



NATIONAL COORDINATOR FOR ADULT LEARNING AGENDA

Skills for life in Slovakia

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POLICY BRIEF

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Skills of adults have been significantly present in Slovakia in recent years in public discourse, especially in connection with technological changes, but also in relation to negative demographic changes. The digital and green transitions and their multidimensional nature are already significantly present in our daily lives and during the implementation of this relatively short project, interest in the effects of artificial intelligence has increased sharply in public debate in Slovakia. The impact of technological change and current social transformations on skills for life is at the heart of the professional community and the public more than before. One of the objectives of this project was to initiate activities, to network stakeholders and map the current state of skills for life in Slovakia, as well as to identify areas in which skills for adult life need to be supported by public sources. The Skills for Life project was designed as one of the quick responses to what is perceived as one of the most significant shifts in adult skills needed for their daily lives.

Identifying areas where policy intervention should take place to improve skills for life can be challenging, as life skills are a transversal concept and activities that can influence this area of adult skills usually involve a wide range of stakeholders. Skills for life have not yet been discussed in Slovakia in terms of the potential functions that adult education policies can assume in this context. There is ad hoc evidence of activities carried out by NGOs and some policy actors that have an impact on adult life skills, be they direct participants or the public reached by the results of the project activities. There is a lack of understanding of how policies and public funding could be used effectively in terms of promoting skills for adult life; open a debate on the need to address basic skills at national level.

The project "Skills for Life" was implemented by the State Institute of Vocational Education (ŠIOV) as the National Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning to support a comprehensive view of the needs of adult learning in relation to skills challenges for Slovakia and to create a space for discussion and formulation of opportunities, priorities and threats that adults in Slovakia need to address in relation to their current or future skills shortages.

The aim of the project "Skills for Life" was to:

- Open a debate in a community of adult learning actors on the importance of skills for life.
- Raise awareness of the importance of skills for life in view of technological, economic and social changes in Slovak society.
- Collect evidence-based data on current skills practice for adults.
- Identify challenges and priorities in promoting skills for life in adult learning.
- Inform policy makers and stakeholders about potential areas of intervention to promote adults' skills for life through public funding.

The findings of the project are based on:

- i) documentary research on initiatives in the field of skills policy for living in Slovakia and abroad;
- ii) a review of literature relevant to life skills, including academic literature and reports from recent applied projects;
- iii) analysis of the original qualitative data collected for the project by means of questionnaires;
- iv) analysis of information from roundtable discussions, which has been rewritten and analysed by the thematic mapping method (also available in the form of a mapping report).

1. Skills for life are consensually recognized by relevant actors as an important thematic area that deserves more attention in Slovakia by policy makers and educational institutions. As a result of new and ever-increasing pressures implying the need for support for life skills, this support should be available to all groups of adults, including those with generally well-developed life skills in the past.
2. The concept of skills for life is seen as a concept that includes basic skills. The concept of basic skills refers to the necessary level of skills needed for life (both personal and social) and for work. The concept of skills for life broadens the perspective of skills with a more comprehensive approach to how skills for life and work can be developed and what their level and composition should be in order to lead a happy life.
3. The concept of basic skills could very easily be combined with “survival”, while the concept of skills for life refers rather to the “satisfaction” of the individual. Therefore, groups identified as vulnerable due to lack of basic skills also need support for life skills.
4. In general, adults in Slovakia are at risk because of the risks faced by the economy and society at macro level. This is particularly felt in relation to addressing the digital transformation, the ability to assess the quality of information resources and the development of civic attitudes and skills. Other areas of general importance include health management and addressing work-life balance and parental skills.
5. Motivation to learn is underdeveloped and not sufficiently recognized as an integral part of planning effective learning activities or general initiatives to promote skills for life. One of the reasons may be the lack of positive learning experiences from the initial education system, which is slow in innovation and also insufficiently responds to new individual and societal needs.
6. The lack of motivation is also linked to the limited personal experience with the benefits of lifelong learning. Adult learning practice is dispersed in the context of learning activities. Projects or programmes implemented in recent decades have not been sufficiently helpful in developing continuous and learning-oriented opportunities encouraging participation in various learning opportunities.
7. Effective approaches to the development of skills for life in Slovakia need to be developed in more diverse and interconnected environments. We have identified a strong polarisation in support schemes or projects that can be characterised as tailor-made versus universal tools. Universal schemes at the national level usually evolve from top to bottom, and their expected impact may be overestimated at the beginning of the schemes. The key actors who develop tailor-made and non-formal activities that are positive for life skills development are practitioners who often work in or for non-profit organisations. It is positive that this approach is also applied by some national actors.
8. It is crucial that actors and policy frameworks integrate or build on successful bottom-up activities from the local level. This is an important and essential approach to support interventions and build a sustainable adult learning ecosystem.
9. Local economic and social needs determine the focus of skills for living in specific geographical areas. The design of learning activities and their integration into non-formal and local environments are changing for target groups or a specific focus on life skills. Actors and communities form the basis for an individual approach to skills for life. An individualised approach is a precondition for any programme aimed at promoting skills for life.

10. Developing an adult learning ecosystem is important for creating an environment for the promotion of skills for life. Such an ecosystem is based on the activities of different actors in different locations and regions, who can create timely and targeted intervention activities relevant to individuals and their life skills.
11. The current situation in Slovakia is based on a small number of fragmented interventions in terms of adults' access to programmes or activities supporting and developing life skills. A successful skills-based approach for life in Slovakia may require linking these diverse activities so that every adult has access to supporting life skills tailored to their needs.
12. Partnerships are key to building a functioning and open adult learning system. Regional disparities have a strong impact on the development of cooperation frameworks on skills for life.
13. The effective promotion of life skills for every adult is the basis for a well-developed and functioning adult learning ecosystem. Therefore, we believe that targeted promotion of adult life skills can be one of the effective approaches to building an adult education system in a society based on lifelong learning, developing communities of practice, supporting living local communities and increasing active citizenship in Slovakia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEASURES AND POLICIES

1. When developing skills for life, it is very important to develop an appropriate intervention logic based on the needs of specific target groups. This might seem obvious, but the extent of interregional as well as intra-regional disparities in Slovakia calls for the potential consequences of specific regional and local needs to be formulated at the beginning of any policy initiatives, especially those with a predominant top-down approach.
2. From this perspective, any universal policy instruments and programmes/projects that apply universal geographical and target group solutions could have systematically limited capacity in Slovakia to positively influence and improve and develop an education culture for the development of skills for life. When setting up financial schemes, account should be taken of ensuring the sustainability of verified activities and providers.
3. Building initiatives and partnerships to support the development of skills for life complemented by monitoring of successful activities at local level and finding ways to build on them has emerged as one of the most effective approaches in Slovakia.
4. Programmes and initiatives that would have a positive impact on skills for life must adopt approaches with an implicit focus on learners' internal motivation. Learners constantly face obstacles that prevent them from participating in education. Individuals with a more serious lack of skills for life, especially those with basic skills problems, are very likely to find themselves in a disadvantaged material or social environment. Lack of motivation is seen as a general obstacle in dealing with demotivated learners. Structuring activities in relation to the daily problems of learners, especially those with low skills, is one of the best ways to integrate motivation into the design of the activities.
5. Effective skills for life activities are often conceived as practical activities that do not have an unambiguous character of education and training. It is important that this is recognised in policy initiatives and programmes.
6. Mental health and lack of work-life balance become a frequent negative factor. This is one of the important topics for interventions in the field of skills for life, but needs to be more involved in health services, counselling and support from psychologists.

7. The lack of motivation to learn has been identified as one of the key topics that needs more attention. Internal motivation is a key factor in reaching adults, but at the same time, internal motivation can only develop gradually. Thus, while motivation is crucial, especially given the low participation rate of adults in education and training, it is essential to find ways in which internal motivation can be supported in terms of the design of activities. As one of the approaches that can be effective, more emphasis has been put on helping learners to identify the benefits they could achieve in participating in education. Demonstrating the benefits of participation in diverse learning is effective for learners and employers.
8. When developing programmes for specific skills or target group, careful analysis of needs, options and constraints is needed to ensure that learning activities are properly targeted and the conditions under which skills development will take place addressed.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Project name National Coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning

Coordinator State Institute of Vocational Training

Duration 2022-2023

Website www.vzrucnostiprezivot.sk <http://www.vzdelavanieidospelych.sk/>

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Other resources Skills for life in Slovakia. Mapping report
<https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Zrucnosti-pre-zivot-2023-SK.pdf>

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