

22BG06

Guidance on the implementation of a whole-of-government action plan for skills in Bulgaria

Output 2: 22BG06 – Technical support for the development of a National Skills Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria

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Foreword

The OECD and the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (DG Reform) are co-operating to provide technical assistance to Bulgaria as part of the Project “Technical support for the development of a National Skills Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria”. The project will enable the Bulgarian Government to implement a national skills action plan with a comprehensive set of skills policy actions, in line with their national priorities. This report is one intermediary output in the framework of the Project, and aims to identify relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for inclusion in an action plan for skills in Bulgaria. Building on the objectives and policy actions identified in the previous report, the content of this report provides Bulgarian officials and stakeholders with more detailed input to consider for inclusion in the action plan for skills.

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Table of contents

Foreword	3
Summary	6
Background	6
Results of the desktop research and stakeholder consultations	6
Suggested inputs for a skills action plan for Bulgaria	8
1 Background	17
Context	17
Skills performance in Bulgaria	17
Skills policy in Bulgaria	18
Developing a skills action plan for Bulgaria	19
2 Results of the desktop research	21
Establishing a relevant framework	21
Identifying activities, instruments and responsibilities through desktop research	22
3 Results of the stakeholder consultations	26
Background on stakeholder consultations	26
Lessons learned from international experts	27
Outcomes of stakeholder consultations	28
4 Suggested skills activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	40
Developing youth skills	41
Developing adult skills	55
Using skills effectively	59
Strengthening the governance of skills systems	65
5 Next steps	70
References	71
FIGURE	
Figure 1. Project outputs	20

TABLES

Table 1. Framework for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	7
Table 2. Skills policy actions for Bulgaria by responsible entity and proposed implementation timeline	9
Table 3. National strategic documents with a focus on skills in Bulgaria	18
Table 4. Framework for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	21
Table 5. OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Examples of mapping	23
Table 6. Output 2 stakeholder consultations	27
Table 7. Developing youth skills: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	41
Table 8. Developing adult skills: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	55
Table 9. Using skills effectively: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	59
Table 10. Strengthening the governance of skills systems: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources	65

Summary

Background

Skills are vital for enabling individuals and countries to thrive in an increasingly complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world. In Bulgaria, as in other EU and OECD countries, megatrends such as digitalisation, globalisation, demographic change and climate change are transforming jobs and the way society functions and people interact. Bulgaria faces immediate challenges stemming from these megatrends including low skill levels, inequality problems, low participation in adult education and training, high skills imbalances, a lack of High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP) in places of work, and fragmented coordination between key stakeholders.

The “Technical support for the development of a National Skills Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria” (TSI) Project aims to support Bulgaria in its efforts to implement reforms aimed to encourage investment, increase competitiveness and achieve sustainable economic and social convergence, resilience and recovery, in the area of developing and using skills. Building on the previous *OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Assessment and Recommendations Project* (OSS Bulgaria report), the TSI Project will contribute to the development of a comprehensive set of skills policy actions in Bulgaria. This report is Output 2 of the TSI Project. Building on the skills objectives, policy actions and benchmarks identified in Output 1, Output 2 identifies relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for inclusion in an action plan for skills for Bulgaria. Subsequent outputs will develop a monitoring and reporting framework for measuring implementation progress for these activities and advise on a communication campaign and capacity building to promote an action plan for skills.

Results of the desktop research and stakeholder consultations

During the desktop research phase, the OECD established a framework (Table 1) for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for the Output 2 report, and developed an interim proposal of activities, instruments and responsibilities for Bulgaria’s action plan for skills policy.

Table 1. Framework for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Output	Term	Description
Output 1	Objectives	Objectives are medium-term goals for skills policy in Bulgaria (see Output 1).
	Policy actions	Policy actions are policy measures that Bulgaria plans to implement towards achieving the objective, the progress of which can be tracked using benchmarks (see Output 1).
Output 2	Activities	Activities are steps that need to be taken in order to implement the policy action.
	Instruments (detailed activities)	<p>Instruments are the detailed activities to undertake in order to implement the policy action and achieve the objective.</p> <p>Types of policy instruments could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory instruments (e.g. laws, standards, restrictions) • Financial/Economic instruments (e.g. subsidies, taxes) • Informational instruments (e.g. awareness campaigns, information gathering) • Strategic instruments (e.g. creation of a plan or strategic document, establishment of a strategic body/group)
	Responsibilities	Responsibilities is a designation of which body/entity will be responsible for each instrument. Both a lead body/entity and partner bodies/entities should be designated.
	Timelines for full implementation	<p>Timelines designate the expected time required to fully implement each instrument. The timeline for each instrument is divided into three categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term (up to 2 years) • Medium-term (2-5 years) • Long-term (more than 5 years)
	Potential funding sources	<p>Funding sources describes the potential specific funds that could be drawn to implement each instrument (e.g. ESF+, RRP, Erasmus+, MES budget, etc.).</p> <p>All relevant potential funding sources will be listed according to five funding categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International funds • State/national funds • Sub-national funds • Enterprise funds • Household/individual funds

Note: ESF+: European Social Fund Plus; RRP: Recovery and Resilience Plan; MES: Ministry of Education and Science.

The OECD drew on the draft the OSS Bulgaria report, as well as a range of existing strategies in Bulgaria, to create an interim proposal of activities, instruments and responsibilities for Bulgaria's action plan for skills, which was then tested and refined through stakeholder consultations. Stakeholders also provided additional feedback on activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources through stakeholder consultations and a subsequent information request sent by the OECD.

In general, consulted stakeholders provided positive feedback on the project and its overarching goals, as well as on the OECD proposal for the activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources to include in Output 2. In addition to more specific feedback that was incorporated into the proposed tables in Chapter 4, some important comments shared by stakeholders and reflected in the final proposal included:

- The proposed instruments should be made more actionable and prescriptive.
- The OECD should be wary of recommending the establishment of new structures, except where necessary, and should try as much as possible to adapt the mandate of existing structures in order to carry out the policy recommendations.
- It would be most clear if only one "lead" institution was assigned per instrument. In addition, it is best to assign responsibility at the level of the ministry or agency rather

than at the level of departments within the institution, because these specific departments change relatively frequently.

- The social partners and sub-national stakeholders should be added as partners in the responsibility column for a wider range of instruments.
- It would be most helpful for the timelines column to reflect the timeline by which the instrument will be fully active rather than the timeline required to prepare the instrument. It is also more helpful to designate time frames (e.g. short-term, medium-term, long-term) for implementation rather than specific years.

The Output 2 stakeholder workshop included presentations from experts from Norway, Latvia, and Ireland about the experience of each country developing and implementing a skills-related strategy. The experts shared challenges faced by their respective countries including adapting to changes in government, maintaining public interest in the strategy for a sustained period of time, and ensuring long-lasting whole-of-government co-ordination in the area of skills. In addition, they shared successes from their respective countries' experiences developing and implementing skills-related strategies, such as acquiring public support from the political level, involving a broad range of stakeholders from the beginning of the process, developing a shared vision of the future, and developing a clear structure for the strategic document.

Suggested inputs for a skills action plan for Bulgaria

The full range of suggested skills activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines, and potential funding sources are detailed in Chapter 4 of this report. As a more succinct summary of the full proposal, the most specific activities from the detailed tables in Chapter 4 are displayed in Table 2, grouped by responsible entity and projected timeline for implementation. Please note that Table 2 contains only a subset of the proposed input for a skills action plan for Bulgaria, and the detailed tables in Chapter 4 should be consulted for the full range of the proposed input.

Table 2. Skills policy actions for Bulgaria by responsible entity and proposed implementation timeline

Reference numbers refer to more elaborated actions detailed in Table 7, Table 8, Table 9, and Table 10.

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Ministry of Education and Science (MES)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2.1.2 Increase access to initial and/or continuous professional development (CPD) training for pedagogical and non-pedagogical early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff in both public and private preschools and kindergartens. 1.2.1.3 Increase the attractiveness of professions in ECEC institutions. 1.2.2.1 Develop and implement a National Quality Framework in ECEC. 2.1.1.2 Provide education stakeholders with resources for implementing the curriculum reform. 2.1.2.1 Conduct a review of the Regional Education Departments' (REDs') capacity and resources for providing methodological support to teachers in implementing the competency-based curriculum. 2.1.2.2 Build capacity and upskill experts within REDs to support and mentor teachers to implement the competency-based curriculum. 2.2.1.1 Introduce test items that are able to assess students' competencies in relevant, practical contexts and focus less on student memorisation of knowledge. 2.2.1.2 Develop an item bank/database with calibrated test items to increase the validity of the test. 3.2.1.2 Improve and expand training for teachers and non-pedagogical school staff to promote equity and multicultural understanding among students. 3.2.1.4 Create partnerships between schools and local communities to create a supportive community environment. 3.2.2.2 Provide additional support for students from small and rural settlements to participate in education. 4.1.1.3 Incentivise employees from industry to enrol in initial teacher education (ITE) and become teachers in vocational education and training (VET). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.2.1.1 Reduce the child:staff ratio in ECEC classrooms and groups by changing the regulatory framework. 2.1.1.1 Clearly communicate the rationale, expected benefits and desired outcomes related to the implementation of curriculum reform to education stakeholders. 2.1.2.3 Increase REDs' resources as needed while monitoring REDs' activities to ensure effective support for competency-based curriculum implementation. 2.2.2.1 Prioritise investments in essential psychometric resources to strengthen the national assessment system. 2.2.2.2 Ensure the Centre for Evaluation of Pre-school and School Education (CAPSE) has sufficient financial and technical resources to implement the outlined reforms to the national external assessments. 3.1.1.3 Increase the resources allocated to address the educational needs of gifted students. 3.1.2.1 Encourage partnerships between schools and Personal Development Support Centres (PDSCs) for early identification of students' abilities and to promote students' development through school support teams. 3.2.1.3 Provide tailored outreach, information and psychological and pedagogical support services to parents from multicultural backgrounds. 3.2.2.1 Provide additional Bulgarian language training for children from vulnerable groups. 3.2.2.3 Improve the reputation and attractiveness of VET among target vulnerable groups. 4.1.1.1 Create a working group gathering university representatives to encourage ITE providers to establish a common minimum threshold score for ITE admission. 4.1.2.2 Diversify the profile of teachers delivering course content during ITE. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.2.1 Establish centres providing Early Childhood Development (ECD) services for children from vulnerable groups and their parents. 3.1.1.1 Develop functional tools to assess the educational needs of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and chronic diseases. 3.1.1.2 Improve infrastructure and innovative educational technologies in schools for students with SEN. 3.1.2.2 Develop and implement tools to identify the risk of student dropout and prevent dropouts from the compulsory education system. 3.2.1.1 Promote understanding and positive attitudes towards ethnic and cultural diversity and identity in the school environment. 3.2.2.4 Provide and improve integrated services for educational, social, psychological and health support for students in schools.

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Ministry of Education and Science (MES)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.1.2.1 Expand practical classroom-based learning opportunities for teacher trainees, as well as practical work-based learning for VET teachers. • 4.2.1.1 Develop and disseminate an annual, school-based formative appraisal to generate evidence on teachers', staff's and principals' training needs. • 4.2.1.2 Systematically collect, synthesise and use aggregated findings on training needs from teacher and staff appraisals, students' results from national external assessments and school results from external evaluations and information from classroom observations. • 4.2.1.3 Require / encourage CPD providers to develop their programmes around priorities determined by the collection and synthesis of the above data. • 4.2.2.2 Introduce / develop indicators to evaluate CPD programmes' effectiveness. • 5.1.1.2 Strengthen employers' role, including at the regional level, in the planning of places for State-subsidised enrolment in VET. • 5.1.2.2 Incentivise the establishment of training associations to share the costs of organising apprenticeships among groups of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). • 5.1.2.3 Strengthen the role and responsibility of sectoral skills councils and subnational employment committees with an expanded mandate in VET to support employers and schools to expand work-based learning (WBL) in VET. • 5.1.2.4 Increase access to subsidised transportation for secondary VET students to attend school and WBL. • 7.2.1.1 Streamline the recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedure by simplifying and shortening the administrative process for both individuals and providers. • 7.2.1.2 Alter the design of RPL certificates to match professional qualification certificates, to make them better understood and more accepted by educational and training institutions and employers. • 8.2.2.1 Develop and regularly update a list of prioritised areas of adult education and training of national and/or regional importance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.1.2.3 Improve and expand mandatory training to better prepare teacher mentors for their roles. • 4.2.2.1 Expand the functions and strengthen the capacity of the National Inspectorate for Education to develop and implement a data-driven mechanism for assessing the quality of CPD programmes for teachers and other school staff. • 4.2.2.3 Invest in capacity building to ensure all registered CPD providers are re-assessed on an ongoing basis based on the measured quality of their CPD offerings. • 5.1.2.1 Develop a policy for providing financial support to encourage and support businesses, especially SMEs, to provide WBL opportunities to VET students. • 5.2.1.1 Develop a system for automatically generating user-friendly labour market information (LMI) indicators annually for higher education institutions. • 5.2.1.2 Adjust public higher education funding settings to increase enrolments and completions in fields facing shortages and/or of strategic importance. • 5.2.1.3 Utilise information from the planned national graduate survey and the improved skills assessment and anticipation activities when determining the number of state-subsidised places by field and region. • 5.2.1.4 Make greater use of performance-based funding in higher education by increasing the share of institutions' funding based on the employment outcomes of their graduates. • 5.2.1.5 Strengthen linkages between VET and higher education in relevant fields of study. • 5.2.2.1 Expand financial incentives to disadvantaged students to access higher education. • 5.2.2.2 Provide financial incentives to higher education institutions to implement non-financial support for disadvantaged students to succeed in university programmes. • 7.2.2.1 Make adult basic (primary) education for low-skilled adults available free of charge in a wide range of educational institutions. 	

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Ministry of Education and Science (MES)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11.2.1.2 Provide additional financial support for dual training programs in the priority thematic areas of smart specialization and technologies related to Industry 4.0 and/or Industry 5.0. • 12.2.1.1 Broaden the membership of the Consultative Council on VET (CCVET) to include social partners, academic experts, education and training institutions, and agencies from across the whole skills system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7.2.2.2 Integrate basic education into practical/applied training. • 8.2.1.1 Subsidise androgogic training for teachers of adults, as well as information, guidance, peer-learning opportunities, and opportunities to share best practices on teaching adults. • 8.2.1.2 Raise awareness among adult education and training providers about subsidised andragogy courses for adult education and training (AET) trainers. • 11.2.1.1 Integrate vocational education and training into the innovation ecosystem by establishing centres of excellence in vocational education and training. • 11.2.2.1 Develop measures to support the labour market reintegration and career development of promising scientists in Bulgarian universities and scientific organizations. • 11.2.2.2 Develop measures to support the intersectoral and international mobility of R&D staff. • 11.2.2.3 Develop measures to increase the proportion of PhD students and promote the mobility of PhDs between the academic sector and the business/industrial sectors. • 12.2.1.2 Expand the remit of the CCVET to cover tertiary education and adult learning in addition to VET, and to support and advise the new Skills Policy Council. • 12.2.1.3 Adapt regulation of the CCVET to ensure the CCVET is convened more frequently, include expanding the number of actors who can convene the CCVET. 	
Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.2.1.1 Extend support through vouchers and introduce training vouchers that are available to all employed and unemployed individuals and reduce the co-finance rate for vulnerable groups. • 6.2.1.2 Develop a list of courses that are eligible for the training vouchers informed by subjects deemed to be of national and/or regional importance, as well as relevant for current and future labour market needs, and tailor the list to meet specific local/regional needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.1.2.1 Strengthen information and support to employers, particularly SMEs, on assessing their skills and training needs. • 6.2.2.1 Pilot sectoral training funds in one or two sectors, through the planned sectoral skills councils, by providing public co-financing for the sectoral training funds with greater public support for SMEs. • 7.1.2.2 Expand subsidies for employers for costs of providing education and training to employees during work hours in specific strategic sectors and/or for specific strategic skills, and monitor outcomes. 	

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7.2.1.3 Improve the targeting of RPL services to specific vulnerable groups, such as low-skilled adults, including by giving them priority access to these services. • 9.1.1.1 Establish institutional capacity for impact evaluation and conduct counterfactual evaluations of the impacts of programmes that seek to reach out to unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups, and expand the most effective programmes. • 9.1.3.3 Increase the share of active labour market policy (ALMP) expenditure from the state budget that is dedicated to training programmes to align with average EU levels. • 9.2.1.1 Increase employment support for single parents and parents with many children. • 9.2.1.2 Provide training and upskilling opportunities to parents, particularly women, returning to the labour market from parental leave. • 9.2.2.2 Incentivise enterprises to participate in programmes for building and maintaining infrastructure for their employees with family care responsibilities. • 10.2.1.2 Develop virtual and in-person networking events and job fairs, particularly focused on key destination countries for emigrants and key source countries for immigrants. 	
National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6.1.1.1 Provide support and incentives to information and guidance centres, including those of the National Employment Agency (NEA), to improve their capacity to provide career guidance services through multiple communication mediums. • 7.1.1.1 Raise awareness of employers, individuals and training providers about flexible education and training courses. • 7.1.1.2 Improve the recognition of partial qualification awards to allow learners to transfer partial qualifications from one learning institution to another or from one “profession” of study to another. • 7.1.2.1 Encourage greater flexibility and modularity of the adult education and training offer. 	

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7.2.1.4 Make grants available to AET providers and other institutions that offer RPL services. 8.1.1.1 Improve <i>ex ante</i> assessment of adult learning providers. 8.1.2.1 Establish an <i>ex-post</i> assessment process of adult learning providers, including those only providing partial qualifications, with an external evaluation team. 	
National Employment Agency (NEA)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1.3.1 Increase funding for and supply of training tailored to the individual needs of unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. 10.2.2.1 Create specific support services to help return emigrants and skilled immigrants find well-matched jobs and start new businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1.2.2 Expand the number of caseworkers in the NEA to allow more intensive and personalised support for unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. 9.1.2.3 Ensure that NEA caseworkers make use of reliable data and information on skills needs when advising unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. 9.1.3.2 Increase interest in and demand for adult training under ALMP among clients from vulnerable groups through awareness raising such as a widespread information campaign. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1.2.1 Allocate a larger share of NEA caseworkers' time to clients from vulnerable groups. 9.1.3.4 Expand supports to help individuals who complete training via ALMP find jobs that utilise their new skills if a job is not arranged as part of the training programme.
Council of Ministers		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12.1.1.1 Create a Skills Policy Council for Bulgaria comprised of ministries, agencies, regional and municipal representatives and social partners with a stake in skills policies. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.1.2.2 Expand the remit and resources of the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad to be responsible and resourced for fostering return emigration, and specifically for achieving the related goals of a Bulgarian roadmap for return emigration.
Ministry of Economy and Industry (MEI)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11.1.2.2 Pilot and evaluate public subsidies for consultants, mentors or coaches to provide tailored, one-on-one advice to SMEs about implementing high performance work practices (HPWPs). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11.1.1.1 Improve data on skills use and HPWPs in workplaces. 	
Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11.2.1.3 Provide support for human resources training activities in enterprises for enhancing the digital skills of employees, including in areas of smart specialization and technologies related to Industry 4.0 and/or Industry 5.0. 	

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Ministry of Finance (MoF)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.2.2.2 Consider implementing a levy scheme to mandate sectoral training fund contributions from enterprises if uptake is low for voluntary contributions. 	
Ministry of Health (MH)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.2.2.1 Improve the quality and affordability of childcare services and of long-term care services for elderly individuals. 	
Ministry of Interior (Mol)		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.1.2.1 Make fostering return emigration and skilled immigration a priority objective of the Council for Working with Bulgarians Abroad and the State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, respectively. 10.2.2.2 Provide tailored information to return emigrants and skilled immigrants on integrating into Bulgarian society.
Skills Policy Council		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12.1.2.1 Strengthen bilateral inter-ministerial/inter-agency relationships critical for effective skills and related policies. 14.2.1.1 Develop a tripartite agreement to define the division of responsibility for funding skills development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.2.2.3 Designate a dedicated to oversee and support the implementation of the sectoral training fund pilot, including by monitoring outcomes of education and training. 10.1.1.1 Co-ordinate between ministries and social partners to develop a comprehensive and ambitious roadmap for return emigration and skilled immigration. 13.1.1.1 Develop a methodology for skills anticipation that consolidates Bulgaria's skills assessment and anticipation (SAA) methods. 13.1.1.2 Promote and monitor the use of improved SAA information across the skills system. 13.2.1.1 Create an inter-institutional data and evidence centre to integrate, undertake and/or commission primary and secondary data collection, analysis and evaluation for skills policy. 14.1.1.1 Set medium- and longer-term expenditure targets across the skills system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 14.1.2.2 Gradually reallocate public funding to areas with the highest returns on investment.

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Data and Evidence Centre		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8.1.2.2 Collect relevant data on graduate outcomes from VET schools and centres, basic education programmes, and individuals who go through the RPL process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13.2.1.2 Establish formal and informal networks to improve data collection and analysis by the data and evidence centre. 14.1.2.1 Systematically evaluate and compare the costs and benefits, returns and/or impacts of public expenditure on skills development and use.
Municipalities		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1.2 Encourage joint activities between kindergarten and primary school students that take place within primary schools to familiarise kindergarten students with primary school before they enrol themselves. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.1.1 Expand the number of places in ECEC in municipalities with current shortages.
Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1.2.2 Provide tailored outreach and information to parents from vulnerable backgrounds about the benefits of ECEC and assistance related to ECEC that is available to parents. 1.1.2.3 Engage all parents of young children in ECEC more effectively, including through information, training, teacher engagement, support and access to specialists.
Working group on ITE for teachers		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1.1.2 Develop more comprehensive selection criteria for assessing ITE applicants and determine the weight to be given to each of these different criteria in the new ITE admission system. 	
Regional Development Councils (RDC)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.1.1.1 Give RDCs a formal role in steering initial VET provision. 		
State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.2.1.1 Develop an online platform targeting Bulgarian workers abroad and potential skilled immigrants. 	

Short-term (<2 years)	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Long-term (4-6 years)
Bulgarian Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion Agency (BSMEPA)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11.1.1.2 Raise awareness among enterprises by developing a campaign, including on social media channels, on skills use at work and HPWPs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11.1.2.1 Create opportunities for enterprises, particularly SMEs, to meet and learn about good practices for implementing HPWPs. 	
Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12.2.2.1 Expand the membership of SSCs to include not only MES but several ministries with responsibilities for skills, representatives from the subnational level. 12.2.2.2 Pilot an expanded remit for SSCs to cover issues other than VET, such as the labour market relevance of tertiary education and adult education and training, and to articulate broader sectoral and local skills needs rather than focusing on narrower issues of curriculum, qualifications, etc. 		

1 Background

Context

Skills are vital for enabling individuals and countries to thrive in an increasingly complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world. As the digital and green transitions increasingly shape our societies and economies, getting skills policies right becomes even more critical for ensuring societal well-being and promoting inclusive and sustainable growth. For Bulgaria, implementing a strategic approach to skills policies is essential, given the country's exposure to demographic and digital disruptions and persistent inequalities among different social groups.

Against this backdrop, the Bulgarian Government is seeking to develop an action plan for skills (the "National Skills Strategy") that supports the country in developing and implementing a comprehensive set of skills policy actions.

Skills performance in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, as in other European Union (EU) and OECD countries, megatrends such as digitalisation, globalisation, demographic change and climate change are transforming learning systems and the world of work.

In particular, Bulgaria is thought to be highly at-risk of future job automation, and its workers – whose vast majority lack basic digital skills – are not well prepared to cope with it. Contributing further to the uncertainties associated with technological change is the continuing expansion of international trade and global value chains. Bulgaria's integration into international trade and global value chains continues to influence the structure and competitiveness of its economic sectors, which in turn has an ongoing impact on skills supply and demand in the labour market. The green transition will also bring major changes to Bulgaria's economy which is still very reliant on energy coming from increasingly unprofitable coal-fired powerplants. Even more specific to Bulgaria are the challenges related to demographic change. Persistently high migration rates and low fertility rates will cause Bulgaria to experience a major decline of its population, with the greatest impact on its working-age population. This process is expected to exacerbate skills imbalances on the labour market, which are already beginning to be felt. Finally, the drastic rise of inequalities in the last two decades combined with high poverty levels undermine efforts in the skills area, with vulnerable groups facing major obstacles to access and use Bulgaria's skills system.

These megatrends and challenges reinforce the need for Bulgaria to design forward-looking, dynamic skills policies. To do so, Bulgaria will need to improve youth skills to ensure that young people develop the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes needed to thrive in an interconnected world. Bulgaria continues to struggle with low levels of performance in its student population, has not managed to reduce the large gaps in learning outcomes between different student populations over time, and struggles to ensure that vocational and higher education are meeting

labour market demand. Similarly, Bulgaria will need to strengthen adult skills to address skills shortages, bolster its ongoing economic recovery, prepare for shifting skills demands and improve labour productivity. However, participation in adult education and training in Bulgaria is the lowest in the EU and many adults and employers lack motivation to engage in education and training or otherwise face time-related, financial and other barriers to doing so. In addition to developing skills among youth and adults, Bulgaria will need to ensure that skills are being used effectively in the labour market and at work. This entails activating the skills of Bulgaria's working-age population, utilising the skills of return migrants and skilled immigrants and utilising workers' skills effectively at work. Most of Bulgaria's unemployed or inactive adults are from vulnerable groups, with relatively low participation in public employment services. High emigration and low return emigration, as well as low levels of skilled immigration of EU citizens and third-country nationals, have limited Bulgaria's ability to use people's skills and address skills shortages. In addition, many Bulgarian enterprises lack the capacity to implement high-performance workplace practices (HPWP) to support skills use, nor do they receive support for doing so. Finally, to effectively design forward-looking skills policies Bulgaria will need to improve the governance of the skills system. There is a need to better co-ordinate different ministries and agencies to ensure a whole-of-government approach to skills and to increase stakeholder involvement in Bulgaria's skills system. In addition, Bulgaria lacks high-quality information on skills needs in the labour market and public expenditure on skills development and use is low by international standards.

Skills policy in Bulgaria

Aware of the megatrends outlined above and their resulting challenges, Bulgaria has developed various national strategic documents setting policy directions in the area of skills for the near future (see Table 3).

Table 3. National strategic documents with a focus on skills in Bulgaria

National strategy	Topics covered
National Development Programme 2030	This is Bulgaria's highest level strategic document prioritising policies in all sectors of government and addressing education and skills as its first priority.
Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP)	The RRP aims to facilitate economic and social recovery from the COVID crisis as well as to create a more sustainable, equitable and prosperous economy, including more detail to the country's reform commitment to develop digital skills, strengthen skills relevance and promote adult learning.
National Reform Programme (NRP)	This programme of the Bulgarian Ministry of Finance reflects skills measures laid out in the RRP as well as those described in the 2021-2027 Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" (OPHRD).
Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning 2021-2030	This is the main strategic document defining policy priorities for Bulgaria in the area of education.
National Employment Strategy 2021-2030	This is the main strategic document defining policy priorities for Bulgaria in the area of employment and the labour market.
National Employment Action Plans	These are annual action plans that complement the National Employment Strategy 2021-2030.
Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030	This is Bulgaria's leading strategy related to higher education, which includes measures focused on making higher education more responsive to labour market needs.
Innovative Strategy for Smart Specialisation 2021-2027	This is Bulgaria's main strategy in the area of innovation, and includes an operational objective related to skills.
National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises 2021-2027	This is a very thoroughly developed strategy in the area of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurship, in which three of the six areas of impact are related to skills.

National strategy	Topics covered
The Partnership Agreement between Bulgaria and the EU Commission 2021-2027	The Partnership Agreement defines the distribution of EU Cohesion Policy Funds to Bulgaria across the designated period.
National Demographic Development Strategy 2012-2030	This is the main Bulgarian strategy in the area of the demographic development of the population.
National Migration Strategy 2021-2025	This is the main Bulgarian strategy in the area of migration, including skilled immigration.
National Strategy for Bulgarian Citizens and Historical Communities Abroad	This is the main Bulgarian strategy in the area of State policy towards Bulgarians abroad, including return emigration.

Against this policy backdrop, the OECD has conducted an assessment of the performance of the Bulgarian skills system through the *OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Assessment and Recommendations* project (Q1 2022 – Q3 2023). OECD Skills Strategy projects provide a strategic and comprehensive assessment of countries' skills challenges and opportunities in order to build more effective skills systems, including the institutions, actors, policies, laws etc. that have an impact on the development and use of people's skills. The OSS Bulgaria Report assesses Bulgaria's skills performance and provides recommendations for improving the skills of young people and adults, using skills effectively and strengthening the governance of Bulgaria's skills system (OECD, 2023^[1]).

Developing a skills action plan for Bulgaria

The "Technical support for the development of a National Skills Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria" Project builds on the findings and recommendations of the OSS Bulgaria Report to support Bulgaria to develop a comprehensive action plan for skills policy. Broadly speaking, the TSI Project aims to support Bulgaria in its efforts to implement reforms aimed to encourage investment, increase competitiveness and achieve sustainable economic and social convergence, resilience and recovery, in the area of developing and using skills. The Project should also strengthen Bulgaria's institutional and administrative capacity, including at regional and local levels, to facilitate socially inclusive, green and digital transitions, to effectively address the challenges identified in the country-specific recommendations and to implement Union law. The intended short-medium term outcome of the project is that the Bulgarian Government uses the project outputs to develop an action plan for skills policy. The expected long-term impact of the Project is that the Bulgarian Government implements the skills policy actions in line with their national priorities.

This report is Output 2 of the TSI Project (see Figure 1). Output 1 outlined objectives, policy actions and benchmarks to be included in an action plan for skills in Bulgaria. Building on Output 1 and the findings and recommendations of the OSS Bulgaria Report, Output 2 identifies relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for inclusion in the action plan for skills. As part of this report, the OECD has undertaken desktop analysis, engaged in consultations with 40-50 national and regional stakeholders to test and refine results from the desktop analysis, and facilitated peer-learning by inviting experts from select EU Member States and other European countries that have developed and implemented a skills strategy to share lessons learned with Bulgarian stakeholders.

Figure 1. Project outputs



Subsequent outputs will build on Outputs 1 and 2. Output 3 will develop a monitoring and reporting framework for measuring implementation progress for the actions identified in Outputs 1 and 2. Output 4 will then outline a communication campaign to raise awareness of the action plan for skills in Bulgaria. Finally, Output 5 will facilitate and report on a capacity-building workshop for implementation of the action plan for skills.

2 Results of the desktop research

Establishing a relevant framework

During the desktop research phase, the OECD established a framework for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for the Output 2 report. This framework, as outlined in Table 4, provides a definition for each of the relevant terms as well as further details on the possible categories that fall within each category.

Table 4. Framework for determining relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Output	Term	Description
Output 1	Objectives	Objectives are medium-term goals for skills policy in Bulgaria (see Output 1).
	Policy actions	Policy actions are policy measures that Bulgaria plans to implement towards achieving the objective, the progress of which can be tracked using benchmarks (see Output 1).
Output 2	Activities	Activities are steps that need to be taken in order to implement the policy action.
	Instruments (detailed activities)	<p>Instruments are the detailed activities to undertake in order to implement the policy action and achieve the objective.</p> <p>Types of policy instruments could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory instruments (e.g. laws, standards, restrictions) • Financial/Economic instruments (e.g. subsidies, taxes) • Informational instruments (e.g. awareness campaigns, information gathering) • Strategic instruments (e.g. creation of a plan or strategic document, establishment of a strategic body/group)
	Responsibilities	Responsibilities is a designation of which body/entity will be responsible for each instrument. Both a lead body/entity and partner bodies/entities should be designated.
	Timelines for full implementation	<p>Timelines designate the expected time required to fully implement each instrument. The timeline for each instrument is divided into three categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term (up to 2 years) • Medium-term (2-5 years) • Long-term (more than 5 years)
	Potential funding sources	<p>Funding sources describes the potential specific funds that could be drawn to implement each instrument (e.g. ESF+, RRP, Erasmus+, MES budget, etc.).</p> <p>All relevant potential funding sources will be listed according to five funding categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International funds • State/national funds • Sub-national funds • Enterprise funds • Household/individual funds

Note: ESF+: European Social Fund Plus; RRP: Recovery and Resilience Plan; MES: Ministry of Education and Science.

Identifying activities, instruments and responsibilities through desktop research

The OECD drew on the OSS Bulgaria Report, as well as a number of existing strategies in Bulgaria, to create an interim proposal of activities, instruments and responsibilities for Bulgaria's action plan for skills policy. The interim proposal was then tested with stakeholders (see Chapter 3) and revised according to stakeholder feedback to result in the measures proposed by the OECD in Chapter 4. The complete interim proposal can be found in the OECD handout for the Output 2 stakeholder mission.

Activities, instruments and responsibilities from the OSS Bulgaria report

For all objectives and policy actions from Output 1 that were derived from the OSS Bulgaria report, the OECD continued to identify preliminary activities, instruments and responsibilities for the Output 2 report from the OSS Bulgaria report as well. "Activities" in the Output 2 interim proposal corresponds with "Recommendations" in the OSS Bulgaria Report, and "Instruments" in the Output 2 interim proposal are derived from the detailed paragraph that follows each recommendation in the OSS Bulgaria report. Responsibilities in the Output 2 interim proposal were derived from the recommendations or general assessment within the relevant chapter of the OSS Bulgaria report.

An example of one activity ("recommendation" according to the OSS Bulgaria report) from each of the four priority areas in the OSS Bulgaria report is provided in Table 5.

Table 5. OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Examples of mapping

Output 1			Output 2		
Priority area	Objectives (Opportunities)	Policy Actions (Sub-opportunities)	Activities (Recommendations)	Instruments (Details within recommendations)	Responsibilities (Details within recommendations and within the chapter at large)
Improving youth skills	Developing a highly skilled teaching workforce	Selecting and preparing high-quality teaching candidates	1.4 Introduce a more selective and comprehensive admission system for initial teacher education to ensure the suitability and quality of teaching candidates	Create a working group gathering university representatives to encourage ITE providers to establish a common minimum threshold score for ITE admission based on State Matura scores.	Lead: MES, Higher Education (HE) Directorate Partners: Universities; MES, Policies for Strategic Development, Qualification and Career Development Directorate
				Develop additional, more comprehensive selection criteria for assessing ITE applicants and determine the weight to be given to each of these different criteria in the new ITE admission system.	Lead: Working group on ITE for teachers Partners: Universities; MES, HE Directorate; MES, Policies for Strategic Development, Qualification and Career Development Directorate
Improving adult skills	Making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers	Improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers	Introduce financial incentives for employers to increase employee education and training opportunities during working hours, with higher support for small- and medium-sized enterprises	Launch a pilot programme to subsidise the costs to employers in specific strategic sectors of providing education and training to employees during work hours. Funding could be provided to employers directly or via sectoral councils in specific strategic sectors and/or for specific skills (e.g. digital skills). Funding should subsidise training fees and could also subsidise wages during training. Funding should cover more training costs for SMEs than for large enterprises.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Sectoral Skills Councils
				Assess the outcomes of the pilot programme to subsidise employer education and training costs (above), and expand the programme if the programme is deemed effective.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Sectoral Skills Councils

Output 1			Output 2		
Priority area	Objectives (Opportunities)	Policy Actions (Sub-opportunities)	Activities (Recommendations)	Instruments (Details within recommendations)	Responsibilities (Details within recommendations and within the chapter at large)
Using skills effectively in the labour market and at work	Activating the skills of vulnerable groups in the labour market	Connecting more vulnerable adults to public employment services	Evaluate the efficacy of Bulgaria's existing outreach programmes for unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups and expand the most effective programmes	Conduct counterfactual evaluations of the impacts of programmes that seek to reach out to unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups. This should include ensuring the implementation of interventions that aim to improve the evaluation of NEA's policies, outlined in the OPHRD (2021 2027).	Lead: MLSP Partners: NEA
				Based on the results of these evaluations, expand those programmes that are most effective at getting unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups registered with the NEA and Social Assistance Agency. As part of this, consider increasing the number and scope of activators and mediators who reach out to these groups, including youth and Roma activators/mediators.	Lead: MLSP Partners: NEA
Improving the governance of the skills system	Developing a whole-of-government and stakeholder-inclusive approach to skills policies	Developing a whole-of-government approach to skills policies	Identify and strengthen the most important bilateral inter-ministerial relationships for skills policies, including through joint projects and other co-ordination actions	Identify bilateral inter-ministerial relationships critical for effective skills and related policies and seek to strengthen these relationships (e.g. the relationship between MES and MIG on innovation policies, and between MES and the MLSP on employment and skills forecasting).	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG
				Implement active co-ordination measures between ministries, beginning with regular bilateral meetings at the minister and technical level, joint working groups and developing into joint projects and funding.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG

Activities, instruments and responsibilities from Bulgarian strategies

The OSS Bulgaria report from which the vast majority of the objectives and policy actions identified in Output 1 were drawn, and subsequently the vast majority of the interim activities, instruments and responsibilities proposed by the OECD during the desktop research for Output 2, itself draws on the full range of Bulgarian strategies outlined in Table 3. However, some objectives and policy actions in Output 1 came not from the OSS Bulgaria report but rather from other relevant Bulgarian strategies. Therefore, these other Bulgarian strategies were used during the desktop research for Output 2 to identify activities, instruments and responsibilities. In particular, the following Bulgarian strategic documents were referenced extensively for identifying activities, instruments, and responsibilities for the objectives and policy actions that did not come from the OSS Bulgaria report:

- The **Education Framework 2021-2030** for informing activities, instruments and responsibilities related to the objectives on “Improving early childhood development, participation and outcomes” and “Improving equity in education” (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021^[2]).
- The **Employment Strategy 2021-2030** for informing activities, instruments and responsibilities related to the policy action “Ensuring gender equality in the labour market” under the objective “Activating the skills of vulnerable groups in the labour market” (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2022^[3]).
- The **Innovative Strategy for Smart Specialisation 2021–2027** for informing activities, instruments and responsibilities related to the policy action “Driving innovation within firms by improving human resource capacity in fields designated for smart specialisation” under the objective “Supporting enterprises to utilise workers’ skills more effectively” (Ministry of Innovation and Growth, 2021^[4]).

3 Results of the stakeholder consultations

Background on stakeholder consultations

Engaging with stakeholders is a central element of the project to aid Bulgaria in developing an action plan for skills policy. Given that the effective implementation of a skills policy action plan in Bulgaria would require the involvement and collaboration of a number of different ministries, agencies, and stakeholders, it is important to involve these stakeholders in the design of such an action plan at every stage of the project.

Activity 2.2 of the 22BG06 project required the OECD to engage with up to 30 relevant stakeholders about relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and funding sources, during a physical mission to Bulgaria. This was to include a series of consultations, including meetings with officials and a stakeholder workshop to solicit input and discuss possible actions, instruments, timelines and funding sources. Some of these consultations could be held in a hybrid format to facilitate the participation of regional stakeholders. The OECD was also required to invite 1-3 expert(s) from another EU Member States that have developed and implemented a skills-related strategy, to present and share their experiences with Bulgaria.

The OECD engaged 40-50 national and regional stakeholders in June 2023 to test and refine preliminary results from the desktop analysis on relevant activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and funding sources for a skills action plan for Bulgaria. The majority of the stakeholder consultations were held in person during a physical mission to Bulgaria, while a meeting with regional stakeholders was held in virtual format.

The following groups of stakeholders were invited to participate in the Output 2 consultations: relevant ministries and agencies (including the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Economy and Industry (MEI), the Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG), the National Agency for VET (NAVET), the National Employment Agency (NEA), etc.); sub-national authorities (such as the regional structures of MES); social partners; education and training providers at the national and regional levels; academic institutions; students associations; civil society organisations; and others with a stake in skills policies.

To maximise the impact of the consultations, the AG agreed to hold the Activity 2.2 consultations and the launch for the *OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Assessment and Recommendations* report in the same week. The launch event was opened with remarks from the Minister of Education and Science, Minister of Innovation and Growth, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, and President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria. The launch event included a presentation by the OECD as well as a panel discussion including representatives from government, the social partners, civil society, and academia.

Overview of stakeholder consultations

The OECD held 6 in-person consultations and 1 virtual consultation related to Output 2 of the project with a range of stakeholders (Table 6). Subsequently, the OECD sent further information requests to MES, MLSP, MIG, MEI, and social partners.

Table 6. Output 2 stakeholder consultations

Type	Participants
Group discussion on statistics	MES, MLSP, MEI, NAVET, NEA, NSI, Bulgarian Academy of Science, Trade union "Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria", 9 participants total
Group discussion on funding sources	MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NEA, 6 participants total
Output 2 stakeholder workshop	MES, MLSP, MIG, MEI, NAVET, NEA, Human Resources Development Center, Executive Agency Education Program, Junior Achievement Bulgaria, Sofia University, Association "Education Bulgaria 2030", Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Chamber of Builders Bulgaria, Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), Union for Private Economic Enterprise, Confederation of Labor "Support", Confederation of Employers and Industrialists of Bulgaria, Union for Business Initiative, Business for Education Foundation, 32 participants total
Bilateral	MES and NAVET, 8 participants
Bilateral	MLSP and the NEA, 3 participants
Bilateral	MIG, 3 participants
Regional group discussion (virtual)	Stara Zagora Municipality, Stara Zagora Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Regional Department of Education Sofia – city, Regional Department of Education Plovdiv, Gabrovo Municipality, Regional Department of Education – Vidin, Regional Department of Education - Vratsa, BICA, Cluster for Ethical Financing of Entrepreneurship – Plovdiv, Gabrovo Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bulgarian National Association of Essential Oils, Perfumery and Cosmetics, Varna Municipality, Business Innovation Cluster (city: Ruse), Bulgarian Industrial Association (branch Vratsa), 16 participants total

Lessons learned from international experts

The stakeholder workshop during the physical mission to Bulgaria included three presentations from experts from other European countries that have developed and implemented a skills-related strategy. The three expert speakers were Ms. Margrethe Marstrøm Svensrud, Head of the Department of Working Life and Skills in the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (in person), Ms. Jelena Muhina, Senior Expert at the Department of Vocational and Adult Education in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia (virtual), and Karolina Murphy from the Skills Policy & Enterprise Engagement Unit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland (virtual).

Ms. Svensrud presented on The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021, and noted that the strategy only includes skills issues that cut across different ministries and stakeholders (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017^[5]). Lessons learned for Norway included that the support and engagement of top-level politicians was critical, a white paper could unite different actors and clear the path for a skills strategy, and that sometimes a new challenge (in the case of Norway, a new wave of immigration) can be critical for coalescing support for action and co-ordination on skills. While the strategy was not renewed after 2021 following a change of government, the foundation is still in place, as are the Skills Policy Council overseeing Norway's skills priorities, an administrative group that works in parallel to the Skills Policy Council but at the technical level, and the Future Skills Needs Committee tasked with analysing skills needs on an ongoing basis. Ms. Muhina presented on Latvia's Education Development Guidelines 2021-27 (Latvia Cabinet of Ministers, 2021^[6]). Lessons learned for Latvia included that it was vital to develop a shared vision for the future, look at challenges from different perspectives, involve all actors from the beginning of the development process, use proven working methods such as design thinking, and clearly structure and link elements within the guidelines. In terms of challenges, Latvia could potentially have

invested more in the implementation and monitoring process and paid more attention to the horizontal priorities, and will find it challenging to maintain public interest until 2027. Ms. Murphy presented on the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations project, including aspirations for next steps (OECD, 2023^[7]). The presentation highlighted the importance of strengthening partnerships to drive a shared skills agenda, with a focus on the National Skills Council.

Lessons learned shared by the international experts that could be instructive for the Bulgarian context include:

- Garnering the public support and engagement of top-level politicians is critical.
- It is beneficial to work on skills policy simultaneously at the political and technical levels.
- It is important to involve all relevant stakeholders from the beginning and throughout the entire process of developing a coherent national strategy for skills policy.
- Implementation-oriented plans benefit from a clear structure and clear linkage between elements of the plan.
- Outcomes can be improved through well-designed implementation and monitoring processes, and therefore it is worth investing time and effort into designing these processes.
- Setting up structures (e.g. Skills Policy Council) that have ongoing responsibility for following up on and prioritising skills policy helps to ensure long-term improvement of the skills system.

Outcomes of stakeholder consultations

Throughout the various consultations outlined in Table 6, stakeholders shared their feedback on various parts of the OECD proposals, including feedback on the activities and instruments, responsibilities, timelines, funding sources, and statistics that will be incorporated into a skills action plan for Bulgaria. The feedback on these topics has been synthesised across the consultations and are summarised in the sections below.

An important outcome of the stakeholder consultations overall was that they provided an opportunity for the OECD and the Bulgarian project team to clarify for stakeholders that the OECD is not creating a skills action plan for Bulgaria, but rather preparing input and advice for Bulgaria to create its own skills action plan. It was important to clarify this point in different fora of stakeholders to make sure that the purpose of the project was clear to all participants.

Activities and instruments

Stakeholders primarily discussed and suggested refinements to the specific activities and instruments proposed by the OECD during the stakeholder workshop and the regional consultation. The questions related to activities and instruments that were posed by the OECD to stakeholders throughout the consultations included:

- Can the final number of activities/instruments be reduced (e.g. delete or merge instruments/activities)? How?
- How can the proposed activities and instruments be made more actionable and otherwise improved (e.g. edited, specified)?
- Are there any actions/instruments that are of critical importance, but are missing from the document? What are they, and why should they be added?
- Do you disagree with any of the comments/changes made by other stakeholders? Why?

The most common and important feedback given by stakeholders about the activities and instruments was that the instruments should be made actionable and prescriptive. Many stakeholders made suggestions

about how to make particular instruments more actionable during the workshop. However, a number of instruments in the final proposal still remain quite general due to fact that there is not currently enough information or clarity about the subject to meaningfully make the instrument more specific. As Bulgaria proceeds with developing its skills action plan, officials should aim to include activities and instruments as specific as possible in the plan. Another item of feedback from stakeholders was that, due to already strained capacity in the area of skills policy, the OECD should be wary of recommending the establishment of new structures, except where necessary, and should try as much as possible to adapt the mandate of existing structures in order to carry out the policy recommendations.

During consultations, stakeholders discussed whether it would add value for Bulgaria for instruments that are already actively implemented to be included in a skills action plan. The OECD asked stakeholders to clarify in the information request whether it would be valuable to keep specific instruments related to their area of expertise that are already active in the proposal for the action plan. In the final proposal, these instruments were generally adapted to focus on the elements of an actively implemented activity that are still ongoing or could be further improved, and therefore are still included in the proposal for input into an action plan for skills.

More specific feedback provided by stakeholders on the activities and instruments are detailed below, according to the three pillars of the OECD framework: developing relevant skills over the life course, using skills effectively in work and society, and strengthening the governance of skills systems. Unless stated otherwise, the OECD has adopted this feedback in the revised activities and instruments for the action plan.

Developing relevant skills over the life course

The pillar on developing relevant skills over the life course has been divided into three stages of learning: early childhood education and care, formal education, and adult education and training.

Early childhood education and care

Specific stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to early childhood education and care (ECEC) included:

- Improving the qualifications of ECEC personnel should include non-pedagogical staff in addition to pedagogical staff.
- Private preschools and kindergartens should be explicitly included in some of the instruments, particularly those related to the qualification of ECEC personnel.
- Joint activities between kindergarten students and primary school students that take place in primary schools could help to support the transition of young children to primary school.
- The distinction between improving participation of students in ECEC and improving the quality or outcome of ECEC should be made more clear.
- The proposed instrument on providing financial support for “extra costs” beyond enrolment fees for parents of ECEC students from vulnerable groups can be deleted.
- The two proposed instruments that related to increasing the number of teachers/staff relative to children in ECEC can be merged.

Formal education

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to curriculum reform in formal education included:

- The instrument to develop a detailed action plan that articulates how the curriculum reform vision will be translated into changes in the classroom can be deleted.
- Stakeholders strongly agree with the proposed instruments about increasing the capacity of REDs and the qualifications of the staff in REDs.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to improving equity in formal education included:

- VET should be explicitly mentioned in instruments related to equity.
- The instruments under this Objective that relate specifically to teachers should be moved to Objective on developing a highly skilled teaching workforce.
 - While the OECD has generally moved instruments related to teachers to the Objective on developing a highly skilled teaching workforce, the OECD has chosen to keep one instrument under this Objective relating to training to promote equity and multicultural understanding in schools.
- The instruments should reflect the need to improve the reputation and attractiveness of VET among target vulnerable groups to encourage students from these groups to acquire a profession.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to developing a highly skilled teaching workforce in formal education included:

- In addition to teachers, non-teaching staff should be included in measures for improving staff qualifications in formal education.
 - The OECD has included non-teaching staff in instruments related to equity, but has chosen to keep this objective focused specifically on teaching staff.
- The instruments in this Objective should reflect that more teachers, especially VET teachers, should have experience with/in enterprise, whether by encouraging industry employees to become teachers, encouraging real-work apprenticeships for VET teachers, creating partnerships between VET schools and employers or employers' associations, and/or having VET teachers trained by industry representatives.
- The instruments on registering continuing professional development (CPD) programmes and monitoring their quality can be merged.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to making VET and HE more responsive to labour market needs included:

- The instrument on sectoral skills councils (SSCs) should include regulatory measures, including to regulate the goals and activities of the SSCs.
 - Rather than including regulatory measures, the OECD has focused this instrument on strengthening the role and responsibility of SSCs and other relevant bodies by expanding their mandate in VET.
- Regional Development Councils already have employment committees so there is no need to create new skills or VET committees as proposed. Rather, the role of the employment committees should be expanded to cover skills and VET more comprehensively.
- The instrument(s) should strengthen the link between VET and higher education, especially in relevant types of courses.

- Stakeholders agree that courses in higher education should be better aligned with the needs of the labour market, but also stressed that labour-market relevance is not the only goal of higher education institutions and graduates, and efforts to align courses with labour-market needs need not be forced upon purely academic courses.

Adult education and training

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult education and training included:

- A number of instruments can be merged including those related to support and incentives for information and guidance centres, those related to the vouchers scheme, and those related to engaging SMEs through sectoral training funds.
- The instrument about considering implementing a levy scheme to oblige enterprises to contribute to sectoral training funds should be deleted as the text is not clear. Another suggestion was to include only enterprise funds under potential funding sources.
 - The OECD has chosen to keep this instrument given challenges faced by other countries in getting enterprises to contribute to sectoral training funds, and has attempted to make the text more clear than it was previously. For the same reason, the OECD has chosen to keep both State/national funds and enterprise funds in under the potential funding sources.
- It was suggested to add an instrument on strengthening the capacity of career guidance centres of the NEA
 - The OECD has integrated this into another instrument on providing information and guidance (6.1.1.1).
- The instrument related to vouchers should include the cooperation of employers and collaborations at the local level to tailor vouchers to specific local/regional needs. Another suggestion was to delete this instrument entirely as in April 2023 training vouchers were expanded and no longer require co-financing or amend the instrument to extending the support provided through vouchers.
 - The OECD chose to keep this instrument in the tables but to adapt it to focus on extending support through vouchers.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to making adult education and training more flexible and accessible included:

- The term “recognition of prior learning” (RPL) should be changed to “validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences”.
 - The OECD has chosen to keep the term RPL as this term is more broadly used across other OECD countries and at the EU level, and the OECD does not see a substantive difference between this and the term suggested by stakeholders.
- An instrument should be added about developing a special regulatory framework for the development of adult skills with an emphasis on the introduction of micro-credentials and individual learning accounts.
 - While the OECD chose not to add this instrument exactly as it is written, the OECD did incorporate micro-credentials and individual training vouchers into other existing instruments.
- Rather than launching a pilot programme to subsidise the cost to employers for providing training during work hours, subsidies should be expanded, as this is a programme that already exists in Bulgaria. This instrument can be combined with the instrument on monitoring outcomes of these subsidies.

- The instruments on subsidising RPL fees for the unemployed and vulnerable individuals and on adjusting enrolment requirements for CVET to include not only those with a fourth-grade equivalent education level but also those currently enrolled in adult basic education can both be deleted as they have both already been implemented.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training included:

- The instruments on developing a list of prioritised areas of education and training and regularly updating this list can be combined.

Using skills effectively in work and society

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to activating the skills of vulnerable groups in the labour market included:

- Some of these instruments are already being implemented.
 - The OECD has adapted such instruments to focus on areas still in need of improvement.
- The instrument on lowering the six-month waiting period to receive social assistance after registering with the NEA, increasing the level of social assistance benefits, and considering temporarily providing minimum (social) health coverage to encourage more unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups to the register with the NEA can be deleted.
- The instrument on increasing interest in and demand for adult training under ALMP should be amended to be less about conducting further assessments and rather focus on raising awareness in order to increase interest and demand.
- The instrument on introducing requirements, incentives and support for individuals who complete a training ALMP to search for a job that utilises their newly acquired skills can be deleted.
 - While the OECD chose not to delete this instrument, the instrument was revised to reflect stakeholder feedback.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to fostering return emigration and skilled immigration to Bulgaria included:

- The instrument on ensuring that the bodies responsible for fostering return emigration and skilled immigration formally co-ordinate with other agencies and report their activities to the Skills Policy Council should be deleted.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to supporting enterprises to utilise workers' skills more effectively included:

- Some of these instruments are already being implemented.
 - The OECD has adapted such instruments to focus on areas still in need of improvement.
- Some instruments can be merged such as those on raising awareness and creating a public awareness campaign and those on creating events and opportunities for SMEs to do peer-learning on high performance work practices (HPWP).

Strengthening the governance of skills systems

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to developing a whole-of-government and stakeholder-inclusive approach to skills policies included:

- Stakeholders strongly support the establishment of a National Skills Council.
- Stakeholders agree that the power and membership of sectoral skills councils (SSCs) should be expanded, including by including representatives of the social partners on SSCs and by expanding the scope of SSCs beyond VET.
- Regulation of the Consultative Council on VET (CCVET) should be adapted to ensure the CCVET is convened more frequently, including broadening the role of convening the CCVET.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to building and better utilising evidence in skills development and use included:

- Some stakeholders suggested expanding the role and capacity of the existing Centre for Information Provision of Education (CIPE) rather than creating a new centre for data collection. However, MES responded that CIPE is under MES and it would be better to create a new centre that works across government and is not only housed within MES. Other stakeholders suggested the new data collection centre be “inter-institutional” rather than “cross-governmental” to include non-governmental institutions as well.
 - The OECD edited the instrument to propose creating a new inter-institutional data and evidence centre.
- The instruments on identifying opportunities to improve information and evidence and establishing formal and informal networks with experts can be deleted.
 - The OECD chose to keep the instrument on establishing formal and informal networks with experts from academia, research institutes, social partners, NGOs and the private sector because, from the international expertise of the OECD, involving these types of partners in data collaboration is very important for improving the quality and use of data related to skills policy.

Stakeholder feedback on the activities and instruments related to ensuring well-targeted and sustainable financing of skills policies included:

- Rather than “setting expenditure targets” the instrument should focus on “setting targets for increased expenditure”.
 - The OECD chose to keep the original wording of “setting expenditure targets” because, from the experience of the OECD, setting clear expenditure targets can lead to better allocation of funds for skills policy regardless of whether or not the targets are increasing.

Responsibilities

Identifying which institution(s) should be responsible for each instrument was a focus of the workshop as well as bilateral meetings with ministries and the regional consultation. The questions related to responsibilities that were posed by the OECD to stakeholders throughout the consultations included:

- Do you agree with the approach of designating one “lead” responsible for each instrument and at least one “partner” for each instrument? To what level of detail should responsible institutions be named?
- How can the responsibilities be improved? For all instruments for which your institution has been designated a lead or partner, do you agree with this responsibility? Are there any other instruments

for which your institution should be listed in the “responsibilities” column as a lead or a partner where it is not?

- For instruments where more than one “lead” has been specified, which institution should be the lead?

Stakeholders agreed that it would be most clear if only one “lead” institution was assigned per instrument. In addition, stakeholders preferred to assign responsibility at the level of the ministry or agency rather than at the level of departments within the institution, because these specific departments change relatively frequently.

During the workshop, regional consultation, and information request, stakeholders were asked to review all instruments for which they were assigned responsibility (whether as the lead or as a partner), and to reflect if they agree with this assigned responsibility. Furthermore, they were asked to review the remaining instruments to identify any instruments for which they were not assigned responsibility where they should be responsible.

In general stakeholders suggested that the social partners be added as partners in responsibility for a number of instruments. In addition, sub-national stakeholders requested that municipalities and other sub-national entities be added to the assigned responsibilities for a broader range of instruments.

More specific feedback provided by stakeholders on responsibilities are detailed below, according to the three pillars of the OECD framework. Unless stated otherwise, the OECD has adopted this feedback in the revised responsibilities for the action plan.

Developing relevant skills over the life course

Stakeholder feedback on responsibilities related to developing relevant skills through early childhood education and care (ECEC), formal education and adult education and training included:

- The Ministry of Health, the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) and sub-national actors such as municipalities should be added as partners in responsibility for a number of instruments related to ECEC.
- MLSP should be deleted as a partner for a number of instruments related to ECEC as these fall outside of the purview of MLSP.
- More partners should be added to the responsibilities for the Objective on curriculum reform in formal education, including municipalities, employers’ associations and universities.
 - The OECD did indeed add municipalities and universities as partners for several instruments under this Objective. However, the OECD did not find any instruments for which the OECD saw it fit to add employers’ associations as a partner.
- More partners should be added to the responsibilities for certain instruments for the Objective related to improving equity in formal education, including MLSP, the Social Assistance Agency, REDs, kindergartens and schools, social service providers and the Agency for Quality of Social Services.
 - The OECD did indeed add the Social Assistance Agency, REDs, kindergartens and schools, social service providers and the Agency for Quality of Social Services as partners to the responsibilities’ column for a number of instruments for this Objective. However, the OECD did not find any instruments for which the OECD saw it fit to add MLSP as a partner.
- Social partners should be added as a partner in responsibility for a number of instruments related to developing a highly skilled teaching workforce.
- Policies like providing financial support for businesses to provide WBL require a whole-of-government approach as related responsibilities span across ministries.

- Municipalities and social partners should be a partner in responsibility for more instruments related to VET under the Objective on making VET and HE more responsive to labour market needs, and possibly a lead in some cases. For some instruments, MEI, MIG, and the Programme for Education Agency should also be added as partners.
- MLSP should be removed as a lead or transferred from a lead to a partner for a number of instruments under the Objective on making VET and HE more responsive to labour market needs.
- The instrument related to strengthening the role and responsibility of sectoral skills councils and subnational employment committees should be led by MES, not MLSP, and MLSP should be a partner.
- The social partners, municipalities, and the Ministry of Finance should be added as partners in responsibility for a number of instruments for the Objective related to increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult education and training.
- The responsibilities for a number of instruments for the Objectives related to making adult education and training more flexible and accessible and improving the quality and relevance of adult education and training should be adjusted such as declaring MES or MLSP as the lead or partners, or adding the social partners, MEI and/or MIG as partners.

Using skills effectively in work and society

Stakeholder feedback on responsibilities related to using skills effectively in work and society included:

- NEA, municipalities, and the SAA should be added as partners to specific instruments for the Objective related to activating the skills of vulnerable groups in the labour market.
- MLSP removed itself as the lead responsible entity for a number of instruments for the Objective related to fostering return emigration and skilled immigration to Bulgaria and for the Objective related to supporting enterprises to utilise workers' skills more effectively.
- The social partners and MIG should be added to the responsibility partners for a number of instruments for the Objective related to supporting enterprises to utilise workers' skills more effectively.

Strengthening the governance of skills systems

Stakeholder feedback on responsibilities related to strengthening the governance of skills systems included:

- Branch and sectoral organisations and education and training providers should be added as partners to a number of instruments for the Objective related to developing a whole-of-government and stakeholder-inclusive approach to skills policies.
- NSI, NEA, Bulgarian Academy of Science, universities, SSCs and research organisations should be added as responsible partners for several instruments for the objective related to building and better utilising evidence in skills development and use.
- The data and evidence centre should be the lead responsible entity for the instrument on establishing formal and informal networks with a wide range of experts to collaborate with the centre.
- The Skills Policy Council should have a leading role in a number of the instruments under the Objective related to ensuring well-targeted and sustainable financing of skills policies.
- Social partners should be added as partners for the instrument on expanding membership of the sectoral skills councils (SSCs).

Timelines

The timelines for implementing instruments were primarily discussed during bilateral meetings with ministries, and the OECD requested further input from stakeholders about timelines in the information request. The questions related to timelines that were posed by the OECD to stakeholders throughout the consultations included:

- Do you agree with the identification of an implementation timeline indicating the expected timeline by which the instrument should be fully implemented (e.g. short term (<2 years), medium term (2-4 years), and long term (4-6 years))?
- For all instruments relevant to your institution, is the instrument already active? If not, when should each instrument be fully active (short term (<2 years), medium term (2-4 years), or long term (4-6 years))?
- Would it be helpful to also designate a preparation timeline for each instrument indicating what year after the action plan is adopted the preparation for the instrument should begin?

Stakeholders across ministries agreed it would be helpful for each proposed instrument to designate the expected time required to fully implement the instrument from the adoption of a skills action plan.

Given that the Objectives identified in the Output 1 report are defined as medium-term goals for skills policy in Bulgaria, stakeholders agreed with the OECD proposal to designate proposed instruments as either short-term (up to 2 years from the adoption of a skills action plan), medium-term (2-4 years from the adoption of a skills action plan), or long-term (4-6 years from the adoption of a skills action plan). However, stakeholders also noted that, particularly for some Objectives, several instruments are already being implemented to some degree, and so the category of “Implemented already” was added to the tables sent to stakeholders in the information request. In the final proposal there are no longer any instruments designated as “implemented already”. In addition, one ministry expressed that it would be challenging for them to distinguish between the medium-term and long-term categories for some of the instruments under their responsibility, and therefore requested to indicate both these categories in instances where there is uncertainty. In the final proposal this was not requested by the same ministry.

The OECD discussed with stakeholders the possibility of also designating a preparation timeline for each instrument to indicate when preparation should begin in order to reach the implementation timeline goal (e.g. preparation should begin in year 1 of implementation, year 2, etc. reflecting that different instruments can require a different length of preparation), but stakeholders ultimately decided not to include a preparation timeline. Most stakeholders agreed that implementation timelines are more helpful to them than preparation timelines, and that the process would be more streamlined by focusing only on implementation timelines. Furthermore, stakeholders stressed during consultations that implementation timelines in the Output 2 report should be viewed as aspirational, and that more prescriptive timelines will only be set when Bulgaria develops its skills action plan.

Funding

Potential funding sources for the proposed instruments were primarily discussed during the group discussion on funding sources and the bilateral meetings with ministries, and were also a central focus of the OECD information request sent to stakeholders. The questions related to funding sources that were posed by the OECD to stakeholders throughout the consultations included:

- Are there any funding sources other than those listed in the OECD’s discussion handout, for funding a skills action plan in Bulgaria?
- What does the funding allocation process look like?
- Who is involved in funding decisions?

- Generally, in which areas are there funding gaps?
- Do you agree with the OECD categorisation of funding sources (e.g. international funds, State/national funds, sub-national funds, enterprise funds, household/individual funds)?
- For all instruments relevant to your institution which categories of potential funding sources could be relevant?
- For all instruments relevant to your institution, which specific funds could be used to finance that instrument?

During the group discussion on funding sources, stakeholders shared the processes by which public funding is allocated in Bulgaria. As stakeholders described, the allocation of the State budget in Bulgaria is strictly regulated in the State Budget Act which is passed annually. Thus, on an annual basis, each ministry receives the amount allocated to it to implement measures in its area of policy. However, due to the three-year budgetary procedure in Bulgaria, ministries can have some forward planning, as they know the amount of funds they will receive from the State budget for three years into the future. A challenge expressed by stakeholders during the consultations is that there is currently no State budget due to the recent political uncertainty in Bulgaria, which has implications for the spending capabilities of all government authorities.

Stakeholders further explained that allocating State funds to different areas within a given ministry is done through an annual action plan passed by the Council of Ministers, rather than being allocated internally within the ministry. However, throughout the year, officials within the ministry have the option of reallocating or shifting funds from certain interventions to others.

With regard to allocating EU funds, there are a number of national agencies in Bulgaria responsible for allocating EU programme funds across the Bulgarian government. For example, The Executive Agency Programme for Education is an executive agency under MES, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF+), that is responsible for allocating funds associated with the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). Another example is the Centre for Human Resource Development, which is a national agency for administering funding from the Erasmus+ programme. These agencies create annual work plans for allocating funding, which follow a procedure for European funding that involves large-scale exercises for justifying the need for the programmes, pricing out interventions, and establishing relevant indicators. Officials from ministries explained that ministries in Bulgaria generally have a directorate responsible for EU funds that communicates to the rest of the ministry the EU funds available to the ministry and for which interventions they are applicable.

With these conventions for allocating funding in Bulgaria in mind, stakeholders and OECD colleagues agreed that it would be most useful to Bulgaria to gather information on two aspects of funding sources for each instrument in the Output 2 report: potential funding categories (e.g. international, State/national, sub-national, enterprise, and/or household/individual funds) and, within these categories, specific potential funding sources (e.g. ESF+, RRP, Erasmus+, MES budget, etc.). As with the timelines (see above), stakeholders stressed the importance of referring and relating to these funding categories and sources as “potential”, as it is too soon to determine whether these categories and sources will indeed fund the instrument. This is because the timelines and flexibility for funding sources vary greatly in Bulgaria, which makes it possible to be very specific about funding sources for certain instruments and not very specific for others. They also noted that funding sources and their availability has a very strong connection to the timeline in which it is feasible to implement the instrument. Thus, funding uncertainty can lead to challenges in fixing an implementation timeline for the instrument.

Stakeholders agreed that the potential funding categories should be: international funds, State/national funds, sub-national funds, enterprise funds, and/or household/individual funds. In addition, stakeholders agreed that it would be useful to identify the name(s) of specific funds that could be used to fund the instrument to the greatest degree of specificity possible, even if the same level of specificity is not possible for other instruments. Stakeholders also noted that some international funds already have a fixed ratio of

co-financing from the State budget (e.g. European Regional Development Fund [ERDF] programmes receive 85% funding from ERDF and 15% funding from the State budget), and that this should be specified where possible in the funding sources column in the OECD information request. Furthermore, the OECD confirmed during consultations that estimates of the budget for implementing each instrument is outside the scope of the project, and the Output 2 report will include only potential funding sources and not potential funding amounts. Along with timelines, funding sources are the primary information the OECD collected from stakeholders via information requests.

Statistics

While establishing performance benchmarks was a component of Output 1 and developing a monitoring framework will be a focus of Output 3, a group discussion was held on the topic of statistics in order to meet and pose initial questions to relevant experts. The questions related to statistics that were posed by the OECD to stakeholders during the group discussion included:

- What are the main data sources for benchmarking and monitoring the proposed activities for a skills action plan?
- Is the data located primarily in the National Statistical Institute (NSI)? Within specific ministries? Elsewhere?
- Generally, in which areas are there data gaps?
- What is the process of developing a new indicator?
- Who could be data partners or contributors?

During the discussion, stakeholders discussed possible data sources for establishing benchmarks and monitoring indicators for a skills action plan, the quality and reliability of data in Bulgaria, and sharing data across Bulgaria's skills ecosystem.

Stakeholders shared which types of data are housed in various institutions in Bulgaria. Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (NSI) collates some administrative data and has general surveys such as the Labour Force Survey, the Adult Education Survey, and other household surveys. However, stakeholders noted that more detailed data is found within the various ministries and agencies. For example, MES houses administrative data collected from ECEC institutions and schools while MLSP has data on employment, unemployment and inactivity. The NEA collects data on the profiles of registered unemployed individuals by a number of characteristics (e.g. age, education level) and also collects information on individuals' experiences in the labour market through their CVs. NAVET stores data on VET and guidance centres including types of courses provided and in demand, information on course participants (e.g. age, gender, place of residence), and sources of funding for paying for courses. NAVET also collects self-assessment reports from VET providers and conducts a survey on the satisfaction of VET trainers. MEI holds data on the implementation of Bulgaria's SME strategy (e.g. data on the use of EU funds allocated for upskilling in SMEs). In addition, the Institute for Social and Trade Union Research carries out empirical surveys in areas such as digital skills and skills validation. Stakeholders also discussed European-wide surveys that experts in Bulgaria often use in their analysis, such as the European Social Survey, the Health Status and Aging in Europe Survey, and the CEDEFOP survey on vacancies and job-seekers.

Stakeholders shared that the quality and reliability of the data available in Bulgaria is not uniform and that each type of dataset has advantages and disadvantages. For example, ministries and agencies only periodically send their data to NSI, which then validates the data. As such, administrative data from ministries and agencies is more detailed and available in real time, which allows for a more up-to-date analysis. On the other hand, stakeholders expressed that the quality of NSI data is higher, as it is validated, and that it can be more difficult to work with administrative data from ministries and agencies. In addition, stakeholders stated that the different institutions need to modernise their IT systems in order to further improve the quality and reliability of the data they collect. One stakeholder noted that trade unions use

quality assurance measures for collecting data to ensure the data quality. As stakeholders said, these factors should all be taken into account when establishing benchmarks and formulating indicators for a skills action plan.

Stakeholders mentioned that there are some efforts underway to modernise IT systems in order to create a direct connection between the data registers of various agencies and expressed hopes that this would provide officials with greater access to administrative data to use for monitoring purposes.

4 Suggested skills activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

This section presents the OECD’s proposal for activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources for inclusion in Bulgaria’s action plan for skills, based on the desktop analysis (Chapter 2) and stakeholder consultations (Chapter 3). These activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources are organised into four sections, derived from the OECD framework used also in Output 1. Each section includes a table outlining the relevant objectives and policy actions determined in Output 1 as well as the activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources added in Output 2. The four sections are:

- Developing youth skills (see Table 7)
- Developing adult skills (see Table 8)
- Using skills effectively (see Table 9)
- Strengthening the governance of skills systems (see Table 10).

In the tables below, all objectives, policy actions, activities, and instruments have been numbered to ease reference and cross-referencing for this and following reports. In some cases, policy actions determined during Output 1 were renamed and/or restructured to better reflect changes that were made to activities and instruments beneath them. In addition, stakeholders noted during consultations that the instruments should be made more concrete and actionable. To that end, for instruments lacking concrete measures after stakeholder consultations and additional comments from stakeholders through the OECD’s information request, the OECD has proposed examples of more concrete measures from which Bulgaria can choose (all, some, one, or alternate measures) when developing its action plan for skills. For instruments for which the OECD has proposed these examples, the responsibilities, timelines, and potential funding sources correspond to whichever measure(s) Bulgaria chooses to include in the action plan for skills. The level of specificity of funding sources varies greatly across instruments displayed in the tables below. This is largely due to challenges in determining funding sources when the timeline for the adoption of an action plan for skills by Bulgaria’s government has not yet been determined. For each instrument in the tables below the most specific funding source that has been identified is displayed.

Developing youth skills

Bulgaria’s action plan for skills will cover the theme of “developing relevant skills over the life course”. To ensure that Bulgaria is able to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world, all people need access to opportunities to develop and maintain strong proficiency in a broad set of skills. This process begins with the foundations set in early childhood and youth. Building on the objectives related to developing youth skills that were previously agreed to in this project (Output 1), Table 7 proposes policy actions, activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources to include in Bulgaria’s action plan for skills.

Table 7. Developing youth skills: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
Objective 1: Improving early childhood development, participation and outcomes			
Policy Action 1.1: Increasing the participation of young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) ¹			
Activity 1.1.1: Improve access to ECEC and the transition to primary education for every child			
1.1.1.1 Expand the number of places in ECEC in municipalities with current shortages. This can be done by renovating and expanding existing kindergartens as well as constructing new kindergartens.	Lead: Municipalities Partners: Ministry of Education and Science (MES), Ministry of Health (MH)	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) budget State/national: State budget
1.1.1.2 Encourage joint activities between kindergarten and primary school students that take place within primary schools to familiarise kindergarten students with primary school before they enrol themselves. This could be done, for example, by providing pedagogical and/or financial support for such joint activities.	Lead: Municipalities Partners: MES, kindergartens, schools	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given

¹ This refers to pre-primary education or ISCED 0.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
Activity 1.1.2: Expand general and additional support for participating in ECEC for children and their parents			
1.1.2.1 Establish centres providing Early Childhood Development (ECD) services ² for children from vulnerable groups and their parents, including educational, linguistic, social and health services.	Lead: MES Partners: Municipalities, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), MH, Social Assistance Agency (SAA)	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (2024-2029)
1.1.2.2 Provide tailored outreach and information to parents from vulnerable backgrounds, such as those of Roma origin, about the benefits of ECEC and assistance related to ECEC that is available to parents. This could be done, for example, by delivering tailored information sessions or conducting home visits in collaboration with community leaders and organisations.	Lead: Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres Partners: MES, municipalities, MH, SAA, community organisations	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
1.1.2.3 Engage all parents of young children in ECEC more effectively, including through information, training, parent-teacher engagement, and by offering psychological and pedagogical support, and access to specialists in health and social services.	Lead: ECD centres Partners: MES, municipalities, MH	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
Policy Action 1.2: Improving the quality of ECEC			
Activity 1.2.1: Improve the quality of pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff in ECEC			
1.2.1.1 Reduce the child:staff ratio in ECEC classrooms and groups by changing the regulatory framework.	Lead: MES Partners: National Association of the Municipalities in Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB), MH, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

² These centres would provide general and additional support for young children beyond those provided in ECEC classrooms and groups, such as the support described in instruments 1.1.2.2 and 1.1.2.3.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
1.2.1.2 Increase access to initial and/or continuous professional development (CPD) training (e.g. training in early childhood development, health promotion, and hygiene) for pedagogical and non-pedagogical ECEC staff in both public and private preschools and kindergartens. This can be done, for example, by improving the quality of CPD programmes, establishing mentoring programmes, or encouraging greater collaboration and peer learning.	Lead: MES Partners: MH, municipalities, Regional Education Departments (REDs)	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: National qualification programmes
1.2.1.3 Increase the attractiveness of professions in ECEC institutions. This could be done, for example, by raising salaries and benefits, creating initiatives to foster a more supportive working environment, or offering better opportunities for personal development and career progression in the field.	Lead: MES Partners: Municipalities, REDs	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national
Activity 1.2.2: Standardise measures to assess quality in ECEC			
1.2.2.1 Develop and implement a National Quality Framework in ECEC, including developing quality assurance indicators and benchmarks to enable periodic monitoring and analysis.	Lead: MES Partners: MLSP, State Agency for Child Protection, MH, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: European Commission DG REFORM

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
Objective 2: Ensuring that curriculum reform and assessment practices improve students' skills³			
Policy Action 2.1: Building awareness and capacity for competency-based curriculum implementation			
Activity 2.1.1: Increase the active involvement of stakeholders in implementing curriculum reform			
2.1.1.1 Clearly communicate the rationale, expected benefits and desired outcomes related to the implementation of curriculum reform to education stakeholders (e.g. government officials, experts, teachers, school leaders and local authorities). This can be done, for example, by setting up an interactive online portal and holding information sessions/workshops on the new curriculum.	Lead: MES Partners: Social partners, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+, Programme "Education", "Improving the quality of general education through effective implementation of a competence model"
2.1.1.2 Provide education stakeholders with resources for implementing the curriculum reform (e.g. tools designed for schools and teachers, relevant indicators and targets for government officials to monitor reform implementation).	Lead: MES Partners: Municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+, Programme "Education", "Improving the quality of general education through effective implementation of a competence model"
Activity 2.1.2: Reinforce the capacity of Regional Education Departments (REDs) to provide methodological support to teachers in implementing the competency-based curriculum			
2.1.2.1 Conduct a review of the REDs' capacity and resources for providing methodological support to teachers in implementing the competency-based curriculum.	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, municipalities, universities	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
2.1.2.2 Build capacity and upskill experts within REDs to support and mentor teachers to implement the competency-based curriculum (e.g. providing teachers with methods to achieve desired outcomes of the competency-based curriculum, providing training to REDs staff, etc.).	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, municipalities, universities	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: National qualification programmes

³ The instruments for this objective are applicable for primary and secondary education or ISCED levels 1-3.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
2.1.2.3 Increase REDs' resources as needed while monitoring REDs' activities to ensure effective support for competency-based curriculum implementation.	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
Policy Action 2.2: Improve assessment practices to monitor students' skill levels			
Activity 2.2.1: Align external assessments with the competency-based curriculum			
2.2.1.1 Introduce test items that are able to assess students' competencies in relevant, practical contexts and focus less on student memorisation of knowledge (e.g. constructed-response items that measure a student's ability to formulate an argument and defend a point of view).	Lead: MES – Centre for Evaluation of Pre-school and School Education (CAPSE) Partners: municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+, Programme "Education", "Improving the quality of general education through effective implementation of a competence model"
2.2.1.2 Develop an item bank/database with calibrated test items to increase the validity of the test.	Lead: MES - CAPSE Partners: universities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+, Programme "Education", "Improving the quality of general education through effective implementation of a competence model"
Activity 2.2.2: Strengthen the national external assessment system			
2.2.2.1 Prioritise investments in essential psychometric resources to strengthen the national assessment system, such as installing a criterion-referenced scoring process to compare results over time, including introducing performance levels and aligning these with Bulgaria's national learning standards.	Lead: MES - CAPSE Partners: universities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
2.2.2.2 Ensure CAPSE has sufficient financial and technical resources to implement the outlined reforms to the national external assessments.	Lead: MES Partners: universities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
Objective 3: Improving equity in education⁴			
Policy Action 3.1: Promoting educational equity among different types of students			
Activity 3.1.1: Support full participation in the educational process of children and students with different educational needs (including students in special education and gifted students)			
3.1.1.1 Develop functional tools to assess the educational needs of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and chronic diseases.	Lead: MES Partners: Regional Support Centres for Inclusive Education	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: EU "Inclusive Education Project"
3.1.1.2 Improve infrastructure and innovative educational technologies in schools for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), in order to personalise their learning.	Lead: MES Partners: Regional Support Centres for Inclusive Education	Long-term (4-6yr)	State/national: National Park "Modernisation of the Educational Environment"
3.1.1.3 Increase the resources allocated to address the educational needs of gifted students. This can be done, for example, by allocating additional resources to hire and train more teachers to work with gifted students, to develop and implement enrichment programs, and to provide scholarships and subsidies for student participation in academic competitions.	Lead: MES Partners: Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Culture, Personal Development Support Centres (PDSCs)	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: National Programme "School Olympiads and Competitions"
Activity 3.1.2: Better tailor educational services to the needs of specific students or groups of students			
3.1.2.1 Encourage partnerships between schools and Personal Development Support Centres (PDSCs) for early identification of students' abilities and to promote students' development through school support teams. This can include, for example, incorporating additional specialists and digital technologies in schools to support a more individual approach to learning.	Lead: MES Partners: PDSCs, schools, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Culture, REDs	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

⁴ The instruments for this objective are applicable for early childhood education, primary and secondary education or ISCED levels 0-3.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
3.1.2.2 Develop and implement tools to identify the risk of student dropout and prevent dropouts from the compulsory education system.	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, Municipalities, MLSP, State Agency for Child Protection	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
Policy Action 3.2: Encouraging multicultural understanding and social integration of students in the school environment			
Activity 3.2.1: Foster multicultural understanding in schools			
3.2.1.1 Promote understanding and positive attitudes towards ethnic and cultural diversity and identity in the school environment. This can be done, for example, by launching community awareness campaigns, encouraging parental involvement in the educational process in a multicultural environment, and promoting cultural exchange programmes and multicultural events.	Lead: MES Partners: Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (CEICSEM)	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
3.2.1.2 Improve and expand training for teachers and non-pedagogical school staff to promote equity and multicultural understanding among students. Trainings could focus on, for example, working in a multicultural educational environment and dealing with aggression, discrimination and violence in a school setting.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
3.2.1.3 Provide tailored outreach, information and psychological and pedagogical support services to parents from multicultural backgrounds, to encourage their involvement in the educational process, including employing and training educational mediators to bridge the gap between the school and parents from multicultural backgrounds.	Lead: MES Partners: CEICSEM, REDs, municipalities, schools, SAA	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
3.2.1.4 Create partnerships between schools and local communities to create a supportive community environment. This could be done, for example, by sponsoring inter-school educational and extra-curricular activities in the community, facilitating greater cooperation and interaction between the staff of different schools in the same community, and involving existing community organisations in school programming.	Lead: MES Partners: Kindergartens, schools, municipalities, REDs	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: "Success for You project
Activity 3.2.2: Support greater integration of vulnerable students into the school environment			
3.2.2.1 Provide additional Bulgarian language training for children from vulnerable groups, including Roma and migrant students. This could include, for example, offering additional language-focused programmes in the preschool and school environment and providing teachers with additional methodological support and teaching aides for teaching Bulgarian.	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, kindergartens, schools, ECD centres, SAA	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: „Active Inclusion in the Pre-school Education System“ project
3.2.2.2 Provide additional support for students from small and rural settlements to participate in education. This could include, for example, free or subsidised meals, transportation, textbooks and study aides.	Lead: MES Partners: Kindergartens, schools, municipalities, REDs	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
3.2.2.3 Improve the reputation and attractiveness of VET among target vulnerable groups to encourage students from these groups to acquire a profession. This can be done, for example, by strengthening career guidance services, particularly for students from vulnerable groups; bringing industry representatives into schools; and arranging site-visits for	Lead: MES Partners: Social partners, municipalities, Regional Support Centres for Inclusive Education	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: Modernising vocational education and training project (2023-2027), Domino 2 project under the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (2024-2028)

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
students to VET schools and relevant workplaces.			
3.2.2.4 Provide and improve integrated services for educational, social, psychological and health support for students in schools. This could include, for example, utilising data to identify needs, track student progress, and evaluate the effectiveness of integrated services as well as sharing good practices of integrated services between schools.	Lead: MES Partners: REDs, MH, municipalities, schools, social service providers, Agency for Quality of Social Services, SAA	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
Objective 4: Developing a highly skilled teaching workforce⁵			
Policy Action 4.1: Selecting, preparing and retaining high-quality teaching candidates			
Activity 4.1.1: Introduce a more selective and comprehensive admission system for initial teacher education (ITE) to ensure the suitability and quality of teaching candidates			
4.1.1.1 Create a working group gathering university representatives to encourage ITE providers to establish a common minimum threshold score for ITE admission based on State Matura scores and additional criteria for assessing ITE applicants.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
4.1.1.2 Develop additional, more comprehensive selection criteria (e.g. specific entrance exams, candidate interviews, assessment of soft skills) for assessing ITE applicants and determine the weight to be given to each of these different criteria in the new ITE admission system.	Lead: Working group on ITE for teachers Partners: Universities, MES	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
4.1.1.3 Incentivise employees from industry to enrol in ITE and become teachers in VET. This can be done, for example, by supporting ITE providers and social partners to collaborate on	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, social partners, MLSP	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given

⁵ The instruments for this objective are applicable for primary and secondary education or ISCED levels 1-3.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
promoting the benefits of and opportunities for industry experts to join the teaching profession.			
Activity 4.1.2: Improve the quality and relevance of initial teacher education (ITE) by aligning it more closely with classroom practice, including by expanding and supporting teaching practicum			
4.1.2.1 Expand practical classroom-based learning opportunities for teacher trainees, as well as practical work-based learning through periodic internships in real working environments for VET teachers. This can be done, for example, through regulation, specific university policies and targeted programmes with public funding.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ programme "Dual Higher Education"
4.1.2.2 Diversify the profile of teachers delivering course content during ITE, including inviting more current teachers to ITE classrooms (including teachers working in rural and disadvantaged schools). This can be done, for example, by providing time and incentives to selected teachers to deliver ITE.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
4.1.2.3 Improve and expand mandatory training to better prepare teacher mentors for their roles, including mentors in dual education.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
Policy Action 4.2: Monitoring and improving the development of teachers' skills and knowledge			
Activity 4.2.1: Align continuing professional development (CPD) programmes more closely to teachers' training needs by improving the collection and use of appraisal, assessment and evaluation data in CPD planning			
4.2.1.1 Develop and disseminate an annual, school-based formative appraisal to generate evidence on teachers', staff's and principals' training needs.	Lead: MES Partners: Municipalities, schools	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
4.2.1.2 Systematically collect, synthesise and use aggregated findings on training needs from teacher and staff appraisals, students' results from national external assessments and school results from external evaluations and information from classroom observations.	Lead: MES Partners: Municipalities, continuing professional development (CPD) providers, schools	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
4.2.1.3 Require / encourage CPD providers to develop their programmes around priorities determined by the collection and synthesis of the above data.	Lead: MES Partners: CPD providers, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
Activity 4.2.2: Strengthen the quality assurance of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) through preliminary assessment of the CPD offer and systematic evaluation of CPD outcomes			
4.2.2.1 Expand the functions and strengthen the capacity of the National Inspectorate for Education to develop and implement a data-driven mechanism for assessing the quality of CPD programmes for teachers and other school staff, enabling inspections of CPD providers receiving poor feedback.	Lead: MES Partners: CPD providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
4.2.2.2 Introduce / develop indicators to evaluate CPD programmes' effectiveness (e.g. outcome indicators such as newly acquired knowledge and skills; improved quality of student-teacher interaction based on teachers' surveys and teacher appraisals; process indicators such as material, equipment, and facilities; and number of training hours delivered).	Lead: MES Partners: CPD providers	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
4.2.2.3 Invest in capacity building to ensure all registered CPD providers are re-assessed on an ongoing basis based on the measured quality of their CPD offerings.	Lead: MES Partners: CPD providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
Objective 5: Making vocational and higher education more responsive to labour market needs⁶			
Policy Action 5.1: Strengthening the role of stakeholders in the development and provision of initial Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes, including skills related to the digital and green economy			
Activity 5.1.1: Activate employers and local stakeholders in VET planning and provision at the regional level			
5.1.1.1 Give Regional Development Councils a formal role in steering initial VET provision. This should be done by including VET stakeholders in existing employment committees under Regional Development Councils, and strengthening and expanding their mandate to communicate VET-relevant insights and needs to the central government, sectoral skills councils and local VET schools.	Lead: Regional Development Councils Partners: MES, municipalities, National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: MES budget Enterprise
5.1.1.2 Strengthen employers' role, including at the regional level, in the planning of places for State-subsidised enrolment in VET.	Lead: MES Partners: Social partners, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: MES budget Enterprise
Activity 5.1.2: Improve financial and non-financial support to enterprises and students to engage in work-based learning (WBL)			
5.1.2.1 Develop a policy for providing financial support to encourage and support businesses, especially SMEs, to provide WBL opportunities to VET students (e.g. apprentice wage subsidies, tax deductions for training apprentices and subsidising training for student mentors).	Lead: MES Partners: Ministry of the Economy and Industry (MEI), Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG), Social partners, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: EBRD, ESF+ State/national: MES budget Enterprise
5.1.2.2 Incentivise the establishment of training associations to share the costs of organising apprenticeships among groups of SMEs. These apprenticeships could be funded, for example, by tripartite sectoral training funds.	Lead: MES Partners: NAVET, social partners, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+, Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme (2024-2029) State/national

⁶ The instruments for this objective are applicable for secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary, and tertiary education or ISCED levels 2-8.

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
5.1.2.3 Strengthen the role and responsibility of sectoral skills councils and subnational employment committees with an expanded mandate in VET to support employers and schools to expand WBL in VET (e.g. helping to establish partnerships between schools and employers and informing enterprises about government incentives for apprenticeships).	Lead: MES Partners: MLSP, NAVET, social partners, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ State/national: MES budget
5.1.2.4 Increase access to subsidised transportation for secondary VET students to attend school and WBL. This could be done, for example, by easing the administrative processes to receive subsidies and/or broadening eligibility for such subsidies.	Lead: MES Partners: municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: MES budget
Policy Action 5.2: Increasing the relevance of higher education to labour market and student needs			
Activity 5.2.1: Strengthen higher education institutions' capacity to align their educational offers in relevant fields of study with labour market needs			
5.2.1.1 Develop a system for automatically generating user-friendly labour market information (LMI) indicators annually for higher education institutions (e.g. graduate labour market outcomes by degree programme and level of study), to inform their course offerings.	Lead: MES Partners: Higher education institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: MES budget
5.2.1.2 Adjust public higher education funding settings, including places for State-subsidised enrolment, to increase enrolments and completions in fields facing shortages and/or of strategic importance.	Lead: MES Partners: Higher education institutions, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: MES budget
5.2.1.3 Utilise information from the planned national graduate survey and the improved skills assessment and anticipation activities when determining	Lead: MES Partners: Higher education institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+, Erasmus+ State/national: MES budget

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential funding sources
the number of state-subsidised places by field and region.			
5.2.1.4 Make greater use of performance-based funding in higher education by increasing the share of institutions' funding based on the employment outcomes of their graduates.	Lead: MES Partners: Higher education institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: MES budget
5.2.1.5 Strengthen linkages between VET and higher education in relevant fields of study, for example by aligning admission requirements and/or by easing administrative processes for moving between VET and HE institutions.	Lead: MES Partners: NAVET, higher education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions, social partners, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+, Erasmus+ State/national: MES budget
Activity 5.2.2: Continue to provide financial aid and expand non-financial measures to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education, especially in programmes meeting priority skills needs			
5.2.2.1 Expand financial incentives (e.g. scholarships) to disadvantaged students to access higher education.	Lead: MES Partners: Programme for Education Agency, Higher education institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national: MES budget
5.2.2.2 Provide financial incentives (e.g. earmarked and/or performance-based funding) to higher education institutions to implement non-financial support (e.g. mentoring and/or additional tutoring) for disadvantaged students to succeed in university programmes, particularly in institutions offering programmes that meet critical skills needs in the labour market.	Lead: MES Partners: Higher education institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+, Erasmus+ State/national: MES budget

Developing adult skills

As part of the theme of “developing relevant skills over the life course”, Bulgaria’s action plan for skills will also cover the development of adult skills. The process of skill development is lifelong, starting in childhood and youth and continuing throughout adulthood. It is also “life-wide”, occurring not only formally in schools, but also non-formally and informally in the home, community and workplaces. Building on the objectives related to developing adult skills that were previously agreed to in this project (Output 1), Table 8 proposes policy actions, activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources to include in Bulgaria’s action plan for skills.

Table 8. Developing adult skills: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Objective 6: Increasing motivation among adults and employers to participate in adult learning			
Policy Action 6.1: Improving guidance to increase motivation among individuals and employers (including SMEs) to participate in adult education and training			
Activity 6.1.1: Strengthen holistic career guidance services for employed adults			
6.1.1.1 Provide support and incentives to information and guidance centres, including those of the National Employment Agency (NEA), to improve their capacity to provide career guidance services through multiple communication mediums (e.g. in person, via phone and online) and to tailor outreach and guidance for multiple target audiences (e.g. older Bulgarians, low-skilled workers and individuals working in sectors at risk of automation).	Lead: NAVET Partners: NEA, MES, MLSP, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ Human Resources Development Programme (HRDP), Erasmus+ State/national
Activity 6.1.2: Strengthen guidance to employers to assess their skills and training needs			
6.1.2.1 Strengthen information and support to employers, particularly SMEs, on assessing their skills and training needs (e.g. providing access to online skills assessment tools) and on finding suitable training opportunities to provide to their employees.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP, Erasmus+ State/national: Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) budget Enterprise: Enterprise budgets, social partners budgets
Policy Action 6.2: Improving financial mechanisms to increase motivation among individuals and employers (including SMEs) to participate in adult education and training			
Activity 6.2.1: Improve the effectiveness of individual training vouchers			
6.2.1.1 Extend support through vouchers and introduce training vouchers that are available to all employed and unemployed individuals and reduce the co-finance rate for vulnerable groups (e.g. those with average or below average qualification levels, older workers, low-income individuals and individuals in occupations at risk of automation).	Lead: MLSP Partners: MES, NAVET, social partners, municipalities	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
6.2.1.2 Develop a list of courses that are eligible for the training vouchers informed by subjects deemed to be of national and/or regional importance, as well as relevant for current and future labour market needs, and tailor the list to meet specific local/regional needs.	Lead: MLSP Partners: MES, NAVET, NEA, social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: ALMP Budget Sub-national: Municipality budgets, NEA budget
Activity 6.2.2: Better engage small- and medium-sized enterprises in adult education and training by piloting a sectoral training fund(s), with relatively higher support for smaller-sized enterprises			
6.2.2.1 Pilot sectoral training funds in one or two sectors, through the planned sectoral skills councils, by providing public co-financing for the sectoral training funds with greater public support (and smaller enterprise contributions) for SMEs.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs), MES, social partners, municipalities	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP (subject to additional clarification) State/national: ALMP Budget Sub-national: Municipality budgets Enterprise: Enterprises
6.2.2.2 Consider implementing a levy scheme to mandate sectoral training fund contributions from enterprises if uptake is low for voluntary contributions.	Lead: Ministry of Finance Partners: MLSP, SSCs, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national Enterprise: Enterprises
6.2.2.3 Designate a dedicated institution (e.g. the Skills Policy Council) to oversee and support the implementation of the sectoral training fund pilot, including by monitoring outcomes of education and training.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: SSCs, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+
Objective 7: Making education and training more flexible and accessible for adults and employers			
Policy Action 7.1: Improving the flexibility of adult education and training offers			
Activity 7.1.1: Promote existing flexible adult education and training opportunities			
7.1.1.1 Raise awareness of employers, individuals and training providers about flexible education and training courses, such as partial qualifications and online courses through holistic career guidance and other existing communications channels, such as business associations, trade unions and sectoral skills councils.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES, MLSP, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
7.1.1.2 Improve the recognition of partial qualification awards to allow learners to transfer partial qualifications from one learning institution to another or from one “profession” of study to another.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES, MLSP	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national
Activity 7.1.2: Expand flexible adult education and training opportunities			
7.1.2.1 Encourage greater flexibility and modularity of the adult education and training offer. This could be done, for example, by promoting micro-credentials and/or stackable modules in AET, offering AET courses online, reducing or spreading out learning hours and/or offering more courses during evening or weekend hours.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES, MLSP, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
7.1.2.2 Expand subsidies for employers for costs of providing education and training to employees during work hours in specific strategic sectors and/or for specific strategic skills (e.g. digital skills), and monitor outcomes. Funding should subsidise training fees and could also subsidise wages during training, covering a larger share of costs for SMEs. Funding could be provided to employers directly or via sectoral skills councils.	Lead: MLSP Partners: SSCs, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national: ALMP budget
Policy Action 7.2: Improving the equity and accessibility of adult education and training			
Activity 7.2.1: Optimise the procedure for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to encourage greater uptake of RPL services			
7.2.1.1 Streamline the RPL procedure by simplifying and shortening the administrative process for both individuals and providers.	Lead: MES Partners: MLSP, NAVET, education and training providers offering RPL services	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
7.2.1.2 Alter the design of RPL certificates to match professional qualification certificates, to make them better understood and more accepted by educational and training institutions and employers.	Lead: MES Partners: MLSP, NAVET, education and training providers offering RPL services, social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given
7.2.1.3 Improve the targeting of RPL services to specific vulnerable groups, such as low-skilled adults, including by giving them priority access to these services.	Lead: MLSP Partners: education and training providers offering RPL services, Educational institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
7.2.1.4 Make grants available to adult education and training (AET) providers and other institutions that offer RPL services.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES, MLSP, Adult education and training (AET) providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+
Activity 7.2.2: Ease access to adult basic education and expand basic education opportunities for learners in other education and training programmes			
7.2.2.1 Make adult basic (primary) education for low-skilled adults available free of charge in a wide range of educational institutions (e.g. general education schools, VET gymnasiums, VET colleges, universities and tertiary colleges, VET centres, and <i>chitalishta</i>).	Lead: MES Partners: Educational institutions	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+
7.2.2.2 Integrate basic education into practical/applied training.	Lead: MES Partners: Educational institutions, NAVET, AET providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Objective 8: Improving the quality and relevance of education and training for adults and employers			
Policy Action 8.1: Improving the quality assurance of adult learning opportunities, and the quality of workforce skills			
Activity 8.1.1: Strengthen <i>ex ante</i> assessment of adult learning providers			
8.1.1.1 Improve <i>ex ante</i> assessment of adult learning providers by, for example, establishing quality labels and providing them to adult education and training providers that exceed minimum licensing requirements.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES, MLSP	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
Activity 8.1.2: Develop a system for independent, <i>ex post</i> monitoring and assessment of adult learning quality and outcomes			
8.1.2.1 Establish an <i>ex post</i> assessment process of adult learning providers, including those only providing partial qualifications, with an external evaluation team.	Lead: NAVET Partners: MES	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
8.1.2.2 Collect relevant data on graduate outcomes from VET schools and centres, basic education programmes, and individuals who go through the RPL process to better monitor the quality of adult education and training and RPL. Distribute this data among AET providers and policymakers designing AET policy to inform further quality improvements in AET.	Lead: Data and evidence centre Partners: NAVET, MES, education and training providers, basic education providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
Policy Action 8.2: Making adult learning more relevant to learners' and labour market needs			
Activity 8.2.1: Make adult education and training more relevant to the specific needs of adult learners			
8.2.1.1 Subsidise andragogic training for teachers of adults, as well as information, guidance, peer-learning opportunities, and opportunities to share best practices on teaching adults.	Lead: MES Partners: NAVET	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
8.2.1.2 Raise awareness among adult education and training providers about subsidised andragogy courses for AET trainers.	Lead: MES Partners: NAVET	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
Activity 8.2.2: Align AET with skills needs in the labour market			
8.2.2.1 Develop and regularly update a list of prioritised areas of adult education and training of national and/or regional importance informed by the skills assessment and anticipation, current employment forecasting projections and the list of "protected specialities" and "priority professional fields" (these lists are already used to determine financial incentives in secondary education).	Lead: MES Partners: MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ State/national: MES budget

Using skills effectively

Bulgaria’s action plan for skills will also cover the theme of “using skills effectively in the labour market and at work”. Developing a strong and broad set of skills is just the first step. To ensure that Bulgaria gains the full economic and social value from investments in developing skills, people also need opportunities, encouragement and incentives to use their skills fully and effectively in the labour market and the workplace. Building on the objectives relating to using skills effectively that were previously agreed to in this project (Output 1), Table 9 proposes policy actions, activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources to include in Bulgaria’s action plan for skills.

Table 9. Using skills effectively: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Objective 9: Activating the skills of vulnerable groups in the labour market			
Policy Action 9.1: Strengthening the effectiveness of employment services for vulnerable adults			
Activity 9.1.1: Connect more vulnerable adults to employment services			
9.1.1.1 Establish institutional capacity for impact evaluation and conduct counterfactual evaluations of the impacts of programmes that seek to reach out to unemployed and inactive adults from vulnerable groups, and expand the most effective programmes. As part of this, consider increasing the number and scope of activators and mediators who reach out to these groups, including youth and Roma activators/mediators.	Lead: MLSP Partners: NEA	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
Activity 9.1.2: Increase the frequency and intensity of National Employment Agency caseworker interactions with unemployed adults from vulnerable groups to help more of these adults access training and jobs			
9.1.2.1 Allocate a larger share of caseworkers’ time to clients from vulnerable groups. This can be done, for example, by expanding the NEA’s online services for clients with sufficient digital skills (registration, guidance, etc.), developing and utilising a more modern statistical profiling tool, informed by and building upon the existing “Phasing” model, that predicts clients’ unemployment duration, and implementing other relevant measures targeting the digital transformation of the NEA.	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP, RRP State/national: ALMP budget
9.1.2.2 Expand the number of caseworkers in the NEA to allow more intensive and personalised support for unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. The increased number of NEA caseworkers should at least return caseloads to their pre-pandemic levels, and ideally below that.	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP, RRP State/national: ALMP budget
9.1.2.3 Ensure that NEA caseworkers make use of reliable data and information on skills needs when advising unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. This data and information should ideally come from improved skills assessment tools and anticipation activities.	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
Activity 9.1.3: Place more unemployed adults from vulnerable groups into tailored and labour-market-relevant training programmes by increasing the supply and demand for these programmes			
9.1.3.1 Increase funding for and supply of training tailored to the individual needs of unemployed adults from vulnerable groups. Training should be tailored for specific groups (especially youth, Roma, low-educated/low-skilled adults, and parents who are unemployed after parental leave) as well as for particular skill needs of importance across vulnerable groups (e.g. basic skills in literacy, numeracy, digital).	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
9.1.3.2 Increase interest in and demand for adult training under ALMP among clients from vulnerable groups through awareness raising such as a widespread information campaign.	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: ALMP budget
9.1.3.3 Increase the share of ALMP expenditure from the state budget that is dedicated to training programmes to align with average EU levels. This could be done by rebalancing existing ALMP expenditure from the state budget away from direct job creation towards programmes that upskill and reskill job seekers, including training not requested by specific employers, and possibly by increasing overall investments in training under ALMP as a percentage of GDP.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Council of Ministers, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: ALMP budget
9.1.3.4 Expand supports to help individuals who complete training via ALMP find jobs that utilise their new skills if a job is not arranged as part of the training programme. This can be done, for example, by strengthening requirements and supporting incentives for these individuals to complete relevant job applications.	Lead: NEA Partners: MLSP	Long-term (4-6yr)	State/national: ALMP budget
Policy Action 9.2: Ensuring gender equality in the labour market			
Activity 9.2.1: Provide additional support to adults with family care responsibilities, especially women, to participate in the labour market			
9.2.1.1 Increase employment support for single parents and parents with many children. These supports could include flexible working time, shorter working hours, more paid leave, and financial assistance, as well as incentivising enterprises to allow for more flexible forms of employment across sectors.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
9.2.1.2 Provide training and upskilling opportunities to parents, particularly women, returning to the labour market from parental leave.	Lead: MLSP Partners: Social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
Activity 9.2.2: Improve services and infrastructure to ease the burden on adults with family care responsibilities, especially women, allowing them to participate more in the labour market			
9.2.2.1 Improve the quality and affordability of childcare services and of long-term care services for elderly individuals.	Lead: MH Partners: MLSP, municipalities, SAA	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: ALMP budget
9.2.2.2 Incentivise enterprises to participate in programmes for building and maintaining infrastructure for their employees with family care responsibilities (e.g. on-site kindergartens).	Lead: MLSP Partners: Enterprises, MES, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+
Objective 10: Fostering return emigration and skilled immigration to Bulgaria			
Policy Action 10.1: Prioritising return emigration of qualified specialists and skilled immigration in Bulgaria's skills agenda			
Activity 10.1.1: Develop a cross-sectoral roadmap for return emigration and skilled immigration			
10.1.1.1 Co-ordinate between ministries and social partners to develop a comprehensive and ambitious roadmap for return emigration and skilled immigration. The roadmap should explicitly articulate the potential benefits of and a positive vision for return emigration and skilled immigration; set ambitious and concrete goals and targets for return emigration and skilled immigration (including for international students in Bulgaria); and align with Bulgaria's current and anticipated skills needs.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MLSP, Ministry of Interior (Mol); MES, MEI, social partners; State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration.	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national Enterprise

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Activity 10.1.2: Assign clear responsibility and adequate resources for fostering return emigration and skilled immigration, both at the level of strategic councils and national agencies			
10.1.2.1 Make fostering return emigration and skilled immigration a priority objective of the Council for Working with Bulgarians Abroad and the State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, respectively.	Lead: Mol Partners: Council for Working with Bulgarians Abroad; State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration	Long-term (4-6yr)	State/national
10.1.2.2 Expand the remit and resources of the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad to be responsible and resourced for fostering return emigration, and specifically for achieving the related goals of a Bulgarian roadmap for return emigration. An existing or new body should similarly be responsible and resourced for fostering skilled migration, especially in areas of skills shortages.	Lead: Council of Ministers Partners: State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad	Long-term (4-6yr)	State/national
Policy Action 10.2: Reaching and supporting return migrants and skilled immigrants			
Activity 10.2.1: Develop a comprehensive suite of measures for reaching out to Bulgarian emigrants and potential skilled immigrants to promote migration			
10.2.1.1 Develop an online platform targeting Bulgarian workers abroad and potential skilled immigrants. The platform should promote relocation to Bulgaria, provide relevant information (e.g. on Blue Cards and Startup Visas), foster communications and allow for the development of online communities.	Lead: State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration Partners: Mol; MES; MLSP; MEI; social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national
10.2.1.2 Develop virtual and in-person networking events and job fairs, particularly focused on key destination countries for emigrants (e.g. Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom) and key source countries for immigrants (e.g. Balkan and Slavic language countries). Importantly, these efforts should also target international students in Bulgaria.	Lead: MLSP Partners: State National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration; Mol; MES; MEI, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national
Activity 10.2.2: Develop a comprehensive suite of services to help returning emigrants, skilled immigrants and international students find suitable work, start businesses and integrate into Bulgarian society			
10.2.2.1 Create specific support services to help return emigrants and skilled immigrants (including international students) find well-matched jobs and start new businesses. These services could include, for example, information sessions, job-search matching services between migrants and enterprises, referrals to institutions that can recognise prior learning from abroad, and short courses.	Lead: NEA Partners: MIG, MLSP, MES, training providers offering RPL services	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ HRDP State/national: ALMP budget
10.2.2.2 Provide tailored information to return emigrants and skilled immigrants on integrating into Bulgarian society. This could include, for example, information on renting/buying, schools and kindergartens, tax obligations, etc. As part of this, provide feedback to responsible agencies on how to streamline these processes for return migrants and skilled immigrants.	Lead: Mol Partners: MES, MEI, Ministry of Finance, MLSP	Long-term (4-6yr)	State/national

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Objective 11: Supporting enterprises to utilise workers' skills more effectively			
Policy Action 11.1: Promoting effective skills use and the adoption of high-performance workplace practices (HPWP) in Bulgarian workplaces, including in SMEs			
Activity 11.1.1: Raise awareness of effective skills use and HPWP in Bulgarian workplaces			
11.1.1.1 Improve data on skills use and HPWPs in workplaces. This can be done, for example, by running a national survey based on the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and/or Eurofound company/worker surveys.	Lead: MEI Partners: Social partners, MIG, MLSP	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
11.1.1.2 Raise awareness among enterprises by developing a campaign, including on social media channels, on skills use at work and HPWPs. The campaign could include, for example, the benefits of skills use and HPWPs, good practices from enterprises, and available support from the government for HPWPs to all groups and sectors of employers. The information should be centralized on the existing one-stop-shop portal for SMEs and other existing resources (such as the Business Guide for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises).	Lead: Bulgarian Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion Agency (BSMEPA) Partners: MLSP, MEI, MIG, social partners	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESIF, RRF, ERDF, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: MES budget, National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
Activity 11.1.2: Support employers to improve skills use and adopt high-performance workplace practices (HPWP), including SMEs			
11.1.2.1 Create opportunities for enterprises, particularly SMEs, to meet and learn about good practices for implementing HPWPs. These opportunities could include, for example, subsidised peer-learning conferences, seminars and workshops. Promote these events as part of broader awareness-raising initiatives on skills use at work and HPWPs and use them to point enterprises to available support for implementing HPWPs.	Lead: BSMEPA Partners: Social partners, MEI, MIG	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESIF, RRF, ERDF, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: MES budget, National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
11.1.2.2 Pilot and evaluate public subsidies for consultants, mentors or coaches to provide tailored, one-on-one advice to SMEs about implementing HPWPs. This could be achieved through a voucher scheme or other financial schemes.	Lead: MEI Partners: Social partners, MLSP, MIG	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESIF State/national: MEI budget

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Policy Action 11.2: Driving innovation within firms by improving human resource capacity in fields designated for smart specialisation			
Activity 11.2.1: Enhance human resource capacity in new technologies and innovation			
11.2.1.1 Integrate vocational education and training into the innovation ecosystem by establishing centres of excellence in vocational education and training.	Lead: MES Partners: MEI, MIG, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
11.2.1.2 Provide additional financial support for dual training programs in the priority thematic areas of smart specialization and technologies related to Industry 4.0 and/or Industry 5.0.	Lead: MES Partners: Schools, social partners, MIG	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+, Horizon Europe State/national: MES budget
11.2.1.3 Provide support for human resources training activities in enterprises for enhancing the digital skills of employees, including in areas of smart specialization and technologies related to Industry 4.0 and/or Industry 5.0 (e.g. methodological and/or financial support).	Lead: MIG Partners: MLSP, MEI, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+ HRDP, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, RRP State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG) Enterprise
Activity 11.2.2: Improve the international and intersectoral mobility of skilled individuals in fields designated for smart specialisation			
11.2.2.1 Develop measures to support the labour market reintegration and career development of promising scientists with internationally recognized scientific achievements (experienced researchers) in Bulgarian universities and scientific organizations. This can include, for example, providing reintegration grants specifically designed for experienced researchers, offering flexible research positions and opportunities for career development, etc.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, Bulgarian Academy of Science, MIG, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, RRP State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
11.2.2.2 Develop measures to support the intersectoral and international mobility of R&D staff (e.g. grants and scholarships, exchange programs, promotion of industry-academia collaborations, etc.).	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, Bulgarian Academy of Science, MIG	Medium-term (2-4yr)	Enterprise International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, RRP State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG) Enterprise
11.2.2.3 Develop measures to increase the proportion of PhD students and promote the mobility of PhDs between the academic sector and the business/industrial sectors. This can include, for example, creating awareness campaigns and outreach programmes tailored to PhD students, offering scholarships and internships, and encouraging enterprises to offer industrial placements for PhD students.	Lead: MES Partners: Universities, Bulgarian Academy of Science, MEI, MIG, social partners	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)

Strengthening the governance of skills systems

Finally, Bulgaria's action plan for skills will cover the theme of "strengthening the governance of skills systems". Success in developing and using relevant skills in Bulgaria requires strong governance arrangements to promote co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration across the whole of government; engage stakeholders throughout the policy cycle; build integrated information systems; and align and coordinate financing arrangements. Building on the objectives related to strengthening the governance of skills systems that were previously agreed to in this project (Output 1), Table 10 proposes policy actions, activities, instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources to include in Bulgaria's action plan for skills.

Table 10. Strengthening the governance of skills systems: Instruments, responsibilities, timelines and potential funding sources

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Objective 12: Developing a whole-of-government and stakeholder-inclusive approach to skills policies			
Policy Action 12.1: Developing a whole-of-government approach to skills policies			
Activity 12.1.1: Improve whole-of-government leadership, oversight and co-ordination of the skills system			
12.1.1.1 Create a Skills Policy Council for Bulgaria comprised of ministries, agencies, regional and municipal representatives and social partners with a stake in skills policies. The council should oversee the skills system and ensure the achievement of Bulgaria's skills policy objectives, for example, by monitoring and reporting on skills policy implementation and outcomes. This should include oversight of existing skills bodies (e.g. NAVET) and those that are planned (e.g. sectoral skills councils). The Skills Policy Council should also oversee and publicly report on initiatives to improve stakeholder engagement, skills needs information, policy evidence, resource allocation and cost sharing, and any other measures defined in Bulgaria's proposed action plan for skills.	Lead: Council of Ministers Partners: Skills Policy Council, MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA, social partners, branch and sectoral organisations, education and training providers	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national
Activity 12.1.2: Identify and strengthen the most important bilateral inter-ministerial relationships for skills policies			
12.1.2.1 Strengthen bilateral inter-ministerial/inter-agency relationships critical for effective skills and related policies (e.g. the relationship between MES and MIG on innovation policies, and between MES and the MLSP on employment and skills forecasting). This can be done by implementing active co-ordination measures such as regular bilateral meetings at the minister and technical level, joint working groups and joint projects and funding.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Policy Action 12.2: Engaging stakeholders effectively for skills policy making at the national, sectoral and local levels			
Activity 12.2.1: Strengthen and extend the mandate of the Consultative Council for Vocational Education and Training (CCVET)			
12.2.1.1 Broaden the membership of the CCVET to include social partners, academic experts, education and training institutions, and agencies from across the whole skills system.	Lead: MES Partners: The Consultative Council for Vocational Education and Training (CCVET), universities, social partners, education and training providers	Short-term (<2yr)	State/national: MES budget
12.2.1.2 Expand the remit of the CCVET to cover tertiary education and adult learning in addition to VET, and to support and advise the new Skills Policy Council.	Lead: MES Partners: CCVET, universities, social partners, education and training providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: MES budget
12.2.1.3 Adapt regulation of the CCVET to ensure the CCVET is convened more frequently, include expanding the number of actors who can convene the CCVET.	Lead: MES Partners: CCVET, universities, social partners, education and training providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	State/national: MES budget
Activity 12.2.2: Improve the effectiveness of planned sectoral skills councils (SSCs)			
12.2.2.1 Expand the membership of SSCs to include not only MES but several ministries with responsibilities for skills, representatives from the subnational level (e.g. dedicated members or committees representing particular geographical regions), and representatives of the social partners, sectoral and branch organisations and education and training providers.	Lead: SSCs Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, social partners, sectoral and branch organisations, education and training providers, Regional Development Councils, municipalities, NAVET	Short-term (<2yr)	International: ESF+ State/national: MES budget

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
12.2.2.2 Pilot an expanded remit for SSCs to cover issues other than VET, such as the labour market relevance of tertiary education and adult education and training, and to articulate broader sectoral and local skills needs rather than focusing on narrower issues of curriculum, qualifications, etc.	Lead: SSCs Partners: MES, NEA, social partners, sectoral and branch organisations, universities, adult education and training providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+, RRF, ERDF, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: MES budget, National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
Objective 13: Building and better utilising evidence in skills development and use			
Policy Action 13.1: Improving the quality and use of skills needs information			
Activity 13.1.1: Develop a more comprehensive and consolidated skills assessment and anticipation (SAA) approach for use by all key actors in the skills system			
13.1.1.1 Develop a methodology for skills anticipation that consolidates Bulgaria's SAA methods. This should include: defining which data and information key skills actors need from SAA initiatives; expanding existing quantitative tools to provide more sectoral, occupational, educational, demographic and regional insights; and developing qualitative insights from consultation with employers and potentially from foresight techniques.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MLSP, MES, MEI, MIG, NAVET, subnational authorities, social partners, National Statistical Institute (NSI), NEA, Bulgarian Academy of Science, universities, SSCs, research organisations	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national
13.1.1.2 Promote and monitor the use of improved SAA information across the skills system. The improved SAA information can be used, for example, by: career guides/counsellors serving youth in formal education and adults in education and training; NEA caseworkers serving unemployed adults; and by advisors who are assessing enterprises' skills and training needs or providing other business support services.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MLSP, MES, NEA, MEI, MIG, NAVET, subnational authorities, social partners, Bulgarian Academy of Science, universities, SSCs	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: ESF+ State/national Sub-national: Municipality budgets Enterprise

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Policy Action 13.2: Improving the quality and use of performance data and evaluation evidence in skills policy			
Activity 13.2.1: Create an inter-institutional data and evidence centre responsible for collating and improving skills data and evaluation evidence			
13.2.1.1 Create an inter-institutional data and evidence centre to integrate, undertake and/or commission primary and secondary data collection, analysis and evaluation for skills policy. The data and evidence centre should be staffed with a small team that is supported with secondments from the ministries involved in skills policy and should be tasked with improving the quality, accessibility and use of data and evaluation evidence for all key stakeholders.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA, social partners, Bulgarian Academy of Science, universities, research organisations, education and training providers, government agencies, CCVET, SSCs, municipal authorities, NSI	Medium-term (2-4yr)	No information given
13.2.1.2 Establish formal and informal networks to improve data collection and analysis by the data and evidence centre. These networks could encourage collaboration with experts from academia, research institutes, social partners, non-government organisations and the private sector.	Lead: Data and evidence centre Partners: Skills Policy Council, universities, research institutes, social partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector, NSI	Long-term (4-6yr)	No information given
Objective 14: Ensuring well-targeted and sustainable financing of skills policies			
Policy action 14.1: Increasing and reallocating spending on skills development and use			
Activity 14.1.1: Set targets for increasing expenditure on skills development			
14.1.1.1 Set medium- and longer-term expenditure targets across the skills system (e.g. VET, higher education, adult learning, ALMP and supporting HPWPs).	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA, social partners, education and training providers	Medium-term (2-4yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)

Instruments	Responsibilities	Timelines for full implementation	Potential Funding Sources
Activity 14.1.2: Evaluate existing spending across the skills system with the aim of reallocating resources to the activities offering the greatest returns			
14.1.2.1 Systematically evaluate and compare the costs and benefits, returns and/or impacts of public expenditure on skills development and use.	Lead: Data and evidence centre Partners: Ministries, government agencies, CCVET, sectoral skills councils, municipal authorities	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
14.1.2.2 Gradually reallocate public funding to areas with the highest returns on investment (e.g. to SAA, career guidance and business support services, and from job creation to training in ALMP).	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA, social partners, education and training providers	Long-term (4-6yr)	International: RRF, ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe State/national: National Science Programmes, National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure, Scientific Research Fund, National Innovation Fund (MIG)
Policy action 14.2: Effectively sharing the costs of skills development			
Activity 14.2.1: Divide responsibility for funding skills development between government, employers and individuals			
14.2.1.1 Develop a tripartite agreement to define the division of responsibility for funding skills development. The agreement should clarify where and how government (at the national and municipal levels), employers and individuals should co-invest in education and training, in order to achieve Bulgaria's new targets for increased expenditure across the skills system. The agreement should also seek to articulate how stable funding will be ensured over time, even with the use of European project-based funding.	Lead: Skills Policy Council Partners: MES, MLSP, MEI, MIG, NAVET, NEA, social partners, education and training providers	Short-term (<2yr)	No information given

5 Next steps

Following Output 2, the remaining outputs in the project to develop an action plan for skills in Bulgaria include:

- **Output 3:** Report providing guidance on developing a monitoring and reporting framework, including performance indicators for measuring the implementation progress.
- **Output 4:** Outline for a communication campaign to raise awareness of the national skills strategy for Bulgaria.
- **Output 5:** Follow-up report and capacity building workshop for implementation.
- **Output 6:** Public closure event and communication outputs at the conclusion of the project.

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