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Lifelong learning in Slovak republic



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Based on European Commission documents and guidelines, it can be concluded that strong social dialogue between employers and trade unions, together with empowering workers through further training and skills upgrading, are the building blocks of the digital transformation. This transformation is expected to bring about exponential changes in society as a whole and in the world of work. Although the digital economy was already expected to have a significant impact on employment opportunities, both in terms of job creation and the destruction of existing jobs, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some digital trends. The Recovery and Resilience Plan (among others) identifies retraining and upskilling as one of the main areas of investment and reform. In this context, social dialogue remains a prerequisite for a well-functioning social market economy.

Skilled human resources are essential to promote the competitiveness and performance of the economy, and their education and training for the labour market must meet the new requirements of Industry 4.0, Industry 5.0. and the digitalisation of society. Human resources need to be continuously trained to meet the rapidly changing requirements of the labour market and continuously adapted to innovation and the development of new skills. It is no longer sufficient to undergo formal education alone, not only because of rapid social changes (innovations, digitization, environmental challenges), but also because of the persistent systemic lack of acquisition of key competences for the labour market in formal education in the Slovak Republic (SR).

Formal education is failing to keep pace with innovation. It is slower to respond to change, which is reflected in the weak link between the labour market and education and inadequate preparation of graduates for the labour market. Awareness of the functions and benefits of a lifelong learning (LLL) culture and participation in adult learning is also weak.

In this context, the Slovak Republic faces a number of challenges in the area of employment and training. Problems include low participation rates of adults in vocational training, low levels of digital skills and an education system that is not adapted to labour market dynamics. According to Eurostat data, participation in adult education in Slovakia in 2021 was only 5% for 25–64-year-olds. Slovakia is one of the countries with the lowest participation in Europe. Countries with low participation include Bulgaria (2%), Greece (4%), Romania, Croatia, and Poland (5%). The EU average in 2021 was 10.8%¹. In addition to the low participation of adults in learning overall, those who need to learn the most (risk target groups, e.g. mothers after parental leave, low-skilled workers, people over 50 years old, etc.) are the least likely to participate in learning. The

¹ Participation in lifelong learning increases in 2021. Eurostat [online]. 30.1.2023 [cit. 2023-03-02]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20230130-1>



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Education and Training Monitor 2020 reports that, on average, only 10.8% of adults in the EU participated in adult learning in 2019 (women: 11.9%, men: 9.8%). Participation in adult learning was 9.2% in 2020 (women: 10.0%, men: 8.3%), and 5% in 2021 (5%), Eurostat².

As COVID-19 has accelerated automation and digitalisation, many workers find themselves in positions for which they do not have the appropriate skill set. The lack of rapid action also increases the risk of creating employment problems overall, widening the qualitative gap between supply and demand in the labour market. Several factors hinder the effective development of CVET in the SR. A well-designed system of CVET and adult education could support the development of appropriate key competences, skills and competences of all target groups and would enable the development of a skilled workforce and the personal potential of individuals in working and civic life, taking into account their individual capacities and needs.

In a global context, the culture of LLL and the culture of adult learning itself is gaining importance. This is the overall growing importance of lifelong learning and continuing adult learning, as discussed in the UNESCO report 'Embracing a culture of lifelong learning'³. LLL is supposed to be the key to tackling the current challenges relating to the climate crisis, technological and demographic changes, including the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To create a sustainable, healthier and more inclusive future, it is essential to transform the entire education system and promote LLL (learning to learn). In this context, a culture of adult learning and awareness of continuous self-development and its importance must be explicitly promoted.

In addition to systemic shortcomings, such as legislative and terminological ambiguities, LLL is financially undersized, and it is necessary to set up an effective system of financing. There is also a functional and flexible system for recognizing the results of the LLL. The present analysis identifies factors hindering the development of an effective LLL system in the Slovak Republic related to:

- the impact of innovations and technological changes on the LLL system in order to adapt human resources to the trends of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0,
- the alignment of the LLL system with the needs of the labour market,

² Participation in lifelong learning increases in 2021. Eurostat [online]. 30.1.2023 [cit. 2023-03-02]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20230130-1>

³ Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: contribution to the Futures of Education initiative; report; a transdisciplinary expert consultation [online]. 2020, 52 s. [cit. 2023-03-02]. ISBN 978-92-820-1239-0. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112>



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- financial and systemic barriers.

As part of the analysis, a questionnaire survey was carried out, aimed at identifying barriers to adult continuing education, motivators for participation in continuing education and barriers related to changing jobs. Respondents commented on factors related to further education and possible personal/financial barriers to undertaking further education on the employer's side. The questionnaire survey also explored respondents' preferred forms of further training, attitudes to job change and their willingness to retrain.

The survey showed that 73% of the 424 respondents were involved in education, taking various courses and training alongside their employment. The largest number of respondents are participating in training courses in the Banking sector, up to 83% (277) of the respondents. The higher the level of education, the higher the interest in learning. More than 79% of the university educated persons said that they have received education. With a secondary education, 66% of those surveyed had been educated.

The most common reasons for non-participation in further education

38% of university-educated respondents and 31% of secondary-educated respondents cited lack of time as a reason for not participating in further education.

Financial difficulty was the second most significant barrier to further education (26% of university-educated respondents and 24% of secondary-educated respondents).

Focus of education

81% of respondents who were in training reported that they had last received training 0-6 months ago. The most common areas of learning were soft skills (28%), vocational training (18%) and management skills development (16%). In the Retail sector, most training was in the areas of vocational training (44%). In the HORECA sector, 28% of respondents had received the most training in management skills development and 31% of respondents in the Banking sector had developed soft skills. The training received was mostly completed with a training certificate (61% of respondents). Only 4% of the respondents had obtained retraining.

If respondents were given the opportunity to choose a training course, the greatest interest was in language training. Up to 30% of respondents would choose a language course and 19% a vocational training course. Only 15% of respondents were interested in developing digital skills of these, 32% said they would choose a



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highly specialised course (cyber security, programming, data analysis, etc.). Only 6% of those educated in higher education would need a basic digital skills course. High school graduates were most interested in a specialised course to develop digital skills in their area of work (sales software, data processing software, etc.).

In the Retail sector, only 12% of the respondents were interested in training in digital skills development, while in the Banking and HORECA sectors 16% and 16% respectively.

Education financing

The employer most often paid for the education (70% of respondents). In the Banking sector, this figure was as high as 77%, and in the HORECA sector, 21% of respondents paid for their education themselves. Many trainings were conducted during working hours and were organised by the employer. Respondents who received training during working hours and had training related to their professional development rated such training as very beneficial.

Only one per cent of respondents had received a financial contribution for training from the labour office. This was despite the fact that half of the respondents (51%) were aware that the state provides subsidies for training. As many as 71% of respondents in the Retail sector were aware of the possibility of receiving a training grant, with 63% of respondents finding out this information on the internet. Overall, across all sectors, another important source of information was family and friends (25%).

Form of education

If respondents were engaged in training alongside employment, they preferred shorter courses. Respondents' preferred dedicating their time to education in terms of hours rather than longer durations. Respondents also expressed preference that they would equally accept that their choice of further training, whether vocational, interest-based or other, would tend to be shorter in duration, on the order of days. In the HORECA sector, up to 50% of respondents prefer this length of training. The preferred form of training is combined (online + face-to-face). Up to 47% of respondents favour this form of training. For the face-to-face form of training, they mainly perceived as an advantage the direct contact with other participants, the opportunity to exchange on-site experiences from the same field and to gain best practices from colleagues in the sector. As a negative of online learning, respondents mentioned, for example, that they cannot concentrate online and feel spatial barriers, not having a distraction-free space available after working hours.





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Also, there are training courses that require a face-to-face format because of the practical training (driving licence).

Respondents indicated that they would be willing to consider longer training periods specifically for language skill development, such as learning a foreign language.

Motivation to participate in training

The motivation of employees to pursue education in the respective sectors is an important factor that encourages participation in further training. Of the respondents who had received training, 35 % wanted to improve their professional skills and 15 % said they wanted to upgrade their qualifications. Overall, respondents are not very interested in developing digital skills. However, it can also be noted from the survey results that secondary educated respondents were more likely to report a reluctance to learn and difficulty identifying an area in which they should learn.

Changing jobs

44% of respondents reported that they found changing jobs to be very stressful or extremely stressful (indicated by a 4 or 5 on the scale). Average levels of stress were reported by 27% of secondary-educated and 32% of university-educated respondents. As the duration of employment increased, the level of job-hopping stress also increased. As many as 54% of respondents who had been in their current job for more than 5 years reported that they found changing jobs very or extremely stressful. Despite this, only 5% of respondents wanted to educate themselves to prevent job loss.

Barriers

In exploring the barriers and motivators for workers in relation to learning, we identified a number of key barriers to adult participation in learning activities. Below we provide a summary of these barriers:

- **Lack of time:** 35% of respondents who did not participate in training indicated that lack of time was the reason. Balancing family, personal, and work life while participating in further education is a challenge that, without mastering it, Slovakia will not be able to increase the proportion of adults engaged in further education. Discussion with respondents in the Retail sector confirmed that many women have more responsibilities with family management and care, including caring for elderly



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family members. Lack of time and lower levels of flexibility can be a barrier for women trying to combine work, family, and education.

- **Financial barriers:** Lack of financial resources is one of the main barriers to participation in adult further education. 25% of respondents who were not in education cited the financial difficulty of training as a reason. The highest proportion of respondents who did not access training due to the financial difficulty of the courses was in the HORECA sector (29%), followed by Banking at 25% and Retail at 12%.
- **Lack of awareness** of the importance of developing digital skills in the context of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0: Only 15% of respondents said they were interested in developing their digital skills, which we attribute to a weak awareness of future labour market needs, the need to adapt to the digital transformation of the landscape, work processes and innovation.
- **Access barriers:** 10% of respondents who did not participate in training reported that there were not enough courses in the area they wanted to be train in. In addition to the lack of course offerings, other barriers need to be considered. Not everyone has equal access to educational resources and opportunities. Physical barriers, such as the inaccessibility of educational institutions for people in certain geographical areas or even for people with disabilities, can limit access to learning environments. In the case of limited internet, technological barriers may also occur.
- **Lack of mentoring in education:** 10% of respondents did not know in what area they could be trained. The absence of visible role models and lack of mentoring on which direction to take in education may prevent individuals from seeking out and then completing educational opportunities.
- **Gender stereotypes and expectations:** Stereotypes and expectations in society can discourage women from pursuing certain types of education. For example, women may feel disadvantaged or restricted in choosing technical or scientific fields that are traditionally perceived as 'masculine'. These gender stereotypes can influence women's decisions to engage in certain educational programmes. This may in turn have an impact on women's different, weaker pay.

Recommendations

- **Break down financial and systemic barriers:** Systemic national measures to provide financial support to employers and workers/citizens to cover the costs of training may be the solution. Various subsidy programmes, tax incentives, scholarships, grants, national projects from the new Operational programme Slovakia, individual education accounts, etc. can serve as a solution.

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- **Provide flexible learning opportunities:** Creating flexible time for people in employment to participate in further education can make a significant contribution to increasing the motivation to learn. The provision of blended learning, distance learning programmes and alternative forms of learning save time and allow a greater degree of flexibility for learners.
- **Shorten training programmes:** In terms of time capacity, courses and training sessions of a few hours, up to a maximum of a few days, seem to be the most affordable.
- **Raise awareness and education:** Building public awareness of the opportunities and, in particular, the importance of continuing adult education through managed information campaigns will benefit the personal and professional development of each individual. Information campaigns should be differentiated according to target groups and provide information on available learning opportunities, resources, and support options. It is recommended that information campaigns pay particular attention to the priorities and visions of Slovakia's digital transformation and the associated expectations for a change in professional knowledge, skills and competences. The media and social networks are an ideal place to reach the general public.
- **Promote quality training institutions:** It is recommended to open a public debate on setting criteria for measuring the quality of further education provision, the quality of further education providers and the creation of a publicly accessible register of these verified providers according to the thematic focus of the training content.
- **Remove technological barriers:** Access to hardware, technology and the internet for those populations that do not have such capacities, so that they can also benefit from online learning resources and programmes. Such a proactive approach must be part of Slovakia's digital transformation vision. This may include investment in infrastructure, supported hardware purchases and the provision of affordable internet. The successful Digital Pupil project can serve as a model. Through such measures, it is possible to purposefully increase the digital literacy of especially vulnerable target groups, such as persons with basic education, low-skilled persons, persons coming from a socially disadvantaged environment, etc.
- **Create the conditions for learning and development in a working environment:** The social partners, trade unions and professional organisations can play an important role in this area through intensive support for corporate cultures aimed at promoting the development of adult learning and skills development for workers.



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- **Ensure recognition of lifelong learning outcomes:** A key component in this area is the preparation and adoption of a new law on lifelong learning.
- **Align the lifelong learning system with labour market needs:** It is recommended to ensure regular monitoring of labour market and skills needs in line with digital transformation, innovation and sectoral changes in the labour market, as a necessary basis for content innovation and prioritisation of lifelong learning.