

# Strengthening the Governance of the Swedish Skills System

## Report on relevant international practices in the field of skills governance

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## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to identify and describe selected international practices for governing skills systems (from EU Member and/or non-Member States, as appropriate) that are relevant to the opportunities for improving the governance of Sweden's skills system that were identified in Output 3 (Situation Analysis Report) (OECD, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>).

The opportunities for improvement identified in Output 3 include:

- Opportunity 1: Improving collaboration between national agencies at a strategic level
- Opportunity 2: Improving collaboration between national agencies at an operational level
- Opportunity 3: Improving collaboration between national and sub-national levels of governments
- Opportunity 4: Improving engagement with stakeholders at the national level
- Opportunity 5: Improving engagement with stakeholders at the sectoral level.

This document presents ten relevant international practices from five countries, which relate to Sweden's opportunities for improvement as follows:

Country	Relevant international practice	Relevance for Sweden's opportunity for improvement
Ireland	High Level Skills Implementation Group	Opportunity 1
	Labour Market Advisory Council	Opportunity 2
	Education and Training Boards and Regional Skills Fora	Opportunity 3
	National Skills Council	Opportunity 4
Norway	Skills Policy Council	Opportunity 1, 2 and 4
	Regional Competence Fora	Opportunity 3
Flanders (Belgium)	Policy Councils and Management Committees	Opportunity 1
	Flemish Education Council	Opportunity 4
Latvia	Sectoral Expert Councils	Opportunity 5
Netherlands	Training and Development Funds	Opportunity 5

Each relevant international practice starts with a description of the relevant governance mechanism, before outlining area(s) of learning relevant to Sweden related to one or more of the five opportunities for improvement mentioned above.

The content of the document was developed based on desk research and a series of virtual interviews with international experts conducted by the OECD.

## Relevant international practices

### *Ireland*

#### *High Level Skills Implementation Group*

The High Level Skills Implementation Group (HLSIG) is a newly established governmental body aimed at promoting a whole-of-government approach to skills policy implementation in Ireland. It comprises of representatives from five governmental departments and twelve national agencies (detailed below) with roles and responsibilities in skills policy, all of whom are former members of the National Skills Council (NSC). The establishment of this purely governmental body came as a result of an evaluation of the NSC, which had previously served as a platform for both governmental and non-governmental skills actors, and the recommendations outlined in the OECD's Skills Strategy Ireland report (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>) (further details regarding the NSC are provided in the dedicated subsection below). The Group is still in early stages of development, with its first meeting held in November 2023. The terms of reference for the HLSIG are therefore not yet finalised and may undergo revisions in the forthcoming months.

Chaired by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), the Group comprises Secretaries general or designated representatives from the Departments of Education; Public Expenditure; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and Social Protection. Additionally, the following government agencies will be represented by their Chief Executive Officer (or equivalent) or a designated representative: the Higher Education Authority, SOLAS (the Further Education and Training Authority), Education and Training Boards Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, Industrial Development Agency (IDA), Enterprise Ireland, Skillnet Ireland, Irish Universities Association, Technological Higher Education Association, and the Higher Education Colleges Association. The council will also include a regional representative.

The primary objective of the HLSIG is to support high-level skills policy priority setting and alignment across the government, integrating guidance from the NSC (see more below). It is also intended to drive policy implementation. Specifically, the HLSIG is tasked with prioritising and aligning strategic skills policy objectives across the entire government and tertiary skills ecosystem, encompassing higher education institutions and programmes, as well as further education and training. It is anticipated that the HLSIG will act upon the strategic advice provided by the NSC to the government by implementing targeted measures in the identified areas for action. Moreover, the Group will extend support to the NSC by offering operational policy guidance and advice as required. Additionally, the HLSIG will oversee and monitor the implementation of policy priorities identified by the OECD Skills Strategy review that are aligned with ongoing key Government priorities, as well as policy objectives of the NSC, and the HLSIG itself. Follow-up procedures will include, among others, the submission of an annual progress report/statement on the contributions of the HLSIG towards addressing the areas for intervention identified by the NSC.

The frequency of HLSIG meetings will be determined as necessary, with an approximate quarterly schedule envisaged, including two annual meetings held jointly with the NSC. Additional co-ordination mechanisms between the NSC and the HLSIG may be established, although the precise nature of their relationship remains under consideration. Administrative support for HLSIG operations is provided by the NSC secretariat, situated within the DFHERIS. The Group does not receive designated funding.

#### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 1 – Improving collaboration between national agencies at a strategic level**

The establishment of the HLSIG, recently emerging as a separate intra-governmental group from a previously government-stakeholder National Skills Council (NSC), holds several lessons for Sweden regarding inter-agency collaboration at the strategic level. First, there are strategic advantages to

establishing a dedicated body for government collaboration as opposed to a joint body for government and stakeholder engagement. The NSC had previously set out to serve as a platform for dialogue both between governmental departments and between government representatives and non-governmental stakeholders. However, the NSC did not fully succeed in facilitating either goal (see more below). Ireland has therefore decided to transform the NSC into a primarily stakeholder-driven skills body and create a new inter-department/agency collaboration body (i.e. HLSIG).

Second, the establishment of the HLSIG underscores the importance of having a dedicated body to steer policy implementation and alignment in addition to an advisory body (i.e. the NSC). Ireland acknowledges that while involving multiple actors and perspectives in the policy prioritisation process is crucial, governance structures also serve the vital role of aligning actions across the government to drive implementation of common priorities. By establishing the HLSIG, the process of gathering input on skills policy priorities from a diverse range of actors is separated from the responsibility of driving implementation. This separation enables more targeted efforts in translating inputs into actionable strategies through consistent co-ordination and information exchange among public actors within the skills system.

Third, the significance of precisely defining the purpose of governance structures and their ensuing mandates cannot be overstated. Accordingly, the DFHERIS is presently engaged in meticulously deliberating and formalising HLSIG's terms of reference to ensure clarity and consensus among participating departments and agencies, while still achieving the original, overarching goals. Establishing common agreement on the terms of reference will also facilitate a clear understanding of individual responsibilities among participating agencies within the Group. Given that it is expected that there will be a connection between the HLSIG and the NSC, the terms of reference of the HLSIG are to be finalised along with those of the new NSC, which will be established in the coming months. The importance of formalising commonly agreed upon goals and mandates has also been identified in the case of Sweden's Inter-agency skills co-operation structure (*Myndighetssamverkan för kompetensförsörjning och livslångt lärande, MSV*), where the absence of such a mandate emerged as a primary challenge to inter-agency collaboration, though progress has been made recently to better define the MSV's main goals.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, clearly defining the relationship between the HLSIG and the NSC is essential. Given that Ireland, like Sweden, has distinct bodies for stakeholder engagement and inter-agency collaboration, clarifying the interplay between these entities is imperative to optimise efficiency. Ireland, aspiring for the NSC to be demand-driven and independently led by employer representatives (see more below), has stipulated that the HLSIG's mandate should not impede or dictate the NSC's agenda. While the HLSIG is mandated to consider advice provided by the NSC, and the NSC is expected to oversee and advise the work of the HLSIG, the exact roles, responsibilities, and relationship between the groups are yet to be finalised.

Involvement of high-level officials is key to supporting effective collaboration and facilitating commitment of all involved institutions. The HLSIG convenes Directors General or equivalent high-ranking officials from relevant departments or agencies to ensure alignment of high-level policies across institutions. This inclusion can also facilitate the incorporation of decisions taken by the Group into the priorities of each institution. This aligns with the establishment of a Directors-General group (DG) within Sweden's MSV. However, in the case of the MSV, the DG convenes separately from the StG and WG. Therefore, it is

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<sup>1</sup>The MSV Steering Group has recently established its high-level objective of contributing to a well-functioning supply of skills - based on the needs of the individual and working life - through co-operation between the labour market, business, and education. The StG has also delineated subgoals and detailed objectives for individual working groups. Additionally, the Government has restated the task of collaborating across the government, MYH's role in co-ordinating the collaboration under the MSV, and specified priority areas for the MSV to work on in 2024, namely: data analysis for forecasts and planning of the education offer, support for regional skills work, education for the green transition, and increasing participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education.

crucial to ensure communication and alignment between the different levels of the MSV so that high-level officials are well-informed about discussions and decisions taken at the administrative levels and can consequently incorporate necessary changes.

However, involving only high-ranking officials in governance bodies may result in interactions that remain at the discussion and do not lead to concrete actions. The participation of technical level experts in implementing decisions taken by high-level officials can enhance accountability and ensure that discussions translate into actions and subsequently, outcomes. To this end, the HLSIG is considering establishing working groups to drive policy implementation, similarly to Sweden's MSV.

### *Labour Market Advisory Council*

The Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC) serves as an advisory body to the Minister for Social Protection and the Government concerning the efficient operation of the labour market (i.e. increasing participation rates, minimising unemployment rates, and reducing unemployment duration, etc.), encompassing skills-related policy issues on occasion as necessary.

Chaired by an independent labour market expert, the Council includes representatives from various government departments including the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of the Taoiseach (prime minister), the Department of Social Protection (DSP), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS). Additionally, within its various subgroups (detailed below) it comprises representatives from relevant state agencies, employer bodies, unions, individual employers, academics, and community and voluntary sectors, including the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed and the National Youth Council of Ireland, as relevant.

The LMAC is responsible for providing labour market situation analysis and evaluations, collecting perspectives and inputs from key labour market stakeholders, and providing policy advice to the government on labour market policy, including advice on strengthening mechanisms for engagement with employers. The Council also has an active role in implementing and developing governmental labour market strategies. To effectively achieve these goals, the Council has two, technical-level, operational subgroups: The Evaluation Subgroup, and the Employer Engagement Subgroup.

The Evaluation subgroup is tasked with assessing the state of labour market conditions and outcomes, evaluating the effectiveness of labour policy programmes and interventions through data analysis and inputs from stakeholders, and providing informed advice to the government based on its findings. Initially comprising primarily experts from academia, this subgroup has witnessed increased interest and involvement from other stakeholders over time.

The Employer Engagement group is responsible for facilitating effective engagement with employers on labour market policies, and employer-specific commitments in the Pathways to Work Strategy. The group comprises representatives from employers of various sizes, as well as governmental officials. Discussions within the subgroup encompass topics such as enhancing the uptake of schemes and devising a new employer engagement strategy. These meetings serve as a platform for employers to contribute input on the practical implementation of government policies and lead new initiatives such as the development of the employer youth charter. Additionally, they provide the DSP with an opportunity to introduce new policies and strategies to employers, solicit feedback, and elucidate the potential benefits of these policies to employers. This engagement is particularly valuable when employers express reservations or opposition to proposed policies. The Employer Engagement Subgroup is more dynamic in comparison to the Evaluation Subgroup, particularly with respect to agenda setting and meeting facilitation. For example, a short paper is often circulated among participants prior to meetings with key topics and questions that will be addressed, along with an invitation for to raise questions and discussion topics. Meetings will often start with an update or follow up on the previous meeting, allowing a continuous conversation, as not always possible in the main council meetings.

In addition to the responsibilities of evaluation and employer engagement, the Council has an active role in policy setting. The Council secretariat, in collaboration with Council subgroups and participants, produces an annual report on the implementation of the Pathways to Work Strategy. Furthermore, the Council was tasked with advising on the development of a new strategy and its high-level goals, to replace the Pathways to Work Strategy upon its completion. As part of this process, the main Council conducted a mid-term review of the Pathways to Work Strategy, submitted to the government in November 2023. As part of the review, the Evaluation Subgroup evaluated the key performance indicators of the Pathways to Work Strategy.

Full council meetings are convened quarterly, with each session lasting approximately four hours and one annual full day meeting. These meetings include updates from each subgroup and discussions on various labour market policy questions. Subgroup meetings occur as needed – this may be every one to two months or more infrequently.

The DSP serves as the provider of secretariat support for both the main council and its subgroups, and funds the council's activities. Each sub-group of the council is supported by a separate secretariat, comprised of officials whose expertise aligns with the roles and responsibilities of that subgroup. The DSP team overseeing the Pathways to Work Strategy provides secretarial support to the LMAC as a whole. The Labour Market Research team in DSP offers assistance to the Evaluation Subgroup, while the DSP Employer Relations team provides secretariat support to the Employer Engagement Subgroup. The council chair receives a fee from the DSP, with additional funding allocated through an annual research programme. This funding can be utilised to commission research projects as required.

Given the related and sometimes overlapping themes within the LMAC, NSC and HLSIG, DSP acknowledges that it is crucial to establish mechanisms for alignment and co-ordination between these entities. Even though the LMAC does not primarily focus on skills policies as mentioned above, skills-related topics may arise as part of LMAC's work and therefore require alignment with the work of the NSC and HLSIG. Currently, DSP and DFHERIS hold high-level meetings approximately once every 2-3 months, in the context of an existing DSP-DFHERIS High-Level Group, where they co-ordinate actions between public employment services and the education and training sector to assist job seekers in reskilling. Moreover, the DSP is represented at the HLSIG. However, there exists no formal co-ordination forum between the LMAC, the NSC and HLSIG at present.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 2 – Improving collaboration between national agencies at an operational level**

Ireland's LMAC is a well-regarded body known for producing high-quality advice and analysis. Given the active operation of the two technical-operational level sub-groups, LMAC offers valuable insights for Sweden towards enhancing inter-agency collaboration at the operational level, which may be applicable to Sweden's MSV.

It is first worth noting the effective operational model of the LMAC's subgroups. The establishment of two subgroups was a strategic decision driven by the need to both monitor and further develop the Pathways to Work Strategy and develop sustainable evaluation capacities within the public sector. With respect to the former aim, the Employer Engagement Subgroup was established to foster sustainable employer engagement in regards to the Pathways to Work Strategy, with which employers are key partners. With respect to the later aim, the Evaluation Subgroup was established to support DSP with evaluating the state of the labour market and the impact of relevant policies. Such strategic decision-making behind the establishment of the different working groups was highlighted as lacking in the case of Sweden's MSV, where working groups were established based on existing initiatives or consensus. Moreover, the composition of the secretariats, comprising experts closely aligned with the council's objectives, underscores the mutually beneficial synergy between DSP teams and the LMAC.

The operational subgroups play a central role within the LMAC. These subgroups are integral components of the Council, as they not only provide updates during main Council meetings but also drive and generate many of the Council's outputs. Therefore, effective communication and alignment between the operational and higher strategic levels, which has posed challenges for Sweden's MSV, are well-developed within the LMAC. Moreover, the presence of high-level officials, including on occasion, junior ministers, at subgroup meetings underscores their commitment to integrating subgroup advice into overarching strategies, projects, and services. This level of involvement enhances stakeholder commitment to the subgroups, particularly among non-governmental participants. This may also speak to the challenges of the MSV WG, where the desired mechanism for stakeholder involvement has not yet been established.

In addition to high-level involvement, the operational subgroups and their respective secretariats also play a role in fostering commitment in various other ways. Subgroups provide dynamic platforms for active and direct discourse on labour market issues, enabling all participants to express perspectives, opinions, and suggestions. Participants also have the opportunity to influence meeting agendas directly. As previously mentioned, the secretariat may circulate a brief paper ahead of subgroup meetings, offering participants a chance to raise topics or questions for discussion. When council or subgroup outputs are produced, the secretariat facilitates an iterative process, wherein members are continuously invited to provide input.

Effective facilitation of the Subgroups employed by both Subgroup secretariats (as described above), as well as stakeholders' interest in the subgroups' topics, has spurred heightened stakeholder involvement in the work of the subgroups. Within the Evaluation Subgroup, this is evidenced by increased participation from diverse labour market stakeholders, marking a shift from a purely quantitative, academic focus to a more inclusive approach incorporating qualitative insights. This evolution has enriched the understanding of the labour market, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective. Similarly, in the Employer Engagement group, interest has surged, facilitated by a more dynamic, employer-led discourse, fostering active engagement and collaboration. While the above processes facilitated by the secretariat indeed encourages commitment and engagement, it is also key to ensuring that subgroup discussions are translated into action. To achieve this, the secretariat will propose a draft, to which participants can propose modifications, comments, and feedback. This process may have several iterations by the end of which the secretariat produces a single output that reflects as many perspectives as possible and can be seen as a product of collaborative effort. This approach may be especially useful to Sweden in strengthening the operational aspects of the MSV, as the challenge of translating ideas into action has been highlighted as important for the MSV WG.

Additionally, the work of the LMAC subgroups provides important lesson on managing conflicting positions and perspectives. Similar to Sweden's MSV, the presence of diverse participants with varying viewpoints may lead to debates and conflicting views both at the strategic and operational levels. While the Council does not necessarily aim to achieve universally agreed-upon solutions, it employs several mechanisms to manage conflicts and develop broadly accepted policies. Tools already described such as shared agenda setting and iterative drafting aid in mitigating conflicts by demonstrating to participants that their viewpoints were considered and integrated. During subgroup meetings, a facilitator from the secretariat fosters balanced conversations, allowing all voices to be heard and facilitating consensus-building in the face of conflicting perspectives. Additionally, the secretariat utilises a disclaimer statement in each output, clarifying that the document may not encompass all individual views within the subgroup or the Council.

The roles and responsibilities described above underscore the importance of appointing individuals best suited to their positions in the subgroups and secretariats. While representation from various fields and institutions is crucial, individual characteristics play a pivotal role in fostering successful collaborations. Professional expertise is a vital asset for all members, alongside a robust commitment to collaborating to enhance public policy. This is demonstrated, for example, in the Evaluation Subgroup, where it is imperative to include representatives possessing extensive research backgrounds, an active interest in policy, and a willingness to invest time in the Council's work. Furthermore, given the secretariat's vital role in integrating diverse views and managing conflicts, it is essential for its members to possess adept



facilitation skills, ensuring that all voices are heard. The ability to lead effective discussions, allowing for the expression of different viewpoints, and facilitating joint decision-making that respects all members' perspectives is also paramount for those leading subgroup meetings. This underscores the importance for MSV's Working Group (WG) chairs to adeptly lead meetings and facilitate information-sharing between the WG and the Steering Group (StG). Additionally, it shows that MSV's WG members should possess professional expertise and a strong commitment to collaboration to drive initiatives forward effectively.

Finally, the example of LMAC underscores the importance of adequate and targeted funding, which has come up as a challenge in the case of MSV, as the body does not receive dedicated funding. LMAC receives research funding, agreed upon annually, to support its work. While the secretariats supporting the LMAC are not exclusively dedicated to only working on LMAC, they possess adequate resources to sustain such work. LMAC's operation also complements various other initiatives under the secretariat's purview, such as strategy formulation, which helps create synergies.

### *Education and Training Boards and Regional Skills Fora*

The Irish skills system remains relatively centralised. However, regional implementation and delivery have been significantly strengthened in recent years, including through a reform of the skills system in 2013. Two regional bodies – the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Regional Skills Fora (RSF) – play a central role in the Irish skills system. While Ireland only has two government levels (national and county governments), the ETBs and RSF operate at the regional level – i.e. combining several counties – to align skills policies across levels of government and adjust skills provision to regional and local labour market needs. The Swedish system could benefit from examining the Irish model to enhance channels of representation and communication across national, regional, and local levels.

Ireland's Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were established in 2013 under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013. They replaced the former 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) as the primary education providers locally in Ireland. There are 16 ETBs in Ireland, each responsible for providing education and training services in their respective regional area (Education and Training Board, 2019<sup>[3]</sup>). The overall purpose of the ETBs is to promote lifelong learning opportunities, support skills development, and foster community engagement in education and training initiatives. Their core tasks include overseeing initial and further or adult education, managing schools, providing adult and further education and training (FET), delivering youth services (youth support officers and funding initiatives), co-ordinating training programmes, and performing quality control of the school and adult education offers. Each board has 21 members, including 12 local authority representatives, five members from bodies representing community and business interests, staff representatives, and parents' representatives.

The initial education responsibilities of the ETBs are funded and overseen by the Department of Education, whilst the VET and adult education part of the 16 ETBs are overseen by DFHERIS through SOLAS (the Irish State Agency for Further Education and Training), equally established in 2013. Funding for initial education is provided annually by the Department of Education, whilst funding for VET and adult education is provided by DFHERIS through SOLAS.

The primary mechanism to ensure the quality of and spending on VET and adult education is the yearly strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and each ETB. The performance agreements establish focus areas and goals for each ETB, subject to regular review through dialogues between SOLAS, the ETBs, heads of colleges, and education providers (SOLAS, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). With its strategic performance agreements with ETBs, SOLAS is increasingly attempting to ensure that learners obtain sustainable jobs (i.e. in occupations that are in demand today and which are anticipated to be in demand in the future). In addition, they seek to link funding with the strategic performance agreements to strengthen incentives for ETBs to deliver on agreed targets and inject further competition into the system. Through the performance framework and the accompanying online Dashboard, ETBs can follow their performance vis-à-vis annual targets throughout the year and see how they perform relative to other ETBs. The

transparency in the process facilitates peer learning across ETBs, particularly in areas where they may underperform.

In addition to the performance framework, the ETBs have a legal duty to report to DFHERIS and the other departments that oversee their work. ETBs also have ad hoc connections to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), including through representation in various expert groups and task forces supporting national policies and reforms.

The nine Irish Regional Skills Fora (RSF) were established in 2016. They serve as platforms to foster engagement and collaboration between employers and the education and training system to meet their regions' emerging skills needs. The RSF act as one-stop-shops for supporting employers with re- and upskilling activities, collecting data on and helping employers identify their skills needs, and raising awareness of the range of services and programmes available across Ireland's education and training system among employers. Each RSF is managed by an RSF manager (one per region), who serves as the main point of contact for many employers on lifelong learning and collects data on skills needs from employers (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). While the membership of RSF varies, they typically comprise employers and their representatives, education and training providers (e.g. universities, VET schools, ETBs, private providers, etc.), and government departments and bodies (e.g. government agencies, county authorities, etc.). DFHERIS is responsible for supporting and resourcing the RSF, with funding provided from the National Training Fund.

RSFs are responsible for and have the flexibility to set their strategic priorities based on regional needs. This includes working closely with the DFHERIS to ensure alignment with the overarching objectives of national skills policy. The RSF also operate a structure of industry sub-groups or clusters, addressing specialist or niche areas (e.g. on a sector or thematic basis).

Various structures support co-operation between RSF and the national government. These include quarterly bilateral meetings between RSF and DFHERIS and end-of-year reporting and start-of-year planning meetings between RSF and DFHERIS. Data collected by RSF managers on employers' skills needs is regularly shared with the SOLAS Labour Market Research Unit to enrich the findings in the National Skills Bulletin. Moreover, a position of a Regional Skills Coordinator was created at DFHERIS in 2022 to streamline and consolidate information channels between the RSF and DFHERIS. Recent developments aimed to strengthen the governance of the Irish skills system includes a stronger engagement of the RSF at the national level. In particular, it is foreseen that RSF will be presented in the newly established High-Level Skills Implementation Group (see above). To support co-ordination at the regional level, RSF developed a shared online calendar capturing existing ongoing skills-related initiatives and activities at the regional level.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 3 – Improving collaboration between national and sub-national levels of governments**

Since the reform of the Irish skills system in 2013, significant responsibilities have been devolved to regional level. The reform has supported a more consistent representation of regional and local stakeholders in the skills system. Sweden could benefit from examining the Irish model to enhance channels of representation and communication across national, regional, and local levels.

First, the Irish system is characterised by a national funding structure that supports regional implementation of national skills policy. The 16 ETBs and nine RSF benefit from nationally allocated funding earmarked to fulfil their regional tasks. This ensures that all regions in Ireland have a regional and local focus within the broader national skills strategy framework.

Second, a mix of formal and informal structures supports co-operation between the national and regional levels. The primary structure for co-operation between the two levels of government goes through the RSF. As a foreseen official member of the High Level Skills Implementation Group (see above), it is expected

that RSF will have a voice at the national level where they can influence national skills policy making. RSF are to be represented by one regional manager who is to represent all nine RSF. This set-up is somewhat similar to the Swedish model, where a small group of regional managers have been invited to participate in meetings in the MSV. While the ETBs are not directly represented in the High Level Skills Implementation Group, inter-regional co-operation between RSF and ETBs, to some extent, ensures representation of their work and interests at the national level. In addition, the ETBs and RSF co-operate with national government through other challenges, including through representation in government working groups and task forces.

Third, a distinctive feature of the Irish system is the performance agreements between ETBs and SOLAS. The performance agreements provide a platform for the national government to implement oversight and communicate strategic objectives while fostering opportunities for regions to learn from each other. This combined emphasis on competition and transparency facilitates learning opportunities and shows commitment to enhancing performance and collaboration across all regions. Equally, for the RSF, robust reviewing and reporting through yearly cycles combined with frequent engagement with the national level ensures that the RSF deliver on their regional objectives and that those deliverables align with national skills policy. One challenge in the system – also found in the Swedish skills system – is the continued variation in the quality of work across the regional skills bodies. The oversight mechanisms combined with the newly established Regional Skills Coordinator aim to overcome this challenge by streamlining and consolidating information channels between regional and national levels.

The Fora have proven themselves valuable from the perspective of DFHERIS. RSF are very well regarded locally, managed to establish good connections with local enterprises and play an important role of an “impartial arbiter” by helping enterprises navigate the existing, complex education and training provision. However, the reach of RSF is limited. Most activities of each RSF are run by a single RSF manager, who report that they have limited resources to carry out the wide range of activities they are responsible for.

### *National Skills Council*

Ireland’s National Skills Council (NSC) was established in 2017 by Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025. Between 2017 and 2023, the Council served as an advisory body to the Government of Ireland on skills policy. The NSC was overseen by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

The NSC in Ireland was received positively when first establishment, particularly because it responded to the acknowledged need to engage with non-governmental stakeholders on skills policy. However, the NSC also became subject to a certain degree of criticism related to its limited influence in the Irish skills ecosystem, where the NSC did not succeed in positioning itself as a “strong player” (OECD, 2023<sup>[21]</sup>).

According to NSC’s old terms of reference (ToRs), the NSC was meant to “bring together education and training providers with representatives from business, to effectively respond to skills needs”. However, at the same time, the ToRs placed much greater emphasis on receiving reports and updates from relevant governmental agencies, who were members of the NSC, regarding their relevant work. Therefore, the ToRs positioned the NSC to be a space dedicated primarily to cross-departmental co-ordination and reporting on skills, rather than on engagement with stakeholders (OECD, 2023<sup>[21]</sup>).

However, in contrast to NSC’s original ToRs, each NSC meeting largely consisted of a high-level discussion on a topic determined in advance by the NSC secretariat (i.e. the Skills Policy and Enterprise Engagement Unit in DFHERIS), rather than reporting on relevant initiatives. An expert on the particular topic typically facilitated the discussions (e.g. an international consultancy firm facilitated the discussions on the “workplace of the future”). Despite certain improvement in the engagement in NSC discussions by NSC members, the quality of discussions was considered insufficient, and participation in NSC meetings was at times seen as a “turn-up, tick-box exercise” without real commitment (OECD, 2023<sup>[21]</sup>).

To a certain extent, the modest level of engagement of certain NSC members could be explained by the fact that members were not clear on what the NSC's mandate and objectives were given the divergence between the ToRs and NSC's actual meetings, and therefore what difference their contributions to NSC discussions were making in practice. The NSC secretariat started compiling a summary of NSC discussion outcomes, which are shared with NSC members and within DFHERIS. Nonetheless, it was unclear whether or to what extent the discussion outcomes influenced skills policy, partly because there were no accountability mechanisms to facilitate effective follow-up (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>).

The legitimacy of the NSC was also negatively impacted by the lack of representativeness and diversity in the NSC's membership base. While, as noted above, the NSC original ToRs stated that the NSC would "bring together education and training providers with representatives from business, to effectively respond to skills needs", the NSC membership was dominated by governmental actors. More specifically, 13 out of 21 seats on the NSC were taken up by governmental representatives (i.e. representatives of departments or governmental agencies and institutions). The eight remaining seats were distributed between representatives of public education and training providers (three) and individual employers (five – including the chairperson), while representatives of trade unions or community service organisations were missing. Therefore, unsurprisingly, NSC discussion were dominated by governmental actors (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>).

Following the recommendations made by the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>), the NSC held its last meeting in the "old" format in September 2023, and is currently being reformed.

#### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 4 – Improving engagement with stakeholders at the national level**

Ireland's experience with a body similar to Sweden's National arena for skills supply (i.e. the National Skills Council, NSC), including past challenges and ongoing reform efforts, offers relevant insights into the process of effectively building up a stakeholder engagement "arena" for Sweden. In addition, given that the NSC is foreseen to work closely with the governmental High Level Skills Implementation Group (see above), there are lessons to be learned about setting up collaboration processes between a governmental co-ordination body and a stakeholder engagement body, which may be applicable to Sweden's MSV and the National arena for skills supply (see more below).

The NSC held its last meeting in the "old" format in September 2023, and, as mentioned above, is currently being reformed. While the reform efforts are still ongoing and the mandate and membership of the new NSC is not yet set in stone, DFHERIS envisions that the reformed NSC will resemble an "independent strategic industry think-tank", which will raise challenging skills policy questions, identify pressing skills policy gaps and provide new perspectives on skills policy topics not yet considered by government. In practice, DFHERIS envisions that the NSC would share such insights with the HLSIG (see above) and identify areas for intervention that the HLSIG would act on. In response, DFHERIS envisions that the HLSIG would issue a statement summarising action already taken or to be taken, which would be made available to the NSC as well as to the public. It is planned that the NSC would meet three times a year, of which two meetings would be joint with the HLSIG.

Following OECD's recommendations, DFHERIS is also in the processes of reforming the membership of the NSC, to give greater prominence to non-governmental stakeholders. In order to identify new NSC members, DFHERIS opened an "expression of interest" process during October-November 2023, and received 70 applications, including 12 for the chair-person role, from a broad range of stakeholders including large companies and SMEs, education and training providers, and others. DFHERIS then shortlisted 29 candidates based on an assessment against internally defined criteria and is holding follow-up discussions with the shortlisted candidates. The shortlist has now been finalised and submitted to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for review and approval. The NSC membership is foreseen to include a Chairperson and eight representatives of enterprises from a range of sectors, as well as one representative each from a business association,

association of SMEs, trade union, community and voluntary sector, and an academic expert on skills. Interest in applying to be a representative on the NSC among individual enterprises was raised thanks to existing connections on the ground established by the dedicated Skills Policy and Enterprise Engagement Unit within DFHERIS and the Regional Skills Fora. The relationships built during the development of the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland project were equally useful for this purpose.

For DFHERIS, an added value of opening the “expression of interest” process, rather than simply extending invitations to pre-identified stakeholders, was to help sort through and identify potential NSC members with genuine motivation and interest in order to facilitate active participation and engagement in NSC meetings later on. It is expected that NSC members would also raise awareness of the importance of effective skills development and use through their networks on the ground, underscoring the importance of selecting the right candidates as NSC members. Finally, DFHERIS plans to provide a joint secretariat for both the HLSIG and the NSC. In the initial stages of establishing the NSC, DFHERIS foresees that the secretariat would play an active role in setting the agenda of NSC meetings. In initial meetings of the NSC, DFHERIS plans to provide an overview of relevant work on skills within DFHERIS and present the recommendations of the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland to members. Gradually, however, DFHERIS envisions that the NSC would take on the agenda-setting role once the NSC has had time to fully establish itself. DFHERIS places great emphasis on the selection of a suitable, motivated and driven chairperson of the reformed NSC because it sees the chairperson as instrumental in setting the NSC’s agenda further down the line.

## **Norway**

### *Skills Policy Council*

Throughout the past decade, Norway, like Sweden, has recognised the necessity to enhance co-ordination throughout the skills system. This entails addressing horizontal co-ordination among ministries, which previously operated in isolated silos, as well as vertical co-ordination spanning national, county, and municipal levels, including the provision of skills information for local stakeholders. Additionally, improving co-ordination between the government and non-governmental stakeholders is a priority. Despite having a tradition of tripartite co-operation, Norway’s formal co-operation on skills, understood holistically and across the life course, was limited. At the same time, labour market, digital, and environmental trends called for a more collaborative effort to solving skills challenges.

The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 was therefore developed by a collaborative team comprising representatives from ministries, social partners, and non-governmental organisations. The Skills Policy Council was then established as a jointly led body, bringing together both governmental actors and non-governmental stakeholders to oversee and drive implementation of the strategy, monitor and report on progress, and pinpoint any gaps or requirements for revising or updating the Strategy (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

Despite the Strategy’s completion in 2021 without renewal, and amidst a change in government, the Council has persisted in its role as an advisory body, fostering co-operation in the design and implementation of skills policy. Moreover, it serves as a platform for non-governmental stakeholders to provide feedback and guidance on governmental skills policies. The mandate and purpose of the Council are formally outlined by the Ministry of Education and Research, which now assumes the primary leadership role within the council.

The Council convenes high-level representatives from public institutions, social partners, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Ministries represented include the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, and most recently, the Ministry of Health and Care Services. Additionally, the Sami Parliament, representing the Sami indigenous people in Norway, holds observer status. County municipalities are represented by a county executive or county councillor.

Employers are represented by the Employers' Association (*Spekter*), the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (*NHO*), and the Enterprise Federation of Norway (*Virke*). Employees are represented by the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (*Akademikerne*), the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (*LO*), the Confederation of Unions for Professionals (*Unio*), and the Confederation of Vocational Unions (*YS*). NGOs involved in non-profit adult learning provision are represented by the Norwegian Association for Adult Learning (*VOFO*) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022<sup>[6]</sup>). While tripartite collaboration on skills in Norway has traditionally involved eight key social partners, encompassing the largest employer and employee organisations and the government, the council has expanded stakeholder participation to also include education and training providers. Recognising the pivotal role of providers in the implementation of skills policies, the council now includes representatives from the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions and the Vocational School Council.

The Council is chaired by the State Secretary for the Ministry of Education and Research, representing the Government's interests, and the agenda for council meetings is determined by the Ministry of Education and Research. The composition of ministries participating in council meetings may vary depending on the topic under discussion.

Meetings of the Council occur approximately three to four times a year and typically last around two hours. During these meetings, the government usually provides updates on current or anticipated policies, incorporating feedback received in previous sessions when applicable. Following these updates, other participants are invited to offer comments or reflections and may also propose new policy initiatives. Moreover, reports and insights from the Future Skills Needs Committee, which conducts high-level analyses and forecasts of skills requirements and includes representation from the eight key social partners, are presented during council meetings to inform decision-making processes (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

The Council has recently introduced an operational-level working group (hereafter referred to as the “operational group”), to enhance accountability and actionability in discussions held at the main council level. Comprising administrative-level experts from the same organisations represented in the main council, all members of the operational group also attend main council meetings.

The primary function of the operational group is to review the agenda for upcoming council meetings, facilitating preparation within each organisation and ensuring that high-level officials arrive equipped with prepared feedback and insights. Additionally, the group convenes to further discuss governmental skills policies as well as plans and actions within each institution, aiming to harmonise policies. The government may also task the operational group with specific follow-ups on policies, particularly when a tripartite perspective could prove beneficial. For instance, the government recently issued a white paper on the labour market relevance of higher education, which prompted the Council to initiate a tripartite agreement to follow up on the strategy outlined in the paper. Subsequently, the operational group was assigned to oversee the implementation of this agreement. However, participation in such requests by social partners is voluntary.

Administrative support for the council is provided by the Department of Working Life and Skills, Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, with no dedicated funding allocated to the council's activities.

**Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 1 – Improving collaboration between national agencies at a strategic level; and Opportunity 4 – Improving engagement with stakeholders at the national level**

As a collaborative forum involving both government officials and stakeholders, the Skills Policy Council fulfils a dual role: facilitating strategic co-ordination within the government and engaging stakeholders to collect advice on skills policies from a broad range of actors. Drawing parallels with the Swedish context, it shares similarities with the National Skills Arena for Skills Supply and offers valuable insights for both the Arena and the MSV in enhancing strategic co-ordination within the government.

One key strength lies in the active participation of ministerial representatives in the Council, which fosters stakeholder engagement and inter-ministerial co-ordination. The presence of government officials provides stakeholders with a direct opportunity to influence policy decisions, as their feedback is incorporated into subsequent discussions. This dynamic has been highlighted in the Swedish context, where stakeholders emphasise the importance of ministerial involvement in encouraging their engagement and impact on policy.

From the perspective of ministries, the Council serves as a government-led body, with the agenda usually determined by the Ministry of Education and Research. Consequently, it provides a platform for ministers from diverse fields to introduce their initiatives, seek input, and gather insights into policies across different ministries. This exchange of information and interaction among ministers, along with feedback from stakeholders, which may have implications for multiple ministries simultaneously, aids in aligning high-level priorities across ministries. In Sweden, ministries play a central role in defining skills policy priorities. Co-ordination at the ministerial level, has therefore been identified as important for the success of the MSV.

Furthermore, the Council benefits from a clearly defined mandate and working methods formalised by Ministry of Education and Research, which also assumes the official leadership role of the Council. The Ministry comes to each meeting of the Council with a concrete reform or a policy proposal, on which input is sought from stakeholders. Such clarity vis-à-vis the expected role of stakeholders in Council meetings supports stakeholder buy-in, enhances efficiency and is particularly relevant for the Swedish the National Arena, where the absence of a formalised mandate and clear vision for the Arena meetings has been identified as a challenge.

However, there are drawbacks to not having stakeholders lead the work in the Council more proactively. Their inability to influence the agenda may diminish their sense of ownership and discourage active participation. While government-led approach may streamline decision-making, it risks undermining stakeholder engagement if their role is not clearly defined or if their contributions are not adequately valued. In order to ensure active stakeholder participation in the Council, governmental members of the Council typically respond to the feedback received from stakeholders in previous Council meetings to showcase accountability.

It is also worth noting the broad participation in the Council for its advantages and disadvantages, which may be useful for Sweden as it finalises the membership of the MSV and the National Arena. Having a large number and variety of participating stakeholders allows many and varying perspectives and inputs to come forward but may also have its challenges. First, there may be some tension as to which advice ends up being implemented, in a case where there are several conflicting views. Additionally, this creates a situation where not all topics are relevant to all participating stakeholders, which may discourage participation. In order to address this, the Council tries to include at least one agenda item relevant to each participating stakeholder, ensuring their sustained motivation to engage.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 2 – Improving collaboration between national agencies at an operational level**

The recently added operational group, established to aid the Council secretariat in preparing Council meetings and translating discussions into actionable outcomes, bears resemblance to various aspects of Sweden's MSV and offers valuable insights into operational-level collaboration. The operational group is comparable to the MSV working groups in their technical focus, but also to the preparation group in its role of gathering materials and readying agencies for higher-level discussions.

An important takeaway from Norway's operational group within the Skills Policy Council is that engaging in discussions at a technical level can inherently bolster inter-ministerial collaboration. By convening regularly, the working group affords each institution the opportunity to gather information and insights from other participating organisations, subsequently informing higher-level officials internally. This dynamic serves to enrich and expedite discussions conducted at the high-level.

Moreover, the consistent and frequent participation of ministries in the working group fosters ongoing dialogue on skills matters, in contrast to the main council meetings, which are confined to agenda topics that may vary between sessions, as may participating ministries. Consequently, it is the operational group that actively reinforces inter-ministerial co-ordination, while the main council primarily serves as a platform for stakeholder engagement.

Conducting policy conversations at the operational level affords greater scope for in-depth discussions, presenting more opportunities to reach consensus on topics where participants may have conflicting perspectives. Unlike the main council, which is designed to facilitate the expression of diverse viewpoints and provide input to the government on potential courses of action, the operational group setting encourages robust debate and exchange of ideas on various issues. While both the Council and the operational group may not necessarily strive for unanimous agreement and consensus, having a more balanced and open forum for participants to express their perspectives freely and engage in constructive dialogue from multiple angles can help align ideas and visions across the participating organisations.

The presence of an operational-level group also contributes to achieving results. By fostering connections among individual actors within the skills system, the operational group encourages further collaboration and follow-up on initiatives, thereby catalysing action. For instance, the collaboration within the operational group has led the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Affairs to include a chapter on skills in a recent report on regional development.

An important feature of the operational group is its structure, which differs from that of Sweden's setup where various groups and levels convene separately. In contrast, all members of the operational group also attend the main Council meetings as observers. This arrangement ensures a strong connection between different levels of engagement. While administrative members attend Council meetings as observers, their presence at the meetings ensures their continuous exposure to discussions and decisions made by high-level officials. Moreover, they play a crucial role in relaying information to high-ranking officials within their institutions following operational group meetings, thereby facilitating continuous communication channels between the operational group and the main council in both directions.

The lessons mentioned above, regarding the potential impact of integrating an operational level into the council, suggest that the establishment of Working Groups (WGs) within the MSV may hold promise for strengthening collaboration, enhancing accountability, and achieving tangible outcomes. However, to fully harness the benefits of such an operational level, it is imperative to delineate clearly defined roles and mandates for the WGs, while acknowledging and leveraging their inherent strengths. Moreover, establishing robust and effective communication channels between different levels is essential to ensure seamless integration of the WG's work into strategic-level discussions within the MSV.

In addition to establishing an operational working group, the council has implemented other mechanisms to maintain accountability among higher-level officials through operational-level involvement. For instance, during the implementation of the national skills strategy, each participating institution would provide reports detailing the steps taken toward implementation. These reports were then compiled into a document illustrating the progress made with regards to the strategy.

### *Regional Competence Fora*

The Norwegian Regional Competence Fora (RCF) are part of Norway's efforts to strengthen regional economic growth and workforce development. The RCF were created following the 2017 regional governance reform (*Regionsreformen*) and the launch of the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 (see above). With the governance reform of the Norwegian regions (*fylkeskommuner*), the overall responsibility for regional skills development policies was placed at the regional level. The responsibilities of the regions were further defined in a Government White Paper from 2018. These include supporting the matching of skills supply and demand at regional level, linking regional development with



skills policies, facilitating co-operation across regional stakeholders, and developing regional skills strategies that set goals for skills supply and demand (Government of Norway, 2018<sup>[7]</sup>).

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, a regional development project was initiated, aiming to enhance regional skills development policies, including through the development of new models for co-operation. Through the project, which ended in 2018, the 16 participating regions developed cross-regional guidelines for regional work on matching skills supply with demand. The regions suggested that the work consists of three pillars: 1) regional skills strategies, 2) Regional Competence Fora and 3) an updated knowledge base for regional skills demand. Following the project, Regional Competence Fora have been established in seven regions so far (with RCF still under development in the remaining four regions).<sup>2</sup> Each RCF may be divided into several sub-fora covering groups of local authorities (*kommuner*) within the region. In addition, several regions are considering or in the process of establishing Regional Skills Fora.

The RCF aims to facilitate co-operation between educational institutions, businesses, and national, regional, and local government to address regional and local skills needs, improve the quality of education and training programmes, and promote lifelong learning initiatives. Each RCF focuses on its region's needs and priorities, working closely with stakeholders to develop initiatives that support skills development, economic growth, and competitiveness. The RCF undertake various activities to map and match local and regional skills supply and demand. This includes identifying regional skills needs and priorities, fostering collaboration among educational institutions, businesses, and public authorities, designing and implementing joint projects and initiatives to address skills gaps, and advocating for lifelong learning and professional development opportunities. In most regions, regional skills strategies guide the work of the fora (Det Kongelige Kommunal-og Moderniseringsdepartement, 2018<sup>[8]</sup>). Compared to the Irish RSF (see above), the focus of the Norwegian RCF is not primarily on employers, but on the broader stakeholder landscape.

While the composition of RCF varies across regions, they generally consist of representatives from regional and local governments, employers, trade unions, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (*Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltninga, NAV*), vocational schools, universities and other education providers. While some Fora are run directly by the elected members of the regional councils (*fylkesting*), others are organised and run at the administrative level. Regional work on skills supply and demand, including the RCF, is financed through block grants from national to regional governments. However, there is no earmarked funding for regional skills development activities within the block grants.

Work across regions, including those with a Regional Skills Forum, is co-ordinated through a network of Regional Directors of Skills and Education, which meets regularly. A smaller group of these Directors have been selected to prepare the network meetings. This smaller group also meets monthly with the Ministry of Education and Research to ensure co-ordination across national and regional levels of government. More recently, a network for regional officials responsible for skills and education policies has been created to foster co-operation between regions and other relevant stakeholders (e.g. social partners and the NAV). The network meets quarterly. With support from the Ministry of Regional Development, RCF (and the regions more generally) also co-operate through other formal and informal networks and ad hoc meetings (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017<sup>[9]</sup>).

Co-operation between the regions/RCF and the national government takes place mainly through the Skills Policy Council and the recently added operational group (see above). The network of Regional Directors has appointed one Director to represent the regions/RCF in the Skills Policy Council and its operational

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<sup>2</sup> The regional governance reform of 2017 resulted in the reduction of counties (*fylkeskommuner*), which is the regional elected level of government in Norway, from 19 to 11. The reform came into effect on 1 January 2022. In June 2022, the Norwegian Parliament decided to increase the number of counties to 15. The change came into effect on 1 January 2024. There are currently no competence forums in the re-established counties.

group. At the local level, RCF seek to facilitate co-operation between local authorities within their region, including on topics such as skills and labour market integration of migrants and refugees and the development of upper secondary education, vocational education and training and adult learning policies.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 3 – Improving engagement between national and sub-national levels of governments**

The Norwegian Regional Competence Fora is in many ways comparable to the role of the Swedish regions in the skills field. Yet, there are differences between the two systems, which may serve as learning points for Sweden.

First, the roles and responsibilities of the Norwegian RCF were clearly defined with the 2017 regional reform. Until 2021, they were also guided at the national level by the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021. Unlike Sweden, all regions have agreed to establish a Regional Competence Forum and develop a regional skills strategy to guide their work. Although the RCF – similarly to the Swedish regional bodies – differ in their composition and capacities, they are guided by a clear vision and approach set out in the Government White Paper and the following agreement between all regions.

Second, the RSF are well-integrated into the national government structure through the representation of the regional level in the Skills Policy Council and the operational group. This ensures strong representation of rural and urban areas in national policymaking and supports co-ordination of national policies and regional initiatives. This is further supported by the monthly dialogue meetings between the Ministry of Education and Science (see above) and the smaller group of regional Directors. In addition, the NAV is represented in all RCF, ensuring a link to the national government. Combined with strong links to local authorities, the RSF function as the link between national and local government and support co-operation on skills policies across levels of government.

Third, the RCF have proven fundamental to developing tailored strategies to address the diverse skills needs of Norwegian regions. The Norwegian government has sought to strengthen rural areas by allocating additional resources and supporting capacity building through the RCF (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017<sup>[9]</sup>). In addition, the government has experimented with pilots to find effective ways of addressing skills needs in remote regions. Amongst other things, these approaches aim to include marginalised communities such as the Sami in the northern regions of Norway.

### ***Belgium (Flanders)***

Flanders and Sweden have certain administrative arrangements in common; specifically, they both have small departments (ministries) and partially autonomous government agencies tasked with implementation. Within the Flemish government, there are ten departments, each overseeing a distinct policy area as well as at least one agency. Each department operates under the direct oversight of the minister and is charged with leading policy design and decision-making processes. Agencies, on the other hand, have a higher degree of autonomy and primarily focus on policy implementation. Two key departments overseeing skills policy are Work and Social Economy, and Education and Training.

To foster collaboration and co-ordination, Flanders operates Policy Councils, Management Committees, and Strategic Advisory Boards. Policy Councils and Management Committees facilitate intra-governmental co-ordination and are described in detail below.

Strategic Advisory Boards engage non-governmental stakeholders to solicit input and advice. The two Strategic Advisory Boards most relevant to skills policies are the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), discussed below, and the Social Economic Council of Flanders (SERV). The SERV provides input for socio-economic policy through advice, stakeholder action agreements and research (OECD, 2019<sup>[10]</sup>). For example, in 2016, the SERV produced a platform text “Flanders 2030 – An outstretched hand” (*Vlaanderen*

2030 – *Een uitgestoken hand*) (SERV, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>) which outlines guidelines for the next fifteen years in a number of socio-economic areas (economy, labour market, education, energy, and social policy).

In addition to the structures noted above, Flanders has also established the Partnership for Lifelong Learning (PLL) in 2020. This initiative aims to enhance synergies and co-operation on lifelong learning within the Flemish Government. Its 2021 action plan on lifelong learning presents a clear vision for cultivating a culture of lifelong learning and highlights specific actions, ambitions and flagship initiatives aimed at achieving that vision (Partnership for Lifelong Learning, 2021<sup>[12]</sup>). With 18 members drawn from diverse sectors including the SERV, public and private learning providers, sectoral funds, the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training, local authorities, business schools, and the VLOR Council for Lifelong Learning (see more below), the Partnership represents a broad spectrum of stakeholders committed to advancing lifelong learning objectives in Flanders.

### *Policy Councils and Management Committees*

As noted above, each department in Flanders, including of the Department of the Work and Social Economy (WSE) and the Department of Education and Training, maintain Policy Councils. These Councils serve as fora where the relevant minister convenes with secretary generals of the relevant department (ministry), alongside experts from both the department and agencies, to deliberate on and align policies. Moreover, a joint Policy Council, comprising ministers, departments, and experts from all agencies relevant to Work and Social Economy, and to Education and Training, convenes regularly to ensure seamless co-ordination on matters pertaining to skills and lifelong learning.

Management Committees, which include secretary generals and experts from the relevant department, are tasked with delving deeper into policy matters addressed by Policy Councils. The Committees concentrate on administrative concerns and the implementation of agreements established in the Policy Councils. The Committees do not have official decision-making power on new policy, but serve more as co-ordination and consultation bodies, with decision-making power on administrative matters. As in the case of the Policy Council, a joint Management Committee focused on Education and Training, as well as WSE, meets regularly to align policies pertaining to skills and lifelong learning. Chairing and secretariat responsibilities of the joint Management Committee rotate annually between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of WSE.

The composition and frequency of meetings for the Policy Councils and Management Committees are tailored to accommodate evolving policy needs and agendas, with roughly three to four Management Committee meetings per year. Funding for each Policy Council or Management Committee comes from within the relevant department, as the fora are bodies within the departments. In the case of the joint Committee, funding for the secretariat will rotate annually between the two departments.

Both the Policy Councils and Management Committees are characterised by their relatively high-level and strategic focus. They can be compared to the MSV, with the Policy Council resembling the Directors General Group (the main distinction being the inclusion of ministers in Policy Councils), and the Management Committee resembling the Steering Group.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 1 – Improving collaboration between national agencies at a strategic level**

As mentioned above in the case of Ireland's Labour Market Advisory Council and Norway's Skills Policy Council, there is a strategic advantage in incorporating both high-ranking officials and administrative-level experts in co-ordination bodies. Establishing fora where high-ranking officials from different institutions deliberate and align policy issues not only incentivises active participation in discussions but also helps foster policy alignment across each institution, as top leaders are best positioned to incorporate change within their organisations. The Policy Councils notable include ministers, which is important in the Swedish

context, where enhanced collaboration between Ministries has been underscored as essential by several participating agencies.

Conversely, involving operational-level experts in strategic discussions can further bolster collaboration, drive implementation efforts, and uphold accountability. It can therefore be beneficial to establish distinct, yet strongly linked fora dedicated to each of these objectives. This speaks to the importance of having an administrative-level group involved in strategic steering such as MSV's StG, as well as having links between the WG and StG in the MSV.

### *Flemish Education Council*

The Flemish Education Council, known as the Vlor, is the official strategic and advisory body on education and training policy for the Flemish community. The Council was formed in 1991 with the aim to assess government policy plans whilst producing proposals of their own. Since then, it has played a major role in preparing education policy in Flanders, covering areas such as curriculum development, teacher training and education equality (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2024<sup>[13]</sup>). The mandate and membership of the Vlor is specified in legislation, and funding is provided by the government.

The Vlor consists of a General Council and four sub-councils for different levels of education: the Primary Education Council, the Secondary Education Council, the Higher Education Council, and the Council for Lifelong Learning. The Councils work on the 'content' of education policy, which includes discussing and voting on Vlor's advice/policy proposals for the government (see more below). Each Council also has a dedicated bureau, responsible for planning and strategic decisions. The bureau of the General Council, called the General Board, oversees all activities of the Vlor and its finances. Overall, the Vlor has over 300 members which are comprised of individuals and organisations with a stake in education and training policy, including: education and training providers, teachers' unions, learners, their families, student representatives, socio-economic and socio-cultural organisations, and independent experts.

The mandate of the Vlor encompasses three main functions: advice, consultation, and study and documentation.

First, the Vlor is primarily an advisory board. It assesses the government's policy plans and makes its own proposals regarding Flemish education policy. Official advice is deliberated and approved internally by the General Council or one of the four sub-councils, before being submitted to the Minister of Education and other ministers involved (if applicable), and to the secretary-general of the Department of Education and Training. Vlor's official opinions and policy recommendations are then published on their website.

Secondly, the Vlor is also a consultation forum. It serves as space for strategic-level discussions between members about the future of education in Flanders (Belgium).

Thirdly, the Vlor is active in study and documentation. In order to deliver respectable and trustworthy advice and policy opinions, the ability to access reliable, peer-reviewed data is crucial for reaching informed conclusions. Therefore, the Vlor utilises existing research and international reports and routinely consults external experts. The culmination of this process can be a publication "strategic exploration documents", one example being "*The Future of Early Childhood Education*" (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2023<sup>[14]</sup>) and "practice orientated research papers", one example being "*Keys for Effective Reading Comprehension*" (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2019<sup>[15]</sup>).

While the Vlor itself is independent from the Ministry of Education, it reports its activities annually to the Flemish Government and the Flemish Parliament. This yearly report depicts an academic year of education policy through the lens of the Vlor and provides a general overview of the salient themes that were discussed (Douterlungne and Herpelinck, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>). Moreover, in the yearly report, the Vlor reinforces its main recommendations and positions.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 4 – Improving engagement with stakeholders at the national level**

The operation of the Vlor holds several lessons for Sweden, which could prove useful as Sweden finalises the establishment of its National Arena for Skills Supply.

First, the Vlor has clearly defined what input is expected from stakeholders at what stages of the policy cycle, which could be relevant for Sweden's National Arena, where involved stakeholders mentioned that expectations around their exact role were not yet fully clear. In Flanders, the Vlor gives advice on both a mandatory and voluntary basis. For example, the Flemish Minister who is responsible for Education and Training is required to request Vlor's official opinion on all preliminary draft education decrees. Without this advice from the Flemish Education Council, no act can pass Parliament, with the exception of the yearly education budget bill. For example, the Vlor was asked to provide an opinion on the preliminary draft decree amending the decree on the use of Dutch-Flemish Sign Language in primary education (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2023<sup>[17]</sup>). The Vlor will assess the Minister's proposals and determine their desirability, feasibility and acceptability for educational stakeholders, as well as the potential impact for students, schools, and society and ultimately evaluating whether they will enhance the quality of education. In addition, there are instances where the government is not required to seek Vlor's advice, but does so nonetheless, as was the case with regards to the government decision to regulate apprenticeships (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>). Conversely, there are instances where the Vlor decides to offer its advice without a formal request from government. In cases where the Vlor provides advice at its own initiative, it typically does so early in the policy preparation process, while the Government would usually seek Vlor's advice only at later stages as new policy is being prepared (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2023<sup>[19]</sup>).

Second, there are clear accountability mechanisms in place regarding how the advice given by the Vlor is handled. In cases where the Minister is required to consult the Vlor when preparing an education decree and such a then decree passes the Flemish Parliament, the accompanying documentation at the end of the legislative process would mention the advice given by the Vlor and the way in which the government did (not) take it into account. Establishing clear accountability mechanisms, which allow stakeholders to see where, if and how their advice has been used, could be equally considered by Sweden to help secure commitment and engagement of stakeholders in the National Arena.

Third, in determining the membership and operation of the Swedish National Arena, it may be relevant to examine Vlor's approach, where further engagement activities are undertaken in addition to regular Vlor meetings to ensure both inclusiveness of engagement and feasibility of conducting meetings. As stated in Vlor's annual report 2022/2023, all those involved in Flemish education should have a voice representing them in the Council and all stakeholders are encouraged to join the discussion to help shape education policy from an educational, pedagogical, and social perspective. Stakeholders, beyond Vlor members, are therefore invited to participate in seminars (including thematic "inspiration days"), focus groups and webinars organised by the Council. These platforms serve as opportunities for additional stakeholders to share insights, exchange ideas, and contribute to the development of education policies from various educational, pedagogical, and social perspectives.

Finally, consulted stakeholders in Sweden also strongly emphasised the need for the work in the National arena to lead to concrete results in order to sustain stakeholder engagement. Besides the advisory, consultative and study roles described above, the Vlor carries out "innovation projects", in which case it assumes a role in policy implementation. For example, between 2019 and 2022, the Vlor implemented the "The teacher at school and in society" project, which aimed to explore ways of motivating more people to become – and remain – teachers. The Vlor typically runs one such multi-year project every five years. The project cycle typically starts with the Governing Board deciding on the strategic goal of a project, which the Secretariat then transforms into a concrete project proposal (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad, 2022<sup>[20]</sup>). Once the project is underway, the Vlor dedicates staff in the Secretariat to work on project implementation. Vlor members are actively engaged at various stages of the project in a strategic, advisory capacity.

## Latvia

### *Sectoral Expert Councils*

In Latvia, 13 tripartite Sectoral Expert Councils (SECs) have been established to enhance collaboration among the State, local governments, industry employers, associations, trade unions and specialists around vocational education and training (VET) planning and delivery. The Councils cover sectors such as construction, energy, transport and logistics and tourism. The first 11 councils were established in 2011 through the Vocational Education Law. These 11 SECs are led by the Employers' Confederation of Latvia (LDDK), the Free Confederation of Trade Unions of Latvia (LBAS), and the National Centre for Education of Latvia (VISC). In 2015, the Agricultural industry organisations supported the establishment of the Food Industry and Agriculture SEC, and in 2022, a new, 13th SEC - the Cultural Education Council was established, co-ordinated by the Latvian National Centre for Culture. Today, almost all sectors and occupations are covered by a SEC, except those sectors financed and regulated by the state, such as the justice system, healthcare, and defence (Līce et al., 2023<sup>[21]</sup>). Latvia is currently considering expanding the SEC system's scope to cover public sector jobs and merging some existing councils to increase co-operation.

The main tasks of the SECs include the development of sectoral qualification frameworks, updating occupational standards, introducing a modular approach in VET programmes, enhancing professional qualification exams, and creating a system for recognising prior learning. Most of their work is devoted to developing Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks (SQFs), developing occupational standards, and planning the VET offer. While the focus of the SECs is currently restricted to VET, there are ongoing discussions in the country around including adult education in the responsibilities of the SEC in the future.

The Councils are tripartite bodies consisting of state representatives (ministries and public agencies), employers' representatives (employer organisations, professional associations), and employees' representatives (trade unions and their associations). At least 50% of the members of the councils have to be representatives of employers, giving employers greater say in the SECs. The membership of national ministries and authorities varies across the SECs (e.g. the Ministry of Agriculture is represented in the Food Industry and Agriculture SEC). On paper, decisions within SECs are reached through majority voting. Yet, in practice, consensus decision-making is the norm. While VET institutions/education providers cannot cast votes, they are invited to participate as permanent observers. Each SEC comprises between 16 and 32 voting members, potentially including up to 16 non-voting observers (Līce et al., 2023<sup>[21]</sup>).

SECs receive administrative support from a Secretariat managed by the LDDK and funded and overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science. The LDDK and the other co-ordinating organisations (e.g. LOSP Agricultural Organisation Cooperation Council *Lauksaimniecības Organizāciju Sadarbības Padome*) are accountable to the Ministry of Education and Science and must submit quarterly reports on the SECs progress and spending. While SEC board membership is voluntary and not compensated financially, the LDDK Secretariat assists SEC boards in their duties (Līce et al., 2023<sup>[21]</sup>). Given the role of the Ministry of Economics in producing labour market intelligence, the Government is currently considering the option to split financing and oversight of the LDDK Secretariat between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Economics.

While SECs are overseen by the government, each council operates independently in decision-making processes. SECs have the authority to establish sub-councils representing more autonomous sub-sectors, such as construction, mining, and metal working. However, these only exist in the most active/largest SECs (Līce et al., 2023<sup>[21]</sup>). LDDK convenes the SEC Council, an informal gathering attended by all SEC chairpersons or deputy chairpersons, representatives from the co-ordinating organisations and LBAS, to exchange information on current issues among SEC leaders.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 5 – Improving engagement between national authorities and stakeholders at sectoral level**

The Latvian sector council model could provide a number of insights for Sweden on the potential roles and responsibilities of sector skills councils, criteria for establishing councils in new sectors, the governance arrangements and funding mechanisms, and mechanisms to support co-operation between councils and other institutions in the skills system.

First, the Latvian sector council model is characterised by comprehensive coverage of the economy and clearly defined roles for the councils. Specifically, the clear definition of the role and mandate of Latvia's SECs through national legislation and strong oversight by the co-ordinating institutions ensure strong consistency in the work of SECs. This is different from the Swedish model, where only a few sectors are covered by skills sectors bodies and where there is significant variation in the organisation and work of the different bodies. Discussions around the potential establishment of councils takes place between the Government and employers' representations, while the ultimate decision-making powers lies with the Government, co-ordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science (and possibly the Ministry of Economic in the future).

Second, a legally defined governance structure, including mandated quarterly meetings between the government and the councils, establishes a strong framework for communication and collaboration with the national government. Hence, the system fosters both detailed work within each sector and co-ordination across sectors to ensure that sectoral insights and initiatives are aligned. This is supported by the Secretariat, funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Sector Council, which promotes collaboration across all SECs.

Third, SECs are led by industry leaders, with a minimum of 50% of board members being employers. The strong representation of employers on the boards ensures that they have a strong say the work of the SECs. In many sectors this has fostered high employer engagement in the VET system – something many other countries struggle to achieve. Yet, it may also be a challenge to the tripartite system as government and unions remain a minority in the boards. The Latvian example provides a contrast with the Swedish VET advisory councils, which are mainly funded and run by the government.

### **Netherlands<sup>3</sup>**

#### *Training and Development Funds*

The Dutch "Training and Development" Funds or O&O Funds (*Onderzoek en Opleiding fondsen*) or sometimes also called "Sector Funds" (*Sector fondsen*), are organisations that pool financial resources from employers and employees to provide training and workforce development services within a specific sector. The funds are established voluntarily during collective labour agreements (*Collectieve Arbeids Overeenkomsten CAOs*), in which each fund's guiding principles and board members are agreed upon. In the Dutch system, over 800 industry branches are combined in around 225 sectors, 130 of which have active O&O Funds. The Funds originated in the early 1980s when they became prominent in fighting the consequences of the oil crisis of the 1970s by improving labour productivity through sector-focused skills training. Today, the funds form a fundamental part of the Dutch labour market and skills system (Van der Meijden and Van der Meer, 2013<sup>[22]</sup>), even though they are not enshrined in law. The resources, capacities, and size of the funds vary significantly, and a substantial number of sectors do not yet have a fund (Van der Meijden and Van der Meer, 2013<sup>[22]</sup>). Traditional industry sectors, such as metalworking and

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<sup>3</sup> The writing of this case study has benefited from information shared in a fact-finding interview with consultants from *WeCreate*, a company representing 33 O&O funds.

construction, have some of the biggest funds, whilst service industries, such as the financial or consulting industry, often lack a CAO and thus are not covered by funds.

The competencies and tasks of O&O Funds vary across sectors. The primary purpose of the funds is to strengthen intake and professionalism of the training in their sector, including by acting as an information point on available training and providing training activities (Stichting van de Arbeid, 2009<sup>[23]</sup>) (Sociaal Economische Raad, 2011<sup>[24]</sup>). While some funds focus mainly on distributing funding directly to employers and employees (e.g. through training vouchers), others are more active in identifying training needs in their sector (e.g. through analytical work in collaboration with researchers or other stakeholders) and in designing and providing training opportunities relevant to the employers. The funds focus increasingly on distributing financing to vocational education and training (VET) opportunities (Van der Meijden and Van der Meer, 2013<sup>[22]</sup>). Some funds also play an advisory role for employers, especially SMEs, seeking to strengthen their focus on and effectiveness of lifelong learning policies. They can assist smaller enterprises in developing an upskilling strategy for their company, advise on the right training offer, and aid in funding applications.

Funding for O&O Funds is agreed upon in the respective collective labour agreements mentioned above. Funding varies significantly across sectors, ranging from around EUR 100 000 annually for the smallest funds up to EUR 50 million annually for the largest funds. Smaller funds are sometimes operated by less than one full-time employee, whilst larger funds can have up to 40 employees allowing them to have a significant impact on their industries.

The O&O Funds are overseen by a board comprising representatives from employers and employees appointed by their respective sector's social partners. Within some larger funds, sub-committees and working groups have been created, staffed by industry experts and focusing on enhancing training and development opportunities within the sector. Daily tasks within funds are performed by a secretariat. There are no formal structures to support co-operation across funds. However, members of boards, committees and working groups often hold multiple roles, creating a network of experts across sectors that tend to collaborate through more informal structures. Some funds hire external parties to perform daily operations. As these external parties often represent more than one fund, they play a part in fostering the development of an unofficial network of funds.

There are no formal structures to support co-operation between the national government and the O&O Funds. Instead, board members, through their positions in local and national trade unions and employers' organisations, form the main link between the funds and the national government. The strength of this link depends on the seniority and individual capabilities of board members. Ministries also hold congresses and meetings in which multiple funds gather. Recently, ministries have been seeking ways to increase governmental engagement in sectoral skills development through the funds to achieve strategic targets such as industry preparedness for the digital and green twin transition, combating skills shortages, and increasing global competitiveness through enhanced labour productivity. To this end the government provides additional grants on top off the funds' basic funding. These grants are competitive, and to get access to the grants, funds are required to: i) conduct labour market intelligence to show challenges with labour and skills shortages in their sector; ii) draft a strategy for the implementation of the grant, including measurable objectives for output/impacts; and iii) perform and deliver on these objectives.

### **Area of learning relevant for Sweden: Opportunity 3 – Improving engagement with stakeholders at the sectoral level**

The O&O Funds system in the Netherlands holds several lessons for Sweden, including regarding the coverage of sectors by councils, engagement of social partners, and roles and responsibilities of the councils, which may be useful in Sweden's own efforts to expand the network of sectoral arenas.

First, the Dutch system presents an example of a sector council skills system that ensures coverage of a broad range of sectors in the national economy, similar to Latvia as mentioned above. In Sweden, sector



skills bodies remain relatively scarce, with the existing bodies varying significantly in form, working methods, and connections to the government. In the Dutch system, more than 130 out of around 225 sectors have an active O&O Fund. This indicates a much broader coverage of the economy. The structure of the funds is similar across all sectors, with boards consisting of equal representation from employers and employees. Moreover, there is a general understanding and agreement on the overall purpose of the funds, which supports the effectiveness of the Funds' operations.

Second, the Dutch system reflects the robust presence and decisive role of social partners across sectors of the Dutch economy. The historical significance of social partners in the Netherlands, coupled with their commitment to sectoral collective labour agreements, has provided conducive conditions for the operation of the funds. Through the funds, employers and employees have taken up a crucial role in identifying skills needs within specific sectors and providing training and learning opportunities adjusted to these needs. In addition, through their connections to regional and local employers and unions, the funds have also provided opportunities for locally-based stakeholders, such as local initiatives for education, to participate actively in the skills system. While social partners play an equally important role in Sweden (including through an extensive system of sector co-operation agreements (*yrkesnämnder*) between employers' organisations and trade unions to facilitate re- and upskilling, the system takes a more informal form and relations to the government (e.g. through national agencies) are limited. For example, there is no complete overview of the types of sector co-operation agreements in place across the sectors in the Swedish economy. In addition, links to national agencies tend to be strongest in the sectors with the most resources/among larger employers.

Third, especially the larger funds play a strategic role in ensuring broad support for lifelong learning in the Dutch society and promoting lifelong learning opportunities, including for low-skilled workers who are generally less engaged in re- and upskilling activities. For example, the funds visit companies to help employers draft upskilling strategies that are adjusted to their specific needs and can be effectively communicated to employees. In this way, the funds play a vital role in developing and implementing lifelong learning strategies across different sectors and employers in the Dutch economy.

Fourth, providing strategic funding from government to O&O funds (see more above) represents an interesting way for policy makers at the national level to align re- and upskilling activities to the changing labour market needs of specific sectors. Through dedicated competitive funding, the government empowers funds to implement strategic upskilling programmes, thereby fostering significant sector-specific knowledge to confront labour market challenges. Good examples are targets on the digital and green transition in different sectors. Funds provide intelligence of the effect of such transitions and link this to government policy to stay globally competitive. In this manner O&O funds assist in the implementation of strategic policy. Sweden could look at this model to explore options for improving their competitiveness on a sectoral level.

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