6th Policy Learning Forum on Upskilling Pathways for all adults, 9-10.11.2026

Takeaways from Cedefop's Policy Learning Forum on upskilling pathways for all adults, Brussels, 9–10 November 2026

On 9 and 10 November, Cedefop brought together policymakers, social partners, researchers and practitioners for its 6th Policy Learning Forum (PLF), held during European Skills & VET Week 2026 at the premises of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in Brussels. The theme: *upskilling pathways for all adults – understanding inequalities in skills development and shaping forward-looking approaches*. EARLALL took part, represented by Camilla Winter and Noelia Cantero.

The central message was uncomfortable and clear: adult learning systems work best for those who need them least.

Two groups of "invisible" adults
Opening the Forum, Cedefop Executive Director Jürgen Siebel pointed to two persistent inequalities. Participation in adult learning is unequal, with migrants and people in rural areas among those least likely to take part. And what people learn at work, arguably the best venue for learning, is hard to measure.
He described two types of "invisible" adults:

- **Economically inactive adults**, outside both work and education. For them, guidance, support and, above all, finding ways to reach them are the key.
- **Employees in jobs with little learning content.** Learning matters, but learning on the job matters even more, and low-quality jobs create a "low-learning trap": those who need to learn most learn least.

The question he left with participants: how do we reach adults our systems do not see, and make sure our actions do not stop at the door of those who need them?

The policy context
Diana Andreea Spiridon (European Commission, DG EMPL) set out the policy backdrop: the Union of Skills is well into implementation; the European Semester now covers human capital for the first time; work continues on anticipating skills needs and on a skills portability recommendation; and a new education and skills package had just been presented. The forthcoming VET strategy aims at flexible, high-quality training, but, she stressed, the ambition goes further: learning opportunities for everyone, including people outside the labour market, and support for workers in strategic sectors such as automotive so that no one leaves a job unprepared. Universal access, she said, must go hand in hand with differentiated support, and further work on guidance is coming. Social fairness and economic competitiveness should advance together, and the Commission's quality jobs roadmap is part of that picture.

What the data say
Cedefop experts presented evidence that explains why progress is slow.

- **Participation is too low.** Only 39.5% of adults took part in formal or non-formal learning in 2022 (the latest available data; the next survey is due in 2028), against a 60% target for 2030. Among low-qualified adults the rate was 18.5%, against a 30% target for 2025; among unemployed adults it was 15.3%, against 20%. These figures do not include on-the-job training.
- **The barrier is often perception, not supply.** Many adults do not see the need to learn. Confidence, past experience, incentives, awareness, and guidance and relevance all play a part. Funding helps but cannot overcome a lack of confidence, and participation is not the same as impact.
- **Workplaces matter.** Drawing on the European Skills and Jobs Survey, Giulia Santangelo showed that over half of employees never receive training initiated by their employer, a very different

picture from training initiated by employees themselves. Job design, workloads and human-centred management decisions shape how much people learn.

- **Firms train for immediate needs, rarely for the long term.** Workplaces hold learning potential that policy has yet to use fully, and fragmented systems lose people that coordinated ones keep.

Guidance: the strongest lever

Pier Paolo Angelini's analysis of guidance across Europe was among the most striking contributions. Fewer than one in five adults receive guidance (counselling and advice, screening of learning needs, or validation advice), with rates ranging from around 60% in Finland to about 5% in Czechia. Guidance reaches the unemployed more than others, yet at work it reaches only one in five workers, more often those in higher-level jobs: the same learning paradox again.

Guidance also shows the strongest link to taking part in learning, and that link is strongest where participation is lowest, among the groups who learn least. The conclusion: if lifelong learning is to be a reality for all, so must guidance be.

What the roundtables said

On the afternoon of day one, mixed stakeholder roundtables looked at the two groups above.

Inactive adults: where policies get stuck. The group is diverse: NEETs, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, carers, older adults, rural populations, Roma communities, former prisoners and people in undeclared work, often facing cumulative disadvantage. Policy stalls because institutions are fragmented while people's problems are multiple. Two approaches stood out: *go where people are*, through trusted community channels and relationship-building before training; and *build long-term pathways* that connect learning to realistic job prospects and let people progress in stages. The changes needed: integrated governance with clear responsibilities at national, regional and local levels, with multidisciplinary frontline teams; and a shift from short-term projects to sustained investment and a stronger culture of lifelong learning.

Employees in jobs with low learning content. Access to training is not enough; workplace conditions must change. Platform workers, the self-employed and migrants are often left out, microenterprises lack training budgets, and employers do not always support learning. What works: bringing training closer to the workplace, sectoral cooperation between companies, strong local and regional ecosystems, training for managers, mapping skills and redesigning tasks, and ensuring learning leads to higher pay. Social partners are crucial, and local authorities need to support SMEs and microenterprises.

Four scenarios for the future

On day two, Lidia Salvatore presented Cedefop's research paper *Preparing for 2040: Four AI-powered scenarios for the future of continuing skills development*, followed by perspectives from Jean-Michel Pottier and Nicoletta Merlo of the EESC. EARLALL took part in the workshops behind the paper and contributed its expertise.

The discussion stressed that everyone should have access to learning, and that human support and guidance remain essential even as AI reshapes the field. Participants called for national legislation to support on-the-job training, noted the difficulty SMEs face without public funding, and underlined cooperation across local and regional ecosystems. Participation in adult education is below 10% in some countries. Some argued that the transferability and mobility of skills may matter more than formal recognition, and that women, including mothers, face barriers in many countries.

The stakeholder panel: what needs to be done now

The closing panel brought together employee, employer, government and civil society perspectives. Recurring points: companies need guidance themselves; trade union members can be trained to encourage colleagues to learn; newly acquired skills must be applicable after training; low-skilled workers need access to basic skills; and policy should focus on guidance and validation. Participants also warned that workers at EQF levels 2 and 3 are wrongly assumed not to need training, that day-to-day work in SMEs leaves little room for it, that only three EU countries have a Roma strategy, and that it is hard to offer individual guidance to every worker. One open question hung over the room: what happens if AI replaces counsellors?

EARLALL's perspective

For EARLALL and its member regions, the Forum's conclusions are familiar ground. The calls for integrated governance across national, regional and local levels, for local and regional ecosystems that work together, for local authorities to support SMEs, and for qualitative data collected through regional structures describe the territory where regional and local authorities act every day. Camilla Winter and Noelia Cantero followed the two days on behalf of the network, and EARLALL's contribution to Cedefop's 2040 scenarios workshops shows its commitment to shaping, not only following, this debate.

The Forum also pointed to a real risk ahead: the possibility that ESF+ will have fewer resources in 2028–2034, just as the demand for sustained investment grows.

Key takeaways

- Rapid change is increasing the pressure to adapt, and reshaping the skills we need.
- Adults from vulnerable groups have a right to lifelong learning; reaching them requires outreach, trust and guidance.
- Access to training is not enough: workplaces must offer real learning content, and learning should be rewarded.
- Short-term projects must become sustained investment, backed by integrated governance and strong regional and local networks.
- We need to be pragmatic, test new methods, and collect better data, including on gender.