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Institutional frameworks of lifelong learning in the Slovak Republic



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Lifelong learning (hereinafter referred to as “LLL”) in the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as “SR”) is shaped in the context of European policy and is generally understood as a targeted educational activity, the purpose of which is the continuous improvement of knowledge, skills and overall competences in order to increase the share of adults in education.

A key document influencing lifelong learning and counselling (hereinafter referred to as “LLL&C”) is the Council of the European Union document (14. 12. 2021) **Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021 - 2030** (2021/C 504/02)¹ (hereinafter referred to as the “Resolution”) to increase participation in adult learning. The vision is to put in place opportunities (whether in formal, non-formal or informal learning) that can develop the knowledge, skills and competences needed to create an inclusive, sustainable, socially just and more resilient Europe. As an important component of LLL, adult learning can contribute to stronger and more resilient economies and societies.

There is a lot of discussion at the moment about a new culture of LLL, which is supposed to emphasise:

- importance of basic skills for all;
- importance of the continuous acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and competences at all levels in the context of formal and non-formal education;
- informal learning throughout life.

The EU Council Resolution responds to the changes facing society (in particular the digital and green transformation) and the challenges of recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. It addresses resilience and flexibility in the context of changing labour market needs, the mismatch between skills on offer and those in demand, the green and digital transformation, and the persistently high proportion of adults in Europe with low basic knowledge, skills and competences.

The resolution also stresses that adult education, as a lifelong endeavour, should be carried out at regular intervals throughout a person’s life. Encourage and support through effective lifelong guidance systems with outreach activities as well as through integrated systems of recognition of prior learning. It also highlights the importance of making available forecasts of future skills and information to support LLL&C.

¹ Source: Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021 - 2030 [online]. Official Journal of the European Union, 2021 [cit. 2023-03-02].

Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G1214\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G1214(01)&from=EN)



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The importance of foresight in LLL is highlighted in a number of key documents (e.g. UNESCO's Adoption of a Culture of Lifelong Learning²).

Employer engagement is essential to foster a culture of LLL and adult learning. Financial and tax incentives and other social benefits or compensatory measures could provide their motivation. Sustainable public funding should be complemented by funding at different levels (European, national, regional, local, employer, individual) for all types, forms and levels of adult learning. Effective allocation and use of funding is key and needs to be tailored to individual learning needs.

The issue of LLL is regulated in the Slovak Republic by Act No. 568/2009 Coll. on Lifelong Learning and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts³. LLL is understood as all activities that take place throughout life to improve knowledge, skills and competences.

LLL is the basic principle of education and training applied in the educational system of the SR and consists of school education and further education following the level of education attained in school education.

Continuing education is education that builds on school education and allows for the completion, renewal, extension or deepening of acquired education. **However, further education can also be used to retrain or to fulfil interests, and it also provides the capacity to participate in civil society.** Further education does not lead to a different or higher level of education.

Act No. 568/2009 Coll. on Lifelong Learning further regulates:

- Quality assurance of further education through the accreditation mechanism, rules and procedures for the verification and recognition of the results of further education leading to partial or full qualifications.
- **National Occupational Framework**, which provides a framework for the assessment of partial and full qualifications.
- **National Qualifications Framework**, which contains the levels of classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for the knowledge, skills and competences attained and is the link to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework.
- Creation of a continuing education information system.
- A system for monitoring and forecasting educational needs.

² Source: Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: contribution to the Futures of Education initiative; report; a transdisciplinary expert consultation [online]. 2020, 52 p. [cit. 2023-03-02]. ISBN 978-92-820-1239-0. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112>

³ NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC. Act on Lifelong Learning and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts: 568/2009 Coll. [online]. 01.12.2009 [cit. 2023-03-02]. Available at: <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2009/568/20150901>



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- The area of control of the delivery of further education.

Efforts to promote LLL&C and adult education have also been increasing in the context of EU impacts in the SR. The year 2021 was a key year for the field of LLL, when a number of systemic steps were developed that could clearly strengthen the LLL&C policy in the SR. Efforts to improve the quality of LLL and counselling at a systemic level have also resulted in the development of the **Lifelong Learning and Counselling Strategy for 2021 - 2030** (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2021)⁴ (hereinafter referred to as the “LLL&C Strategy”) and the follow-up **Action Plan to the LLL&C Strategy for 2022 - 2024** (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2022)⁵. The first three-year period of the Action Plan responds to a dynamically changing labour market, the nature of work in the context of the fourth industrial revolution and systematic changes in the field of education for all. This initial action plan for the implementation of the LLL&C Strategy 2022 - 2024 addresses 45 selected actions in all proposed thematic areas. The Alliance of Sectoral Councils (hereinafter the “Alliance”) and the sectoral councils have a key role to play in fulfilling the tasks set out here. The activities in the Action Plan and resulting from the LLL Strategy are to be largely funded from EU resources from the programming period 2021 - 2027 through the Operational Programme Slovakia.

The LLL&C Strategy is an important strategic document responding to the need to provide LLL&C where citizens are struggling as individuals or where a systemic shortage has been identified in areas of skills for the population or specific target groups. The strategy’s overarching objective is to ensure that every citizen has lifelong access to opportunities to learn, develop their skills and competences throughout their lives, at every stage of life and taking into account individual needs and circumstances, so that everyone can realise their potential in their personal, working and civic lives.

The LLL&C Strategy states that there is still a weak awareness in the Slovak Republic of the functions and benefits of LLL culture and in particular of appropriate and effective forms of support for adult participation in learning from public sources. The aim of LLL&C in Slovakia is to **increase the adaptability and flexibility of Slovak citizens to new labour market conditions**. The LLL&C strategy also stresses the importance of the individual’s learning journey and the need to **enter the labour market in sectors that have development potential, with an emphasis on the Industrial Revolution 4.0, digitalisation and automation that the whole country must face**.

4 Lifelong Learning and Counselling Strategy 2021-2030 [online]. [cit. 16/05/2023]. Available at: <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/22182.pdf>

5 Open Government Portal: Action plan for the Lifelong Learning and Counselling Strategy 2022 - 2024. Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic [online]. 07.04.2022 [cit. 16/05/2023]. Available at: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/27153/1>





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Recently, there has been a proliferation of initiatives in the Slovak Republic to support increased adult engagement in LLL, not only under the pressure of European policies. A major motivation for stepping up efforts in the field of LLL is also the fact that indicators have shown poor results for further education of adults, despite rapidly changing workforce requirements in the context of innovation, digitalisation and the impact of crises (the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the environmental crisis).

The LLL&C strategy also includes objectives to support the alignment of the LLL system with labour market needs and in this context strengthens the work of the **Alliance** and the sectoral councils. Measures related to this activity include the measure on Alignment of the LLL system with the labour market needs through the **National Occupational Framework** (the “NOF”) and the **National Qualifications Framework** (the “NQF”) and the measure Support for the sustainability of the sectoral councils management system with a focus on the transfer of innovative processes and labour market requirements to LLL and the alignment of the LLL system with the labour market needs through the NOF and the NQF.

Personal accounts, the **so-called individual learning accounts**, will play an important role in setting up a quality system of LLL. Individual Learning Accounts are intended to serve as a tool for individualised support for individuals in further education (retraining) and as a pilot scheme to strengthen the motivation of adult participation in learning. Their aim is to ensure that all people have the opportunity to continue to develop the skills they will need throughout their working lives if they want to remain in sustainable employment or secure employment in a changing European labour market.

The Alliance should again be responsible for the **quality of educational programmes** delivered by educational institutions. The Alliance and experts from the sectoral councils should oversee the relevance of the content and quality of education to sustain employment in the face of the impacts of digitisation, automation and the promotion of the green economy, as well as evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending in this area.

Other documents affecting the key frameworks of LLL in the Slovak Republic include the amendment to **Act No.5/2004 Coll. on Employment Services and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts effective from 1 January 2023** (the “Employment Services Act”)⁶. The Employment Services Act regulates the scope of the Alliance, which establishes sectoral councils according to the relevant sectors of the economy, ensures their activities and evaluates their functionality and effectiveness, and also ensures tasks related to the implementation of common interests supporting the alignment of the LLL system with the current and future needs of the labour market. The unique composition of the sectoral councils creates a

⁶ Act No. 5/2004 Coll: Act on Employment Services and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts. Laws for people.sk [online]. [cit. 16/05/2023]. Available at: <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2004-5>





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prerequisite for improving cooperation between representatives of the labour market and education. Each of the 24 sectoral councils includes representatives of the state administration, local government, employers, trade unions and professional organisations. Representatives nominated from universities and colleges form another important part of sectoral councils, as these educational institutions prepare graduates as future workers for employers.

The Alliance, again in the context of the Act, has a role in ensuring and coordinating the development and updating of the NOF and the NQF and their interconnectivity. The social partners, especially employers, also have an important role to play here, as they should formulate the requirements for vocational training graduates and participate in ensuring that the qualifications acquired are in line with the requirements of the labour market. In addition to the above, the amendment to the Employment Services Act also regulates the issue of education and training for the labour market.

Currently, within the Slovak Republic, support for LLL is implemented under the auspices of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family primarily in the form of national projects. Such projects include e.g. KOMPAS+, REPAS+ or Don't lose your job - learn. Although efforts to promote LLL of any kind are welcome and in some ways beneficial to society, the problem is that they are short-term and non-conceptual. As practice shows, it is not possible to ensure the long-term sustainability of the processes of supporting LLL set up within these projects even after their completion. It is therefore necessary to set up the support solution and its financing in a conceptual and systemic way.

In the context of the uptake of LLL support through projects, several major barriers for potential learners can be observed within the Slovak Republic. One of the most fundamental is the functioning of the projects themselves. The possibility of obtaining support in the framework of the LLL is administratively and bureaucratically demanding. It is currently not implemented in line with the objective of digitising society, requires disproportionate effort and involvement on the part of the applicant for support, the conditions for applying and allocating support are often unclear, the process is slow and inflexible. These barriers are the (most prominent) reason for target groups at risk (e.g. mothers after parental leave, low-skilled workforce, people in their 50s, etc.) for not taking part in LLL even if it is supported.

In the context of financing, the "National Reform Programme of the Slovak Republic 2022" (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic), the Programme Slovakia 2021 - 2027 - Partnership Agreement - Investment Strategy for Euro Funds for the programming period 2021 - 2027 (Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation of the Slovak Republic, 2022) and the "Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic" (Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, 2021) are important. The SR Recovery and Resilience Plan is seen as a "stepping stone" to improve the state of education. In the





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Recovery and Resilience Plan, the SR has allocated funds for education and especially for the promotion of digitalisation in education. The introduction of digitalisation in formal education is a necessity, and the Recovery Plan also emphasises the development of vocational education and the dual education system.
