, 2021^[18]; CEDEFOP, 2022^[57]). Another factor contributing to the difficulty of transferring partial qualifications is a lack of standard definitions of partial qualifications across different providers (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Partial qualifications could be made easier to transfer between institutions and more useful to individuals by strengthening Bulgaria's RPL system, including for partial qualifications, as discussed in Recommendation 2.7.

Second, the quality assurance and funding of partial qualifications could be improved. For example, the content and time requirements of partial qualifications for similar professions are inconsistent between providers because partial qualifications are not currently regulated (World Bank, 2021^[18]). This can be a positive characteristic, as it allows for greater diversity and flexibility in partial qualification courses. However, effective external quality assurance mechanisms, such as those described in Recommendation 2.9, can help to ensure that partial qualification courses are of high quality and are recognised by different training providers and employers. Finally, to encourage even greater take-up of flexible courses, partial qualification courses can be included on the list of approved courses for which individuals can redeem the training vouchers described in Recommendation 2.3. Including partial qualification courses on the approved list may, in time, encourage VET schools and colleges to adopt partial qualification courses as well (to date, they are only available in VET centres).

In addition to improving partial qualifications, offering more adult education and training in the workplace can introduce greater flexibility in Bulgaria's adult learning system for both employers and employees. Training during working hours, for example, in the workplace, makes learning accessible to working adults, as it overcomes the time barriers these adults often face to learning in the evenings, on weekends or at learning institutions. Employers in Bulgaria already provide most of the non-formal adult education and training that occurs in the country. The share of non-formal learning provided by employers in Bulgaria (64%) is higher than the EU average (34%) and than in any other EU country (Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10. Provision of non-formal adult education and training in Bulgaria and the European Union, 2016

Percentage of all non-formal training, by provider



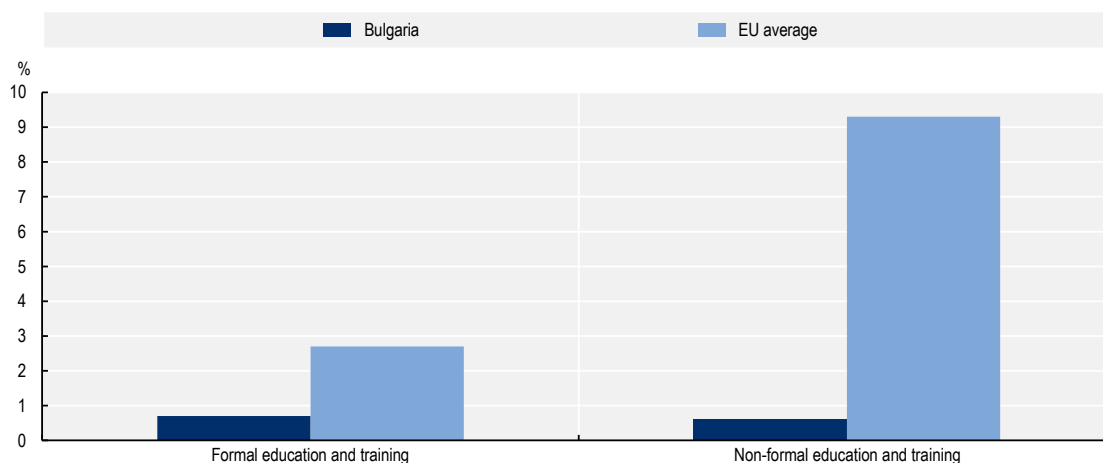
Source: Eurostat (2016^[8]), *Adult Education Survey 2016: Distribution of non-formal education and training activities by provider*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_AES_170/default/table.

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

However, there is still much room to improve the role of employers and the workplace in upskilling and reskilling adults in Bulgaria. Participation in non-formal education and training is low in Bulgaria, even if employers provide a high share of this learning. While Bulgaria has lower shares of employed adults participating in both formal and non-formal education than the EU average, the gap in participation for non-formal education is substantially larger (Figure 3.11). As project participants noted, this is compounded by the requirement that publicly subsidised training (e.g. training delivered under OPHRD funding) be delivered at adult education and training provider premises. As such, training on employers' premises does not receive public funds. Bulgaria could make adult learning more flexible by increasing education and training in workplaces through financial incentives to employers offering on-site training (Box 3.5).

Figure 3.11. Participation rate of employed individuals in formal and non-formal learning in Bulgaria and the European Union, 2021

Participation rate in education and training (last four weeks) for 25-64 year-olds, by type



Source: Eurostat (2021^[29]), *Labour Force Survey 2021: Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type, sex, age and labour status*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFS_11_custom_4117833/default/table?lang=en.

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

Box 3.5. Relevant international practice: Improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers

Denmark: Modular learning for adults

In Denmark, whether vocational or professional, higher education programmes are offered in a modular format that allows for greater flexibility for adult learners, particularly those employed. Academy education programmes (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] 5 out of 8 levels) target working adults with at least two years of work experience who want to learn part-time. Students in the programme can take as many or as few modules as they want at any given time and can complete the programme in up to six years (most commonly, it lasts for two to three years at part-time capacity). Organising an individual course to meet the learner's needs is also an option. The flexible framework also allows learners to combine modules from different disciplines to gain a range of skills that suits their particular job responsibilities. Professional bachelor's and master's programmes can also be taken in a modular fashion, either as one-off educational experiences or building towards a degree. Modular options in higher education are also offered at times that allow maximum flexibility. For example, there are offers in the evenings, on weekends and through remote learning.

Luxembourg: Co-funding of company training

The “co-funding of company training” scheme in Luxembourg provides a subsidy to enterprises to cover up to 15% of an enterprise's annual training costs for enterprises whose employees have fixed- or indefinite-term contracts and pay social security contributions. The subsidy can be used for a number of different types of education and training, including training with a training body (i.e. external training); training delivered to a minimum of two participants by an employee of the company (i.e. structured in-house training); on-the-job training (i.e. internal training); conferences, fairs and exhibitions; self-learning; and e-learning. Furthermore, at least half of the training time for training covered by the subsidy should be scheduled during regular working hours. The subsidy can cover a number of training-related costs, including participants' salaries; internal trainers' salaries; expenses for externally approved training bodies or supplier-trainers; travel, accommodation and subsistence expenses; the costs of training management software; the cost of subscriptions to training bodies and fees paid to an auditor (optional). A greater subsidy is provided for specific employees from vulnerable groups, such as those with low qualifications or older workers. Additionally, enterprises are refunded EUR 500 to compensate them for the cost of applying for the subsidy. The Luxembourg National Institute for the Development of Continuing Vocational Training (INFPC), which manages the subsidy, provides additional training information and support to enterprises that apply for the subsidy.

The co-funding subsidy is available for training in seven focus areas: languages; information technology/office automation; management/human resources management; finance/accounting/law; quality/ISO/safety; technical/core business related; and on-the-job training. However, training that is compulsory by law for regulated professions is not eligible for the subsidy. The subsidy has a cap that varies according to the size of the enterprise, covering up to the value of 20% of payroll for enterprises with under 10 employees, 3% for enterprises with 10-249 employees, and 2% for enterprises with 250 or more employees. In 2018, co-financing of in-company training under the scheme amounted to EUR 35.4 million, benefiting 2 288 enterprises (Observatoire de la Formation and INFPC, 2021^[58]).

Source: Danish Ministry of Education (2020^[59]), “University of Copenhagen Study Programmes”, www.ug.dk/uddannelser/universitetsuddannelser/enkeltfagogdeluddannelserveduni/enkeltfag-og-deluddannelser-koebenhavns-universitet; Danish Ministry of Education (2019^[60]), “About Academy Education”, www.ug.dk/uddannelser/artikleromuddannelser/omkurserogefteruddannelse/om-akademiuddannelser; OECD (2022^[61]), *Good practices in Europe for supporting employers to promote skills development*, www.oecd.org/skills/Good-practices-in-Europe-for-supporting-employers-to-promote-skills-development.pdf; OECD (2023^[62]), *OECD Skills Strategy Luxembourg: Assessment and Recommendations*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92d891a4-en>.

Online learning could also be expanded in Bulgaria to improve the flexibility of adult learning opportunities. The percentage of individuals in Bulgaria reporting taking an online course or using online learning materials stands at 12%, compared with an EU average of 28% (Eurostat, 2021^[28]). Project participants noted that low levels of online learning are driven by a number of factors, including the lack of online learning platforms, resources, and tools; the lack of pedagogical capacity of training institutions; and the inability of these institutions to monitor and control the quality of online training.

One of the biggest and most successful efforts in Bulgaria thus far to address remote accessibility to adult learning is the MyCompetence website managed by the NEA and created in collaboration with the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) with funding provided from the European Social Fund (<https://mycompetence.bg/>). In addition to providing information on the competencies required for different positions and sectors, tools for competency self-assessment, and the ability to create a “personal profile of a jobseeker,” the MyCompetence website offers an array of non-formal online courses for jobseekers and employed individuals alike (though they are free for jobseekers) (Bulgarian Industrial Association, 2014^[63]). Courses offered on MyCompetence, which gained traction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, include those on time management and business etiquette, conflict management, the use of decision-making tools, digital competencies, and hiring or leading courses for managers (Bulgarian Industrial Association, 2014^[63]). However, the benefits of the shift to more online lifelong learning opportunities are not equally accessible to all because these courses are only available to those with Internet access and sufficient digital skills (OECD, 2019^[53]). Furthermore, project participants noted a number of other challenges to the online provision of adult education and training, including the lack of methodological and technological knowledge of online course instructors and the lack of quality assurance mechanisms for online learning.

Bulgaria is making efforts to increase digital learning and skills among adults, which will require effective co-ordination and engagement to be successfully implemented. The “Provision of digital skills trainings and set-up of a platform for adult learning” priority in Bulgaria’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan allocates EUR 164.7 million to develop a digital platform for online training for adults (Dobрева and Lilyanova, 2022^[64]). Project participants elaborated that, in addition to developing a digital platform, the funding to improve digital skills will go towards tailoring online learning to disadvantaged groups, training instructors in online teaching and developing digital clubs throughout the country. To expand participation in online adult learning in the future, stakeholders involved in skills policy should actively participate in the implementation of these priority areas, ensuring that its implementation is informed by best practices in other countries and lays the groundwork for the smooth expansion of online adult learning in years to come.

A more flexible adult education and training system in Bulgaria can be achieved via a combination of short-term and long-term measures. In the short term, efforts should focus on both increasing flexibility in formal adult education and training by improving the partial qualifications system and by incentivising training for employed adults during working hours, for example, in their workplaces. In the long term, Bulgaria should aim to build on the “Provision of digital skills trainings and set-up of a platform for adult learning” under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and further increase digital literacy among individuals to make online and blended learning a more widespread method for providing adult learning.

Recommendations for improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers

Recommendations

- 2.5 Introduce financial incentives for employers to increase employee education and training opportunities during working hours, with higher support for small- and medium-sized enterprises.** To make education and training more accessible and flexible for working adults, the MLSP should dedicate funds for a pilot programme to subsidise the costs to employers of providing education and training to employees during work hours. Funding could be provided to employers directly or via sectoral councils (see Chapter 5) in specific strategic sectors and/or for specific skills (e.g. digital skills). Funding should subsidise training fees and could also subsidise wages during training. Finally, funding should cover more training costs for SMEs than for large enterprises.
- 2.6 Support and promote existing flexible adult education and training opportunities, including partial qualification courses.** NAVET, in collaboration with MES and the MLSP, should support increased participation and quality in partial qualification courses. First, they should increase the affordability of partial qualification courses by including them on the list of approved courses for which individuals can redeem training vouchers (related to Recommendation 2.3). Second, they should improve the recognition of partial qualification awards to allow learners to transfer partial qualifications from one learning institution to another or from one “profession” of study to another (related to Recommendation 2.7). Third, they should strengthen the quality assurance of partial qualification courses to overcome the lack of regulation of these courses and build confidence in them among learners and employers (related to Recommendation 2.9). Finally, NAVET, MES and the MLSP should raise awareness about flexible courses, such as partial qualifications and online courses to employers, employed individuals, and education and training providers through holistic career guidance (see Recommendation 2.1) and other existing communications channels, such as business associations, trade unions and sectoral councils (see Chapter 5).

Making learning more accessible for low-skilled adults

Low-skilled adults in Bulgaria and other countries often face greater barriers to participating in adult learning than other adults and may need specific policies to address those needs. One barrier that low-skilled learners face is that they often have had negative experiences with school in the past and are, therefore, hesitant to re-enter a classic school environment (Windisch, 2015^[37]). Furthermore, many adults classified as “low-skilled” may have a range of skills they have acquired informally or through experience that have not been recognised in any way (OECD, 2019^[65]). Another barrier is that those without basic skills may want to participate in vocational training but lack the necessary skills to qualify for such training or succeed in it.

RPL, or the recognition of prior learning (often called “validation of prior learning” in Bulgaria), is a key tool for encouraging individuals to engage in lifelong learning. RPL is the process by which knowledge and skills acquired through experience, non-formal and/or informal learning are recognised formally (e.g. with a certificate, partial qualification or full qualification). The process of RPL can improve the employability of individuals, make individuals eligible to apply to further educational programmes requiring specific qualifications or skills as prerequisites, or shorten the duration of education and training by exempting individuals from courses or credits toward skills they already possess (OECD, 2021^[66]).

RPL is the subject of various laws and strategies in Bulgaria and is a priority for different ministries. The validation of professional knowledge, skills, and competencies is regulated by Ordinance No. 2 of 13 November 2014 on the terms and conditions for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competencies of the Minister of Education and Science. Other regulations on RPL are laid out in the Pre-school and School Education Act and VETA (VINCE, 2019^[67]). Furthermore, RPL is a central priority in a number of Bulgarian national strategies, including the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) and the VET Development Strategy (2015-2020).

The process to obtain RPL in Bulgaria is fairly straightforward in concept but not in practice. RPL in Bulgaria is available for general education and VET, but there is not yet a validation arrangement for higher education (Dzhengozova, 2019^[68]). It is currently possible to obtain a full formal qualification or part of a formal qualification in general education and VET through RPL in Bulgaria, which is equivalent to qualifications awarded in formal education institutions and can be used for all the same purposes, including to enrol in further formal education programmes (CEDEFOP, 2019^[69]). Validation can be provided by vocational schools, vocational high schools, art schools, sports schools, vocational colleges and vocational training centres (Eurydice, 2022^[22]).

The RPL process in Bulgaria has two stages. The first stage involves the institutions providing validation (as listed above) and identifying the skills or competencies of a candidate applying for recognition. For VET, this includes identifying the qualifications required for the relevant profession, comparing the candidate's skills to the qualifications required by the list, verifying that the candidate has these skills through a portfolio, and confirming the candidate's skills through an exam. The second stage of the process involves recognising the candidate's previously acquired skills by awarding the candidate a full or partial qualification (CEDEFOP, 2018^[70]). A consultant is assigned to every candidate to serve as a guide through the RPL process. The consultant helps the candidate prepare a portfolio exhibiting relevant competencies for the validation institution and then helps ensure the RPL is formally registered and recognised after it is officially approved (CEDEFOP, 2019^[69]).

Bulgaria's existing RPL procedures do have a number of advantages. For example, there is a clear division of responsibilities between relevant actors, such as public institutions and social partners, as well as a requirement that providers of RPL have internal quality assurance systems (CEDEFOP, 2018^[70]). Furthermore, Bulgaria developed a Manual for Vocational Schools for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning, which provides methodological guidelines and practical tools to help make the RPL process easier and more accessible to VET institutions (Box 3.6).

Box 3.6. Relevant national and international practices: Recognition of prior learning

Bulgaria: Guidance for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning – A methodological manual

Under the New Opportunity for My Future (2013-2015) project, implemented by MES in co-operation with NAVET, the Manual for Vocational Schools for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning was created. This manual provides methodological guidelines and practical tools to aid VET providers in providing RPL services. Tools in the manual include, for example, comparative tables to aid in assessing the competencies of the individual candidate seeking RPL with the competencies outlined in the official LPVET for the relevant vocational qualification. This measure is intended to serve as an internal quality assurance measure for RPL services in Bulgaria, given that there are no external quality assurance measures in place at present.

Guidance for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning: RPL guidelines in Norway

Under Norway's Ministry of Education and Research, the Skills Norway Agency has developed guidelines for RPL for both vocational and higher education institutions. The guides provide background information on relevant European and Norwegian RPL strategies and documents, as well as tools and guides for both RPL candidates and institutions involved in RPL assessment and provision. For the candidate, there are guides on the process and the documentation that must be provided as part of one's application. For those evaluating the applications, there are guides on the various steps of the RPL process and different assessment methodologies. In addition, the agency also provides best practice examples as a guide for entities providing RPL.

Source: CEDEFOP (2018^[70]), *NQF Country Report: Bulgaria*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/bulgaria-2018; Dzhengozova (2019^[68]), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update*, http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Bulgaria.pdf; Kompetanse Norge (2020^[71]), *Admission to higher vocational education on the basis of prior learning*, www.kompetansenorge.no/contentassets/58c112900db245a194cccfdafda83fd7/veileder_opptak_til_hoyere_yrkesfaglig_utdanning.pdf; OECD (2021^[72]), *OECD Skills Strategy Lithuania: Assessment and Recommendations*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/14deb088-en>.

While Bulgaria's take-up of RPL has been rising over time, it remains quite low by international comparison (CEDEFOP, 2019^[69]). In 2017, only 1% of all VET certificates in Bulgaria were acquired through RPL (Dzhengozova, 2019^[68]). Furthermore, RPL has only been used in certain industries, primarily in the areas of real estate, organising ritual ceremonies, childcare and chef/restaurant services (Dzhengozova, 2019^[68]; World Bank, 2021^[18]). While these findings show that take-up is low, they also indicate significant room to expand the scope of RPL in Bulgaria.

As shown in Table 3.5, Bulgaria's RPL system does meet some good practice principles for validation but falls short in others. Most notably, there is little in place to ensure the quality of the RPL system and validation is not employed to specifically benefit disadvantaged groups in Bulgaria.

Table 3.5. Bulgaria's performance with regard to good practice principles in the validation of prior learning

	Principles on validation	Status of Bulgaria	Notes
1	Validation arrangements in place	Yes	Validation arrangements are in place for basic education, vocational education and training (VET) and adult learning, but not for higher education.
2	Guidance and counselling are readily available	Yes	Each person who applies for validation is assigned a consultant to provide guidance throughout the process.
3	Information and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures are available and accessible	Yes	Information is available and free of charge, but services providing information and guidance are under-utilised.
4	Validation arrangements are linked to a national qualification framework (NQF) and in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Yes	Validation is linked to Bulgaria's NQF, which aligns with the EQF.
5	Qualifications or parts of qualifications obtained through validation comply with agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to those for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	Yes	Full and partial qualifications obtained through validation comply with Bulgaria's state educational standards.
6	Provision is made for the development of the professional competencies of validation practitioners	No	Bulgaria has no specific provisions related to the continuing professional development of validation staff.

	Principles on validation	Status of Bulgaria	Notes
7	Transparent quality assurance (QA) measures support reliable, valid and credible assessment methods and tools for validation	No	Ordinance No. 2 requires that providers have internal quality assurance systems for validation, but there are no external QA measures. However, the Manual for Vocational Schools for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning is a useful tool for QA.
8	Synergies between validation and credit systems exist	Partially	Through validation, credits in VET can be accumulated and transferred between qualifications in the same vocational area according to the list of professions for VET. However, credits cannot be transferred between vocational areas or between VET and higher education.
9	Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	No	Disadvantaged groups benefit from validation in general education and basic skills courses, for example, through the New Chance for Success adult literacy programme. One of the primary goals of this programme was to pilot a validation system for non-formal and informal learning for individuals with low literacy levels. However, as of 2019, no validation certificates had been issued as part of the programme.
10	Skills audits are available for individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment	Partially	National Employment Agency advisors carry out informal skills assessments with unemployed persons that could, in theory, be used for validation but are not uniform or linked to state educational standards.
11	EU/national transparency tools are promoted to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes	No	EU transparency tools such as the Europass or Youthpass are not used in Bulgaria.

Note: The European Union developed these 11 good practice principles for validation of prior learning following a European Union Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012.

Source: OECD assessment based on CEDEFOP (2019_[69]), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: Final synthesis report*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-on-validation; Dzhengozova (2019_[68]), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update*, http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Bulgaria.pdf; World Bank (2021_[18]), *Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria*, www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf.

One of the central challenges contributing to the low take-up of RPL arrangements in Bulgaria is the cumbersome administrative and financial burdens it places on individuals and training providers (Dzhengozova, 2019_[68]). During consultations, project participants emphasised that these burdens are the main reason RPL is under-utilised in Bulgaria. The validation process can be so long that it sometimes is shorter for individuals to take a new training for the qualification they hope to acquire instead of applying for validation for the same qualification (World Bank, 2021_[18]). Similarly, the cost of RPL can be greater for an individual than the cost of enrolling in a training course for the same qualification (World Bank, 2021_[18]). This is because public funds often subsidise the cost of full training courses, while the fees for RPL are generally paid by individuals or potentially their employers (the costs are sometimes covered by funds from national or international projects) (Dzhengozova, 2019_[68]).

Furthermore, while accredited VET providers can validate prior learning, very few provide such services. Project participants explained that this is due, in large part, to the fact that providing RPL involves lengthy administrative processes on the part of providers and is not financially beneficial to them. The fee charged to individuals (or employers) for acquiring validation of prior learning cannot legally be greater than the cost incurred by an education and training provider (CEDEFOP, 2022_[57]). This gives providers little incentive to take on the administrative burdens and provide RPL services as they make no profit.

Second, while RPL is meant to make acquiring qualifications more flexible for individuals, the flexibility of RPL is quite limited in Bulgaria. This is due to the structure of Bulgaria's VET system, where RPL is primarily used. Qualifications in VET in Bulgaria are organised according to the official LPVET, which is updated infrequently. RPL only allows individuals to have skills recognised within the same vocational area as dictated by the LPVET and does not allow for transfer between vocational areas (Industry Watch Group, 2021_[41]).

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing RPL in Bulgaria is that employers and individuals seem to have little confidence in the RPL process. Even though an individual with an RPL certificate officially has the same rights as someone with a formal qualification, the certificates from RPL are easily distinguishable from formal education certificates (they have different designs), and because employers are often not well aware of the equal status of RPL certificates, they tend to undervalue qualifications acquired through RPL (CEDEFOP, 2018^[70]). Furthermore, this low level of understanding and interest in RPL among employers can act as a disincentive for individuals to participate in RPL and contributes to the fact that there is currently not much trust in Bulgaria in the RPL process and its outcomes, limiting its effectiveness as a tool (Dzhengozova, 2019^[68]). Another challenge to raising confidence in Bulgaria's RPL system is a lack of data on the outcomes of individuals who go through RPL. There is also no explicit mechanism for quality assurance of RPL (Dzhengozova, 2019^[68]). While improving the validation of prior learning has been raised as a high priority among project participants consulted by the OECD, Bulgaria lacks experience in successfully using RPL to increase adult learning and skills outcomes.

Bulgaria plans to develop more infrastructure around RPL in the coming years. For example, the Human Resources Development Programme (2021-2027) includes provisions to establish centre(s) to validate and certify skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning and improve RPL services. This is intended to improve the skills and employability of vulnerable individuals, particularly those with low education and skill levels (Портал за обществени консултации; see www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx). Furthermore, the establishment of new infrastructure related to RPL presents an opportunity for Bulgaria to institute a suite of reforms related to RPL to broaden its scope and impact.

Alongside RPL, Bulgaria could encourage the greater participation of low-skilled adults in learning by integrating basic skills learning into other education and training programmes (Box 3.7). It is important to improve literacy and remedial adult education in Bulgaria, where the share of young adults (aged 25-34) with low educational attainment (ISCED 0-2) stands at 18%, surpassing the EU average of 15% (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Furthermore, though illiteracy rates country-wide are about 1.3% of the adult population (aged 25-64), 14.1% of Roma in the same age group are illiterate (Baev, 2021^[73]). According to existing regulations, individuals in Bulgaria need to have an equivalent of fourth-grade-level literacy to enrol in a CVET programme. During consultations, project participants explained that the admission requirements for participating in CVET courses make learning inaccessible to Bulgaria's most vulnerable groups, the very groups who could benefit most from upskilling and reskilling opportunities. This is particularly important, given that these vulnerable groups are more likely than the general population to face other barriers to participation in adult learning, including living in geographically remote areas far from learning centres, having lower levels of digital skills to access remote learning, and having lower levels of awareness about adult learning opportunities.

The current system in place in Bulgaria for providing remedial support for adults is second-chance literacy courses meant to be delivered through specific adult literacy programmes offered by general education schools (e.g. primary or secondary schools; see Table 3.2). However, Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (NSI) does not collect data on the number of schools providing second-chance adult courses or on the take-up by adults of these courses, so there is very little known about them, though its share in adult education and training is thought to be marginal (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Regarding the content of such courses, second-chance curricula for adults have been developed through various EU-funded projects. In general, public funding for adult literacy and basic skills courses is much lower in Bulgaria, however, than public funding spent on education and training for work-related skills for employed and unemployed individuals. In 2014-20, BGN 19.1 million was spent on adult literacy, compared with BGN 998.5 million on work-related training for employed and unemployed individuals (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Given that there is a greater focus in Bulgaria on work-related training than on basic skills, the most realistic and promising way to improve basic skill levels in Bulgaria may be to integrate basic skills into work-related reskilling and upskilling programmes.

Bulgaria's main policy initiative in the area of remedial adult skills was the New Chance for Success programme, which was active between 2016 and 2019 (as it was financed by the OPSESG [2014-2020]) and had the goal of improving the access of illiterate people (a term that was never clearly defined) to basic skills/general education and vocational training. As of 2018, about 90 schools had offered courses under New Chance for Success; by 2019, about 5 500 students had participated in them (the initiative's target was 10 000 students). The programme was also meant to pilot a system of RPL, but no RPL certificates were granted by the end of the programme (World Bank, 2021^[18]).

Box 3.7. Relevant international practice: Integrating basic skills into adult education and training

Mexico: The Education Model for Life and Work programme

Mexico's Education Model for Life and Work (Modelo Educación para la Vida y el Trabajo, MEVyT) is a programme that provides basic education for those aged 15 and older. The programme is meant to help individuals close educational gaps and to provide adults with an opportunity to earn a primary or secondary education degree. MEVyT offers learning opportunities in basic literacy skills, numeracy skills, communications, science, citizenship, and business and environmental training.

The MEVyT programme is innovative in that it provides a model of basic education for adults that integrates basic education, such as literacy, with more vocational skills training for adults. It is not intended to be a literacy programme but an integrated part of the country's adult education and training system. Furthermore, the programme is innovative in that learning is modular, allowing for greater flexibility for adult learners. The learners can choose among self-contained modules that can also build on one another towards accreditation in primary or secondary education. Furthermore, the programme also includes modules adapted to reflect the specific linguistic, cultural or social specificities particular to vulnerable groups. Learners can also choose their preferred learning mode, including self-study, in groups in community learning centres or online learning. An evaluation of the programme indicated that 92% of learners were satisfied with the learning modules in MEVyT, and 63% reported occupational advancement as a result of participating in the programme.

Source: OECD (2019^[65]), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>.

Recommendations for making learning more accessible for low-skilled adults

Recommendations

- 2.7 Reform the recognition of the prior learning system for adults to encourage greater uptake of RPL services.** NAVET, MES and the MLSP should collaborate with emerging RPL centre(s) to implement more streamlined and effective RPL processes and to incentivise greater take-up of RPL services, particularly among low-skilled adults. The RPL process should be streamlined by simplifying and shortening the administrative process for both individuals and providers; altering the design of RPL certificates to match other learning certificates; collecting data on RPL outcomes through the data and evidence centre (see Recommendation 5.6 in Chapter 5); and targeting RPL services to specific vulnerable groups, such as low-skilled adults. In addition, to incentivise greater take-up of RPL, subsidies for RPL fees should be provided to individuals, similar to those provided for participation in adult education and training, and grants should be available to adult education and training providers that offer RPL services.

2.8 Ease access to adult basic education and expand basic education opportunities for learners in other education and training programmes. MES should make adult basic (primary) education for low-skilled adults available free of charge in a wide range of educational institutions in Bulgaria that provide adult education and training, including general education schools, VET gymnasiums, VET colleges, universities and tertiary colleges, VET centres, and community cultural centres (*chitalishta*). Furthermore, adult basic education should be made more modular and flexible so that learners can combine basic education modules simultaneously with other reskilling and upskilling opportunities. Furthermore, enrolment requirements for CVET should be adjusted to include not only those with a fourth-grade equivalent education level but also those currently enrolled in adult basic education. Furthermore, the government should begin collecting data on participation in adult basic education to inform future policy actions in this area.

Opportunity 3: Improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training for adults and employers

An extremely important aspect of making adult learning attractive to adults in Bulgaria is ensuring that adult learning opportunities are of high quality and teaching skills relevant to Bulgaria's current and future labour market. Boosting the quality of adult education in Bulgaria involves improving quality assurance of the adult learning system, the qualifications of teachers, and the quality of teaching methods used for adults. These have been identified by project participants and reviews of Bulgaria's relevant policies as central challenges to the success of Bulgaria's lifelong learning system. In Bulgaria, dissatisfaction with the relevance of adult learning also represents an obstacle to greater participation in adult learning because if individuals and employers do not see the added value that adult learning will bring to their lives, they will be hesitant to participate.

Improving the quality of adult learning opportunities

To make participating in adult education and training in Bulgaria more attractive to individuals and employers, Bulgaria needs to institute mechanisms to ensure that the education and training offered is of high quality. If adult learning opportunities are of high quality, individuals and enterprises can be more confident that the training will be a worthwhile investment, successfully imparting new or improved skills to participants. An effective quality assurance regime consists of two elements: 1) *ex ante* recognition and certification of adult learning providers (e.g. eligibility standards, curriculum requirements, training plans, etc.); and 2) *ex post* monitoring of learning outcomes (e.g. assessment, monitoring, evaluation, etc.) (Box 3.8). Together, these elements help to ensure that adult learning opportunities and the providers who offer them meet pre-established standards, which help individuals and enterprises have more confidence in the value of adult learning.

Box 3.8. Key elements of a quality assurance system for adult education and training

A quality assurance regime for adult learning includes the following elements:

- ***Ex ante* recognition and certification of adult learning providers:** Introducing quality standards for the recognition, certification and accreditation of adult education programmes and/or institutions.
- ***Ex post* monitoring of learning outcomes:** Tracking adult learners following course completion to assess whether learning opportunities lead to measurable skills gains, for instance, through the use of administrative data and surveys.

Source: OECD (2021^[74]), *Strengthening Quality Assurance in Adult Education and Training in Portugal: Implementation Guidance*, www.oecd.org/portugal/Strengthening-Quality-Assurance-in-Adult-Education-and-Training-in-Portugal-Implementation-Guidance.pdf.

It is difficult to assess the quality of adult learning opportunities in Bulgaria because of a lack of relevant evidence for doing so. That being said, there are indications that the quality of adult education and learning opportunities in Bulgaria is not particularly high. The share of individuals in Bulgaria that report that the quality of adult education and training is generally regarded as being good or very good (64%) is lower than the EU average (69%) (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]). While the percentage of individuals in Bulgaria reporting that the most recent adult education or training experience in which they personally participated was “very good” (38%) is quite similar to the EU average (39%), project participants noted that quality is a significant issue and that both individual participants and providers are too often solely concerned with acquiring or providing a certificate, and not necessarily with truly developing skills (CEDEFOP, 2020^[31]). In terms of employers, a recent survey conducted by MES found that half of surveyed employers were sceptical about both the quality of vocational training offered by VET institutions and the relevance and benefits of said training (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021^[75]).

In Bulgaria, quality assurance of the adult education and training system is overseen by MES, the NEA, NAVET, and the National Accreditation and Evaluation Agency (European Commission, 2017^[10]). MES is responsible for ensuring the quality of adult education provided by the formal school system (general and VET schools), while NAVET is responsible for ensuring the quality of adult VET training provided by VET centres. The National Accreditation and Evaluation Agency is responsible for quality in higher education, and the MLSP is responsible for ensuring the quality of adult training organised by the NEA (see Chapter 4). These bodies are currently implementing a limited set of measures to ensure the quality of adult learning opportunities in Bulgaria (Table 3.6).

Table 3.6. Bulgaria’s main processes and actors for quality assurance in adult education and training

Strategy/policy/programme	Responsible ministry/actor	Description
Documents (procedure) for developing state educational standards	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET)	The state educational standards (SES) are mandatory for the vocational education and training (VET) system. They are the basis for the development of VET curricula (for both students and adult learners). SES are developed by an author team with representatives of educational institutions and business. They go through an independent review by two external experts and a review procedure at a meeting of the Expert Commission. The Expert Commission includes representatives of key state institutions, representatives of employers and trade unions in the professional field. After the approval of a meeting of the Expert Commission, the SES project is presented at a meeting of the Management Board of NAVET, after which it is sent to MES for public discussion and approval by the Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science.
Partnerships between employers and VET institutions	VET institutions	These partnerships encourage the interaction between business and education in the development of curricula, practices, training teachers to work with modern technologies, providing internships and training through work.
Quality assurance for general and VET schools in which adults learn	Ministry of Education and Science (MES)	MES is more responsible for quality assurance mechanisms in the formal school system.
Accreditation of VET centres	NAVET	NAVET licenses VET centres and controls the quality of the qualification courses.
Accreditation of higher education institutions	The National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation, MES	The National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation accredits higher education institutions. MES is more broadly responsible for accreditation.

Source: Government of Bulgaria (2022^[13]), *Responses to the OECD Questionnaire for the OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria*.

In terms of *ex ante* recognition and certification of providers, NAVET is responsible for licensing vocational training institutions for individuals aged 16 and older and for licensing centres for information and vocational guidance. NAVET is also responsible for developing the LPVET and the SES for acquiring qualifications by professions that are referenced to determine licensing. In addition, alt education and training is linked to Bulgaria’s NQF, which helps to ensure quality standards (European Commission, 2017^[10]).

Ex post monitoring of adult education and training learning outcomes is an area that requires significant improvement in Bulgaria. While some assessment mechanisms are in place, they are not fully functional and/or comprehensive. For example, VETA dictates that a quality assurance methodology should be developed for VET schools, which include adult learners, but this has not yet taken place (World Bank, 2021^[18]). VET centres are required to submit annual self-assessment reports to NAVET, and these self-assessments are summarised by NAVET and reported to the NAVET Governing Board. However, these self-assessments are not complemented by any external assessment measures (Government of Bulgaria, 2022^[13]). Furthermore, while VETA recommends that the quality of adult education and training be assessed by a three-pronged panel involving representation from government, employers, and training providers, project participants noted that this is not a requirement and usually does not happen in practice.

Two recent pilot programmes in Bulgaria have begun to test systems for tracking the outcomes of VET graduates, including adults. First, the “On track” programme provides a model for VET providers to track the outcomes of their own graduates. Second, the “EQAVET: Vireo2” pilot programme (under Erasmus+) uses administrative data to follow key indicators of VET graduates. Both of these programmes receive EU funding. However, there is still no systematic approach to nationwide data collection on adult graduate outcomes (World Bank, 2021^[18]).

Beyond perceptions of the quality of the system, there are a number of indications that the quality of teaching by adult learning trainers could be improved in Bulgaria. There is currently no required initial or continuing professional development for adult learning trainers to render them qualified to specifically teach adults (World Bank, 2021^[18]). Furthermore, a recent survey found that inadequately prepared adult education trainers is one of the main factors lowering the quality of adult training (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). Despite the occasional good practice when it comes to training trainers (Box 3.9), there are no systemic plans in place to address adult education trainers’ low qualifications and capabilities. In addition, there are currently no mechanisms to monitor or evaluate the quality of teaching in adult education and training in Bulgaria (Industry Watch Group, 2021^[41]).

Project participants expanded upon these findings. They explained that there are no requirements for those providing adult training other than having a university degree in the field being taught. That is, there are no requirements that they have any training in teaching more generally or training in teaching adults specifically. They noted that there are very few educational programmes in Bulgaria that provide qualifications in andragogy (the teaching of adults). Furthermore, teaching aids, such as textbooks, and teaching infrastructure, such as classrooms, are not adapted to adult learners.

Therefore, many opportunities remain to better understand and improve the quality of adult learning in Bulgaria. These include monitoring the outcomes of adults who complete education and training; taking steps to independently assess the quality of existing programmes and to publicise the results of these assessments; and implementing measures to improve the quality of teachers and teaching aides for adult education programmes (Box 3.10).

Box 3.9. Relevant national practice: Improving the quality of adult learning opportunities

Bulgaria: The Bulgarian-German Vocational Training Centre State Enterprise (BGVTC)

The BGVTC, in addition to providing training courses for employed and unemployed individuals, also provide “train-the-trainer” courses to improve the qualifications of adult education and training instructors. The centres have provided training and methodological support to about 900 adult education and training instructors, which include teachers in VET schools, instructors in VET centres and instructors and apprenticeship mentors in enterprises. This initiative is connected with the implementation of dual training, mentoring within apprenticeships, practice training, traineeship and the introduction to work of newly hired persons.

Source: Digi-Ready (2022^[76]), *Bulgarian-German Vocational Training Centre State Enterprise*, https://digi-ready.eu/consortium_bgcpo.

Box 3.10. Relevant international practice: Improving the quality of adult learning opportunities

Slovenia: The Institute for Adult Education (ACS)

The ACS in Slovenia has developed a framework for evaluating the quality of adult education and training that consists of both internal and external monitoring methods, including a detailed model for self-assessment, internal quality counsellors, external expert evaluations, peer reviews and an award of the “green quality logo” to well-performing providers.

Adult education and training providers in Slovenia are legally required to undertake self-evaluations but are provided with a number of tools to help them do this well. For example, the ACS developed the Offering Quality Education to Adults model for self-evaluation that includes guidance on self-evaluation planning, methodological support for evaluating data, and support to develop measures for improvement as a result of the evaluation. ACS also provides adult education quality indicators that are relevant for both formal and non-formal adult education that can be used as a resource for providers when conducting self-assessments and can also be used for external evaluations. Another resource ACS offers is the Quality Mosaic online portal with self-assessment good practices, tools and guidelines, which also serves as a resource to providers.

External evaluation of adult education and training in Slovenia is done by external evaluation teams that include ACS staff, technical experts and adult education experts. The Evaluation Team analyses the provider’s self-evaluation, conducts an on-site visit and prepares an external evaluation report. In addition, if providers meet a list of eight self-assessment quality standards, they are awarded a “green quality logo” by ACS, which serves as a public marker of excellence for the training provider.

Austria: The Academy of Continuing Education

The Academy of Continuing Education (WBA) in Austria offers RPL for adult educators, guidance for acquiring any missing skills, and two types of accreditation to standardise and professionalise the quality of adult education trainers in the country.

As the first step in the process, adult educators submit evidence of their existing competencies and practical experience. Practical experience working in adult education and training is required to receive WBA accreditation. The WBA then assesses these documents and proof of competencies based on standards they have developed from qualification profiles. Wherever competencies are lacking, the WBA refers candidates to relevant courses offered by other adult education providers (the WBA does not offer training programmes to adult educators) to fill in the gaps. Finally, the WBA accredits the skills of adult educators through two types of awards: a certificate of basic competencies in adult education and a more high-level diploma in adult education in a specific field. This allows adult education trainers to receive accreditation in adult education while recognising the relevant competencies they have built through their work and teaching experience. It also creates country-wide standards for adult education trainers without instituting strict training requirements that could discourage trainers from teaching in adult education. Furthermore, certification from the WBA can have the added benefit of serving as a quality assurance signifier to adult learners.

Source: OECD (2021^[74]), *Strengthening Quality Assurance in Adult Education and Training in Portugal Implementation Guidance*, www.oecd.org/portugal/Strengthening-Quality-Assurance-in-Adult-Education-and-Training-in-Portugal-Implementation-Guidance.pdf; OECD (2021^[77]), *Improving the Quality of Non-Formal Adult Learning: Learning from European Best Practices on Quality Assurance*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f1b450e1-en>; Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (2022^[78]), *Austrian Academy of Continuing Education*, <https://wba.or.at/de/english/about-us.php>; Eurydice (2022^[79]), *Austria: Institutions*, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/austria/institutions#WBA>.

Recommendations for improving the quality of adult learning opportunities

Recommendations

2.9 Strengthen *ex ante* assessment of adult learning providers and develop a system for independent, *ex post* monitoring and assessment of adult learning quality and outcomes.

NAVET should strengthen *ex ante* assessment of adult learning providers by, for example, establishing quality labels and providing them to adult education and training providers that exceed minimum certification requirements. NAVET should further establish an *ex post* assessment process of adult learning providers, including those only providing partial qualifications (see Recommendation 2.6) with an external evaluation team. NAVET, in collaboration with MES and training providers, should collect relevant data on graduate outcomes from VET schools and centres and individuals who go through the RPL process to better monitor the quality of adult education and training. The data should be used to guide learners toward quality providers and to create healthy competition among providers in order to ensure the supply and take-up of high-quality and relevant adult education and training (see Recommendation 2.12).

2.10 Strengthen initial and continuing professional development for adult learning trainers.

MES, in collaboration with NAVET, should encourage the upskilling of adult educators through a combination of policy measures, including subsidising costs for adult education and training instructors to participate in training in andragogy and raising awareness about these subsidised courses among education and training providers. In addition, softer support should be offered to trainers and adult education and training providers on how to best instruct adults, including information, guidance, peer-learning opportunities, and sharing best practices.

Making adult learning more relevant to learners' and labour market needs

One of the central reasons that individuals participate in adult education and training programmes is to make their skills more labour-market-relevant and improve their employment prospects. This is even more important as global trends, such as automation and globalisation, are rapidly changing the skills required in labour markets. In addition, certain occupations are likely to become less prevalent in Bulgaria in the coming years, such as skilled agriculture, while others are expected to expand, such as service industry jobs (CEDEFOP, 2020^[80]). Furthermore, the rapid introduction of new technologies during the pandemic has likely hastened automation and job polarisation. This is compounded in Bulgaria, where the population is declining rapidly due to low fertility and high migration rates, further challenging the supply of skills. For these reasons, it will be critical for adults in Bulgaria to upskill and reskill in order to meet evolving labour market needs.

One reason that participation in adult learning in Bulgaria might be low is that the education and training offered is not perceived as relevant to the needs of employers. This is despite the fact that collaboration between employers and adult education and training providers to create greater alignment between adult learning outcomes and labour market needs has improved. It is a central objective of the National Strategy on Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) and has been given greater prominence in this and other more recent strategies than in previous lifelong learning strategies (World Bank, 2021^[18]). As discussed above, 20.2% of Bulgarian individuals report that they do not participate in adult learning because there is no suitable offer for education or training, a slightly higher share than their peers in the European Union (18.6%) (Eurostat, 2016^[8]). Meanwhile, among enterprises in Bulgaria, the gap is substantially larger: 20% attribute not providing training to a lack of suitable CVT courses, compared to an EU average of 14.4% (Eurostat, 2020^[32]). Recent Bulgarian surveys show that most employers in Bulgaria see the adult VET offerings as

outdated and out of touch with technological advancements (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021^[75]; Hristova et al., 2022^[50]). Local experts have also found training materials used in adult education and training not relevant to the needs of participants (Hristova et al., 2022^[50]).

To align adult skills with labour market needs, the following conditions need to be met: 1) adult education and training programmes need to be responsive to current skills needs and aware of changing needs in the future; 2) participants and providers of adult education and training need to be incentivised to participate in and provide courses that teach labour-market-relevant skills; and 3) systems should be put into place to regularly assess and adapt policies as skills demands change (OECD, 2019^[38]). All three of these areas are in need of improvement in Bulgaria (the first is discussed primarily in Chapter 4 on skills imbalances, and the latter is discussed primarily in Chapter 5 on the governance of Bulgaria's skills system). Thus, the present discussion is concerned with incentivising participation in and provision of adult education and training opportunities that impart labour-market-relevant skills.

Adult learning opportunities in Bulgaria can be made more responsive to current and future labour market needs by involving employers in the design of adult education and training programmes. VETA lays out a framework in which employers' organisations in Bulgaria play a role in ensuring the relevance and quality of the training provided. In theory, VETA envisions interaction between business and vocational education and training institutions in the development of curricula, practices, training of teachers to work with modern technologies, and providing internships and training through work. However, even though this role is described in VETA, project participants noted that the involvement of employers in designing these elements of adult education and training is very limited in practice. Bulgaria already plans to establish sectoral councils under the new operational programme, "Education" (2021-2027). The role of these councils will include forecasting labour market needs at the sectoral and regional levels and supporting partnerships between vocational schools and employers (see Chapter 5, Box 5.2). Establishing sectoral councils, as well as incentivising collaboration, such as in the Trakia Economic Zone in Bulgaria (Box 3.11), can help to steer adult education and training programmes to teach knowledge and skills that will help adults become more qualified for the jobs that exist in their region and/or sector.

Box 3.11. Relevant national practice: Making adult learning more relevant to learners' and labour market needs

Bulgaria: The Trakia Economic Zone (TEZ)

TEZ unites 6 industrial zones in the region of Plovdiv (the second-biggest city in Bulgaria) and incorporates 180 companies with over 30 000 employees. In 2016, an Educational-Industrial Board was established in TEZ to bring together policy makers, businesses and providers in the area to ensure the relevance of education more generally to changing labour market needs. The board was created as the result of collaboration between MES, the Plovdiv Municipality, TEZ and the Bulgarian think tank, Industry Watch Group.

In 2019, TEZ established a specific VET centre called TrakiaEDU to reskill and upskill employees in the companies that are part of the economic zone with skills specifically relevant to the industries located in TEZ, as well as training courses that teach transferrable soft skills. The VET centre was developed in partnership between TEZ, six local VET schools, seven municipalities, the Regional Department of Education and the regional governor.

Source: Trakia Economic Zone (n.d.^[81]), *Trakia Economic Zone*, <https://tez.bg/>.

Incentivising more adults to participate in existing labour-market-relevant programmes is another way to meaningfully improve the relevance of adult skills in Bulgaria. A few of the subsidies currently available to individual adult learners in Bulgaria target specific types of skills (e.g. web programming, foreign languages, etc.; see Table 3.3), but there is no mechanism for providing different levels of subsidies to individuals depending on the labour market relevance of the programmes in which they are participating, a fact that project participants flagged as important.

Furthermore, the system currently in place to promote labour market relevance in education and training does not sufficiently cover adult education and training. In 2016, MES developed a scheme to encourage enrolment in VET schools and higher education institutions in areas of study where labour market demand was high but enrolments were low (“priority professional fields”), as well as areas of study the ministry determined to be of national strategic importance (“protected specialities”). MES scheme provides financial incentives (e.g. funding study places, providing scholarships, exempting tuition for students, etc.) to encourage students in secondary VET and higher education to enrol in areas of study that are “protected specialities” or “priority professional fields” (World Bank, 2021^[18]). However, no similar system exists to increase the labour market relevance of the provision of adult education and training (which primarily takes place in VET centres) or the labour market relevance of adult learners’ education and training choices (Box 3.12). Improving the collection of skills data (as discussed in Chapter 5) can help inform a list of priority skill areas to be applied to adult education and training.

With regard to the provision of adult education and training in Bulgaria being more responsive to the specific needs of individual adult learners, it is very difficult to design or provide individualised learning pathways for adult learners because there is a lack of data about learners’ needs and expectations (World Bank, 2021^[18]). As part of developing a system of monitoring adult education and training participant outcomes, as outlined in Recommendation 2.9, it would be important to collect data to inform greater individualisation of adult learning pathways.

Box 3.12. Relevant international practice: Making adult learning more relevant to learners’ and labour market needs

Australia: Incentivising labour-market-relevant adult learning

In VET provision in certain states in Australia, such as Queensland, study programmes are classified into “Priority One,” “Priority Two,” and “Priority Three” categories based on how much they contribute to strategic directions for the country. The cost of training in these areas is subsidised accordingly, with more subsidy provided for VET provision in “Priority One” (100%) than in “Priority Two” (87.5%) and more so in “Priority Two” than in “Priority Three” (75%). The classification into priorities is based on annually updated national and state data reflecting skills needs and shortages.

Furthermore, a similar model, called the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, is used for higher education institutions in Australia, where funding provided to higher education institutions varies based on the field of study provided. Fields of study in higher education are grouped into eight funding clusters based on their labour market relevance. There are then different subsidy levels associated with each funding cluster.

Source: OECD (2017^[35]), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>.

Recommendations for making adult learning more relevant to learners' and labour market needs

Recommendations

- 2.11 Increase the involvement of employers in the design of adult education and training programmes.** MES, the MLSP and the Ministry of Innovation, in collaboration with NAVET, should incentivise greater collaboration between employers or employers' organisations and adult education and training providers in designing education and training programmes relevant to employers' skills needs. This can be done by establishing dedicated structures, such as sectoral councils (see Chapter 5) and/or regular meetings of employers with VET centres, VET colleges, higher education institutions and other adult education and training providers. These local stakeholders should be brought together to discuss local skills needs and the learning programmes that should be expanded or created to meet these needs.
- 2.12 Develop a list of prioritised areas for adult education and training to inform differentiated public subsidies for adult learners in areas of skills shortages and/or of strategic economic importance.** The MLSP, MES and NAVET should establish a list of prioritised areas of adult education and training of national and/or regional importance. Evidence to inform the list should include the skills assessment and anticipation outlined in Chapter 5, current employment forecasting projections and the list of "protected specialities" and "priority professional fields" used to determine financial incentives in secondary education. In addition, Bulgaria should increase the value of existing training vouchers (see Recommendation 2.3) for learning opportunities in areas of skills shortages and/or of strategic economic importance. Thus, the value of training vouchers should differ based on learner characteristics and the relevance of training programmes to skills needs. The list of priority areas should be updated to ensure its continued relevance. However, it should be stable over the medium term (e.g. for a three-to-five-year period) to ensure that institutions have enough time to invest in developing programmes that meet labour market needs.

Summary of policy recommendations

Policy directions	High-level policy recommendations
Opportunity 1: Increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning	
Improving non-financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training	<p>2.1 Strengthen holistic career guidance services for employed adults by expanding the capacity and quality of information and guidance centres.</p> <p>2.2 Strengthen support to employers to assess their skills and training needs.</p>
Improving financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers to participate in adult education and training	<p>2.3 Expand individual training vouchers, while differentiating support to better target vulnerable groups.</p> <p>2.4 Better engage small- and medium-sized enterprises in adult education and training by piloting a sectoral training fund(s), with relatively higher support for smaller-sized enterprises.</p>
Opportunity 2: Making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers	
Improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers	<p>2.5 Introduce financial incentives for employers to increase employee education and training opportunities during working hours, with higher support for small- and medium-sized enterprises.</p> <p>2.6 Support and promote existing flexible adult education and training opportunities, including partial qualification courses.</p>
Making learning more accessible for low-skilled adults	<p>2.7 Reform the recognition of the prior learning system for adults to encourage greater uptake of RPL services.</p> <p>2.8 Ease access to adult basic education and expand basic education opportunities for learners in other education and training programmes.</p>

Opportunity 3: Improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training for adults and employers

Improving the quality of adult learning opportunities	2.9 Strengthen <i>ex ante</i> assessment of adult learning providers and develop a system for independent, <i>ex post</i> monitoring and assessment of adult learning quality and outcomes. 2.10 Strengthen initial and continuing professional development for adult learning trainers.
Making adult learning more relevant to learners' and labour market needs	2.11 Increase the involvement of employers in the design of adult education and training programmes. 2.12 Develop a list of prioritised areas for adult education and training to inform differentiated public subsidies for adult learners in areas of skills shortages and/or of strategic economic importance.

References

- Acemoglu, D. (1998), *Why do New Technologies Complement Skills? Directed Technical Change and Wage Inequality*, <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/113/4/1055/1916970>. [3]
- Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (2022), *Austrian Academy of Continuing Education*, <https://wba.or.at/de/english/about-us.php>. [78]
- Baev, S. (2021), *Някои основни характеристики на образованието на възрастни в България [Some main characteristics of adult education in Bulgaria]*, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewjTkOrrher-AhVoSKQEHacWDiEQFnoECA4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Ffire-bg.org%2Fwpsite%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2021%2F01%2Fadult-learning-in-Bulgaria.pdf&usq=AOvVaw0ugpkPnZ6SHFx>. [73]
- Bulgarian Industrial Association (2014), *MyCompetence*, <https://mycompetence.bg/en/> (accessed on 18 March 2022). [63]
- CEDEFOP (2022), *Bulgaria: National employment strategy 2021-30*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/bulgaria-national-employment-strategy-2021-30> (accessed on 12 May 2023). [16]
- CEDEFOP (2022), *Financing adult learning database: Adaptation credit*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/adaptation-credit> (accessed on 1 December 2022). [48]
- CEDEFOP (2022), *Vocational education and training in Europe: Bulgaria*, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4161_en.pdf (accessed on 21 August 2022). [57]
- CEDEFOP (2020), *Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Bulgaria*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-bulgaria> (accessed on 18 March 2022). [42]
- CEDEFOP (2020), "Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe: Volume 1: Second opinion survey", <https://doi.org/10.2801/717676>. [31]
- CEDEFOP (2020), *Skills forecast 2020: Bulgaria*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/bulgaria-2020-skills-forecast>. [80]
- CEDEFOP (2019), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: Final synthesis report*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-on-validation>. [69]

- CEDEFOP (2018), *NQF country report: Bulgaria*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/bulgaria-2018> (accessed on 18 August 2022). [70]
- Danish Ministry of Education (2020), *University of Copenhagen Study Programmes*, <https://www.ug.dk/uddannelser/universitetsuddannelser/enkeltfagogdeluddannelserveduni/enkeltfag-og-deluddannelser-koebenhavns-universitet>. [59]
- Danish Ministry of Education (2019), *About Academy Education*, <https://www.ug.dk/uddannelser/artikleromuddannelser/omkurserogefteruddannelse/om-akademiuddannelser>. [60]
- Dearden, L. et al. (2006), *Training and corporate productivity: Evidence from a panel of UK industries The Impact of Training on Productivity and Wages: Evidence from British Panel Data**, <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media//2E3BD/03>. [4]
- Digi-Ready (2022), *Bulgarian-German Vocational Training Centre State Enterprise*, https://digi-ready.eu/consortium_bgcpo (accessed on 3 January 2023). [76]
- Dobрева, A. and V. Lilyanova (2022), *Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan*, European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733662/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)73366_2_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733662/EPRS_BRI(2022)73366_2_EN.pdf). [64]
- Dzhengozova, M. (2019), *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update*, http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Bulgaria.pdf. [68]
- EUMIS (2020), *All Grant Procedures*, <https://eumis2020.government.bg/en/f93df370/Procedure/Ended> (accessed on 21 September 2022). [49]
- EURES (n.d.), *Bulgaria | EURES Jobs - European Job Days*, <https://europeanjobdays.eu/en/eures-country/bulgaria> (accessed on 22 February 2023). [26]
- Eurofound (2019), *European Company Survey*, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/2019/european-company-survey-2019> (accessed on 7 July 2022). [33]
- Eurofound (2019), *European Working Conditions Survey 2019*, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-working-conditions-surveys-ewcs>. [30]
- European Commission (2021), "Education and Training Education and Training Monitor 2021: BULGARIA", <https://doi.org/10.2766/91817>. [17]
- European Commission (2017), *Independent national experts network in the area of adult education/adult skills Full Country Report-Bulgaria*, https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-02/17.01.19_ALN_BG-TOC.pdf. [10]
- European Commission (2015), "An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe", <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c8c38dc9-89d0-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>. [36]

- European Commission (2008), “National Programme for Roma Literacy and Qualification”, [15]
https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/national-programme-roma-literacy-and-qualification_en (accessed on 12 May 2023).
- Eurostat (2021), *Digital Economy and Society 2021*, [28]
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5481.
- Eurostat (2021), *EU-Labour Force Survey*, [29]
<https://www.eui.eu/Research/Library/ResearchGuides/Economics/Statistics/DataPortal/EU-LFS> (accessed on 13 July 2022).
- Eurostat (2021), *National Accounts - Euro-indicators*, [9]
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/euro-indicators/national-accounts> (accessed on 3 October 2022).
- Eurostat (2020), *Continuing Vocational Training Survey*, [32]
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/continuing-vocational-training-survey> (accessed on 18 July 2022).
- Eurostat (2016), *Adult Education Survey*, [8]
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/adult-education-survey> (accessed on 13 July 2022).
- Eurydice (2022), *Austria: Institutions*, [79]
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/austria/institutions#WBA>.
- Eurydice (2022), “Bulgaria: Administration and governance at local and/or institutional level”, [25]
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/administration-and-governance-local-andor-institutional-level> (accessed on 9 May 2023).
- Eurydice (2022), *Bulgaria: Institutions Providing Adult Education and Training*, [22]
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/institutions> (accessed on 4 January 2023).
- Eurydice (2022), *Main Programmes and Provision in Adult Education and Training*, [11]
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/main-programmes-and-provision-adult-education-and-training>.
- Eurydice (2014), *Bulgaria: Lifelong learning strategy*, [19]
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/lifelong-learning-strategy> (accessed on 4 January 2023).
- Government of Bulgaria (2022), *Responses to the OECD Questionnaire for the OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria*. [13]
- Hristova, A. et al. (2022), *Evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of support measures for employees under Priority Axis 1 of the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development” 2014-2020*, FORECAST, [50]
<https://esf.bg/en/assessment/>.
- ILO (2017), *Korea Training Levy Case Study*, [46]
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/--ro-bangkok/---ilo-jakarta/documents/presentation/wcms_565074.pdf.
- ILO (n.d.), *Bulgaria - Employment Promotion Act of 20 December 2001, as amended.*, [20]
https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=60386 (accessed on 3 October 2022).

- Industry Watch Group (2021), “Проучване сред заинтересованите страни за последваща оценка на въздействието на Стратег [Ex-post impact evaluation of the Strategy for Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015-2020]”. [41]
- Kompetanse Norge (2020), *Admission to higher vocational education on the basis of prior learning*, https://www.kompetansenorge.no/contentassets/58c112900db245a194cccfadfa83fd7/veiled_er_opptak_til_hoyere_yrkesfaglig_utdanning.pdf. [71]
- Konings, J. and S. Vanormelingen (2015), “The impact of training on productivity and wages: Firm-level evidence”, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 97/2, pp. 485-497, https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00460. [5]
- Midsundstad, T. (2019), *A review of the research literature on adult learning and employability*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330900908_A_review_of_the_research_literature_on_adult_learning_and_employability. [2]
- Ministry of Economy and Industry (2022), *Human Resource Development*, <https://www.mi.government.bg/en/>. [14]
- Ministry of Education and Science (2021), “Анализ на резултатите от анкетно проучване за пречките за включване в професионално образование и обучение на потенциални възрастни обучаеми (Analysis of the results of a survey on the barriers to inclusion in vocational education and training of potential adult learners)”, https://epale.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-07/REPORT_anketa%20NE_FINAL.pdf#. [75]
- MLSP (n.d.), *National Council for Promotion of Employment*, <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/eng/national-council-for-promotion-of-employment> (accessed on 3 October 2022). [21]
- NAVET (2022), *National Agency for Vocational Education and Training*, <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/statistika-na-obuchenite-litsa/> (accessed on 19 December 2022). [56]
- NAVET (2018), *The amendments to the Vocational Education and Training Act in Bulgaria create conditions for improving the quality of professional preparation*, <https://www.navet.government.bg/en/the-amendments-to-the-vocational-education-and-training-act-in-bulgaria-create-conditions-for-improving-the-quality-of-professional-preparation/> (accessed on 4 January 2023). [55]
- NAVET (n.d.), “Register of Vocational Training Centres (CVT)”, <https://www.navet.government.bg/en/register-of-vocational-training-centres-cvt/> (accessed on 9 May 2023). [24]
- NEA (2021), *Отчет на Плана за действие на Агенция по заетостта за 2021 г.*, <https://www.az.government.bg/web/files/PageFile/123/19468/otchet-na-plana-za-dejstvie-2021-g.rar>. [40]
- NSI (n.d.), *National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria*, <https://www.nsi.bg/> (accessed on 3 August 2022). [23]
- Observatoire de la Formation and INFPC (2021), “La contribution financière de l’État”, <https://www.lifelong-learning.lu/accueil/fr> (accessed on 6 January 2023). [58]

- OECD (2023), *OECD Skills Strategy Luxembourg: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92d891a4-en>. [62]
- OECD (2022), *Bulgaria Economic Snapshot*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/economy/bulgaria-economic-snapshot/> (accessed on 3 October 2022). [7]
- OECD (2022), “Good practices in Europe for supporting employers to promote skills development”, <https://www.oecd.org/skills/Good-practices-in-Europe-for-supporting-employers-to-promote-skills-development.pdf> (accessed on 21 July 2022). [61]
- OECD (2022), *Reaching Out and Activating Inactive and Unemployed Persons in Bulgaria*, Connecting People with Jobs, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7b91154a-en>. [39]
- OECD (2021), “The recognition of prior learning in adult basic education”, https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Prior_learning.pdf (accessed on 20 July 2022). [66]
- OECD (2021), *Career Guidance for Adults in a Changing World of Work*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a94bfad-en>. [34]
- OECD (2021), *Creating Responsive Adult Learning Opportunities in Japan*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/cfe1ccd2-en>. [44]
- OECD (2021), *Improving the Quality of Non-Formal Adult Learning: Learning from European Best Practices on Quality Assurance*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f1b450e1-en>. [77]
- OECD (2021), *OECD Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for Life*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0ae365b4-en>. [54]
- OECD (2021), *OECD Skills Strategy Lithuania: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/14deb088-en>. [72]
- OECD (2021), *Strengthening Quality Assurance in Adult Education and Training in Portugal: Implementation Guidance*, <https://www.oecd.org/skills/centre-for-skills/Strengthening-Quality-Assurance-in-Adult-Education-and-Training-in-Portugal-Implementation-Guidance.pdf> (accessed on 13 April 2022). [74]
- OECD (2021), *Training in Enterprises: New Evidence from 100 Case Studies*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7d63d210-en>. [51]
- OECD (2019), *Adult Learning in Italy: What Role for Training Funds?*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311978-en>. [45]
- OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>. [38]
- OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>. [65]
- OECD (2019), *Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora’s Box?*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/203b21a8-en>. [47]
- OECD (2019), *OECD Skills Outlook 2019: Thriving in a Digital World*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/df80bc12-en>. [53]

- OECD (2019), *PISA results 2018, Country Note: Bulgaria*, [27]
[https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=BGR&treshold=10&topic=PI#:~:text=In%20reading%20literacy%2C%20the%20main,30%20points%20higher%20for%20girls\).](https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=BGR&treshold=10&topic=PI#:~:text=In%20reading%20literacy%2C%20the%20main,30%20points%20higher%20for%20girls).)
- OECD (2017), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training, Getting Skills Right*, [35]
 OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>.
- OECD (2016), *Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills [6]
 Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264258051-en>.
- OECD (2011), *PIAAC Conceptual Framework of the Background Questionnaire Main Survey*, [1]
[http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC\(2011_11\)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PIAAC(2011_11)MS_BQ_ConceptualFramework_1%20Dec%202011.pdf).
- PwC, E. (2020), “Deliverable 4: Technical report including in-depth analysis of the SMEs in [43]
 Bulgaria and preliminary recommendations for the directions of action of the new strategy”,
https://www.mi.government.bg/files/useruploads/files/sme/FINAL_DG_Reform_SME%20Strategy_Technical%20Report_2020-04-27.pdf.
- SkillsFuture (n.d.), *SkillsFuture Credit*, <https://www.skillsfuture.sg/credit> (accessed on [52]
 15 November 2020).
- VINCE (2019), *Bulgaria*, <https://vince.eucen.eu/validation-in-europe/bulgaria-4/> (accessed on [67]
 3 January 2023).
- Windisch, H. (2015), “Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy [37]
 intervention”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris,
<https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en>.
- World Bank (2021), *Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria*, [18]
https://www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf.
- World Bank (2021), “Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in Bulgaria: Situation Analysis [12]
 and Policy Direction Recommendations”,
https://www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2021-08/EN_VET_LLL_June_22.pdf.
- Zone, T. (n.d.), *Southeast Europe’s Leading Industrial Project — Trakia Economic Zone*, [81]
<https://tez.bg/> (accessed on 21 February 2023).

Annex 3.A. Individual learning schemes

Box 3.A.1. Individual learning schemes

This report discusses a number of different forms of individual learning schemes (ILS), including those outlined below. A common characteristic across individual learning schemes is that the benefit is linked to individuals, as opposed to providers, and is not dependent on the individual's employment status.

While most individual learning schemes implemented across OECD countries are called “individual learning accounts” (ILAs), in practice these ILAs encompass a number of different types of individual learning schemes, with the most frequently implemented scheme being voucher schemes.

Individual learning accounts

Individual learning accounts are “virtual” accounts in which training rights are accumulated over time. The accounts are virtual because the resources in them are only activated if and when an individual undertakes education or training.

Individual savings accounts for training

Individual savings accounts for training are physical savings accounts in which individuals accumulate funds over time that can be used for education and training later. In some cases, employers and public authorities may also deposit funds in these accounts. Funds that are not used for training are owned by the individual and, in some cases, may be used for other purposes.

Training vouchers

With training vouchers, individuals receive direct subsidies for participating in education and training, which often require co-funding by the education or training participant. Training vouchers usually do not allow for rights or resource accumulation over time.

Time accounts

Time accounts allow individuals to accumulate time, rather than money, to be used towards education and training at a later point. The accumulated time can be linked to overtime hours.

Source: OECD (2017^[35]), *Financial Incentives for Steering Education and Training*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264272415-en>; OECD (2019^[47]), *Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora's Box?*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/203b21a8-en>.



From:
OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria
Assessment and Recommendations

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/c2eb2f34-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Improving adult skills in Bulgaria", in *OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/f9bca78c-en>

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.