

### In brief: Fostering institutional co-ordination on adult learning policies

- Adult learning policies are often less effective than they could be due to fragmented institutional responsibilities and a lack of co-ordination.** This is even more the case for adult learning policies targeted at firms' investment in training, which interact with industrial and innovation policies. Co-ordination efforts across relevant government authorities and stakeholders are therefore crucial to avoid overlapping or incoherent policy efforts. Noting that effective co-ordination mechanisms depend on each country's institutional set-up, this note explores: (i) at which level policy co-ordination on adult learning can take place; and (ii) which co-ordination mechanisms are most effective based on a review of good practice across the OECD.
- Co-ordination can take place between central government institutions, across levels of government, and between the administration and social and economic stakeholders.** Horizontal co-ordination across institutions at the level of central government is crucial for a strategic approach to adult learning policy, while vertical co-ordination across different levels of government avoids policy overlaps. Lastly, the engagement of social and economic stakeholders can strengthen the political legitimacy of policy actions and facilitate policy implementation.
- The most common mechanism for co-ordinating adult learning policy in OECD countries is a co-ordination body with advisory, planning, or policy making functions.** Co-ordination bodies oversee complex policy area throughout the policy cycle and can help foster a whole-of-government approach. A co-ordination body's impact is stronger the clearer its mandate, resources, and role. The National Council for VET in Norway is a good practice example for policy co-ordination on vocational education and training.
- Policy strategies, defined quality standards, and shared information systems can be effective to foster co-ordination.** Policy strategies, such as the German National Skills Strategy, help to identify common priorities, while quality standards encourage coherent policy implementation. Shared information systems, as the Sonrai system used by Skillnet in Ireland, create a common understanding of target objectives and offer opportunities for regular feedback.
- Implementation networks and funding agreements help mobilise local and regional resources.** Both mechanisms facilitate capacity building on the ground and support policy implementation according to local needs. Funding agreements, for instance, the Labour Market and Workforce Development Agreements in Canada, clearly prescribe responsibility and foster accountability. Implementation networks as in the case of the Training Networks in Germany are especially useful to facilitate capacity building on the ground.

## The institutional governance of adult learning policies

In the socio-economic context of rapid population ageing, the digital transformation, efforts to lower carbon emissions, and the recovery from the unprecedented shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, investing in the skills development of adults is becoming increasingly important. Supporting investments in skills can help countries to address economic and social challenges and foster a more resilient and productive workforce.

The institutional systems that govern adult learning policy in OECD countries are complex, as they involve a range of different actors. Responsibility for policies in the area of adult skills is typically shared, with adult learning policies targeted at the unemployed typically falling within the purview of the Ministry of Labour, while for other groups the responsibility often resides with the Ministry of Education. Meanwhile, industrial policies – which can encourage investment in skills development by employers – are mostly overseen by the Ministry of Economy. Other ministries may also be involved where adult learning policy interlinks with issues of migration, environment, or other policy domains.

A range of different government agencies typically operate in the field of adult learning policies, such as Public Employment Services or investment promotion agencies. Some countries have dedicated public bodies on adult learning or skills policy, such as SkillsFuture Singapore, Skills Development Scotland, or the Future Skills Centre in Canada. Depending on the distribution of responsibilities in government, federal states or regional governments can also play a role in designing and implementing adult learning policies. In many OECD countries, regional governments run adult learning centres or regional support services for businesses.

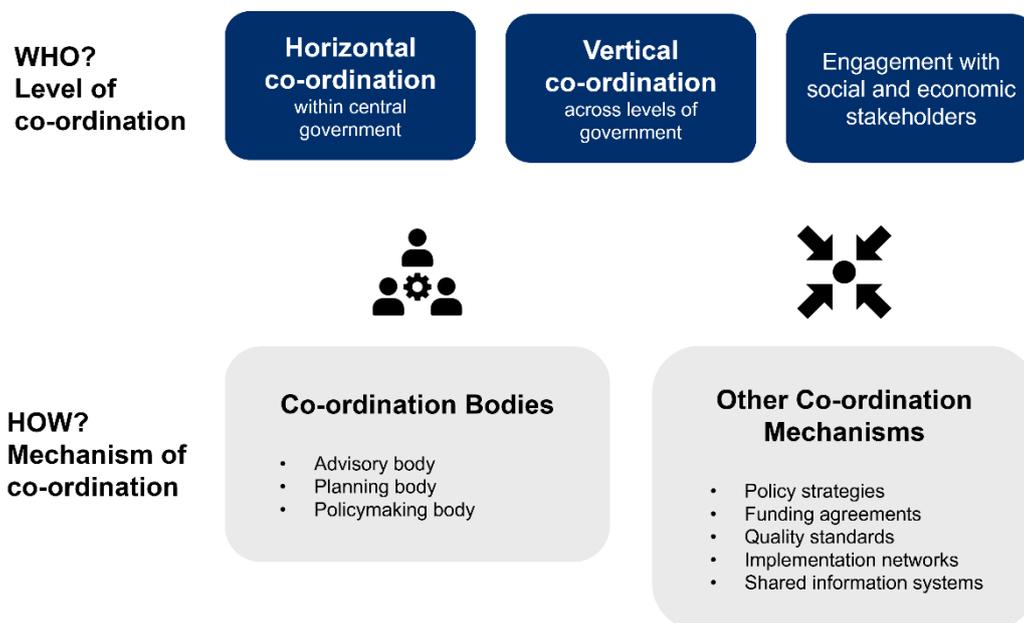
Lastly, social and economic stakeholders such as Chambers of Commerce, employer networks, trade unions, NGOs, or civil society representatives support employees and companies in their investment in skills, usually through determining training needs, offering advice, or providing funding support. Adult learning institutions, universities, or training centres supply adults with educational opportunities and may also be included in policy processes.

Despite the crucial role they stand to play, mechanisms to co-ordinate adult learning policies throughout the policy cycle (meaning policy design, implementation, and evaluation) are rare in OECD countries. Even if mechanisms for co-ordination exist in a country, they may be temporary, or fail to set the right incentives for relevant actors to contribute. As a consequence, decisions taken across institutions or funding instruments can be inconsistent, and policies are overall less effective than they could be. A lack of synergy can potentially result in the misallocation of public resources and a low impact of adult learning policies.

Co-ordination matters across the policy cycle, which includes the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies. The initial policy design stage tends to be led by the central government, even in cases where regional governments are involved (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>), but it also provides opportunities to receive inputs from regional governments and a range of different stakeholders. This can help widen the political legitimacy of the reform. However, even when well designed, policies for adult learning can struggle to translate into tangible change on the ground. Strong governance mechanisms have the potential to increase coherence of policy implementation and to avoid potential overlaps. At the end of the policy cycle, co-ordination mechanisms can support monitoring and evaluating the impact of policies and adapting them according to evidence-based insights.

This policy note explores: (i) at which level policy co-ordination on adult learning can take place; and (ii) which co-ordination mechanisms are most effective, based on good practice across the OECD. While the choice of co-ordination mechanisms will depend on the specific institutional context of each country and the division of responsibilities, this note describes different options that policy makers have at their disposal to foster formal co-ordination on adults' skill policies. The different levels of co-ordination and types of co-ordination mechanisms are shown schematically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Co-ordinating adult learning policy: Levels and mechanisms



### WHO? Inter-institutional co-ordination and stakeholder engagement on adult learning policies

The central and regional levels of government and social and economic stakeholders have different roles in the design, implementation, and monitoring of adult learning policies. While much depends on the existing institutional set-up, there are some general insights about the role of horizontal government co-ordination at the level of central government, vertical government co-ordination between central and regional governments, as well as the engagement of stakeholders in these policies.

## Key lessons: Features of horizontal and vertical government co-ordination, and stakeholder engagement

- **Horizontal co-ordination across institutions at the level of central government is important for a consistent approach to adult learning policies.** The strategic role of the highest levels of government becomes more important as the complexity of the policy design process increases. A whole-of-government policy approach is especially relevant when looking at training and learning in firms. Horizontal governance should involve not only Ministries but also agencies of the central government (where relevant), to facilitate policy alignment and delineate responsibilities.
- **Vertical co-ordination across different levels of government can reduce overlap and foster synergies, ensuring that adult learning policies at different levels are mutually reinforcing.** Strong vertical governance arrangements can support knowledge transfer, inform budget allocations, target policy to local needs, and help to reduce disparities in adults' participation in adult learning across regions.
- **Social and economic stakeholders' involvement in policy design and implementation can generate political legitimacy, but also support knowledge exchanges and the flow of information.** Effective engagement with stakeholders is more likely when they have a formally pre-defined role in the governance of adult learning policies and are involved continuously rather than ad-hoc. Sectoral co-ordination among social partners, for instance, through Sectoral Skills Councils, is valuable to identify skills needs in certain industries and to develop training that meets employer demand.

### **Horizontal co-ordination**

Well-defined co-ordination at the central level of government is key to drive policy reform on adult learning policies, including for policies that aim to stimulate investment in skills by firms. The importance of co-ordination has grown due to an increase in the number of cross-ministerial policy initiatives in most OECD countries (OECD, 2014<sup>[2]</sup>). The central government usually provides the initiative and leadership for a new policy or reform, even in cases where regional governments are also involved (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>). This horizontal co-ordination takes place at the highest level of government, usually the Council of Ministers or Cabinet, and at the level of Ministries and other bodies of the central government.

Inter-institutional government co-ordination consists of regular exchanges between two or more ministries on policy priorities, planning, and decision-making. In the case of adult learning policies for firms, this is particularly common, considering that industrial and innovation policies are not usually defined by the ministries of Labour or Education. These exchanges can be formalised as part of a co-ordination body (see Table 1), which take different names (inter-ministerial, steering committees, working groups, or task forces). The strategic role of the highest body of government, typically the Council of Ministers or Cabinet, has been expanding over the course of the last decade due to the increasing complexity of policy making, the emergence of whole-of-government strategy setting and implementation, and the strategic monitoring of government performance over the medium term (OECD, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>). Most OECD countries have strengthened the institutional and financial capacities of the highest executive bodies, and progressively shifted their mandate from administrative support to policy co-ordination (OECD, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>).

Horizontal governance, particularly on more technical aspects of adult learning policies, should also involve the agencies of the central government that have responsibility for adult learning policies. This facilitates the alignment across different institutions and can help to delineate responsibilities. The Employment Policy Deliberative Council in Korea is a good example for inter-institutional co-ordination at the level of central government (Box 1).

### **Box 1. Horizontal co-ordination: The Employment Policy Deliberative Council in Korea**

In Korea, the Minister of Employment and Labour chairs the Employment Policy Deliberative Council, a body that co-ordinates policies on vocational education and training across ministries and levels of government. It involves senior representatives from other Ministries, representatives from unions and employers, as well as employment experts. The Council reviews information on skill demand, takes decisions on training and employment policy, and assesses the impact of policies, for instance related to the training supply or certain employment programmes. The Council also provides feedback on the policy strategy for vocational skills development by the Ministry of Employment and Labour that is updated every five years.

Source: OECD (2021<sup>[5]</sup>) *OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Korea: Strengthening the Governance of Adult Learning*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f19a4560-en>.

### **Vertical co-ordination**

Strong vertical co-ordination between central and regional governments on adult learning policies can reduce geographical disparities in training participation, as well as in the institutional capacity for adult learning policies across regions (OECD, 2013<sup>[6]</sup>). The involvement of regional governments in the design of skill policies, furthermore, can help build consensus around the policy design, target policy to local needs, and make policy implementation more effective by increasing the buy-in of different levels of government and regional public authorities (OECD, 2013<sup>[6]</sup>). Lastly, vertical co-ordination can increase the effectiveness of adult learning policy by facilitating knowledge transfer and informing budget allocations.

Depending on the degree of decentralisation of a country, regional governments or federal states may have important responsibilities for adult learning policy. In these systems, vertical co-ordination is fundamental to reduce the overlap and foster synergies in adult learning across the country, to best ensure that adult learning policies at different levels are mutually reinforcing. This is especially relevant in contexts where regions are markedly different with respect to adults' and workers' participation in training, as well as industrial specialisation and density of firms. Vertical co-ordination can consist of informal exchanges across levels of government, take place in established co-ordination bodies, or be part of a consultation process for a policy reform. The Partnership Agreements for the for European Structural and Investment Funds in Italy are an example of vertical government co-operation during policy design (Box 2).

## Box 2. Vertical government co-operation: Formulating partnership agreements for European Structural and Investment Funds in Italy

The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) are financial tools to implement regional and structural policy by the European Union via central and regional administrations. The Partnership Agreement between the European Union and an individual member state determines the priorities for each funding period and channels the funding to a series of investment programmes to the different regions and projects in policy areas concerned. Investments in adult learning including those targeted at firms or workers fall under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

The main strength of government co-ordination on ESIFs in Italy is a broad and inclusive vertical ex-ante consultation process to define the strategic priorities for the next funding period. The Department for Cohesion Policies of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – at the highest, central level of government – co-ordinates and manages it, with the aim to formulate a whole-of-government strategy and concrete policy programmes across different strategic objectives and policy areas. This consultation involves central government ministries and relevant public agencies with responsibility in the respective policy area (e.g. the public employment service), the different regions and autonomous provinces in Italy, as well as social and economic stakeholders (e.g. social partners, chambers of commerce, civil society organisations, education and training providers). The process of formulating policy priorities is facilitated through open calls, whereby regions can express their ranking of priorities for investment, and frequent meetings with the stakeholders.

During the implementation period of the ESIFs, a strategic co-ordination committee works at the central level to avoid overlaps and fragmentation of interventions across the different funding streams.

Source: OECD (2021<sup>[7]</sup>), *Raising Skills in SMEs in the Digital Transformation: A review of policy instruments in Italy*, [https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Raising\\_skills\\_in\\_SMEs\\_Italy.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Raising_skills_in_SMEs_Italy.pdf); European Commission (2022<sup>[8]</sup>), *European structural and investment funds*, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds_en) (accessed on 20 January 2023).

### Stakeholder engagement

Consultation with social partners, education and training providers, chambers of commerce and other relevant actors is essential to the success of a policy that achieves long-term commitment and improvements of adult learning systems (ILO, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>). The benefits of stakeholder engagement are threefold. First, stakeholders contribute valuable information and perspectives that policy makers do not possess themselves. This is essential for an in-depth understanding and an accurate assessment of existing challenges and feasible solutions for the policy under examination. Second, the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders generates political legitimacy and may increase support for policy reform. Third, it may improve the take up of policy measures, for instance, training subsidies, during the implementation phase (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).

Nevertheless, involving stakeholders in policy processes comes with certain challenges. Conflicting interests, particularistic behaviour and undue influence of stakeholders can lead to programme inefficiencies and the misallocation of public resources. While co-ordination may often consist of direct, bilateral exchanges between the central government and individual stakeholder organisations, successful policy examples illustrate the benefit of creating formalised mechanisms for co-ordination that give a pre-defined role to stakeholders. Furthermore, continuous involvement of stakeholders throughout the policy cycle has shown better results than ad-hoc or informal involvement (OECD, 2020<sup>[11]</sup>).

The involvement of non-government stakeholders may take place on a national, regional, local, or sectoral level. Many OECD countries have formalised stakeholder engagement, for instance, by inviting stakeholders to be represented in national or local-level co-ordination bodies. Good examples are also sectoral training funds or Skills Councils, which are employer-led organisations at a regional level that identify skills needs in particular industries and foster suitable opportunities for training and qualification (ILO, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>).

The need for co-ordination with social and economic stakeholders also depends on their level of involvement in adult learning policies: in some cases, mere contact points for information exchange may suffice, whereas more advanced mechanisms of co-ordination will be necessary where governance or implementation tasks are delegated to stakeholders. The extent to which stakeholder engagement is formalised may also depend on the tradition of social dialogue in a country. So-called “corporatist” countries with established structures for stakeholder involvement, such as Germany, Norway, or the Netherlands, may more easily mobilise the commitment of stakeholders for the governance of adult learning policy (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).

The social agreements in the Netherlands are an innovative, formalised mechanism of co-ordination with stakeholders (Box 3).

### Box 3. Stakeholder engagement: Social agreements in the Netherlands

Social agreements have become an innovative tool for public governance in the Netherlands: they follow a process of policy co-design of the government in partnership with stakeholders, such as social partners, public agencies and private companies that are relevant actors in a particular policy area.

The regional “language agreements” as part of the *Tel mee met Taal* (“Count on Skills”) action programme, for instance, were concluded through co-operation between different local partners (employers, municipalities, language providers, community centres, etc.). They contain clear target outcomes. To measure the results of the programme, a monitoring framework with selected indicators has been put in place, and data is gathered quarterly through a request to local co-operation partners. The national government also provided an annual budget and regional language support teams to facilitate the implementation of local agreements. The evaluation of *Tel mee met Taal* 2016-19 found that the programme was successful in establishing a sustainable regional infrastructure of municipalities and local organisations to tackle low literacy.

Source: OECD (2017<sup>[12]</sup>), *OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report: The Netherlands 2017*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264287655-en>; OECD (2020<sup>[13]</sup>), *Mapping quality approaches and monitoring systems in the Netherlands*, <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Better-quality-and-monitoring-systems-Netherlands.pdf>; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2015<sup>[14]</sup>), *Actieprogramma Tel mee met Taal*, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2015/03/06/actieprogramma-tel-mee-met-taal> (accessed on 16 January 2023).

## HOW? Co-ordination mechanisms on adult learning policies

This section outlines relevant formal co-ordination mechanisms across public authorities and with stakeholders that can support the effective governance of adult learning policies. Mechanisms for co-ordination have different features and may be chosen according to the respective context and the institutional actors that are to be involved in a specific policy. All co-ordination mechanisms are relevant across the policy cycle, however, some only become apparent during the policy design phase, while others take more effect during the implementation of a policy.

The following factors play a key role in contributing to the success of co-ordination, irrespective of the specific mechanism:

1. A whole-of-government approach
2. Dedicated resources
3. Measurable policy targets
4. Monitoring mechanisms to track progress towards policy targets
5. Clear division of responsibilities
6. Regular exchange between co-ordination partners
7. Institutionalisation of co-ordination mechanisms

## Key lessons: Co-ordination mechanisms for adult learning policies

Countries may choose a suitable co-ordination mechanism depending on the institutional context and the degree of flexibility sought in a particular policy for adult learning. The following co-ordination mechanisms are based on good practices across the OECD.

- **Co-ordination bodies** with a clear mandate and dedicated resources can support co-ordination throughout the policy cycle and a whole-of-government approach, uniting all relevant stakeholders. Co-ordination bodies may have an advisory, planning, or policy making function.
- **Policy strategies** serve to identify common priorities, determine target goals, and strengthen the legitimacy of policy reform in adult learning. A consultation process helps to define the policy, while the strategy itself may guide co-ordination during policy implementation.
- **Funding agreements** help to clearly attribute policy responsibility and accountability and determine budgetary arrangements across levels of government or implementing bodies. Often, this instrument is used to redistribute funding from the central government to the regions or federal states in line with agreed objectives.
- **Quality standards**, guidelines or certifications encourage the compliance of different implementing public institutions or stakeholder organisations by clearly defining deliverables, reporting requirements, and minimum standards of service provision. They represent an opportunity for further co-ordination with interested stakeholders, in definition and revision of the standards over time.
- **Implementation networks** foster collaboration across different (local) actors, mobilise available resources and institutional structures, and build capacity on the ground, to facilitate policy implementation.
- **Shared information systems** are a concrete way to standardise the exchange of information and data across government authorities and implementing stakeholders. They clearly attribute responsibility, create a shared understanding of target objectives, and offer opportunities for regular feedback.

Success factors across all co-ordination mechanisms are a whole-of-government approach, dedicated resources, measurable policy targets, monitoring mechanisms to track progress towards policy targets, a clear division of responsibilities, regular exchange between co-ordination partners, and the institutionalisation of co-ordination.

### **Co-ordination bodies**

Some leading OECD countries in the area of adult learning make use of co-ordination bodies, which support co-ordination throughout the policy cycle, and allow taking a whole-of-government approach. Countries with a strong tradition of social dialogue and a corporatist approach to stakeholder engagement are more likely to establish formal co-ordination bodies, which in turn become success factors in their performance related to adult learning. Co-ordination bodies typically include representatives from different ministries of the central government, implementing government agencies, and other levels of government. They may also involve social and economic stakeholders. In the context of firm-level policies for training, relevant stakeholders are employers' associations (including associations of training providers), unions, chambers of commerce and other intermediate entities fostering the co-ordination across firms. Co-ordination bodies on adult learning policies can have different names, such as council, committee, or working group, and may have sub-bodies focusing particularly on adult learning policies targeted at firms.

Co-ordination bodies can have an advisory, planning, or policy making function (Table 1). Depending on the body's mandate, they are entrusted with different tasks that include establishing policy priorities, defining appropriate financial incentives, and improving the effectiveness of policy through collaboration among the different partners involved (OECD, 2019<sup>[15]</sup>).

Advisory bodies are the most common type of co-ordination body in OECD countries. Most typically, they function as forum between industry and government to exchange information on the skill needs in different economic sectors. Some advisory bodies also suggest how to update qualification and training requirements, leveraging information from the production sector. An example of a successful co-ordination body is the Estonian Adult Education Council, which has an advisory function and consists of representatives of the relevant ministries, training providers, formal education institutions, employers' and workers' organisations and other stakeholders (Riigi Teataja, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>). The Council has a legal basis to offer strategic advice, monitor the implementation of policy and provide evaluations on adult learning.

Some countries have co-ordination bodies that operate exclusively at a regional or local level. They connect local government actors, such as employers' associations, training providers and government agencies or other institutions. In Ireland, for instance, the central government finances 16 regional Education and Training Boards, which are responsible for education and training at a subnational level, and for managing public education and training centres. Education and Training Boards are composed of local authorities, community, and employer representatives (OECD, 2020<sup>[17]</sup>; ETBI, 2022<sup>[18]</sup>).

**Table 1. Types of co-ordination bodies for adult learning policies**

Type of co-ordination body	Possible names	Example	Main functions	Policy responsibility
Advisory bodies	(Expert) committee, advisory council, advisory group, working group, Skills Council, observatory	Council for Initial Vocational Education and Training in <b>Denmark</b>	Provide information and (technical) advice to relevant authorities of the central government. They traditionally also include social partners, and private or public education and training providers.	Low
Planning bodies	Committee, working group, Skills Council	Skills Committee (Skills National Cabinet Reform Committee) in <b>Canada</b>	Provide mechanisms for joint policy planning, and implementation where appropriate. They seek to avoid overlaps and to set up better evaluation efforts, rather than simply offering a forum to exchange information.	Medium
Policy making bodies	Steering committee, Skills Council	National Council for Vocational Education and Training in <b>Norway</b>	Functions as authority for VET policies, often in co-ordination with the National Skills Policy Council. It strengthens co-ordination between different stakeholders and their own measures and facilitates the diffusion of expertise among them. It has advisory, planning and decision-making powers.	High

Source: Adapted from OECD (2005<sup>[19]</sup>), Promoting Adult Learning, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264010932-en>; and OECD (2020<sup>[17]</sup>), OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Assessment and Recommendations, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1857c8af-en>.

The analysis of international best practices suggests that the body's mandate, resources, and role in the governance of adult learning policies should be clearly defined. A formalised mandate for co-ordination bodies, regular meetings and sufficiently high-level representatives supports their functioning. Meetings with high-level officials can be supplemented by lower-level, technical sessions for in-depth discussions on specific policy issues (OECD, 2018<sup>[20]</sup>). Ideally, co-ordination bodies persist throughout the policy cycle (design, implementation, and evaluation), to steer the policy process and adjust where necessary.

Co-ordination bodies on adult learning policies can create synergies to ensure consistency in a typically fragmented policy area. Those co-ordination bodies that cover a larger adult learning policy portfolio (even if restricted to policies for learning in firms, for example) may take a whole-of-government approach, to identify overarching, structural challenges and to develop comprehensive policy solutions. More specialised co-ordination bodies (e.g. advisory bodies on vocational education and training), conversely, can gather actors concerned with the implementation of policy in a particular area. Co-ordinating bodies, however, are also costly: they require human resources to operate. Dedicated funding is therefore necessary to ensure that co-ordination bodies can continuously fulfil their mandate.

### **Policy strategies**

Policy strategies are a common instrument to identify shared priorities, determine target goals, and strengthen the political legitimacy of reform on adult learning. The development of adult learning policy strategies typically provides opportunities for consultation beyond the central government, to receive input from other relevant stakeholders. Therefore, policy strategies leverage two different instruments for co-ordination: the consultation process preceding (and in some cases, outlasting) the policy strategy, and the policy strategy document itself, which serves as a guiding document for policy making and implementation.

In some cases, adult learning policy strategies stem from an overall perspective on skill policies in a country, as in the case of the OECD Skills Strategy series (OECD, 2022<sup>[21]</sup>). Strategies in more specific policy sub-areas, for instance, policies related to skills development in firms, can be the subject of a standalone strategy, as in the case of the French Skills Investment Plan (*Plan d'investissement dans les compétences*) (Ministère du Travail, du Plein Emploi et de l'Insertion, 2022<sup>[22]</sup>). Lastly, an important adult learning dimension can be present in policy strategies that have other objectives, such as countries' innovation strategies.

Exemplary policy strategies that have been developed in an inclusive manner also help ensuring buy-in during the implementation phase. Ideally, they identify measurable (quantitative) targets to be achieved within a certain timeframe. This can help different actors work together towards a clear common goal and allows monitoring progress during the implementation and evaluation phase. Best practice examples from the OECD also show that dedicated funding and defined monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are contributing to the success of skill policy strategies (OECD, 2019<sup>[23]</sup>). Strategies vary in the level of detail of their policy targets. The European Skills Agenda, for instance, a five-year plan by the European Commission to strengthen skills development and use, outlines 12 general actions and four target objectives linked to adult learning indicators (European Commission, 2022<sup>[24]</sup>). The 2019 German National Skills Strategy included encompassing commitments for the adult learning system, yet without measurable target objectives (Box 4).

#### Box 4. Policy strategies: The German National Skills Strategy

The German National Skills Strategy (*Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie, NWS*), adopted in 2019, created a broad platform across the federal government and federal states, the Federal Employment Agency, and the social and economic partners, aimed to co-ordinate adult learning policies, increase transparency, improve access to training opportunities for adults, and work towards a new culture of lifelong learning in Germany.

The policy strategy, based on the results from the consultation, set out a joint approach to respond to structural changes in the labour market brought about by digitalisation and automation. It outlined ten overarching objectives, each linked to a series of commitments made by strategy partners. Commitments were made, for instance, to increase transparency in the offer of adult learning, to strengthen quality assurance in adult learning, and to better link up career guidance across the German territory. Progress towards these commitments during the implementation phase of the strategy is monitored in thematic laboratories, which also serve to further deepen collaboration between the involved actors. The broad and continuous engagement of stakeholders in the complex German policy context is a key success factor of the National Skills Strategy.

The objectives in the Skills Strategy document itself are qualitative and some remain relatively vague, which can be unfavourable to obtain concrete results. Nevertheless, an implementation report for the Skills Strategy finds that three-fourths of all commitments have been implemented or were in the process of implementation by June 2021.

Source: OECD (2021<sup>[25]</sup>), *Continuing Education and Training in Germany*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1f552468-en>; Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (2022<sup>[26]</sup>), *Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie*, <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Arbeit/Aus-und-Weiterbildung/Weiterbildungsrepublik/Nationale-Weiterbildungsstrategie/nationale-weiterbildungsstrategie.html> (accessed on 29 November 2022).

## **Funding agreements**

An established way to foster co-ordination across levels of government, different institutions, and stakeholders, is to conclude funding agreements. While they may be similar in nature to policy strategies in defining certain priorities and target outcomes, funding agreements rather focus on the implementation of policy across a certain territory, and the distribution of responsibility across institutions. As such, funding agreements are a particularly suitable co-ordination mechanism in decentralised or federal countries, where responsibility for adult learning policy is divided across regions or federal states.

At their core, funding agreements determine a division of policy responsibilities and budgetary arrangements along certain policy objectives. Most often, they involve a redistribution of resources from the central government budget to the regions or federal states, under the conditions defined in the agreement. These conditions can be priority areas for the investment in adults' skills, minimum standards for public service provision in a particular area, or general principles for the implementation of a certain policy. Funding agreements can have a binding character and may be enshrined in law.

The advantages of funding agreements lie in the clear attribution of responsibility, the certainty on funding streams, and the harmonisation of policy approaches, while still allowing a tailored approach to regional contexts and demands. As mentioned already, the latter dimension is especially important in the context of adult learning policies for firms, in countries where geographical disparities in production capabilities and industrial specialisation are stronger.

The Canadian Labour Market and Workforce Development Agreements are prominent examples for established funding agreements (Box 5).

### **Box 5. Funding agreements: Labour Market and Workforce Development Agreements in Canada**

The Government of Canada provides the provinces and territories with ongoing budget transfers through Labour Market Development Agreements and Workforce Development Agreements. These funding agreements support the provision of training and employment services to citizens in the regions. Following common objectives, principles and areas for investment are outlined in the agreement, and provincial and territorial governments have the flexibility to design and deliver employment programmes and services that meet the needs of their local labour markets.

The two types of federal-provincial transfers complement each other and ensure that all workers across Canada have access to a similar set of training and employment support services. Provinces and territories must also commit to serve individuals from underrepresented groups such as persons with disabilities, women, youth, and Indigenous peoples. Funding agreements can include provisions on performance monitoring and specific policy targets. They have also been used to support workers in declining sectors across the country, such as the steel and aluminium industry.

Source: Government of Canada (2022<sup>[27]</sup>), *Labour Market Transfer Agreements*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/training-agreements.html> (accessed on 17 January 2023).

## Quality standards

Quality guidelines, standards or certifications are mechanisms to encourage the adherence to certain quality benchmarks of different public institutions (e.g. employment services) or organisations (e.g. training providers or other third-part intermediaries) that implement policies. For instance, some countries have introduced certifications or quality labels for education and training providers that may be eligible to provide subsidised training for firms. If quality standards are formulated and conceptualised in a collaborative way at the outset, they can be a mechanism for co-ordination between intermediaries such as adult learning providers or employer associations and the responsible government authority, rather than merely an instrument of control.

Quality standards facilitate co-ordination during the policy implementation phase through clearly defining deliverables, quality criteria and reporting requirements for services linked to a particular adult learning policy in a country. Quality standards imply regular monitoring to ensure a level of homogeneity in the implementation of the respective policy across different intermediaries. This also offers recurring opportunities for exchange and feedback between intermediaries and the responsible government authority.

### Box 6. Quality standards: The French *Decrét Qualité*

In France, dedicated legislation (the *Decrét Qualité*) was adopted in 2017 to establish a set of quality criteria that all training providers need to comply with to access funding by OPCOs (*opérateurs de compétences*) and by other public bodies such as the public employment service. There are 11 sectoral OPCO bodies in France, which are responsible for vocational training, certification of competences, and support for businesses on skills development.

Until 2022, training providers underwent an evaluation along six quality criteria, including the qualification of teachers and training outcomes. Training providers that met the criteria were registered in an online database (DataDock). Since 2022, training providers are required to obtain the *Qualiopi* certification. To receive public funding, they need to pass an initial audit based on seven quality criteria, followed by a surveillance audit after approximately 18 months, and a renewal audit after 3 years.

The French Government introduced the *Decrét Qualité* to ensure the high quality of publicly funded training, but also to ensure consistency in the price of training offers, provide a transparent overview of available training, strengthen their control capacities, and improve the co-ordination of public investment in skills made through third-party providers.

Source: Ministère du Travail, du Plein Emploi et de l'Insertion (2022<sup>[28]</sup>), *Opérateurs de compétences (OPCO)*, <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/ministere/acteurs/partenaires/> (accessed on 1 December 2022); Ministère du Travail, du Plein Emploi et de l'Insertion (2022<sup>[29]</sup>), *Qualiopi. Marque de certification qualité des prestataires de formation*, <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/formation-professionnelle/acteurs-cadre-et-qualite-de-la-formation-professionnelle/article/qualiopi-marque-de-certification-qualite-des-prestataires-de-formation> (accessed on 1 December 2022).

## Implementation networks

Adult learning policies often rely on a network-based implementation, whereby all available resources and institutional structures in a territory are mobilised. The role of the network is to foster collaboration across different (local) partners, including public agencies, employers, municipalities, training providers, etc. Adult learning policies, for instance, a particular subsidy on training, are more effective if there is good exchange of information between different partners that are responsible for policy implementation. Collaboration is a requirement when the beneficiaries of a policy, whether individuals or companies, are referred from one

intermediary to another. If referrals and information exchange work well, implementing bodies mutually reinforce their effectiveness. A dedicated budget, clear target outcomes, and capacity-building support, as in the case of the Dutch *Tel mee met taal* (Count on Skills) programme (Box 3) may provide relevant incentives for stakeholders to join a network. Involving intermediaries in the design of policies and the definition of target outcomes will likely increase their commitment and collaboration during policy implementation later on.

In the case of employer-sponsored training, a network-based implementation of skill policies might help overcome co-operation problems across firms, the lack of alignment between training supply and skills demand, and a fragmentation of stakeholder activity. Some countries address these issues through training networks, such as the *Weiterbildaungsverbände* in Germany (Box 7), Qualification Networks (*Impuls-Qualifizierungsverbände*) in Austria, or Skillnet Business Networks in Ireland. All these initiatives rely, at least partially, on public funding with the aim to build collaborations across social partners, firms in a particular sector, and training providers, and to develop training programmes that are tailored to local labour market demands.

### Box 7. Training Networks in Germany

The German federal Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs recently launched a federal programme for the development of Training Networks (*Bundesprogramm zum Aufbau von Weiterbildungsverbänden*) to open new ways for SMEs to access training for their employees. Through the programme, the ministry provides financing for the creation of networks that connect SMEs with training providers, career guidance providers, chambers of commerce, the public employment service, and other institutions active in the adult learning environment, ideally from the same sector or the same region.

Training Networks are designed to address co-ordination barriers across firms and pool resources to organise employee training that satisfies regional and sectoral skills needs. They are meant to co-ordinate on training and guidance needs across different SMEs, organise joint training programmes, provide guidance at shared costs, and disseminate best practices and information.

In total, 39 networks are supported with public funds. There are plans to establish a central co-ordination office to ensure an efficient exchange of knowledge and best-practice transfer across regional training networks.

Source: Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2022<sup>[30]</sup>), *BMAS baut Bundesprogramm zum "Aufbau von Weiterbildungsverbänden" aus*, <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2022/bmas-baut-bundesprogramm-aufbau-von-weiterbildungsverbänden-aus.html> (accessed on 16 January 2023); OECD (2022<sup>[31]</sup>), *Career Guidance for Low-Qualified Workers in Germany*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5e6af8da-en>.

### Shared information systems

Regular exchange of information and data is a requirement for successful co-ordination across government authorities and stakeholders that are involved in implementation. Best practice is to do so through a common information system, which allows for consistent data collection on the implementation and use of a particular policy instrument. A standardised way of collecting and sharing data on key indicators also facilitates the monitoring and evaluation of a policy's impact along target objectives. Shared information systems may be particularly useful to support co-ordination if target objectives and processes for information exchange are defined, updated, and improved in a collaborative way.

The main benefits of shared information systems are a clear allocation of responsibility and a shared understanding of target objectives. Common databases serve to document the activities of implementing bodies, e.g. local service providers, which allows government authorities to keep a better overview of policy interventions at an implementation level. At the same time, however, information systems should consider data protection and privacy standards, while not disproportionately increasing the administrative burden for intermediaries. Generally, they ought to be used as a monitoring and collaboration tool rather than an instrument of top-down control.

Another information-sharing mechanism is the exchange of information on experiences and good practices, both horizontally between implementing bodies and vertically between implementing bodies and government authorities, allowing actors to benefit from practice-based insights. This can be facilitated by government authorities through creating opportunities for dialogue, be it in existing co-ordination bodies, such as working groups or committees, or as part of a specific review or feedback process. Effective exchanges often take place on a local level, but it is important to ensure that key learnings on the design and implementation of the policy are passed on to policy makers (OECD, 2020<sup>[31]</sup>).

#### **Box.8. Shared information systems: Skillnet Business Networks in Ireland**

Skillnet Ireland is a business support organisation that supports distinct 70 Skillnet Business Networks that provide employee training. Skillnet is funded by the National Training Fund, a compulsory training levy paid by employers in Ireland. Skillnet Ireland oversees the activities of affiliated Business Networks and funds them, so they can develop innovative training programmes, and organise training that meets sectoral or regional skill demands.

As a key aspect of their governance model, Skillnet Ireland runs a recording system called Sonrai, which tracks information on the grants provided to Business Networks, and on the activities funded. Each Business Network is required to provide reporting on a set of key performance indicators, including the number of trainees, the number of training days, the events they organised, and their general expenditures. This recording system is continuously updated. In this way, Skillnet Ireland standardises the information exchange with Business Networks, and monitors the use and impact of their funding.

Skillnet Ireland also provides different opportunities for an exchange of experiences between different Business Networks. For instance, a mentorship scheme pairs managers of newly formed Business Networks with experienced managers of more established Networks to pass on their knowledge.

Source: Skillnet Ireland (2022<sup>[32]</sup>), *Driving Business, People, and Innovation Forward through Talent. Annual Report 2021*, [https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Skillnet-Ireland\\_Annual-Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Skillnet-Ireland_Annual-Report_2021.pdf). (accessed on 24 November 2022).

## References

- Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (2022), *Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie*, [26]  
<https://www.bmas.de/DE/Arbeit/Aus-und-Weiterbildung/Weiterbildungsrepublik/Nationale-Weiterbildungsstrategie/nationale-weiterbildungsstrategie.html> (accessed on 29 November 2022).
- ETBI (2022), *Education and Training Boards Ireland*, <https://www.etbi.ie/about-etbi/> (accessed on 28 April 2022). [18]
- European Commission (2022), *European Skills Agenda*, [24]  
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en> (accessed on 29 November 2022).
- European Commission (2022), *European structural and investment funds*, [8]  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds_en) (accessed on 20 January 2023).
- Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2022), *BMAS baut Bundesprogramm zum “Aufbau von Weiterbildungsverbänden” aus*, [30]  
<https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2022/bmas-baut-bundesprogramm-aufbau-von-weiterbildungsverbänden-aus.html> (accessed on 16 January 2023).
- Government of Canada (2022), *Labour Market Transfer Agreements*, [27]  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/training-agreements.html> (accessed on 17 January 2023).
- ILO (2021), *A Resource Guide on Sector Skills Bodies*, [11]  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_818528.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_818528.pdf) (accessed on 29 January 2023).
- ILO (2020), “Effective governance and coordination in skills systems: towards a lifelong learning ecosystem”, [9]  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---ifp\\_skills/documents/publication/wcms\\_755400.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_755400.pdf) (accessed on 20 April 2022).
- Ministère du Travail, du Plein Emploi et de l'Insertion (2022), *Plan d'investissement dans les compétences (PIC)*, <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/le-ministere-en-action/pic/> (accessed on 29 November 2022). [22]
- Ministère du Travail, D. (2022), *Opérateurs de compétences (OPCO)*, <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/ministere/acteurs/partenaires/opco> (accessed on 1 December 2022). [28]
- Ministère du Travail, D. (2022), *Qualiopi. Marque de certification qualité des prestataires de formation*, <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/formation-professionnelle/acteurs-cadre-et-qualite-de-la-formation-professionnelle/article/qualiopi-marque-de-certification-qualite-des-prestataires-de-formation> (accessed on 1 December 2022). [29]
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2015), *Actieprogramma Tel mee met Taal [Action programme Count on Skills]*, [14]  
<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2015/03/06/actieprogramma-tel-mee-met-taal> (accessed on 16 January 2023).

- OECD (2022), *Career Guidance for Low-Qualified Workers in Germany*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5e6af8da-en>. [31]
- OECD (2022), *OECD Skills Strategies*, <https://www.oecd.org/skills/oecd-skills-strategies.htm> (accessed on 29 November 2022). [21]
- OECD (2021), *Continuing Education and Training in Germany*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1f552468-en>. [25]
- OECD (2021), *OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Korea: Strengthening the Governance of Adult Learning*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f19a4560-en>. [5]
- OECD (2021), “Raising Skills in SMEs in the Digital Transformation: A review of policy instruments in Italy”, OECD, Paris, [https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Raising\\_skills\\_in\\_SMEs\\_Italy.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Raising_skills_in_SMEs_Italy.pdf). [7]
- OECD (2020), *Increasing Adult Learning Participation: Learning from Successful Reforms*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/cf5d9c21-en>. [1]
- OECD (2020), “Mapping quality approaches and monitoring systems in the Netherlands”, <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/skills-and-work/adult-learning/Better-quality-and-monitoring-systems-Netherlands.pdf>. [13]
- OECD (2020), *OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1857c8af-en>. [17]
- OECD (2020), *Policy Framework on Sound Public Governance: Baseline Features of Governments that Work Well*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/c03e01b3-en>. [3]
- OECD (2020), *Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3a4bb6ea-en>. [10]
- OECD (2019), *Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311756-en>. [23]
- OECD (2019), *OECD Skills Strategy Poland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b377fbcc-en>. [15]
- OECD (2018), “Centre Stage 2. The organisation and functions of the centre of government in OECD countries.”, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/report-centre-stage-2.pdf>. [4]
- OECD (2018), *OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report: Italy 2017*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264298644-en>. [20]
- OECD (2017), *OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report: The Netherlands 2017*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264287655-en>. [12]
- OECD (2014), *Centre Stage. Driving Better Policies from the Centre of Government*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Centre-Stage-Report.pdf>. [2]

- OECD (2013), *Investing Together: Working Effectively across Levels of Government*, OECD Multi-level Governance Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264197022-en>. [6]
- OECD (2005), *Promoting Adult Learning*, Education and Training Policy, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264010932-en>. [19]
- Riigi Teataja (2015), *Adult Education Act*, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/529062015007/consolide> (accessed on 24 April 2022). [16]
- Skillnet Ireland (2022), *Driving Business, People, and Innovation Forward through Talent. Annual Report 2021*, [https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Skillnet-Ireland\\_Annual-Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Skillnet-Ireland_Annual-Report_2021.pdf) (accessed on 24 November 2022). [32]

## Contact

Magdalena BURTSCHER (✉ [magdalena.burtscher@oecd.org](mailto:magdalena.burtscher@oecd.org))

Luca MARCOLIN (✉ [luca.marcolin@oecd.org](mailto:luca.marcolin@oecd.org))

---

This policy brief should not be reported as representing the official views of the OECD or of its member countries. The opinions expressed and arguments employed are those of the authors.

This document and any 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.

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>.