

SKILLS FOR LIFE IN SLOVAKIA

MAPPING REPORT



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1. Introduction: Focus on skills for life

“Skills are one of the main factors that allow individuals, and societies, to keep up with technological change, to adapt, to innovate; in one word, to prosper.”¹

“Life skills are just as important as the traditionally interpreted vocational skills.”²

The European Commission has made 2023 the European Year of Skills: an initiative to make sure adults have the relevant skills to successfully navigate the ever-changing labour market and fully engage in society³. The four objectives of the European Year of Skills are an increase in investment in training and skills development, improved cooperation between relevant stakeholders, better skills-and-job matching and the ability to attract talent. At the same time, experts and policy actors across the EU countries consensually agree that it is simply not sufficient anymore to support the vocational skills of adults who may struggle to respond to new challenges related to technological and societal changes.

Project Life Skills developed and implemented by the State Vocational Education Institute (ŠIOV), in its capacity of the National Coordinator of the Programme of Adult Education, has been developed also to leverage the momentum created by the European Year of Skills initiative. ŠIOV decided to focus during 2023 on life skills to support a holistic view of adult learning needs in relation to the skills’ challenges for Slovakia and create space for discussing and formulating the opportunities, priorities, and threats that the adults in Slovakia need to address in relation to their current or future skills’ gaps.

The skills of adults have been markedly present in public discourse in recent years in Slovakia, mainly in connection with the technological shifts but also in connection with negative demographic change. Digital and green transitions and their multi-dimensional character are already strongly present in our everyday life and during the implementation of this relatively short project, the interest in the effects of artificial intelligence has rocketed in the public discourse in Slovakia. The impact of technological change and current societal transitions on the life skills of adults is the focus of interest of the expert community and public audience more than before. Among the aims of this project were to initiate activities, to network stakeholders and to map the current state of life skills in Slovakia and identify the areas where the life skills of adults need to be supported by public funding. The Life skills project was designed as one of the quick responses to what is perceived as one of the most significant shifts in the skills adults need for their everyday lives.

It can be challenging to identify areas for policy intervention. What can public actors do to help adults to improve their life skills? Life skills as a subject for public programmes are a cross-thematic concept and activities that can have an impact on the life skills of adults usually involve a wide range of stakeholders.

Skills for life have not been discussed in Slovakia from the point of view of potential functions which can be assumed in this respect by adult learning policies. There is ad-hoc evidence on activities carried out by NGOs and some policy actors that have an impact on the life skills of

¹ OECD 2016, p3.

² Marcella Milana, the Chair of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults for the ELM magazine, Theme Redefining Skills and Competences 02/2023, Interview by Sara Pasino: <https://elmmagazine.eu/redefining-skills-and-competences/vocational-skills-are-no-longer-enough-for-adult-education-in-europe/>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6086

adults, either direct participants or public audience reached by the results of the project activities. There is a lack of understanding of how policies and public funding could be efficiently used from the perspective of supporting the life skills of adults.

The motivation for the Life Skills project was:

- To open a discussion in the community of adult learning actors on the importance of life skills.
- To raise awareness about the importance of life skills considering technological, economic, and social changes in Slovak society.
- To gather evidence-based data on the current practice in life skills of adults.
- To identify challenges and priorities in supporting the life skills of adults.
- To inform policy makers and stakeholders about the potential areas for interventions to support the life skills of adults through public funding.

2. Methodology approach for the mapping activity

Skills for life are as such a cross-sectional and multidimensional thematic area. It was crucial to design the project methodology and activities accordingly. In developing the methodology for the project, we put emphasis on an actor-oriented approach. This means we developed all activities with relevant stakeholders who are involved in supporting life skills for different target groups of adults or have competencies in this area (public actors) or undertake other activities that are relevant to the life skills of adults. In the case of life skills, it is understandable that the variety of stakeholders might be quite large. We argue that the actor-oriented approach is vital for the topic of life skills so that we could obtain viewpoints and experiences of relevant and varied actors engaged in activities that have an impact on the life skills of adults. This approach meant we invested a considerable amount of time in identifying the actors and ensuring their involvement in different stages of the project implementation especially in the regional roundtable discussions.

We set out the following objectives of the project mapping and dissemination activities:

- Map and discuss how the concept of life skills is perceived in Slovakia and reflect on activities provided for adults.
- Identify which components of life skills are currently or will be in the near future at high risk for adults in Slovakia and should be therefore a focus of potential policy intervention support from public funding.
- Identify and prioritise vulnerable groups of adults who might be at risk in particular areas of components of life skills, and what barriers they might face, while also considering also regionally specific conditions.
- Review some of the current policy initiatives as well as activities of stakeholders in the field that are targeted at the development of life skills or have been effective for the development of life skills.

- Identify implementation frameworks and training delivery mechanisms that should be considered when developing public schemes or projects targeting the development of life skills or their components.
- Involve relevant actors from the field covering regional aspects because of large regional differences in Slovakia.
- Initiate and start building a life skills network for stakeholders and practitioners. The actors' structure would be based on three dimensions:
 - o Governance actors and policymakers: governance actors across different sectors and levels of governance, public programme managers.
 - o Organisations and practitioners involved in adult learning: active organisations and individual practitioners who develop activities in the field for different target groups of adults.
 - o Local business representatives providing inputs on skills demand.

In terms of methodology for data collection for the mapping activity, this report is based on i) documentary research focusing on life skills policy initiatives in Slovakia and abroad; ii) a review of literature which is relevant to life skills, including academic literature and reports from recent applied projects, iii) an analysis of original qualitative data gathered for the project via questionnaires iv) analysis of information from round table discussions which have been transcribed and analysed by the thematic mapping approach.

For the collection of original data in the field, we developed participative round table discussions which allowed for combining gathering of information on the current practice and needs with networking of the stakeholders involved in life skills development. With this approach, we also created space for a participatory aspect of the parts of discussions devoted to discussing problems and solutions of connected policy and practice areas of life skills of adults in Slovakia. In terms of gathering information, we implemented structured round table discussions with the stakeholders with regional and thematic focus. As the discussions were designed with a strong emphasis on the multi-actor approach, the views have been not only shared but also further developed in the discussion as different actors benefited from the interactive character of discussions, and from exchange of experience and information about the current practice and their individual activities. This interactive format of qualitative data collection was deemed most appropriate.

As part of the dissemination activities of the project, one of the objectives of the project was to initiate developing a life skills network for stakeholders and practitioners. The participative discussions have been supportive of creating a space for identifying common themes and shared concerns about the problems that different actors observe in practice. Participants consensually agreed on the importance of networking but also stressed the importance of effective approaches to networking which should be based on i) non-formal communication channels ii) horizontal and open exchange of information among different governance actors, especially at national sectoral levels of public governance iii) vertical communication events with strengthened access to information about the grass root activities in the field.

Equally important was the regional dimension. Slovakia is characterised by large regional differences, and regional and local populations are likely to have significantly different structures in terms of the skill level and skills structure of the adult population. Therefore,

discussions were organised in different regions across Slovakia to counteract any potential regional differences that may have potentially arisen. The round table discussions took place during the summer of 2022. The facilitation of the groups was ensured by, on average, three members of the Life Skills project who developed the themes and background information for the discussions⁴.

The mapping analysis carried out within this report is to be understood as a pilot activity to identify potential areas for interventions in adult learning and lifelong learning policies or in other relevant policy areas. In this respect, the comparison with the approach applied for another relatively recent project with the acronym BLUESS⁵, can be helpful. Project BLUESS focused on mapping the basic skills of adults in Slovakia. The initial starting situation of the Life Skills project differed from the project BLUESS which focused specifically on basic skills. In project BLUESS it was already known prior to the project implementation that there is a clear policy gap in basic skills provision and the project aimed at identifying steps to address that gap. In the Life Skills project, we wanted to understand if and where there is a policy gap, but we also needed to identify which elements of life skills are at risk in Slovakia and who are the relevant actors to support the development of life skills for adults in Slovakia.

Due to the scope of the project and the wide range of the practice areas which might be important for life skills, it did not allow for an in-depth thorough analytical study but hopefully will prove worthy as a foundation for further projects that may follow our Life Skills pilot project.

3. Review of literature on skills for life

To support the information base for the project activities, we reviewed selected sources of literature on how the concept of life skills had been developed and applied in the past. For this aim, we undertook a review of academic literature with a focus on the concepts supported by the research in psychology. We also reviewed recent projects that had an applied research approach, and their results were relevant to the concept of life skills and its current contextualisation for the case of EU countries.

Generic classifications

Life skills academic research areas differ in their conceptualisations and goals, and there are numerous distinctive classifications of life skills. Some authors provide a rather broad list of life skills that are applicable across societies, i.e., are contextually independent. One of the first broad classifications was proposed by the World Health Organization (1999), which identified five dimensions that were perceived to be relevant across cultures:

- Decision-making and problem-solving
- Creative thinking and critical thinking
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Self-awareness and empathy

⁴ Background note developed for the discussion is included in the Appendix of this report.

⁵ Acronym BLUESS stands for Blueprints for Basic Skills Development in Slovakia. Project BLUESS was a two-year project implemented by ŠIOV 2019-2020. Project outputs are available at: <https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/projekt-blueess/>

- Coping with emotions and stress

Another generic classification was proposed by International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support (2013), grouping life skills into three interrelated categories of cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills:

- Cognitive skills help individuals to use culturally appropriate coping strategies, analyse situations by thinking critically and weighing pros and cons, solve problems, evaluate future consequences of their actions, create a sense of meaning in everyday life, search for information, use vocational skills, and advocate for rights.
- Personal skills enable individuals to be self-aware of their weaknesses, strengths, and values, be confident, cope with feelings and needs, be empathic, manage stress, cope with changes and challenges, improve their emotional well-being, set realistic goals for the future, and create a sense of meaning.
- Interpersonal skills help individuals to build trust in others, attach to others, care for the well-being of others, communicate effectively, cooperate, and negotiate, solve conflicts peacefully, listen and communicate assertively, feel that they belong to a community, practise cultural activities and traditions, and participate in household responsibilities and livelihood support.

An empirical approach to provide a comprehensive classification of skills required for life was used by Brush et al. (2022). Reviewing the knowledge from the research on social and emotional learning, they analysed and coded data from multiple research projects and programs to see how the skills are conceptualised, researched, and learned in different contexts around the world. They identified more than 550 non-academic skills and competencies across six broad domains and 23 sub-domains, as follows:

- Cognitive skills are used in tasks that require concentration and focus, good memory, the ability to prioritise tasks, control impulses, setting and achieving goals, use and interpret information.
- Emotional skills help individuals to recognise, express and control their emotions and to understand emotions and empathise with others. They also shape interactions with other people in a prosocial way.
- Social skills allow individuals to understand and interpret other's behaviour, effectively navigate social situations, and positively interact with others, solve social problems, work collaboratively, build positive relationships, and coexist with others in peace.
- Values include skills, personality traits and habits that help individuals to be prosocial and productive member of a community. Individuals with these skills follow the core ethical values, seek their highest potential and knowledge, live and work together with others as a friend, family member and citizen.
- Perspectives represent individuals' view on the world and how they approach it. They shape the self-image and the approach to challenges of everyday life. A positive approach, represented by optimism, openness, or gratitude help individuals manage their negative feelings and to successfully fulfil the task and get along with others.
- Identity represents knowledge and beliefs about self, including a perception and confidence of own abilities to learn and grow and overcome challenges.

Context-specific classifications

In contrast to generic classifications, some works classify life skills by taking contextual aspects into account. These are developed by international organisations active in the field, with history especially in developing countries with limited coverage of the population in terms of their access to initial formal education. For illustration, UNICEF (2019a), outlined ten clusters within four life skills dimensions. The list consists of the following dimensions:

- Empowerment – based on self-awareness, communication, and resilience.
- Citizenship – based on empathy and participation.
- Learning – based on critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving.
- Employability – involving negotiation and decision-making skills.

UNESCO and UNICEF (2013) showed that many developing countries adopted their own contextual-dependent definitions and classifications of life skills. Except for general skills, some of these classifications include specific skills, such as disease prevention, security in life and property, preservation of the natural environment and resources, home living and leisure, income-generation skills, science skills, entrepreneurial skills, or mobility skills.

Life Skills concepts relevant to the current European context have been addressed in several applied research projects and initiatives. These concepts or classifications reflect the challenges that are shared by the EU countries in terms of changes in skills needs. We include two examples.

Life Skills for Europe⁶ was the title and focus of the Erasmus+ project implemented by the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) which developed a framework of skills for life. This is a “combination of different capabilities that enable adults to become lifelong learners, live an independent life and contribute to society” based on 8 areas:

- Literacy capabilities
- Numeracy capabilities
- Financial capabilities
- Digital capabilities
- Environmental capabilities
- Civic capabilities
- Personal and interpersonal capabilities
- Health capabilities.

The capabilities are the constituent common part of life skills here, as explained more in one of the reports of the project by Javrh et al. (see Figure 1)

⁶ <https://eaea.org/project/life-skills-for-europe-lse/>

Figure 1 Life skills concept based on capabilities (EAEA)

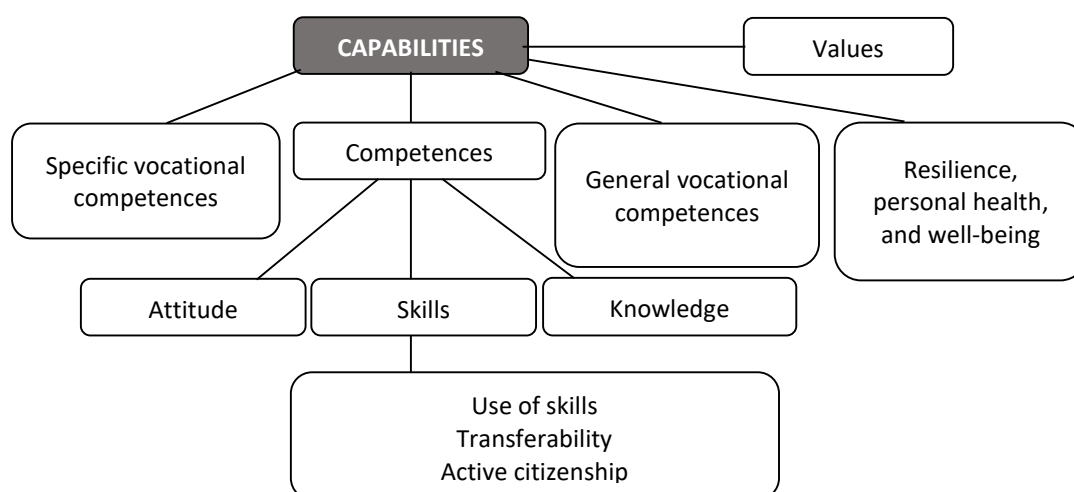


Figure 1. The relationships between life skills' key terms according to Javrh et al. (2017). Source: Own elaboration by M. Grežo based on a scheme by Javrh et al. (2017).

The TRANSVAL project (2021-2023)⁷ uses the term transversal skills and experiments with them in the context of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in five countries - Austria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Belgium. Among other activities, the project has developed the Competence framework⁸ for 12 competencies and aligned them with the European Qualifications Framework:

- Managing and organizing activities
- Solving problems and reacting to the unforeseen
- Cooperating and fostering cooperation
- Resource management
- Using oral communication in one or several languages
- Taking professional, social, and cultural norms into account
- Using written communication in one or several languages
- Communicating using digital technologies
- Critical thinking
- Building one's career path, involving i) developing one's competences and profile; ii) self-reflection.

⁷ <https://www.transvalproject.eu>

⁸ https://www.transvalproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/D2.3-Transversal-Competence-Framework_EN.pdf

4. Skills for life in the context of EU policies and initiatives

The concept of Skills for Life is an overlay of several similar or related concepts that have appeared in the documents of international organisations and the documents of the European Commission in the last decade. These concepts include - key competences, soft skills, transversal and transferable skills, skills for the 21st century, etc. The common feature of the concepts which are related to life skills is that they stand for a set of skills that are not directly linked to professional and vocational skills and competences, or to the performance of specific occupations. However, they are essential for coping with the personal, professional, and social life of individuals.

Lifelong learning, the development of the skills and competences needed for work, life and social participation, was put on the EU agenda by the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2000.⁹ The Memorandum reflected a change of view on the structure of education systems in the context of building a knowledge-based economy and stressed the need to understand learning as a lifelong process taking place in a variety of ways, including non-formal and informal learning. At the same time, it noted two equally important objectives of lifelong learning - promoting active citizenship and promoting employability. The Memorandum analogised these changing needs for building a knowledge society to the social changes brought about by the industrial revolution - similarly to the arguments that have emerged in relation to the fourth industrial revolution and recent megatrends influencing society. Among its key messages, the document highlights the development of basic skills, emphasising the key role of non-formal and informal learning and the accessibility of learning.

In 2006, the EU adopted a Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning¹⁰, which „all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment“. The definitions of individual competences included other related competences such as „critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision taking, and constructive management of feelings“. The Recommendation has led to reforms in formal education systems in many EU countries, and the development of key competences has become one of the priorities of EU education programmes (Lifelong Learning Programme and later Erasmus+).

The recommendation was updated in 2018 – it was linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights, other frameworks, and tools; and some of the competences were modified. One of the aspects that was highlighted as part of the necessary amendment in the Framework of Key Competences was the need to develop mechanisms for assessing the key competences. The differences are shown in the table below:

2006	2018
Communication in the mother tongue	Literacy competence
Communication in foreign languages	Multilingual competence
Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology	Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering
Digital competence	Digital competence
Learning to learn	Personal, social and learning to learn competence
Social and civic competences	Citizenship competence
Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;	Entrepreneurship competence
Cultural awareness and expression.	Cultural awareness and expression competence

⁹ <https://uil.unesco.org/i/doc/lifelong-learning/policies/european-communities-a-memorandum-on-lifelong-learning.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:394:0010:0018:en:PDF>

Skills development of adults in EU in order „to promote personal and professional development, empowerment, adaptability, employability and active participation in society“ was encouraged by the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning¹¹ which also identified instruments for their acquiring, such as the Lifelong Learning Programme (Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci) as well as structural funds.

In 2011-17, OECD conducted the first cycle of the PIAAC Survey - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, which involved 39 countries including 16 EU member states (in Slovakia, data were collected in 2011-2012). PIAAC follows up on efforts that started with the International Adult Literacy Survey in the 1990s and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey in the 2000s¹². The rationale for measuring skills levels refers to the increasing role of the contribution of human capital and skill development i) at the micro level of an individual and his or her life chances and well-being and ii) at the macro level of the whole economy, where human capital produces improvements in productivity and growth. The survey measures cognitive and job-related skills of adults between 16 and 65 years in 3 categories: reading literacy, numeracy and solving problems in a technologically rich environment. It also reflects the state of education and training system in the country, level of literacy, mismatches between education and labour market, the situation of vulnerable groups within education, etc. The second cycle of the survey has been in place in 2022-2023.

The New Skills Agenda¹³ adopted in 2016 shifted the focus of EU policies on skills that help people to have „good-quality jobs and ... fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens.“. It also stressed the importance of learning outside formal settings as well as the importance of validating and recognising such learning experiences. One of the actions outlined by the New Skills Agenda was the adoption of another piece of legislation relating to adults' skills development – Skills Guarantee. The Skills Guarantee reflects the results of the first PIAAC results delivered by OECD in 2013 which indicated that „one in five European adults (aged 16-65) has only a rudimentary level of literacy, while one in four has only the lowest level of skill in numeracy and can only solve very simple tasks using ICT“¹⁴. It also highlighted the limitations imposed on individuals, their lives, professional life, and active citizenship due to low levels of foundational/basic skills. The Skills Guarantee proposed the approach for designing policies in this area based on three pillars: 1) skills assessments to identify existing skills and needs for upskilling; 2) a tailored education and training offer; and 3) validation and recognition of these skills.

These principles were further developed in the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways¹⁵ which even more stressed the need to develop learning pathways for low-qualified people to achieve better basic skills or upgrade their qualifications.

The World Economic Forum looked at the 21st century skills which are necessitated by the challenges of recent and future developments and consist of 3 complementary pillars – foundational literacies/core skills (cognitive), competencies (social) and character qualities (emotional).¹⁶

¹¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:372:0001:0006:en:PDF>

¹² <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/PDF%20for%20web%20Analysing%20Adults%27%20Skills.pdf>

¹³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381>

¹⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0382>

¹⁵ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01))

¹⁶ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_NewVisionforEducation_Report2015.pdf

In 2020, the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience presented a plan for digital and green transition and post- COVID-19 recovery, in which development of skills, re-skilling and upskilling play a key role. The Skills Agenda set out the targets for 2030:

Indicators	Objectives for 2025
Participation of adults aged 25-64 in learning over a period of 12 months	50%
Participation of low-qualified adults aged 25-64 in learning over a period of 12 months	30%
Share of unemployed adults 25-64 with a recent learning experience	20%
Share of adults 16-74 having at least basic digital skills	70%

Within its 12 actions, Skills for Life constitute one of them with this goal: “Beyond the labour market, we will support adult learning for everyone — young people and adults — on issues such as media literacy, civic competences, and financial, environmental and health literacy.”¹⁷

To establish a common taxonomy on skills, qualifications and occupations, the European Commission created the ESCO (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) classification in 2017, which currently provides descriptions of almost 14,000 skills in all EU languages (and some other languages). Skills are categorised in four sub-pillars: skills, knowledge, languages and transversal. The transversal skills are further defined through narrower concepts: core skills and competences, life skills and competences, physical and manual skills and competences, self-management skills and competences, social and communication skills and competences, thinking skills and competences¹⁸.

In recent years, reference frameworks and tools for sets of skills (e.g. DigComp, GreenComp, LifeComp, EntreComp, FinComp, Reference framework of competences for democratic culture) have been developed to facilitate the common understanding as well as exchange of information and data on learning and labour mobility for different actors in the education and labour market sectors.

5. Skills for life in adult education in Slovakia

Life skills have appeared in strategic documents of the Slovak Republic in connection with the growing need to strengthen lifelong learning and especially its component - non-formal education since the 1990s. The main driver of initiative in the area has been the influence of the changing needs of the economy and society (within a shift towards a democratic society after the fall of communism) as well as high motivation and efforts towards accession to the EU.

In 2001, Slovakia signed up for the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning¹⁹ and related consultations and discussions at the national level resulted in the Concept of Lifelong Learning

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1197

¹⁸ https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/classification/skill_main#overlayspin

¹⁹ https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/2607_2000_memorandum_o_celozivotnom_vzdelavani.pdf

in the Slovak Republic²⁰, which set as one of its strategic objectives to ensure access to "the acquisition of new and the renewal of acquired skills necessary for participation in the life of a knowledge-based society". Among these skills, the Concept includes digital literacy, foreign language skills, social skills, entrepreneurial skills and a well-developed capacity to learn.

In 2011-2012, the PIAAC data collection in Slovakia highlighted gaps in several areas of skills of adults. The survey showed that 11.8% of Slovak adults have only the lowest level of reading literacy and 13.8% only the lowest level of numeracy. As many as 21.7% of respondents showed no or only minimal skills in digital literacy and the use of information technology. The PIAAC National Report²¹ concluded that we cannot be satisfied with the situation and highlighted the generally accepted recommendations in this area.

No significant steps have been taken in the ensuing years to significantly enhance the development of basic or other transferable skills of adults. This domain has become part of the activities of the non-profit sector and some private providers of adult education, mostly with the financial support of European programmes, but without state intervention in terms of content, funding or quality control of the education provided. Public funding for adult learning has been provided within active labour market policies for registered job seekers. These programmes, implemented as national projects funded mainly through European Structural Funds, allowed job seekers to select a training programme in vocational training courses (programmes known as REPAS) and to a lesser extent also in soft skills training courses (known as KOMPAS). Vocational training courses had to be accredited. This type of adult learning is enshrined in the Lifelong Learning Act as continuing education was in the national projects REPAS described as requalification for improved employability of the job seekers. The case workers were supposed to approve the training requests of the job seekers based on the labour market relevance of the training. Recently, a new programme has been developed extending access to training courses also to employed, using the implementation framework of the training projects for the unemployed.

The Lifelong Learning Strategy 2011²² reiterated as one of the priority areas the raising of the level of „individual competences for professional and personal development: financial literacy, entrepreneurial competences, communication in world languages, digital literacy and active citizenship“²³ and confirmed their importance for an individual and society. It identified the motivation of people to develop these competences to be the most significant barrier (rather than creating favourable conditions to develop their supply).

The strengthening of the adult education agenda (and within it, non-formal education and the development of basic skills) occurred after the transition of this agenda to the State Vocational Education Institute in 2018, which has been systematically addressing these topics while bringing together and educating actors in this field - whether it was the project BLUESS - Blueprints for basic Skills Development of Adults in Slovakia²⁴, activities in the role of the National Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning or the currently implemented project Digital Learning Accounts in the V4 countries²⁵.

²⁰ https://alkp.sk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2005_koncepcia_celozivotneho_vzdelavania_SR.pdf

²¹ <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/7243.pdf>

²² <https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/1899.pdf>

²³ <https://www.minedu.sk/data/files/1899.pdf>

²⁴ <https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/projekt-bluess/>

²⁵ <https://kifu.gov.hu/en/d-ila/>

The knowledge gained in this area has also been reflected in the Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance 2021-2030²⁶, which addresses the development of skills for life in the most comprehensive way yet. The Strategy proposes concrete measures at both systemic and institutional levels, which have been further considered in setting the priorities of the new Programme Slovakia 2021-2027²⁷ and should also appear in calls for projects in the near future. These include proposals for solutions for basic skills development and citizenship education.

However, the area of skills for life is also touched upon in other current strategic documents that stress the need for them in the context of education, economic growth, and the country's competitiveness, such as the Vision and Strategy for the Development of Slovakia until 2030²⁸ or the National Strategy for Research, Development, and Innovation 2030²⁹.

Skills for life – insights on the current practice in Slovakia

Activities in the field represented the essential component of the Life Skills project and its aims. One of the key motivations of this project was to gather evidence-based data on the current practice in life skills of adults and identify challenges and priorities in supporting the life skills of adults.

As already explained in the methodology section of this report, we used an actor-oriented approach in identifying and addressing participants for our discussions and dissemination activities. For the collection of original data, we designed and implemented eight round table discussions in seven regional localities in Slovakia. One of the events had a specific focus on financial literacy. Overall, more than a hundred participants took part (108), representing key targeted types of stakeholders: i) a governance actor at the national or regional level, ii) a non-governmental organisation active in the field, active at the national level or regional iii) formal education institution especially from higher initial education cycle (secondary schools), iv) organisations active as providers of adult learning v) private organisations (especially financial institutions in case of the event which focused on financial skills). An overview table on the structure of the events is below, showing a relatively strong variation in the size and structure of participants. This was balanced by the overall good representativeness of different stakeholders when merging information from all discussions for the mapping exercise.

Table 1 Overview of discussions

Roundtable discussions	108 participants	Character of discussions - Event specific topics:	74 organisations
8 events Size of municipalities: L: large, M: medium, S: small			
Western Slovakia: 4 L/M/S	7+6+38+17=68	One RT: financial skills, national focus	NGO, national/regional/ sectoral governance

²⁶ <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/22182.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/25920.pdf> at: <https://www.minedu.sk/program-slovensko-2021-2027/>

²⁸ <https://www.mirri.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Slovensko-2030.pdf>

²⁹ <https://vaia.gov.sk/inovujeme-slovensko/narodna-strategia-vyskumu-vyvoja-a-inovacii-2/>

		Networking of national actors	actors, AL providers, experts, libraries
Central Slovakia: 2 M/M	6+8=14	Strong presence of key actors aiming at change	national/regional/governance actors, providers, NGOs, libraries
Eastern Slovakia: 2 S/L	9+17=26	Infrastructure Alliance for vulnerable groups Local ecosystem	NGO, national/regional/sectoral governance actors, AL providers, experts, libraries, local governance

In terms of the types of respondents, we defined a more detailed typology. As explained in the introduction we started from the three broad groups of actors, i) governance actors and policymakers ii) Organisations and practitioners involved in adult learning and iii) Local business representatives. Based on the actual structure of participants in our regional discussions, we were able to refine nine types of actors. These reflect the actual framework of active organisations that are active in adult learning activities or organisations developing cultural and civic activities that have relevance to the skills of adults. We used this typology when analysing the information collected in the discussions and denoting selected citations. The types of actors we applied include:

- Business organisations, entrepreneurs (employers) active in the region and providing their observation on skills needs.
- Institutions with main activities in formal education.
- Public libraries.
- Non-profit organisations that are mainly active as providers of adult learning.
- Non-profit organisations that are not focusing on the provision of adult learning but are actively working with different target groups of adults.
- Providers of adult learning with other types of legal structure (usually business status).
- Financial organisations (including banks).
- Public actors from national governance levels (mainly representatives of national ministries).
- Public actors from regional governance levels, (e.g., representatives of municipal, local or regional governance).

Experts in adult learning or areas relevant to the skills of adults were also present. An overview of the actors, their presence in specific discussions, and the codes we used to denote selected citations are available in Appendix (Table 2).

Following the aims of the project, we developed questions to be used in the discussions³⁰ covering the identified thematic areas as follows:

³⁰ Questions developed for the round table discussions are included in the Appendix of this report.

- Concept of life skills relevant to the current needs of adults in Slovakia.
- Target groups, specific needs, currently provided activities and actors.
- Current needs and rationale for developing support for life skills in Slovakia, current situation.
- Infrastructure for life skills development: cooperation frameworks, partnerships.
- The role of the state in supporting the life skills of adults in Slovakia.

Skills for life in the practice in Slovakia

Our opening questions in roundtable discussions were focused on the perception of life skills from diverse perspectives. The discussion about the concept of life skills has been also in some ways an ongoing thematic dimension of our discussions.

The life skills concept requires a holistic and flexible framework to accommodate dynamically changing individual needs as required for managing the everyday life and work situations of any adult.

The local context of activities in the field of life skills can vary considerably across regions and areas of activities of different actors. Slovakia has significant regional differences, and diverse populations, especially in terms of human capital structures. Therefore, there is a significant variability of the current problems of adults and their skills needs. In the setting that we created in the roundtable discussions, there was a space for interactive development of the consensual view of life skills as well as insights from practice on how life skills are developed in different settings and localities in Slovakia.

The general and prevailing view among the represented variety of actors was that it is important to promote approaches based on a holistic and complex concept of life skills. Life skills support needs to dynamically adapt so that the life skills activities respond to the changing needs of any individual. The new types of challenges that adults need to address to manage everyday life and work situations require new life skills activities, approaches, and solutions.

It might be self-evident that the core foundational skills, especially basic literacies are still crucial for any adult, but the knowledge society implies a new challenge for adults, that any individual must pay attention to his or her learning skills:

“Learning how to learn is the most important (skill)”³¹ [OS6_W1_a_summ]

In what follows we present the key issues which have been raised and discussed regarding life skills in practice:

- Current challenges connected with undergoing technological shifts are important in Slovakia for the whole population. Any adult in Slovakia is likely to need support to develop some components of his or her life skills.

³¹ Original text: Učiť sa učiť je najdôležitejšie.

- Skills needed to use technologies in life and work are generally underdeveloped in Slovakia for the whole population.
- It is important to adopt and share a holistic and complex view of life skills. Such a view of life skills helps to identify when it is not effective to target one type of skill without connections to other types of life skills.
- Weak progress within the initial formal education cycles generates inertia which continuously produces new generations at risk because of weak foundational skills (insufficient levels of basic skills).
- Basic skills are the foundation for any other skills, and insufficient basic skills in most cases lead to insufficient life skills.
- There has been little progress achieved in specific steps for systematic support from public funding for adults who need to catch up to sufficient levels of basic skills.
- Adults who have insufficient basic skills should focus on the basic skills programmes before any other types of support programmes.
- Successful basic skills programmes can be, at least partially, based on life skills approaches. This means they would integrate activities to develop literacies in a setting connected with solving the daily problems of participants.
- Motivation to learn is weak but also insufficiently recognised as a specific condition to be addressed when learning activities for life skills support are being designed.
-

Specific types of skills and the life skills concept for Slovakia

Learning to learn is the core skill that might be generally low because of the still prevailing traditional approaches within formal education (initial education):

“Our education system is built on this, at the entrance of many schools there is a big sign - the mistake is my friend. However, teachers do not want to make mistakes. And they won't make a mistake if they follow the law, according to the plan. This means that the teacher knows that if he follows the defined curriculum that was defined ten years ago, the inspection came five years ago and it was fine, so if he goes that way, he knows that he will not make a mistake.”³² [OS5_E2_NGO_responen#59]

The unsatisfactory outcomes from initial education are directly reflected in the weak life skills of young graduates of lower levels of education programmes, but this might concern some university graduates as well.

As for more specific skills components that are systematically weak in Slovakia, the consensually mentioned skills were digital skills, critical thinking and media literacy, civic skills, green skills, and health literacy. The discussions also confirmed that most actors recognise

³² Original text: „Naše školstvo je postavené na tom, vo vchode mnohých škôl je veľký nápis – chyba je môj kamarát. Učiteľia však nechcú robiť chyby. A chybu neurobia, ak idú podľa zákona, podľa plánu. To znamená, že učiteľ vie, že ak ide podľa zadefinovaných osnov, ktoré boli zadefinované pred desiatimi rokmi, pred piatimi rokmi prišla inšpekcia a bolo to v poriadku, tak ak pôjde tak, vie, že nespraví chybu.”

the crucial role of social and communication skills in life skills, including the capacity to work and/or live in a more open, multicultural environment.

Civic literacy and civic skills need support according to the discussants. The ability of adults to perform actively their civil rights, and to fulfil their civic duties is critically weak, especially for adults with weak socio-economic backgrounds:

*"Our civic awareness is very low. We do not know our (civic) rights and duties. The state probably should play this role."*³³ [OS7_W3_PROVIDER_repospondent#40]

A critical factor for the development of civic life skills is information and media literacy. These are connected with poor digital information skills. Online information sources are the key source of false information. Artificial intelligence is likely to aggravate an already critical situation in this area in Slovakia.

The discussions about other specific skills and issues that need to be addressed included:

- Digital skills are seen as important in connection to information processing, but critical thinking is the key related component that needs to be developed at the same time.
- Green skills need to be developed in general and supported by the local governance actors, and the communities of practice are crucial.

The interconnectivity between different types of components of life skills is vital, yet not sufficiently addressed or integrated into learning activities:

*"Financial, health, social, environmental (skills), they must be in symbiosis."*³⁴ [OS6_W1_b_PUBLIC_nat_respondent#22]

Discussants who represent and work with young adults shared their understanding that it is crucial to discuss and increase general awareness about the importance of social skills and related competencies. Such skills represent the cornerstone for the future:

*As for life skills, I would go one level lower. I would split further into detail the personal and social competencies that we deal with. These are the competencies for the future that are crucial, they must be developed from young children. Cooperation, communication, resilience. We have a big gap here."*³⁵ [OS7_W3_NGO_respondent#39]

For some of the topics, discussions developed more, as was the case of digital skills. Digital skills are generally perceived as one of the weaknesses in the Slovak population in general. Understanding the learning needs is generally one of the key reasons for low interest in participating in learning activities, even in the case of digital skills and the need for upskilling:

*"...that it's not just Excel windows and Facebook, but I don't know what else. That they must be able to work, to motivate, to do something, I don't know what, but (then) you will have offers."*³⁶ [OS3_C1_ORG_reg_respondent#94]

³³ Original text: „U nás je občianske povedomie veľmi nízke. Nepoznáme svoje práva a povinnosti. Tuto asi štát musí zastúpiť túto úlohu.“

³⁴ Original text: Finančná, zdravotná, sociálna, environmentálna, musia byť v symbióze.

³⁵ Original text: “Čo sa týka zručností pre život, ja by som išiel ešte o úroveň nižšie. Viac by som rozdrobil tie osobné a sociálne kompetencie, ktorým sa my venujeme. To sú tie kompetencie pre budúcnosť, ktoré sú absolútne kľúčové, treba ich rozvíjať od malých detí. Spolupráca, komunikácia, reziliencia. Tu máme veľký gap.”

³⁶ Original text: „...že to nie je len Excel windows a Facebook, ale ja neviem čo ešte. Že musia vedieť pracovať, namotivovať, že urobím niečo, ja neviem čo, ale budeš mať ponuky.“

Discussants pointed to the problem of understanding what is meant by digital skills:

*“For me a (digitally) literate (skilled) person is someone who can turn on a computer, somewhere else it is someone who can code”.*³⁷ [OS5_E2_NGO_responent#59]

In connection with digitalisation, the following challenges have been also communicated:

- Some groups of adults are disconnected from the "digital world".
- There are specific target groups that have under-developed digital skills in relation to their needs in everyday life and work. These include teachers in initial education cycles, seniors, vulnerable groups with socially weak backgrounds/Marginalised Roma Communities, young mothers from marginalised Roma communities, and incomplete families in socially weak situations.

The role of employers in supporting more diverse learning activities can be stronger. Employers can benefit also from training that is not directly connected with the job needs:

*“I see an opportunity in nonformal learning, a person has the opportunity to take advantage of opportunities, why should not the employer allow him to do so. When an employee wants to get involved in a volunteer activity, it is a benefit, because he will use the time he would otherwise spend clicking through the Internet.”*³⁸
[OS3_C1_PUBLIC_reg_responent#91]

Target groups

Discussion about different target groups was a strong connecting dimension of reflecting on the goal of life skills programmes, that is to ensure sufficient skills for any adult irrespective of his or her level of education, working position or labour market situation.

In all discussions, participants agreed that all adults (“we all”) need some support for life skills³⁹. Recognition to focus on adults was also strongly emphasised, which corresponds with the reality of limited support to non-formal learning for adults in the practice:

“We all are. It catches up with all of us, whether we are young or old.”

*“We are all a priority target group...It is good that there starts to be focus placed on adults ... People do not realise that it affects them.”*⁴⁰
[OS6_W1_b_PUBLIC_nat_respondent#22]

“The adult population is vulnerable, no one paid attention to adults...” [OS8_W1_b_PUBLIC_nat_responent#7]⁴¹

Adults who are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities. There is a joint understanding that vulnerable groups need more targeted and intensive support interconnected with other

³⁷ Original text: „U mňa je gramotný ten, čo vie zapnúť počítač, inde, že vie kódovať.“

³⁸ Original text: “V neformálnom vzdelávaní vidím príležitosť, človek má možnosť využiť príležitosti, prečo by mu to zamestnávateľ nemal dovoliť. Keď sa chce zamestnanec zapojiť do dobrovoľníckej aktivity, je to benefit, lebo čas, ktorý by strávil inak preklikávaním na internete, využije.”

³⁹ The discussants in this roundtable all have higher levels of educational attainment, yet they strongly expressed their own feeling that they need support in life skills.

⁴⁰ Original text: Všetci sme. Každého nás to dobehne, či sme mladí alebo starší. Prioritnou cieľovou skupinou sme vlastne všetci. Je dobre, že sa začína pozerať na dospelých. Ľudia si neuvedomujú, že sa ich to týka.

⁴¹ Original text: Zraniteľnou je dospelá populácia, dospelým sa nikto nevenoval

support services, especially social services, long-term counselling, and guidance and with support in health management. Specific target groups were identified as:

- Across all regions, seniors, and young mothers (on maternity leave) or young parents, need specific support around life skills development.
- Marginalised Roma communities or any adults in socially disadvantaged situations, especially with limited social and family background, as in the case of young adults from foster homes making the transition to independent life.

Teachers are a more general yet perceived as a particularly vulnerable group that needs more systematic and stable support⁴². This is a consensual and alarming view. In some meetings, the discussions benefited from the presence of the actors discussing the situation in the initial education system, including national and regional governance actors and non-profit organisations that have developed specifically targeted programmes supporting teachers, therefore the reflections have been insightful and well connected to current practice.

The comments most relevant to the life skills in the case of teachers in initial education cycles included:

- Teachers in initial cycles of education (compulsory education) i.e., in elementary and secondary schools are one of the key target groups.
- The support to teachers, especially those in the initial education system is insufficient.
- The working environment of teachers in the initial education system relates to negative, possibly increasing, pressure on their work-life balance. Many teachers seem to systematically suffer from burnout.
- The continuous system of teacher education is not relevant nor up to date to the needs of their profession, both in terms of changing generations of children as well as the demand for skills.
- The institutional system of continuous teacher education might require more radical changes so that teachers could choose from a sufficient range of high-quality learning offers to prepare for the changing nature of the life skills needs of their pupils and students.
- Teachers do not have flexible access to high-quality training which could be one of the quick remedies to the situation before the system solution of continuous education of teachers improves.
- NGOs are currently actively intervening and providing support to teachers. Connection to policy level based on such grass root initiatives could be effective and create a multiplicative positive effect on the skills of teachers. A very good example is a recent cooperation of the Ministry of Education with one of the NGOs providing mentoring to teachers. The Ministry allocated funding for this actor. A national actor responding and providing support to positive activities in the field could signal a shift towards more open and innovative public sector.

Those target groups that do not face strong dispositional barriers, that is they do have sufficient basic skills or have higher educational degrees, need more support in skills assessment, guidance support to identify their learning needs as was illustrated in the case of

⁴² Teachers in the public initial education programmes are meant here.

young mothers who are not facing economic hardships, yet have systematically difficult transition back to work:

“The same young mothers. Few of them move to get a little education, and even they need to be motivated. ... They lose touch with the reality that those computers are developing, that they have to understand the technology on that computer...”
[OS3_C1_ORG_reg_responent#94]⁴³

To reach out to any target group or learner, it is vital that the activities are accessible, individualised, practical and related to actual problems that the adults face in their lives. We discuss this further in the following sections, especially in the section devoted to the project findings (on page 24).

Needs to support the skills for life of adults in Slovakia

The views of the participants about the need to support life skills are important sources of information about the situation in Slovakia and the current problems and challenges. Participants are actors involved in activities relevant to the life skills of adults in diverse thematic and local contexts, and therefore their views complement and develop each other and produce a more complex picture of the situation across the regions and different groups of adults. The respondents discussed and shared their concerns about a rather general lack of life skills in the population of Slovakia. There was an agreement about a clear, strong, and urgent need to find ways to support the life skills of adults in Slovakia. The concerns and reflections of the discussants in connection with the need for such support included:

- There is a general lack of life skills for any adult in Slovakia, including those who hold degrees from higher educational levels.
- The underdeveloped system of lifelong learning in Slovakia is a general problem. Ad hoc national projects or programmes have limited sustainability and low impact.
- Specific target groups for life skills programmes and initiatives are heterogeneous and regionally specific.
- Basic skills are the key pre-condition for life skills development. There has been limited progress in terms of support for basic skills programmes for adults, and these are usually developed by independent NGOs.
- Civic skills need urgent support and public funding might be an important if not necessary condition for achieving progress in the civic competences of adults.

It was also stressed that it is not sufficient to generally agree on support for life skills and develop initiatives in a top-down manner, which, as has been noted, was a prevailing approach in Slovakia.

When advocating for life skills it is equally important to develop discussions among the stakeholders about what the potential and effective activities and programmes could be and

⁴³ Original text: To isté mladé mamičky. Máloktoľ sa posúva, že by chcela sa trošku vzdelávať, aj tie treba motivovať. ... Strácajú kontakt s realitou, že tie počítače sa posúvajú, že musia ovládať techniku na tom počítači

how they could be designed and developed so that would be effective. Only then initiatives aiming at providing effective and systematic support to the life skills of adults in Slovakia can be identified and supported by public funding if needed.

The quality of activities, accessibility and inclusiveness are necessary conditions for life skills support. Equally important are communities of practice, supported by governance actors, ideally by building strong networks open for cooperation. Therefore, in what follows we point to the specific role of actors and frameworks of cooperation.

Actors, frameworks, and cooperation

Multi-actor initiatives and alliances or partnerships are the differentiating factor for initiating, building, and sustaining life skills support activities with a long-term impact. Circumstances and barriers to the development of life skills for different target groups are best addressed in local areas where networking and partnership are feasible to build in case actors are open to them. At the same time, multi-actor networks have been pointed to as missing for sharing information on activities in the field and projects and programmes and their focus on and hence coverage of different target groups.

Grass root activities are best structured to establish long-term partnerships and initiate local change. In one region, a group of young people started their non-profit organisations as a response to their recent experience with the education system. Very soon they expanded their activities to support teachers and established a long and successful partnership with the local governance actor:

“Even at high school and university, we had felt that we needed to help schools. What we had experienced there was not enough for us, they had not prepared us for life sufficiently. We started doing seminars in high schools. We saw that this was simply not enough, so we expanded our focus to teachers.” [OS7_W3_NGO_responent#39]⁴⁴

One of the key success factors by which the impact of different actors can be assessed is the outreach to and relationships with vulnerable learners. Employers can play a more important role in supporting vulnerable learners, either among their employees or by recognising the value of different learning activities or simply activities unemployed undertook prior to applying for a job. Sometimes, vocational training activities are not the feasible starting point on the learning trajectory for the (long-term) unemployed who can and need to be activated by diverse learning activities targeting life skills.

Partnerships are vital for building a functional and open adult learning system. The regional differences have strong implications for developing frameworks for life skills cooperation. Actors develop a range of non-formal learning activities, that are important for the life skills frameworks, but these are sometimes isolated projects also because of the lack of systemic funding.

⁴⁴ Original: My sme ešte na strednej a VŠ vnímali, že treba pomôcť školám. Nestačilo nám, čo sme tam zažili, že nás nepripravujú dostatočne na život. Začali sme robiť semináre na stredných školách. Videli sme, že to jednoducho nestačí, rozšíril sme fokus na učiteľov.

The value added of smaller activities could be leveraged more effectively if different actors were more interconnected as a part of adult learning infrastructure.

Finding a good and sustainable approach to make such interconnection last, as platforms, networks, associations etc. is the cornerstone of the problem. Formal bodies, or organisations, that are not systematically involved in the field activities often focus on establishing their own legitimacy rather than supporting the cause. The transition to an ecosystem of adult learning where access to life skills support would last is not feasible without authentic actors who have a track record of good results working with learners.

Participants communicated the need to exchange information more frequently, and cooperate by connecting activities addressing different components of life skills. Improved but informal exchange of information about activities developed by national actors was strongly recommended too. It was suggested that:

- Regional actors could play more active and important roles.
- Regional differences imply a need for specific local solutions, both in terms of actors, structures and physical infrastructure. NGOs and their premises, libraries, community centres, schools could serve as locations for life skills activities.
- National and regional governance actors would benefit from more freedom and capacity for devising projects for life skills interventions.
- Partnerships function very well when joining activities to reach out to more vulnerable learners who are usually inactive and difficult to get on board.
- *Employers*. Employers could become more interested in life skills programmes. With the increasing need to support social, communication, and multicultural skills the overlaps of skills relevant and valuable to employers and life skills increase.

6. Discussion of the project findings in the context of potential interventions

Towards the end of the project, we had multiple discussions about the approach we adopted to map the situation in life skills in Slovakia. We observed that the multi-actor, interactive approach we adopted for a project of a relatively small scale has not been without its caveats. This was felt especially in the roundtable discussions and differences in the composition of discussions and their thematic focus. This could have also been at least partially the effect of strong regional differences in Slovakia.

On the other hand, at the occasion of the closing conference of the project, we could already observe a positive impact of our approach in terms of actors' mobilisation and their mutual networking.

We also observed and concluded that without the multi-actor and interactive character of the discussion, we would not have been able to reflect on the crucial factors that should be addressed within the adult learning system in Slovakia. Two dimensions that are relevant when considering support to life skills and potential public funding are discussed below.

Factors for developing effective life skills support in Slovakia

Slovakia is characterised by strong regional disparities. Regions which face economic and social hardships for longer periods of time face multiple threats in terms of the skills of their population. Weaker or limited diversity of economic activities relates to limited offers of jobs both in terms of volume and distribution of skills, especially medium and high-level skilled job opportunities. Lack of viable job opportunities, but also lack of learning opportunities contribute to drivers of the brain drain and general loss of human capital in specific sub-regions in all areas across Slovakia, but Western Slovakia with the capital is dramatically different from Eastern Slovakian and some Central Slovakian regions. All these and other similar factors may and usually have strong implications for regional and local development strategies and their implementation frameworks.

During the discussion, several factors have been pointed out as particularly relevant for effective support for human capital development in the context of life skills in Slovakia. These factors should be considered and addressed when developing effective life skills support activities so that they contribute to a sustainable ecosystem of adult learning:

- **Dynamics of life skills.** Technological and social changes and their implications for the life skills of adults in specific areas of intervention are observed in Slovakia and they are expected to produce further changes in skills demand with variations, both geographic and thematic.
- **The ecosystem of adult learning.** A holistic and dynamic concept of life skills is crucial for building a sustainable ecosystem of adult learning that can support all adults and their chances for upskilling.
- **Holistic and not uniform approach to life skills.** Developing a holistic concept of life skills is coherent with identifying and addressing critical components of life skills for specific target groups. This does not imply developing uniform programmes for strictly defined target groups and isolated training activities for specific components of life skills.
- **Non-formal learning.** Non-formal learning is the backbone of lifelong learning and life skills are a very useful concept for explaining the changing learning needs.
- **Basic skills vs. life skills.** Basic skills are an essential element for the development of life skills. A sufficient level of basic skills is necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for sufficient life skills and not vice versa.
- **Civic/citizenship skills.** For the healthy development of society and its citizens, key elements of civic skills must be supported to be learned and practised fully and equally by different target groups at all stages of life. The role of media literacy and digital literacy is increasing for the development of civic skills.
- **The role of state.** The state should be responsible for developing learning frameworks and supporting actors who can develop adequate learning opportunities for basic skills and civic skills for different target groups, especially where the outreach (and often also motivation) is problematic. The concept of life skills is well structured for supporting various skills important for the development of a range of skills necessary for individuals' lives, including civic and basic skills.
- **Life skills and workplace learning.** Life skills relate to any adults and therefore are not typically addressed by employers. Yet, employers increasingly point to the need to support communication and social skills as well as other life skills.

- **Assessment.** Adequate assessment of participants or providing participants with self-assessment tools is an effective and important element of activating passive adults. Identifying the right skills in integrative activity development increases the internal motivation of learners and consequently their ability to successfully participate in activities.
- **Non-formal learning environment.** Environment for life skills interventions is crucial. The non-formal setting combined with corresponding methods is effective for life skills activities, but the range of possible settings can be large. The environment can also be the key factor when starting to design life skills interventions. The form of city festivals, cultural, literary, and culinary events, represent in many countries very effective practices with a strong impact on adults in terms of communication, multi-cultural and civic skills. Non-traditional learning environments and innovative approaches to their development should be encouraged and supported.
- **Formal education.** The formal education system represents an important underlying support structure for life skills. Formal education with adequate emphasis on life skills is the best pre-condition for life skills development from a lifelong learning perspective. Emphasis on the development of life skills should be an integral part of any formal education system (including initial education as well as adult formal education) complemented by the offer of skills development opportunities outside schools and at different stages of life.
- **Programmes.** Examples of good and successful practice in life skills activities include activities which are not designed as explicit learning activities. This is an optimum approach for all learners but an imperative for disadvantaged learners. Life skills programmes are well functioning if designed around the daily and at the time urgent problems of participants. Partnerships are crucial for keeping programmes sustainable and improving the participation of low-skilled learners.
- **Funding.** Existing proven and well-functioning programmes for life skills and basic skills, especially those for people with low educational attainment or complicated social backgrounds, require systematic and sustained government financial support, which is often precluded from developing new projects and proposing new activities in order to succeed in the competition for funding.

These have led us to the following observations (illustrated in the Figure 2 below). Firstly, system pressures affect the everyday life of adults in diverse ways. The system pressures include technological shifts, artificial intelligence, global economic shifts hitting Slovakia, the consequences of the unbalanced structure of the national economy, and regional differences that in some regions include such essential problems as insufficient transport infrastructure. Secondly, for the situation in Slovakia, it is crucial to adopt more open approaches to skills development.

The connections between vocational and general skills are clearly recognised and the role of social and communication skills is increasing also for technical jobs. This could be a positive factor for life skills, as workplace skills are becoming more connected with life skills. At the same time, for example, adults with poor social and communication skills can be more vulnerable both in personal life and work situations. Thirdly, we identified that we pay limited attention to learning environments in Slovakia. The formal adult education environment is often overestimated and compensation approaches for adults with negative experiences from initial education are insufficiently supported. Closely connected with environments are the learning

programmes that are supportive of life skills development. Non-formal activities and individual approaches exist, but their extent is small and based on activities of individual actors often driven by their enthusiasm and efforts to initiate local change.

Figure 2 Factors to be considered when considering life skills interventions in Slovakia.



Source: Based on the findings, developed by I. Studená.

Life skills framework in the adult learning system in Slovakia

When developing life skills, it is crucial to develop adequate intervention logic. An example of interventional logic which, based on our discussion, is relevant for Slovakia is depicted in Figure 3 below. The picture illustrates the key factors that should be considered for an intervention to be effective in supporting the life skills of adults.

One way to start is to take into consideration the needs of specific target groups. This might seem self-evident, however, the extent of cross-regional as well as intra-regional differences in Slovakia requires formulation of the potential implications of specific regional and local needs at the outset of any policy initiatives, especially these with a prevailing top-down policy approach.

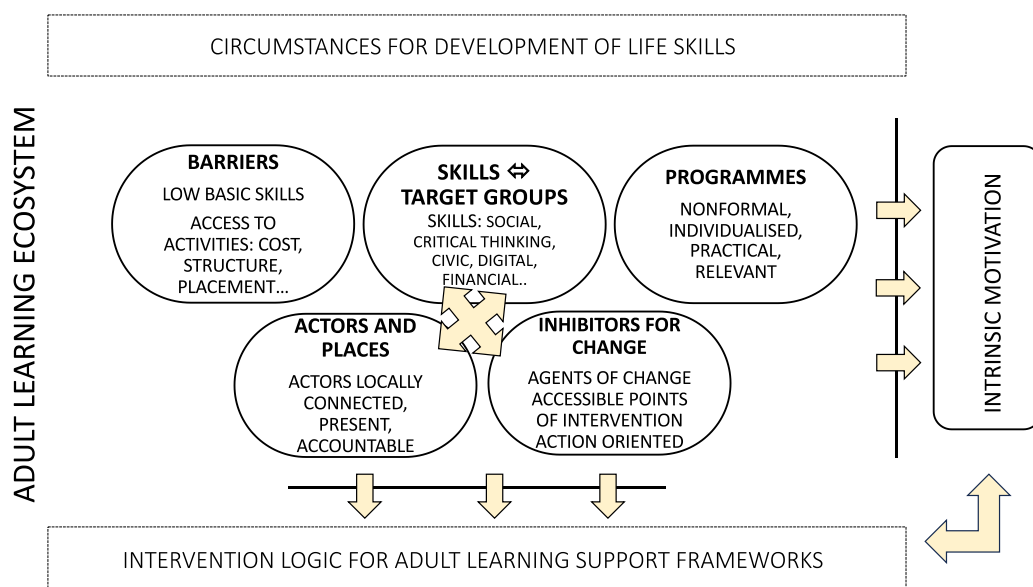
From this perspective, any universal policy tools and programmes/projects applying universal geographical and target group-oriented solutions might have a systematically limited capacity in Slovakia to have a positive impact and improve and develop a culture of learning for life skills development. When setting up funding schemes, consideration should be given to ensuring the sustainability of proven activities and providers.

When building initiatives and partnerships for supporting life skills development, monitoring successful grassroots activities, and identifying ways to build on them proved to be one of the most effective approaches in Slovakia.

Programmes and initiatives that would have a positive impact on life skills need to adopt approaches with an implicit focus on the internal motivation of learners. Learners are

constantly facing barriers to participate in learning. Individuals with a more serious lack of life skills, especially those with problems with basic skills, are very likely to be in disadvantaged material or social environments. Lack of motivation is perceived as a general barrier to addressing discouraged learners. Structuring activities around the daily problems of learners especially those with low levels of skills is one of the best ways of integrating motivation into activity design.

Figure 3 Life skills support for adults: An example of intervention logic.



Source: Based on the findings, developed by I. Studená.

- Effective life skills activities are often designed as practical activities which do not have the explicit character of education and training. It is important that policy initiatives and programmes recognise this.
- Mental health and lack of work-life balance are becoming common negative factor. This is one of the important topics for life skills interventions but health services, counselling, and guidance by professionals from the field of psychology need to be more involved.

Lack of motivation to learn has been identified as one of the key topics that require more attention. The discussants shared an understanding that intrinsic motivation is the key factor for reaching out to adults but at the same time, intrinsic motivation can only be gradually developed by individual learners. So, while motivation is crucial, especially considering the low rates of participation of adults in education and training, it is vital to find ways which intrinsic motivation can be supported in terms of the design of activities. More emphasis on helping learners to identify the benefits they could achieve when participating in learning was mentioned as one of the approaches that can be effective. Demonstration of benefits of participation in diverse learning is effective for learners and employers:

“I wouldn't call it motivation because that is internal motivation. But rather a demonstration of the benefits and the process. How to set up a process, what do I need to achieve if I want (to achieve) my plan, the job. And not only to show those

participants in education and training, the unemployed who want to re-train but also to employers.”⁴⁵ [OS3_C1_PUBLIC_reg_respondent#91]

In this respect, the discussants shared concerns about the limitations of uniform approaches when developing programmes targeting a specific skill or target group. An illustration for this was provided by the case of targeted support to digital skills. Discussants mentioned a recent national project providing tablets to seniors together with digital skills training:

“Education of seniors – for people to learn, tablets are also needed, but people lack motivation. So if you are missing a tablet or the motivation, the result will always be zero.”⁴⁶ [OS3_C1_PUBLIC_reg_respondent#89]

...motivation must be transformed into something concrete... and not stay with resumes and career centres. Although they are important...It doesn't matter whether disadvantaged or not disadvantaged people, you must start working from motivation and it will be better for non-profits and educational organisations as well. We need concrete profit that will come, we cannot build personal development when we do not have basic needs satisfied, a person needs a job, financial autonomy.⁴⁷ [OS3_C1_respondent_PUBLIC_nat_#90]

⁴⁵ Original: Nenazvala by som to motiváciou, lebo to je vnútorná motivácia. Ale skôr ukážka benefitov a proces. Ako nastaviť proces, čo potrebujem dosiahnuť, ak chcem svoj plán, tú prácu. A to nielen ukazovať tým účastníkom vzdelávania, nezamestnaným, kto sa chce rekvafikovať, ale aj zamestnávateľom.

⁴⁶ Original: „Vzdelávanie seniorov – aj tablety treba, aby sa ľudia vzdelávali, ale ľuďom chýba motív. Takže ak vám chýba tablet alebo motív, tak výsledok bude vždy nula“.

⁴⁷ Original: ...motivácia musí byť premenená do konkrétnej podoby... nezostať pri životopisoch a kariérnych centrách. ... Je jedno, či znevýhodnené alebo nie znevýhodnené osoby, treba začať pracovať od motivácie a bude sa lepšie žiť aj neziskovkám, vzdelávačkám. Treba konkrétny zisk, ktorý príde, nemôžeme budovať osobný rozvoj, keď nemáme uspokojené základné potreby, človek potrebuje prácu, finančnú autonómiu.

Conclusions and recommendations

Life skills are consensually recognised by the relevant stakeholders as an important thematic area which deserves more attention by policy makers and the wider educational institutions here in Slovakia. Due to new and already increasing sources of pressure that imply the need for some support in life skills that should be made available to all groups of adults, including those who had generally well-developed life skills in the past.

The concept of life skills is perceived as comprising the basic skills. The concept of basic skills refers to the necessary level of the skills needed for life (both personal and social) and work. The life skills concept extends the view of skills with a more holistic approach to how skills for life and work can be developed and what should be their level and composition to lead a satisfactory life.

The concept of basic skills could be in a very simplified way connected with “survival” whereas the concept of life skills refers more to an individual’s “well-being”. Therefore, groups identified as vulnerable because of insufficient basic skills need support in life skills as well.

Adults are at risk in Slovakia in general because of threats faced by the economy and the society at the macro level. This is especially felt in connection with dealing with digital transformation, assessing the quality of information sources, and developing civic attitudes and skills. Another generally important area includes managing health and addressing work-life balance and parenting skills.

Motivation for learning is poorly developed and not sufficiently recognised as an integral part of designing effective learning activities or general initiatives for supporting life skills. One of the reasons might be the lack of positive experience of learners from the initial education system which has been slow to innovate and respond to the new individual and societal needs.

Lack of motivation is also connected with limited personal experience with the benefits of lifelong learning. Practice in the provision of adult learning is in terms of learning activities scattered. The projects or programmes implemented in the past decades have not been instrumental enough to develop continuous and learner-centred opportunities for participating in different learning opportunities.

Effective approaches to developing life skills in Slovakia need to be developed in more diverse and interconnected settings. We have identified strong polarisation in the support schemes or projects which can be characterised as tailor-made versus universal tools. Universal schemes are usually developed from the national level in a top-down manner and their expected impact might be overestimated at the outset of the schemes. Practitioners, often based in or working for non-profit organisations are the key actors developing tailor-made and non-formal activities which are positive for life skills. It is positive that this approach is being integrated by some national actors as well.

It is vital that actor and policy frameworks integrate or build on successful grassroots activities. This is an important and indispensable approach for supporting interventions and building a sustainable ecosystem of adult learning.

Local economic and social needs define the focus for addressing life skills in specific geographic areas. The design of the learning activities, and their integration in non-formal and local environment changes for target groups or specific focus on life skills. Actors and

communities create the base for individualised approaches to life skills. An individualised approach is necessary for any programme targeting life skills support.

Developing the ecosystem of adult learning is essential for developing an environment for life skills support. Such an ecosystem's success is based on a whole range of activities from different actors across diverse localities and regions who can create timely and targeted intervention activities that are relevant to individuals and their life skills.

The current situation in Slovakia in terms of access of adults to programmes or activities supporting and developing life skills is based on a few and fragmented interventions. A successful life skills approach for Slovakia might need to connect these diverse activities, so that support for life skills is more continuously accessible to any adult in Slovakia.

Partnerships are vital for building a functional and open adult learning system. The regional differences have strong implications for developing frameworks for life skills cooperation.

Effective life skills support for any adult represents the basis for a well-developed and functioning adult learning ecosystem. Therefore, we suggest that targeting support for the life skills of adults can be one of the effective approaches to building an adult learning system for a lifelong learning society, developing communities of practice, supporting vibrant local communities, and increasing active citizenship in Slovakia.

...So that no adult is left behind and unable to deal with his or her situations in daily work and life.

Appendix

Table 2 Structure of discussions by type of actors

Round table identification		Western SK RT 1b	Western SK RT 3	Western SK RT 1a	Eastern SK RT 2	Eastern SK RT 4	Central SK RT1	Western SK RT 2	Central SK RT2
RT code	TOTAL	OS8_W1_b	OS7_W3	OS6_W1_a	OS5_E2	OS4_E1	OS3_C1	OS2_W2	OS1_C2
Actor type		number of participants							
BUSINESS	8	7			1				
EDU_formal	13	6		3		1		1	2
EXPERT	6	1	1	1	1	2			
LIB	10			1		7	1		1
NGO	21	1	1	1	5	6	1	5	1
NGO_PROVIDER	7	1		5	1				
ORG_FIN	3	3							
PROVIDER	5	0	1	2			1		1
PUBLIC_nat	29	19	2	4		1	1		2
PUBLIC_reg	6	0	1		1		2	1	1
TOTALS	108	38	6	17	9	17	6	7	8

Background information used for the roundtable discussions

Starting points:

In accordance with the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Career Guidance for the years 2021-2030, the main goal of the national coordinator in Slovakia is to support the development of the adult education ecosystem and to identify suitable and effective forms of support for adult participation in education from public sources. We plan to implement concrete measures and approaches at the system level that will bring learning closer to citizens, restore their confidence and enable them to learn and continue learning throughout their lives. We want to promote adult learning in Slovakia and create a network of actors who can cooperate with each other and share examples of good practice. More information about the activities of the national coordinator for adult education is available at www.zrucnostiprezivot.sk

Round tables are working meetings of representatives of the public, private and third sectors who work in adult learning directly as education providers or engage in activities which have impact on the level of skills of Slovak citizens (public administration workers providing services in the fields of employment, education, local development, organisations active in adult education, career guidance for adults, employment support, experts in the field of adult education and career guidance, educational, cultural or non-profit organisations, schools and universities, employers, etc.).

Life skills are understood here as a broad set of skills, competences and attitudes that adults (young and old) need so that they can face current and future challenges in their personal, professional or civic life - e.g. digital skills, media literacy, civic competence or financial, environmental and health literacy. The outputs from the meetings will be incorporated into the

mapping report about life skills and will also serve as a basis for the development of recommendations for policymakers in the field of adult education.

The State Institute of Vocational Education, as the National Coordinator of the European Adult Education Program in Slovakia, is part of a European network which aims to ensure and strengthen the effective cooperation of all relevant partners in the field of adult education and lifelong guidance, as well as to set coherent policies to support adult education, reduce the number of low-skilled adults and support their participation in education. One of the activities in 2022 is the mapping of actors and mapping of the situation in provision of life skills in the Slovak Republic, which includes the round tables focusing on life skills.

Why do we want to focus on life skills? Today, Slovakia, like other European countries, needs a revolution in the field of skills that will i) guarantee all individuals prosperity in the time of green and digital transformations and ii) help adults to overcome the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. Social justice and the resilience of our society are an important precondition for managing not only economic crises, but also other threats which occurred in the 21st century. The approval of the national lifelong learning strategy was a key step, but it must be followed by concrete measures to ensure its implementation. At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind the need for inclusion, so that even disadvantaged citizens with a lack of opportunities have opportunities to develop their skills for life, that is, skills that go beyond basic skills and skills for the labour market.

Our discussion during the round tables will be focused on mapping and identifying priority problems in adult learning in Slovakia in relation to life skills.

Key questions used for the roundtable discussions:

- How do we understand the concept of skills for life in Slovakia? Do we need to support their development? Who are the providers of such learning opportunities? In your opinion, which organizations are undertaking activities which can be seen as good practice in this area with a positive impact on adult life skills?
- Which target groups do you work with? Do you consider certain target groups to be a priority and why? Do they face any barriers that prevent them from developing life skills? What are the success factors of working with them? What types of educational or other activities would help meet their needs?
- Which cooperation frameworks or partnerships can be used in the implementation of life skills development?
- Can we name specific areas for targeted support from the state?

Actors involved in the project implementation

List of actors who participated in the discussions

	<i>Name of organisation</i>	<i>Location of organisations</i>
1	365.bank, a.s.	Bratislava
2	Action senior, n.o.	Košice
3	Agentúra práce BBSK	Lučenec

4	AINova	Svätý Jur
5	AIVD SR	Bratislava
6	Aj Ty v IT	Bratislava
7	Akadémia kritického myslenia	Bratislava
8	Akademia vzdelavania a mediacneho poradenstva, n.n.	Liptovsky Mikulas
9	Asociácia lektorov a kariérnych poradcov	Banská Bystrica
10	ČSOB	Bratislava
11	Duálna akadémia, z.z.p.o.	Bratislava
12	EDUCON	Rožňava
13	Eduvan	Bratislava
14	EPALE Slovensko	Banská Bystrica
15	ETP Slovensko - Centrum pre udržateľný rozvoj	Košice
16	Europe Direct Košice / Košický samosprávny kraj	Košice
17	Európska asociácia finančného plánovania ČR	Praha
18	Finančná správa SR	Bratislava
19	Finanční zralost (kooperace s EFPA, AISIS - Rozumíme penězům)	Praha
20	FinQ Centrum, n.o.	Bratislava
21	Finančné riaditeľstvo SR	Bratislava
22	HARMONY ACADEMY	Trnava
23	Implementačná agentúra MPSVRSR	Bratislava
24	Jednota aktívnych seniorov Žilina – Bytčica	Žilina
25	Junior Achievement Slovensko	Bratislava
26	Karpatská nadácia	Košice
27	Katedra pedagogiky a andragogiky, PF UMB	Banská Bystrica
28	KES-RV s.r.o.	Rožňava
29	Knižnica pre mládež mesta Košice	Košice
30	Krajská knižnica Žilina	Žilina
31	OZ Lifestarter	Trnava
32	MČK	Dubová
33	Mesto Trnava	Trnava
34	Ministerstvo financií SR	Bratislava
35	MŠVVaŠ SR	Štúrovo
36	Národná banka Slovenska	Bratislava
37	Národný inštitút vzdelávania a mládeže	Bratislava
38	Nadácia pre deti Slovenska	Svinná
39	Nezisková organizácia Barbora	Pezinok
40	Obchodná akadémia	Topoľčany
41	Obchodná akadémia	Levice
42	Obchodná akadémia	Dolný Kubín

43	Obchodná akadémia, SOŠ podnikania a služieb	Pezinok
44	OVB Allfinanz Slovensko a.s.	Bratislava
45	OZ Detstvo deťom, RCPU Rožňava	Dobšiná
46	OZ Otvor dvor	Rožňava
47	Okresný úrad Rožňava	Rožňava
48	Pressburg Academy	Bratislava
49	Regionálne centrum podpory učiteľov Rožňava	Rožňava
50	Republiková únia zamestnávateľov	Bratislava
51	Rozvojová agentúra Žilinského samosprávneho kraja, n.o.	Žilina
52	SAAIC	bratislava
53	Slovenská asociácia age management	Bratislava
54	Slovenská asociácia knižníc	Košice
55	SOCIA - Nadácia na podporu sociálnych zmien	Bratislava
56	Spojena škola Šaľa	Šaľa
57	Spoločenskovedný ústav CSPV SAV	Košice
58	Strom života	Bratislava
59	Súkromná stredná odborná škola podnikania	Zvolen
60	Štátna vedecká knižnica v Košiciach	Košice
61	Štátna vedecká knižnica v Prešove	Prešov
62	Štátny inštitút odborného vzdelávania	Bratislava
63	Trexima Bratislava	Bratislava
64	UM, n. o.	Banská Bystrica
65	Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici	Banská Bystrica
66	Univerzitná knižnica UPJŠ v Košiciach	Košice
67	Univerzitné poradenské centrum UPJŠ v Košiciach	Košice
68	Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky	Bratislava
69	Ústredná knižnica FiF UK	Bratislava
70	Verejná knižnica Mikuláša Kováča	Banská Bystrica
71	Vídiecky parlament na Slovensku	Banská Bystrica
72	Všeobecná úverová banka, a.s.	Bratislava
73	Základná škola Štúrova	Malacky
74	Združenie pre kariérové poradenstvo a rozvoj kariéry	Bratislava

Programme of the conference: Supporting skills for life in a changing world

6. June 2023, Bratislava

8:30 - 9:00	Registration
9:00 - 9:10	Opening, Lubica Gáľlová, ŠIOV (State Institute of Vocational Education and Training)
9:10 – 9:30	European Year of Skills Ján Varchola, DG EMPL, European Commission
9:30 – 10:10	Controlling quality of thinking? Olívia Hurbanová, HighBrows
10:10 – 10:40	How will we learn in the times of Artificial Intelligence? Peter Gušťačík, PDCS
10:40 – 11:10	Activities of the National Adult Education Coordinators Belgium-Flanders, Germany, Slovakia
11:10 – 11:30	Break
11:30 – 11:50	Life skills development in Slovakia Ivana Studená, CSPS SAS a Lubica Gáľlová, ŠIOV
11:50 – 13:00	Panel discussion: Life skills in Slovakia Ivana Studená CSPV SAV Klaudia Bednárová, The Bridge; Kogneo Veronika Golianová, Gamifactory Roman Fusek, National Bank of Slovakia Lucia Stellerová, Stell+ERP s.r.o
13:00 – 14:00	Obed
14:00 – 15:30	Paralel discussions How to strengthen life skills with the help of artificial intelligence tools, Peter Gušťačík, PDCS • Methods of developing life skills in non formal education, Laco Oravec • Partnerships and frameworks to support life skills development, Ivana Studená, CSPV SAV and Lubica Gáľlová, ŠIOV
15:30 - 16:00	Discussion, conclusions

Results of the online questionnaire on skills for life

Online data collection was also part of the Skills for Life project, which was implemented in addition to the ongoing round tables.

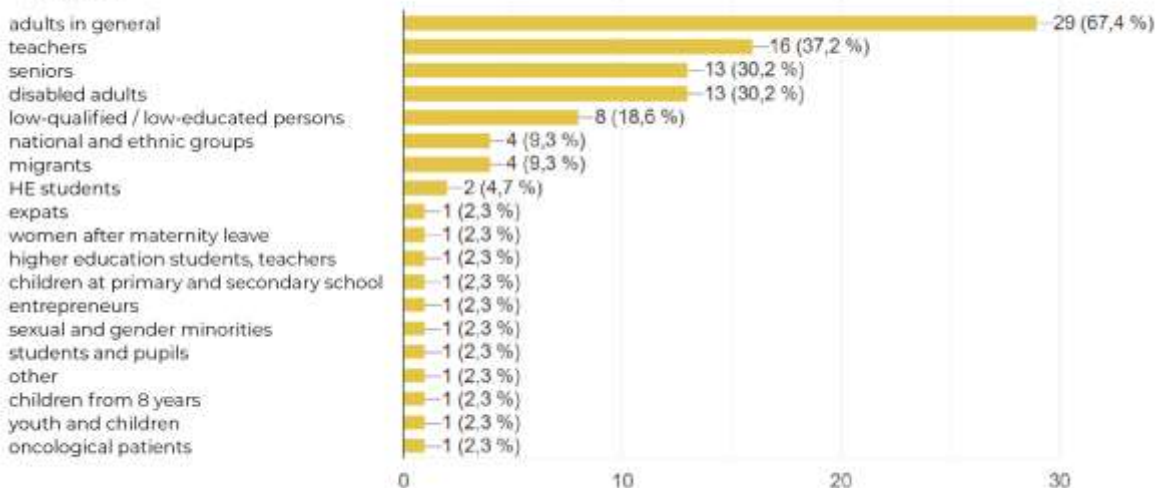
43 respondents filled out the questionnaire. According to the identified seat of the organisation, the majority of organisations came from the Bratislava region (40.5%), and the second most strongly represented region was the Banskobystrický region. The largest representation of organisations was civic associations (42.9%) and public administration organisations (31%), for which we assume that these were mainly self-governing bodies.

Target groups

Two thirds of respondents said that they focus their activities on adults in general. Teachers were identified as the largest specific target group of adults (37.2%). The same proportions of respondents (30.2%) engage with seniors as well as disabled adults. Almost 10% of respondents work with national and ethnic minorities and the same percentage with migrants.

What target groups of adults do you work with?

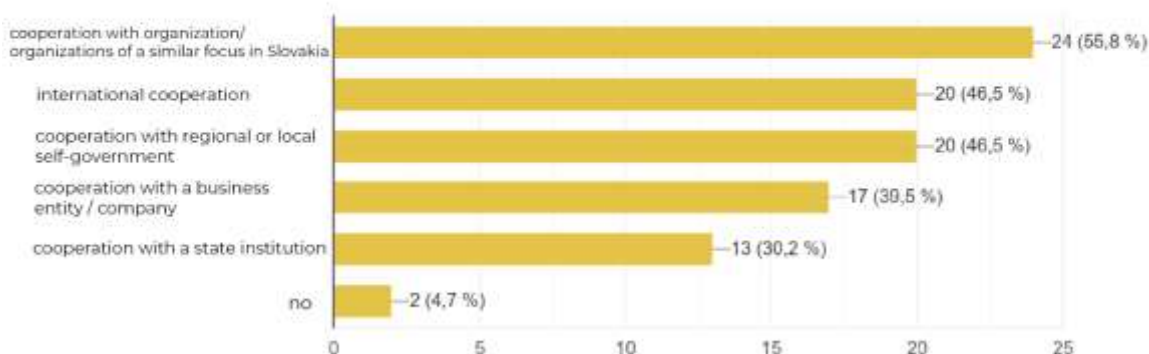
43 answers



A large majority of respondents declared that their activities are based on different types of cooperation with other organisations, whether in a local, regional, national or international context. There is a significant proportion of organisations (almost 50%) that collaborate with local and regional governments in their activities. The high percentage of international activities (46.5%) indicates the availability of financial support through international projects.

Are your educational activities for adults based on cooperation with other entities?

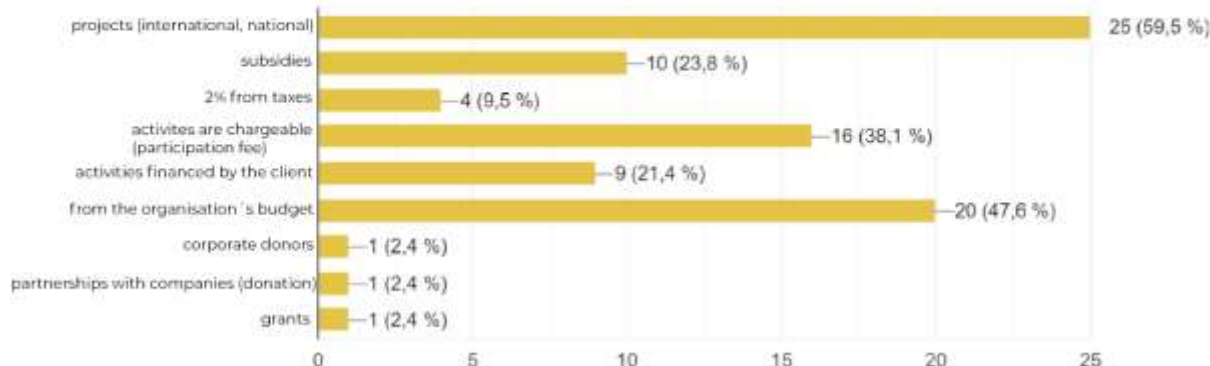
43 answers



The answers provided by the questionnaire on the financing of activities in the field of life skills confirm the information from the participants of the round tables - in particular, that more activity takes place on a project basis (almost two-thirds of the respondents), but almost half also mention financing from their own budget, where we assume that it is public institutions.

How are your adult learning activities funded?

42 answers



The main part of the questionnaire was devoted to thematic areas of the respondents' activities in individual areas of skills:

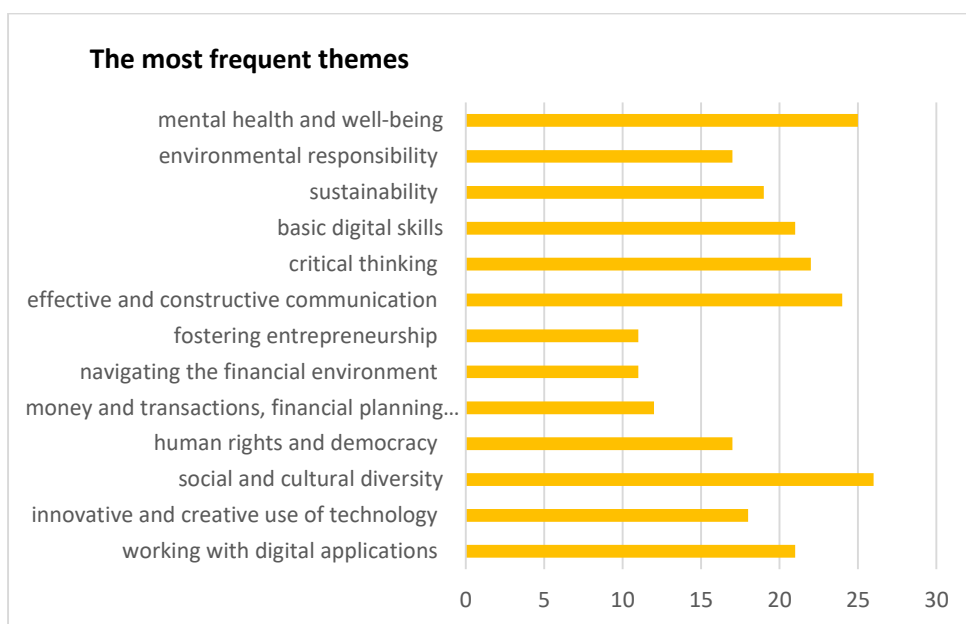
- Civic skills
- Digital literacy
- Financial literacy
- Building resilience (including basic skills)
- Green skills.

In developing this part of the questionnaire, we have drawn on the available competency frameworks (DigComp⁴⁸, GreenComp⁴⁹, the European Reference Framework of Key

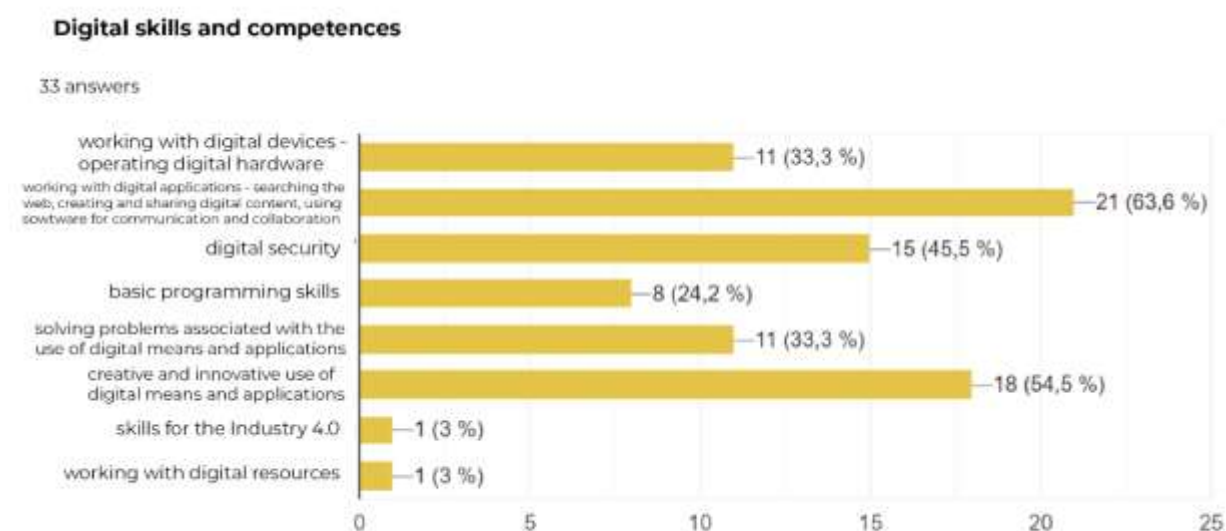
⁴⁸ https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcomp/digcomp-framework_en

⁴⁹ https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework_en

Competences for Lifelong Learning⁵⁰ and the Reference Framework of Competences for a Democratic Culture⁵¹). The most frequent topics are shown in the following chart:



The following charts show a more detailed breakdown of the topics in each thematic area.

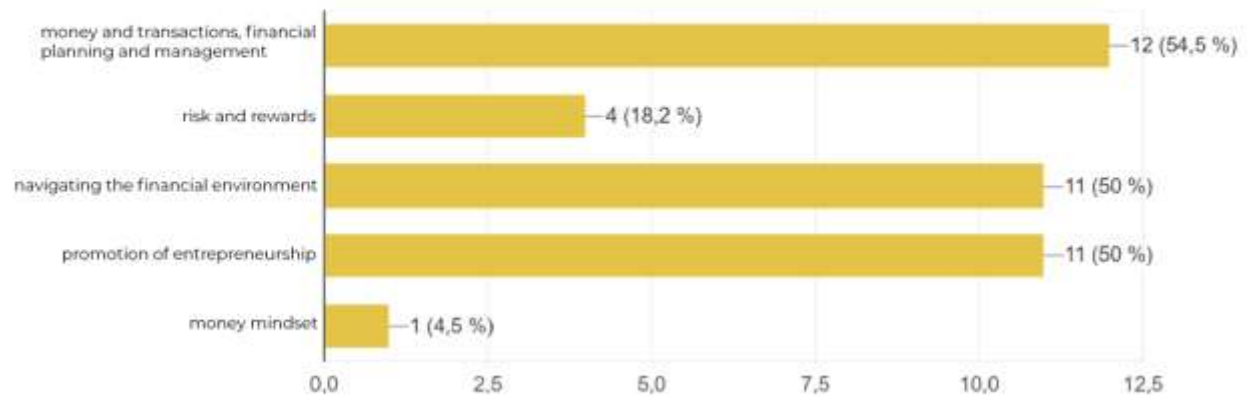


⁵⁰ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/key-competences>

⁵¹ <https://rm.coe.int/rfcdc-volume-1-slovak/1680a19cf0>

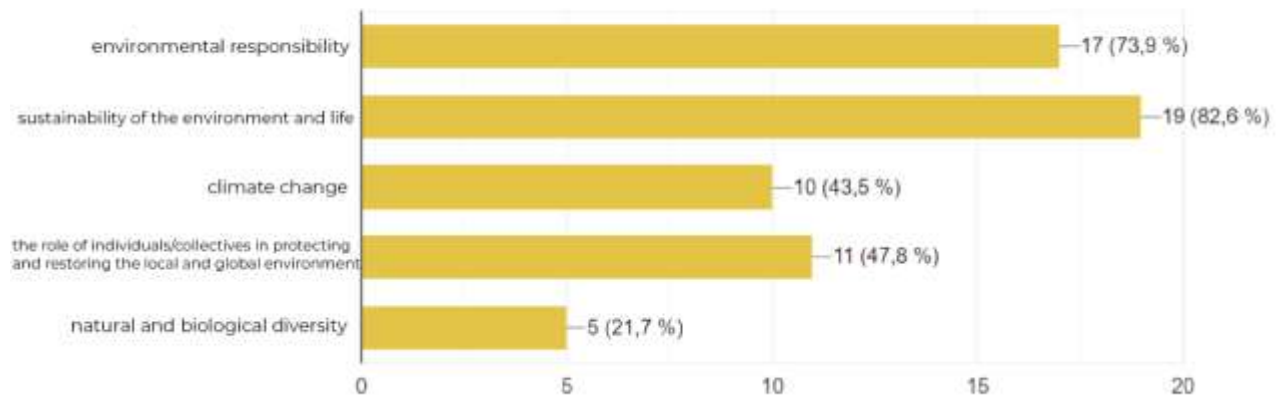
Financial literacy

22 answers



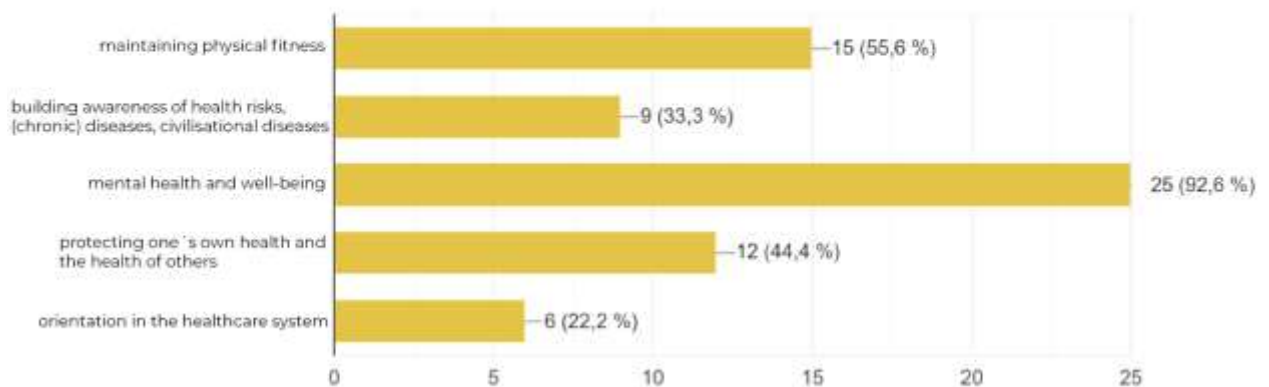
Green / environmental competences and skills

23 answers



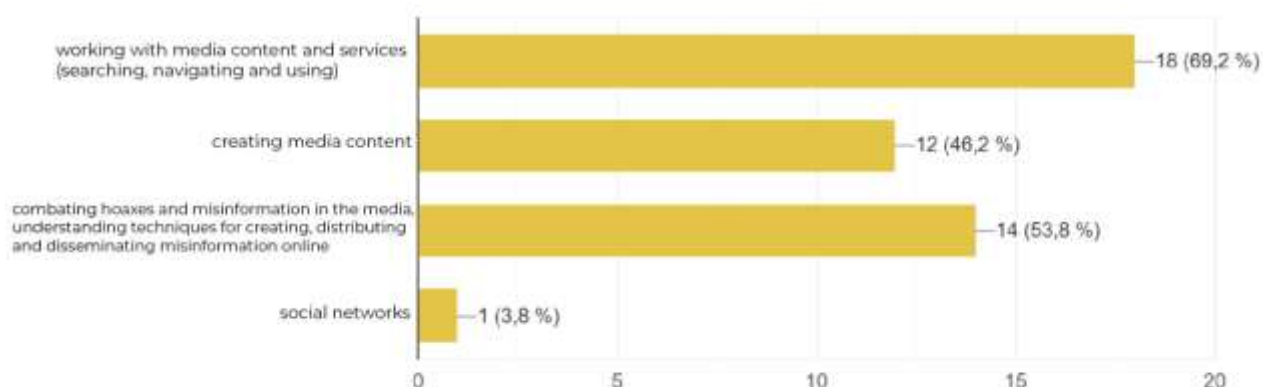
Health literacy / health-related skills and competences

27 answers



Media literacy / skills and competences related to the use of information and media

26 answers



Skills and competences promoting resilience of individuals

38 answers

