



Note on using Skills Audits for specific target groups:

2) Low-Skilled Adults

Written by Anette Curth
June 2018

"Insert Logo"

"Insert Logo"



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Directorate E -Skills

Unit E 2: Skills and Qualifications

Contact: Godelieve Vandenbrande

E-mail: Godelieve.Van-Den-Brande@ec.europa.eu

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Policy context	4
3	Overview of the findings	6
3.1	Legal frameworks and policy frameworks	6
3.2	The role of Skills Audits in Upskilling Pathways.....	9
3.3	Types of skills covered and methodologies used	18
4	Conclusions	23
4.1	Emerging conclusions	23
4.2	Compliance of skills audits for low-skilled adults with the objectives stated in the UP Recommendation	24
	Annexes	27
	Annex 1 Skills audits initiatives targeting low-skilled adults.....	28
	Annex 2 References	32

1 Introduction

In May 2017, the European Commission (DG EMPL) commissioned this study on 'Mapping Skills Audits in and across the EU', to carry out research in EU Member States on their current practice in relation to Skills Audits. The objective of the study was to create a better knowledge base about the availability of skills audits to different target groups, the variations in how skills audits are carried out, what they entail, who is involved and which identification and assessment methods are being used. It was also aimed at collecting evidence on the demand and supply of skills audits across the EU and the effectiveness of different types of practices.

This note uses data collected as part of the study and analyses the use of Skills Audits in for the target group of low-skilled adults, which is in the focus of the 2016 Council Recommendation 'Upskilling Pathways'.

2 Policy context

In 2015, 64 million people - more than a quarter of the Union population aged 25-64 - had left initial education and training with at most a lower secondary education qualification. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills ('PIAAC'), tested levels of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments, and indicated that similar proportions of adults aged 16 to 65 performed at the lowest level of proficiency in 20 Member States.¹

This means that 20 to 25 % of European adults aged 16 to 65 do not have the necessary skills to participate fully in the digitally driven economy and society. They struggle with basic reading and writing, calculation and using digital tools in everyday life; which means they face a higher risk of unemployment, a higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion, higher health risks and a lower life expectancy, and their children face higher risks of educational underachievement.

Yet, until recently, policy makers have paid much less attention to low-skilled adults than to other groups at risk of social and labour market exclusion (for example, young people).² Therefore, low skilled adults have become an important target group of European Policy over the last few years. In June 2016, as part of the 'New Skills Agenda for Europe', the Commission proposed setting up a 'Skills Guarantee' to address this challenge. The initiative resulted in the Council Recommendation entitled 'Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults', which was adopted on 19 December 2016.³

Upskilling Pathways (UP) specifically targets adults with a low level of skills (see Box 1). It addresses those who are not eligible for Youth Guarantee support as they are more than 25 years old. The objective is for those people to acquire at least a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent (level 3 or 4 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) depending on national circumstances).

The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation defines low skilled adults as persons with an insufficient level of literacy, numeracy and digital competences - for example those who have left initial education or training without completing upper secondary education or equivalent. Yet, as PIAAC data show, there are also individuals who do have an upper secondary education, but still have a low level of proficiency in those basic skills.⁴ In other cases, people are low-qualified rather than low-skilled, as they have work

¹ Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, cf. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN)

² Ibid

³ Cf. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224&langId=en>

⁴ Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, cf. section 5.

experience, but no qualification. Consequently, Member States may define priority target groups for Upskilling Pathways depending on the national circumstances.⁵

One of the main aims of Upskilling Pathways is to bring low-skilled adults back to education and training. The European Council has set a benchmark for the adult participation in learning: by 2020, the participation of the adult population (25-64 years) education or training should stand at 15%.⁶ Data from the EU Labour Force Survey 2016 show that the EU remains over 4 percentage points below the target, with the rate of participation practically unchanged since 2014.⁷ This situation is particularly problematic regarding the low-skilled: In 2015, only 2.9 million low-qualified adults (4.3%) took part in education and training (in the previous 4 weeks); 0.6 million of them (1% of the total) took part in formal education, and 2.2 million of them (3.5% of the total) took part in non-formal education. 61.2 million low-qualified adults (95.7%) in need of upskilling did not take part in education and training.⁸

The Upskilling Pathways Recommendation is aiming to change by setting out a coherent 'pathway' to a higher level of skills. To design such pathways, a series of three strongly interlinked steps is suggested:

- **Step 1: Skills Assessment**, to identify existing skills as well as skills needs.
- **Step 2: Tailored training offer**, relating to the provision of literacy, numeracy or digital skills and/or progression to a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4. This step covers the design and delivery of an education and training offer tailored to the specific needs of each individual and their existing skills, as indicated in the assessment.
- **Step 3: Validation and Recognition** of the skills acquired through the personalised upskilling pathway, ideally leading to an EQF level 4 qualification. Moreover, existing validation arrangements should be enhanced and built on.⁹ Hence validation and recognition is not limited to the skills acquired through step 2 - there should be other options available to assess and certify prior knowledge, skills and competences, including learning at work - ideally leading to certification towards a qualification.

All three steps entail targeted interventions aiming to reinforce and strengthen the personalised support to low-skilled adults.

The variety of target groups all benefit from flexible opportunities to enhance their level of skills, or to acquire a broader skills set. Skills audits (here: 'Skills Assessments') play an important role in that context. They are seen as the first step, and as a means to better define the starting point for the Upskilling Pathway. According to the UP Recommendation, the Skills Assessments should be used to:

- Carry out an initial assessment of an individual's skills already acquired
- Make them visible through a document/portfolio that states the skills of the individual, ideally in relation to professional or educational standards;
- Identify any skills deficits in relation to these standards;
- Tailor the required training to the needs of the individual, ensuring it boosts their basic skills and/or ultimately leads to an EQF level 3 or 4 qualification;

⁵ Cf. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224&langId=en>

⁶ Indicator: Participation in E&T during the four weeks preceding the survey.

⁷ Education and Training Monitor 2017 – progress on the EU benchmarks in education https://ec.europa.eu/education/content/progress-eu-benchmarks-education_en

⁸ EU28. Eurostat data.

⁹ As foreseen by National Qualification Frameworks and systems – e.g. those put in place in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

- Recommend a process of validation of NFIL or relevant stages thereof, suited to the needs of the individual, to ensure all prior learning outcomes are acknowledged.

In the following section (section 3), we will analyse a small sample of skills audits identified as part of a DG EMPL study against the objectives of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. Conclusions are presented in section 4.

3 Overview of the findings

As stated in the introduction, the study 'Mapping skills audits in and across EU Member States'¹⁰ aimed to provide an overview on the types of skills audits on offer, their purpose and methodology, and the target groups addressed.

The research carried out as part of this study shows that generally, skills audits are on offer in the 16 Member States covered, and different types of skills audits serving different purposes and target groups have been developed. Yet, country research shows that in none of the 16 Member States, is the target group of low-skilled skills adults as defined by the UP recommendation in the focus of policies and programmes related to skills audits.

However, policies and large-scale skills audits initiatives are on offer for groups that may include low-skilled adults and young people at risk of becoming low-skilled adults (for instance, early leavers from E&T, NEET, long-term unemployed, migrants and refugees). More than half of the respondents to a survey among skills audit providers that was undertaken as part of the study (in 16 Member States) state that their offers are open to low-skills adults, or people with skills gaps.¹¹

In a few countries, this is underpinned by a legal right of all citizens, or certain groups of citizens, to have their skills assessed, and possibly, validated. In most countries, skills audits are an established part of the PES service offer to the unemployed. These policies and practices are not tailored to the target group of the Upskilling Pathways recommendation, nevertheless low-skilled adults can benefit from them. The rationale behind the Upskilling Pathways initiative is that it should not invent new measures but rather take into account national circumstances, available resources and existing national strategies, etc. Therefore, this overview can play a modest part in revealing what is there to be built on.

3.1 Legal frameworks and policy frameworks

Among the 16 countries reviewed, three categories of legal and policy frameworks can be differentiated:

1. Countries that grant a universal right to skills audits for all citizens (BE, FR, LU, IT). A skills audit is however not obligatory;
2. Countries with legal frameworks, that entail rights to and obligations with regard to skills audits for certain target groups, e.g. adults learners entering VET, migrants and refugees entering the labour market, school leavers etc. (DE, DK, FI, CZ);
3. Countries with no legal framework, but with policy frameworks (e.g. validation arrangements) supporting the use of skills audits (AT, NL, HR, PL, SE, UK, IE, MT).

¹⁰ European Commission 2018. The study covered 16 Member States. Austria, Belgium (Belgium-nl, Belgium-fr), Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the UK

¹¹ Survey carried out among skills audit providers in these 16 countries as part of the study, n=90

3.1.1 Countries with a universal right to skills audits for all citizens

In the first group of countries, skills audits are well-established practices underpinned by legal frameworks and embedded in broader policy initiatives, which ensure a legal right for a person to undertake a skills audit. This includes:

- In **France**, a legal framework for skills audits (*bilan de compétences*) was developed in 1991. The law defines a regular skills audit as 'a tool to analyse professional and personal competences, as well as aptitudes and motivations to build a professional development project'. Legislation means that every individual has a legal right to a skills audit (*bilan de compétences*). Other French-speaking countries have adopted similar policies: In **Luxembourg**, the *bilan de compétences* was created through legislation in 1998, in line with the introduction of the National Action Plan for Employment. It is promoted as a tool to help manage periods of change/transition at both individual and at company level. In the **French-speaking community of Belgium**, a legal right for all workers to undertake a 'skills audit' (*bilan de compétences*) came into force in 2001 in the context of policies promoting lifelong learning. Skills audit in this respect consists of a diagnostic to identify a person's skills, knowledge, aptitudes, and motivation aimed at the construction of a professional project.
- In **Italy**, the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino* received official status in 2005. Since then a national legal framework in this area has progressively developed. The *Libretto* is defined as a portfolio allowing the documentation of learning experiences and competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts by any citizen. More recently, Legislative Decree 150/2015 states that skills audits (defined in the legislative text as '*bilancio di competenze*') must be offered to unemployed people accessing the services within four months.

These policies have been developed to support people in phases of professional transition by making their skills visible, broadening their horizon and making the right choices. While this theoretically includes those at risk of exclusion (e.g. long-term unemployed), more evidence has been found that these policies and frameworks support people with a higher level of skills, rather than the low-skilled.

For instance, an evaluation of the French '*Bilan de competence*' revealed that practitioners find that the initiative improves the clarity and soundness of a professional project that beneficiaries are pondering, and helps to gauge the chances to succeed. The '*Bilan*' is less useful in cases where the aim is to develop options for persons struggling with basic skills. Another issue for low-skilled persons are the costs related to the '*Bilan*'.¹²

Hence the existence of a universal legal right for all is not sufficient to support low-skilled adults. Targeted methods and specific support are needed.

3.1.2 Countries with legal frameworks on skills audits for certain target groups

In the second group of countries, legal frameworks specify rights and obligations related to skills audits for certain target groups (unemployed, VET students, lower secondary school leavers, migrants). These legal frameworks do not specifically address low-skilled adults. Yet they can at least marginally benefit from them in several ways.

- In **Germany**, students in the last year of lower secondary school are obliged to take a skills audit which assesses their talents and aptitudes. The outcomes are used to help them make the right choice for further training and a professional career. This can be regarded as a preventive measure, which helps to ensure that lower secondary school students are referred to next steps (general education or VET)

¹² Ferrieux et Carayon (1998), and Crépon, Dejemeppe & Gurgand (2005)

that are suitable for them, so that early leaving from education and training is reduced.

- In **Finland**, the entire VET system is flexible and competence-based: each learner is offered the possibility to design an individually appropriate path to finish an entire qualification or a supplementary skills set, based on his/her prior knowledge and skills. The primary emphasis is on what the student has learned and is able to do, not on where and when and during what period of time. All prior skills are assessed, and subsequently validated and recognised. Low-qualified people with skills from work experiences benefit from this approach as there is a low entry threshold to acquire a qualification.
- In **Denmark**, all adult learners (25+) entering IVET have a legal right to a skills audit procedure prior to starting their course. Similar to Finland, this is also a measure to ensure people with skills from work experiences can enter the VET system easily, and shorten training pathways.
- In the **Czech Republic**, applicants for long-term and permanent residency (i.e. migrants) are required by law to undergo skills assessment that includes basic language, social/cultural knowledge and skills. In **Germany**, skills audits have also been introduced as an obligatory part of the administrative process of the integration of migrants and refugees. In the context of migrants and refugees, who usually don't have a high level of language skills in the language of the receiving country, innovative methods have been developed that focus more on visual test and work trials rather than on interviews and written tests. This may be interesting for other target groups as well, including low-skilled that struggle with basic skills including literacy.
- In most of the 16 countries, regulations pertaining to the activities of PES provide a form of legal framework that regulates skills audit related activity across the PES. One example can be highlighted from the **United Kingdom**. Whilst there is no legal right to a skills audits, claimants under the Department for Work and Pension's 'Work Programme' are required to attend an assessment interview with PES and develop a plan in order to find employment. As part of this process a skills assessment may be carried out. This is valid for people of all skills levels, hence included the low-skilled/low-qualified.

The mapping study has found that in many of these cases, skills audits are carried out with the assistance of education and training institutions and educational advancement is already a main priority. Hence developing them or tailoring them more to the needs of low-skilled in the context of implementing UP should be achievable without too much effort. Yet, to be ready to accept a bigger intake of low-skilled people, the method and knowhow may need to be transferred to a larger number of schools, colleges, training centres, etc.

The study also found that PES are generally well prepared to support low-skilled adults in a well-matched return to the labour market. Yet, more attention should be given to using the outcome of skills audits to direct people to further education and training, as a step to securing more sustainable labour market integration.

3.1.3 Countries that promote skills audits as part of other policies

The third group of countries has no overarching legal framework for skills audit, and thus no legal rights or obligations in this area. Instead, the promotion of skills audit is firmly rooted in policy supporting lifelong learning, including the validation of non-formal and informal learning (e.g. Austria, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Sweden) or as part of wider guidance and/or vocational counselling policy (e.g. Croatia, Poland). Examples below show how low-skilled adults can directly or indirectly benefit from these policies.

- The **Czech** National Register of Qualifications provides documentation, assessment and validation of non-formal and informal skills leading to the award of partial VET qualifications. This is a useful alternative for those low-skilled who see acquiring a whole qualification as unattainable.

- In **Poland**, skills audits are most commonly understood as identification and analysis of competences, interests and professional aptitudes. They are provided by the PES to unemployed people as part of vocational counselling, in line with the Act on the Promotion of Employment and Labour Market Institutions. The link to guidance and counselling is noteworthy here, as in the cases from Denmark and Finland in the examples above, since guidance is recommended enabler is implementing Upskilling Pathways. Moreover, they are offered by the Voluntary Labour Corps to young people with difficulties regarding school completion, acquiring vocational qualifications, and finding a job. Especially the latter can be seen as a measure addressing target groups that are at risk of entering the labour market as low-skilled workers.
- Skills audits are indirectly recognised as a right in **the Netherlands** in the sense that all Dutch residents are entitled to obtain a relevant starting qualification at EQF-level 2 or 3. Based on this informal right, residents can access a skills-recognition system with which they can get a transparent overview of their main skills, related to certain sectors of the labour market and link their profiles with occupations and certification opportunities. Accredited providers are listed on the website of the 'National Knowledge Center EVC'. Applicants discuss with a counsellor from one of the accredited providers which type of skills are important to improve their chances on the job market, and for their professional development. Subsequently they collect data and evidence on their knowledge and experience and submit those to the supervisor for assessment. A Certificate of Experience ('Ervaringsbewijs') is issued.

3.2 The role of Skills Audits in Upskilling Pathways

In the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation it is stated that Skills Assessments (=skills audits) are the first step on an Upskilling Pathway. Yet, the reality is more complex. Some skills audits cover two steps (skills assessment and training), while others cover all three steps and hence constitute an Upskilling Pathway in their own right.

In the sections below, it is shown how the examples studied relate to the three steps. Scenarios of beneficiaries' journeys are used to show how low-skilled learners can benefit from the different types of skills audits along their Upskilling Pathway.

3.2.1 Articulation of Skills Audits with Upskilling Pathways

To get a more detailed picture, 41 skills audit initiatives from 16 countries were researched in detail. The study did not aim to make a comprehensive mapping of skills audits in each of the selected countries. Instead the study looked at a selection of skills audits which represent a diversity of target groups and approaches. This means also that some are relatively small scale, and in the country context possibly marginal. Nevertheless these practices were included in the analysis next to large scale and established ones, to better understand how the different types of skills audits work. Consequently, the sample is not representative and no quantitative analysis can be undertaken.

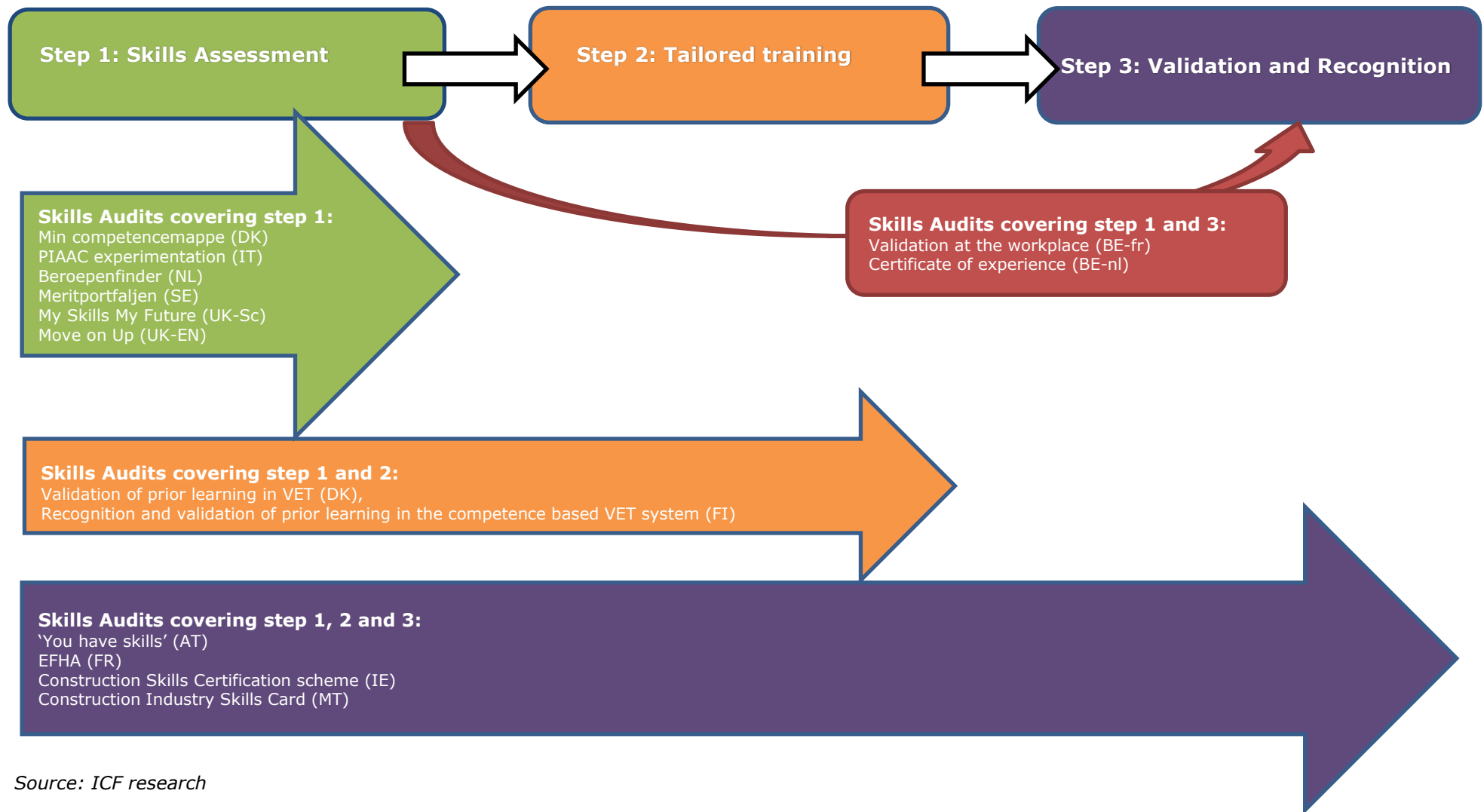
14 of the 41 initiatives analysed in detail state that they address low-skilled adults, or are open to that group¹³. In the following sections, we will discuss the current offer of skills audits, and provide examples of how low-skilled benefit from them.

Most of these 14 initiatives are broader than just a skills assessment, and may include tailored training and/or validation and recognition. Consequently, the examples relate to the three steps of Upskilling Pathways to a different extent.

The figure below (figure 1) shows what steps of Upskilling Pathways are covered by the 14 examples addressing low-skilled adults that were researched as part of the mapping study.

¹³ An overview on the 14 initiatives and their characteristics is given in Annex 1.

Figure 1. How many steps of Upskilling Pathways are covered by the 14 examples analysed as part of the mapping study?



Source: ICF research

3.2.2 Skills audits covering step 1 of UP

Six of the 14 examples identified that mention low-skilled adults as a target group cover exclusively the first step of Upskilling Pathways, hence constitute a pure Skills Assessment, with no inherent follow-up in form of a training and/or validation.

These six initiatives have been designed with the purpose of supporting an individual to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses, build self-awareness, make decisions on the step of their professional trajectory, and be better able to present themselves to others in a professional context. They aim to have an activating or motivational effect and are very open as to their possible outcomes, as the beneficiary is free to use the results at their own discretion. Consequently these skills audits are often open to a broad range of target groups, including young people, adults, job seekers, persons interested in (further) education and training or change of professional pathways. All six initiatives include low-skilled adults in their target groups. Yet they address the target group in different ways:

- The initiative '**Min kompetencemappe**' from Denmark is an online tool that helps a person to get an overview on their skills and competences. It is self-administered, the outcomes have no formal value. Yet, low-qualified persons could use this general assessment as a precursor to an 'official' skills assessment at a VET provider which would lead to validation and taking training towards a qualification (see next section).
- Italian PES have experimented with an online tool to assess basic skills of low skilled long-term unemployed persons that is based on the assessment method developed for the PIAAC survey. **PIAAC Online tests** are offered for auto-administration by the beneficiary. The PES counsellors, however, have direct contacts with the beneficiaries before the PIAAC Online tests are carried out in order to illustrate the tool's main features, and will support the beneficiary during the testing phase in case the test content is not clearly understood and/or any technical problems occur.

General objective of the experimentation is to test a new tool that can help VET providers, guidance providers, PES and employment agencies to assess clients' command of basic skills and key competences. Decision makers and service providers will use the intelligence gathered to increase the quality of the services provided, such as guidance, profiling, validation, counselling, or developing an Action Plan. In view of UP the results of the test could be used as a basis to outline the tailored offer of learning, and any following steps.

- The '**Competence test**' (beroepenfinder) is a self-administered online tool from the Netherlands that aims to help low-skilled/low/qualified unemployed persons to learn more about their aptitudes and point them to available jobs, based on the outcomes. Like 'Min kompetencemappe', it could become the way to a more robust skills assessment and learning in the context of UP.
- The initiative **Meritportfölj** from Sweden aims to empower unemployed low-qualified people and support them in their job-search by making their skills visible. It is offered by PES and supported by a guidance counsellor.
- The initiative '**My Skills My Future**' from UK-Scotland is an online tool aimed at supporting individuals in identifying the skills they have gained from non-formal and informal learning. The tool is offered online and is freely accessible, but support from counsellors is available if needed.
- The initiative '**Move on Up**' addresses the target group of young black men not in education, training or employment in the UK (London). The initiative is based on psychometric tests, tests related to work-readiness and numeracy/literacy tests. The initiative aims to improve the self-confidence of the target group, make them aware of their skills, and help them to apply for a job. Besides the skills assessment, the initiative also includes skills training with mentoring from employers for young

people to improve a range of skills and build character, and one-to-one support focused on the young people's skills, confidence and outlook.

It should be noted that persons with low IT skills may be discouraged from using self-administered online-tools, if no option to take the assessment together with a counsellor is provided. The UP recommendation suggests to "Provide guidance and/or mentoring services to support learners' progression through all steps of the upskilling process."

Yet these examples boast many parallels with the idea of Upskilling Pathways as defined in the UP Recommendation. In the box below, we highlight this using the example of the 'Meritportfölj' initiative from Sweden.

Sweden: Meritportfölj

The initiative was originally developed by the Municipality of Malmö in Southern Sweden in 2003 as a tool for integrating unemployed and low-qualified workers (with a focus on immigrants and refugees) into the labour market. The initiative was one of the first of its kind in Sweden, and became known as the "Malmö model".¹⁴ The Meritportfölj can be described as a methodology for gathering documentation and compiling a structured description of the entire sum of a person's knowledge, skills and competences, regardless of whether these were acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal way. Hence, the Meritportfölj also includes transversal competences and competences from volunteering.

Meritportfölj aims to

- **Give the beneficiary a detailed insight into his or her own strengths and weaknesses** in a labour market context, which is strongly in line with what UP suggests for Step 1.
- Use a **portfolio** approach. The portfolio is developed in collaboration between the PES counsellor or a municipal guidance counsellor, and the beneficiary.
- The beneficiary receives the results which s/he can use at his/her own discretion. The initiative itself does not entail any further steps, yet the **guidance counsellor may give personal recommendations**.
- **This can empower the beneficiary to take the next steps in his or her trajectory**, which could be moving on to further education (Step 2) and/or validation (Step 3). In that case, the beneficiary could use the outcomes of the skills audit to better communicate about their existing skills and knowledge gaps to an education provider or validation centre.

Source: ICF research

As the quotes below (from participants to the UK-'Move on up'-project') illustrate, low-qualified persons, especially from the 'inactive' group, can experience a strong self-empowering and confidence-building effect that may lead to tackling next steps in their personal trajectory. This effect is enhanced if the skills audits are embedded in programmes that include intensive personal counselling and support.

"They won't give you one interview and say 'he's no good'. They look where you went wrong and build you back up again. They encourage you. (...) I learnt to speak to people. I relaxed myself. That's something you learn that you never come in with."

"They basically showed me that if I put my mind to it, and I really want to do it, I can do it ... sometimes you just sit down and you feel like "Oh well, I'm a young black

¹⁴ It should be noted that the initiative has been discontinued and has been replaced by another type of initiative which is more target-group-specific and more prescriptive in terms of an ensuing Action Plan. The successor initiative is not mentioned here as it targets refugees and migrants. The use of Skills Audits for this target group is addressed in another paper.

man in Hackney, too many people around me that are not doing so well, am I going to be that as well?" It just opened my eyes to the fact that it's not going to be like that if I work hard."

Source: ICF research¹⁵

3.2.3 Skills audits covering step 1 and 2 of UP

Among the 14 examples, two were found to cover two steps of Upskilling Pathways, namely skills assessment and tailored training. In both cases, the approaches are part of the countries' education and training system, which allows for flexible learning pathways (for all learners in one country – FI, and for certain groups of learners in the other – DK). In both countries (certain groups of) learners entering or re-entering the VET system have a legal right to skills assessment and validation of (relevant) prior learning.

The skills audits are offered by VET providers and adult education centres, and are carried out with the purpose of validating prior learning from formal, non-formal and informal contexts in view of shortening education/training pathways, and tailoring the training offer. Validation is carried out in view of a certain training course (DK) or individual learning pathways (FI), hence prior learning is mapped against the content of a course, or a professional objective. On completion of the training process – which takes place in the formal VET system – a qualification is issued. This means that the third step may not be necessary, but could still be helpful for people who do not fully complete Step two.

- **Finland** has a fully flexible competence-based VET system, where all prior learning can be validated and recognised, regardless of where and when it was acquired. Several projects make use of this system to bring low-qualified migrants closer to a job. A skills assessment is carried out (**Step 1**). All documented findings on a person's skills and competences can be subject of validation. If the skills assessment shows that before possible employment, VET is necessary, these measures are included in the individual (learning) plan of a participant (**Step 2**).
- In **Denmark**, since the beginning of the millennium, validation of prior learning (in Danish: realkompetencevurdering) is an integral part of Danish IVET. In 2015, realkompetencevurdering was made obligatory for all learners over 25 years of age. Since then, all Danish learners over 25 (and many below that age) enrolling in IVET and who do not come straight from lower secondary school have gone through an initial skills assessment process with a view to identifying relevant prior learning and recognising this in relation to the IVET-programme they will be pursuing. The assessment comprises qualifications from formal learning and an assessment of skills acquired in non-formal and informal contexts (e.g. through work experience) (**Step 1**). On the basis of this, the identified learning outcomes are compared to the learning objectives of the programme, and are validated in relation to this. Subsequently, an individual learning plan is elaborated which ensures that the learner can accomplish his or her programme without having to duplicate learning (**Step 2**). Training time can be reduced, so that an individual can capitalise on his/her prior learning.

Yet, recent (2017) evaluations carried out by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) indicate that shortened learning trajectories are not perceived as a positive aspect by all learners. Some adult learners feel that they need time to readjust and come to terms with "school" again. A shortened training pathway may seem to them as if they are pushed through an accelerated programme, which may be frightening to

¹⁵ The beneficiaries' narratives provided in this note are based on interviews carried out as part of the DG EMPL mapping study, hence on real cases. Yet they may combine information gained through more than one interview, and features from several cases ('vignette approach'). Names and other personal information have been changed.

some – in fact, some would like to have more time to complete their qualification rather than less. The Danish government has drawn consequences from these evaluation findings: As of 2018, validations of prior learning will not lead to a compulsory shortening of the learning trajectory. Instead, it will be an offer, and it will be up to the individual to decide whether he or she wants to make use of it.

The beneficiaries' stories below illustrate how these approaches can be used by low-qualified individuals.

Hanna, Finnish, 30 years old, finished compulsory education and had always done temporary jobs as a cleaner in medical practices, while raising two children. When she became unemployed she made use of her right to validation as part of the competence-based qualification system. The local VET college advised her to take a formal qualification for industrial cleaners and together with a vocational teacher and guidance counsellor she begun the validation process. At the end of the process that included documentation of her skills, and identification of missing skills, a tailored on-the-job learning module was proposed, following which Hanna achieved the qualification in industrial cleaning and was able to get a full-time job contract in the field.

Peter is 27 years old and from Denmark. He is currently training as an apprentice automation technician in a large manufacturing company in Denmark. Prior to beginning his apprenticeship, he had been working for 3 years at the production line in the same enterprise as an unskilled worker. As Peter was doing a good job, and the company wanted to give Peter more responsibility over time, his line manager suggested that Peter sign up as an apprentice. The local vocational school carried out a skills assessment and found out that, due to his work experience, Peter does not need to spend any time at all on placements for his apprenticeship.

All he has to do to acquire a qualification is follow the school periods. Since he left school after the 10th form at the age of 17, it was tough for Peter to get back into the school setting and take Danish and maths classes. He left school 10 years ago and coming back to school seemed quite challenging, especially with the prospect of having to finish quicker than regular students do. Yet he took up the challenge, as being able to take his journeyman's examination and get his qualification in half a year seemed like a very attractive option.

Source: ICF research

It could be argued that these examples cover all three steps of the training process, as they include certification towards a qualification as an integral part of Step 2, which also encompasses the validation of prior learning. Yet, as validation takes place in view of tailoring the training offer, these two initiatives have been classified as covering two steps only.

In the next section, we will present examples that cover all three steps of Upskilling pathways. The difference here is that in these examples the skills audits do not take place in view of tailoring a training offer, but include validation and recognition processes that directly lead to a certification or a qualification. It can hence be stated that these skills audits are used to compensate for a lack of formally documented skills or qualifications, and constitute an entire Upskilling Pathway in itself.

3.2.4 Skills audits covering all three steps of UP

Four initiatives have been identified that cover all three steps of Upskilling Pathways, hence skills assessment, tailored training and validation and recognition.

- **'You have skills' (AT):** The Austrian initiative 'Du kannst was' ('You have skills') is a project initiated by the Austrian social partners, which targets low-skilled workers and validates competences acquired in informal and non-formal learning contexts. 'Du kannst was' leads to an 'Apprenticeship certificate or diploma' (the

certificate of successful completion of the final apprenticeship examination), in a two-step examination process. After an initial counselling session, beneficiaries participate in three workshops, during which - guided by qualified trainers - they create competence portfolios with evidence files (**Step 1**). These documents are then taken into consideration by the Apprenticeship Office of the Economic Chamber (i.e. the awarding body for apprenticeship certificates in Austria), which evaluates and further processes the cases: in a first 'Competence Check' the existing competences are evaluated, and the missing competences can be further acquired in internships or specialised courses (**Step 2**). After that, a second and final 'Competence Check' takes place, which constitutes the second part of the final apprenticeship examination, which focusses mainly on the competences, which were lacking during the first 'check'. An apprenticeship diploma is awarded which is equal to the diploma acquired through the regular pathway (**Step 3**).

- **Regional mapping of low skilled workers in the health care sector and their professionalization needs (EFHA), FR:** The sectoral organisation ANFH in France started in 2014 to identify the skills or professionalization needs of low-skilled workers in public hospitals (care homes etc.) in the French PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur)-region. This concerns 28 different low-skilled occupations with low requirements, ranging from cleaners to concierge/caretaker. The objective is to quantify the number of workers in need of training to make sure the future skills demand in the sector is covered. The idea is also to encourage workers to undertake training to progress professionally. The auditing is done based on the identification of skills needs by the worker or management (because the worker has already made a request for a refresher training course; or because management has identified problems the worker has in performing the job; or because management has identified signs that the worker might face difficulties in performing the job in the future). Only basic skills are covered by the skills audit: verbal skills (French language), numeracy and literacy. Pathways for professionalization are then proposed for each worker and assessed by management (**Step 1**). Two professionalization options are available: strengthening of basic skills, or a training course leading to upskilling. (**Step 2**). If the latter is offered, there are three types of professionalization pathways: entry level, occupational and occupational mobility. The training is carried out by sector-specific training providers and is supported by the employer. In addition, beneficiaries are referred to validation systems. The courses all lead to certification/qualification, and participants receive a VAE (Validation des Acquis de l'Experience) certificate to document their skills from NFIL (**Step 3**). Not in all cases does the training lead to an EQF level 3 or 4 qualification. Some training only leads to partial qualifications or specific modules that nevertheless open up new opportunities.
- **Construction Skills Certification scheme (IE):** CSCS supports the training, assessment, certification and registration of unskilled workers in the construction and quarrying sector. The aim of the CSCS is to enable participants to prove that they have the skills and knowledge that are associated with their occupations in the construction sector. Workers who successfully complete a CSCS training and assessment programme, are awarded QQI Certification and are issued with a CSCS Registration Card. CSCS can be taken at various skills levels. A specific training and certification scheme for low-skilled/low-qualified workers exists. Unskilled workers take a test (**Step 1**) and are subsequently admitted to a training course suitable to their level of skills (**Step 2**). Upon completion of the training, they are awarded the CSCS Registration Card, which specifies their level of proficiency (**Step 3**).
- **The Maltese Construction Industry Skills Card (CISC)** is a scheme with similar objectives than the Irish example. The trades included in the scheme are currently plumbers (and assistant plumbers), plasterers (and assistant plasterers), tile layers

(and assistant tile layers) and assistant electricians¹⁶. Workers with no formal qualifications or those who can have their skills gained through NFIL validated can take part in this initiative and the idea is to support their integration into the construction sector. Obtaining a CSIC is compulsory for anyone working in the construction industry. Companies (often in partnership with providers) also use the initiative for their workforce to ensure their skills (including knowledge of health and safety regulations) comply with national standards. As such CSIC was designed to provide reassurance to consumers that the service being received is provided by qualified trade persons. CSIC also helps to tackle undeclared work in the sector.

The PES are responsible for implementing the CISC on behalf of the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) in Malta: it consists of an assessment of skills (**Step 1**). If the outcomes of the assessment are successful, and a worker has all the necessary knowledge, skills and competences, s/he can directly move on to validation of non-formal and informal learning, and receive their CISC (**Step 3**). In cases where the assessment shows that the worker does not yet have all the necessary skills for a CISC, they are referred to formal training delivered by a training service provider (**Step 2**). The CISC is then awarded upon completion of the training course (**Step 3**).

The examples also show that sectoral organisations play a large role in the upskilling of low-skilled adults. Three of the four examples above are put in place in sectors with traditionally high numbers of unqualified workers: the construction sector and the health care sector. Sectoral organisations have put initiatives in place that help individuals that do not hold a qualification, but have skills from work experience, to acquire a diploma or a qualification through training and validation.

The fourth example from Austria is organised by the social partners. To ensure that the beneficiaries have good prospects of finding a job, 'Du kannst was' is demand-oriented: Depending on the regional province, 'Du kannst was' is only available for a limited number of apprenticeship qualifications with a relatively high number of unskilled workers, such as baker, retail salesperson, cook or carpenter. The specific offer depends on the demand in the regional province and currently ranges from 3 to 19 apprenticeship qualifications per province.

These examples provide ideas for countries or regions that have particular sectoral skills deficits or upskilling needs, and may be considering Upskilling Pathways as a way to remedy this. Many of the methodologies would appear to be transferrable to other sectors.

Two beneficiary stories below show how individuals can benefit from the Austrian 'You have skills' initiative.

Petra is 28 years old, has three children and lives in Austria. She used to be enrolled in dual vocational education for the profession of 'cook' and finished all three years of training in the company and in the vocational school for apprentices, but became pregnant with her first child before she could take the final apprenticeship examination. In between her pregnancies she took up work as an unskilled factory worker, taking opposite shifts with her husband, to add to family income. Now, 9 years later, her youngest child is in kindergarten, and she finally has time to focus on her career again.

She went to a counselling service offered by a local adult learning centre for women, where she was introduced to the initiative 'Du kannst was!', which appealed to her due to its individualised approach and low cost. She is determined to complete her

¹⁶ 'Government response to the consultation of: Towards A Socio-Responsible Construction Industry. The Concept of Introducing 'Skill Cards' in the Construction Industry in Malta.' Ministry for Social Dialogue and Consumer Affairs, December 2015. Additional information provided by Jobsplus (14/12/2017).

education and pass the final apprenticeship examination so that she can work in her originally chosen profession.

Inge is 53 years old. For the past 10 years she has worked as a kitchen help in a home for elderly people in Austria. Her new boss supported her, entrusting her with more responsible tasks and encouraging her to investigate further training measures and 'make more out of herself'. Since her kids had moved out of the house, she finally had the time to invest in further training, and was actually thinking about doing a regular 'basic training' for cooks at the CVET institute of the Chamber of Economy.

As this class was very expensive, she went to the Chamber of Labour to find out about possibilities to receive funding. This is where she was informed about the possibilities of 'Du kannst was!', and she decided to sign up for this initiative instead. She likes the way 'Du kannst was!' is designed, as it seems 'not too much' besides a regular job, but it still feels like a very long way and a lot of extra work. She is also afraid she might struggle with studying for the exam, but is glad that she will receive personalised support to help her. Her objective is to enlarge her professional opportunities. Even though her boss did not specifically promise her a better position, she feels that once she has the Apprenticeship Certificate, it will be easier to look for jobs in other organisations or restaurants too.

Source: ICF research

3.2.5 Skills audits covering steps 1 and 3 of UP

Two of the identified examples constitute a validation initiative rather than an Upskilling Pathway. The skills assessment directly leads to validation (or failure): if the assessment is unsuccessful, there are no pathways foreseen that would allow for the individual to fill the gaps through tailored training. The individual can continue working as an unskilled worker, or take up formal training through regular training pathways. In the context of UP implementation, the latter could be made more flexible and tailored to respond to the training needs identified in step 1. For example, in the following example, VDAB and SYNTRA are providers as well as responsible for the assessment and are, therefore, well placed to develop synergies. It is important that this type of offer is open to further progression and does not end with new bottlenecks or barriers, e.g. by linking the outcomes to NQFs.

However these examples can be seen as covering two out of the three steps of UP and are an offer specifically designed to upskill low-qualified workers by helping them to acquire a qualification), hence they are worthwhile mentioning here. Both examples are from Belgium (French-speaking and Dutch speaking community).¹⁷

- **Certificate of experience (BE-nl):** A 'Certificate of Experience' is offered by Belgian-nl PES and employer organisations (VDAB, SYNTRA). In a conversation and a practical test, job seekers can demonstrate that they master job-specific skills (**Step 1**). If the candidate passes, s/he will receive a 'Certificate of Experience', stating which skills were demonstrated in relation to a described occupational profile (**Step 3**). The Certificate of Experience enables a jobseeker to prove that s/he is qualified for vacancies on the labour market, even if they have no official diploma. In the Ervaringsbewijs (BE-nl) the Certificate of Experience provided is highly recognised by employers as employers have helped to develop the CoE-process defining the professional profiles.
- **Validation at the workplace (BE-fr):** Skills validation is an initiative that was developed within the validation framework that has been in place since 2003 in French-speaking Belgium. The national framework in place in the continuing

¹⁷ It should be noted that other countries offer this type of validation initiative as well. Examples can be found in the Cedefop [Inventory for the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#). These two examples were selected to study the method of skills assessment that is applied.

vocational education and training (CVET) sector was initially developed in the context of lifelong learning policies, targeting in priority individuals who did not hold any formal qualifications. Skills validation (validation des compétences) aims at recognising professional knowledge and know-how that has been acquired outside of typical training channels (hence from non-formal and informal learning). The process leads to the issuing of a Skills Certificate that is recognised by public authorities in French-speaking Belgium. Since 2013, skills validation is no longer solely an individual initiative, but can also now be a collective process for employees within a company. Skills validation in companies (validation en entreprise) can take place when there is agreement between social partners about the feasibility, conditions and added value of validating the skills of a group of employees within a specific company. Employees are then assessed in their familiar environment, carrying out their usual work tasks (**Step 1**). When the assessment is successful, they receive a certification (**Step 3**).

The examples of a beneficiaries' story below show how low-skilled workers in BE-fr can benefit from validation at the work place.

Hélène is 50 years old and has been working in the food industry sector for more about 30 years. After working in catering for several years, she joined her current employer 25 years ago as a temporary worker. Shortly after she signed a long-term contract and became production operator. Over the years Hélène took part in a number of in-company training schemes but she did not hold any qualifications.

Since joining the company her objective had always been to progress in the company and she took part in every training opportunity the company offered. When the company provided its employees with the opportunity to take part in collective skills validation, she was first scared of the idea of "sitting for an exam": "when I sit for an exam I tend to panic very quickly. But I thought, I won't be the only one that does it. And I like challenges. Being afraid is a good sign. [...] I am very rigorous in my job and I believe I am very professional. So I thought I could do it, despite the stress".

What motivated Hélène was the idea of obtaining an official certificate that would recognise the skills she acquired over all those years.

The evaluators tested and observed her during her daily work. Afterwards they had a long discussion about the way the test unfolded, what went well and what went less well. What she found rewarding was to discuss her strong points with them. "They told me half-jokingly that I should receive a distinction for the hygiene and safety aspect. I already knew that I attached a lot of importance to these aspects, but this time it was people from outside the company who said it."

For her the added value of undertaking the test on-site is beyond doubt: the evaluators can be sure that they are observing and assessing tasks that correspond to the skills underpinning the occupation in a real life context: "The work I was doing, my reactions on the machine, it was all real. I had to think very quickly because we work on a chain and everything I do impact my colleagues at the other hand of the chain. And being aware of the impact of one's work on the work of the colleagues is a key element of being a production operator. It's a collective work".

Hélène believes that reproducing such tasks in a validation centre would be very difficult, so the outcomes of the tests would be less realistic and would not reflect what a person can really do under real-life conditions. However, successful candidates do have the possibility to continue their learning in the adult education sector.

Source: ICF research

3.3 Types of skills covered and methodologies used

The 14 examples described in this note assess different types of skills:

- **6 out of 14 examples focus on occupational skills** which are assessed in view of entering a training course, or in view of receiving a certification (Validation in companies, Certificate of experience, Realkompetencevurdering, Competence-based VET in FI, CSCS, CISC). In all six cases, the process leads either directly to certification, or admission to a training pathway that will eventually lead to acquiring a qualification.
- **3 out of 14 examples assess a broad range of skills** incl. occupational skills, transversal skills and/or personal aptitudes, and basic skills (You have skills, Min Competencemappe, Meritportfolj). The 'You have skills' example leads to an apprenticeship diploma, while in the other cases participants receive a personal portfolio with information about their skills.
- **3 out of 14 examples focus on basic skills** (Move on UP, PIAAC online tool, EFHA). 'Move on UP' combines this with a psychometric test. These three tools lead to detailed information about a persons' basic skills and personality traits (scorecards etc.). Yet this information is mostly used by the guidance counsellor, and is shared strategically with the participant: E.g. only to the extent necessary to help them decide on the next steps, or in a way that boosts their confidence rather than undermines it.
- **2 out of 14 examples focus on transversal skills and/or personal interests and aptitudes** (beroeopenfinder and My Skills, My Future). Both examples are online tools that result in a 'diagnosis' that the beneficiary can use at their own discretion. Beroepenfinder also directly leads to information about vacancies in the suggested line of work.

As to methodologies, most of the initiatives combine forms of self-assessments (online tools and paper-based self-assessment questionnaires) with an assessment by a third party. The methods used include interviews, written tests as well as practical tests based on work tasks and work trials (in the case of BE-fr, even under real-life conditions at the beneficiaries' work place)

It has already been described in section 3.2 that those initiatives that cover only the first step of UP usually use online-self assessment tools. In a few cases, persons that are not comfortable with these types of tests or have low IT skills can take the test together with a guidance counsellor, and receive additional support. In other cases this is not foreseen.

Where Skills audits cover more than the first step of UP, they are in general carried out in a supervised environment (in test centres, or at the work place, see examples in previous sections). An overall tendency to focus on practical tests rather than on written tests can be observed. This seems appropriate given the UP' target groups' low level of literacy/IT skills. Where written or IT tests are being used, assessors may use those to test a persons' professional skills as well as their IT and verbal/writing skills.

The majority of skills audits analysed in this note includes validation of learning outcomes from prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning - either in view of tailoring training, or in view of issuing a certificate. Consequently there is a prevalence of standard-driven, 'objective' approaches. Hence the tests are carried out to assess whether a candidate's skills comply with certain professional or occupational standards, or job requirements.

The methodologies used to assess professional skills include:

- In the project "**Du kannst was!**" (AT) methodologies used include guided self-assessment, interviews, observations and simulations. Three initial workshops are dedicated to guided self-evaluation. Professionals help participants with the self-evaluation competence portfolio on the choice about the level of competences, terminology etc. Evidence is also gathered from former employers of participants and a final 'Competence Check' is carried out following the regular apprenticeship examination' method with observations and work simulations.

- In the **Realkompetencevurdering** (validation of prior learning in VET) (DK) a mixture of methods is used, including self-assessment, individual interviews, group interviews, oral and written tests, practical tests (observation, simulation etc.). The assessment is done in VET centres. The methods are not prescribed, they are designed by VET centres according to what is deemed most appropriate given the assessed profession: e.g. where skills can be assessed by the quality of a product (e.g. carpenters, butchers, cooks etc.), a different methodology will be chosen than in cases where more service-oriented skills are required. This also means that an exam related to the same profession can be conducted in different ways, depending on the centre.
- Persons applying for a Maltese **Construction Industry Skills Card** go through four distinct stages: The first stage of assessment consists of a portfolio, which candidates bring in with them to illustrate the experience they have gained in whichever field of construction they have worked. The assessment board then decides whether this portfolio sufficiently demonstrates that they do have at least three years' experience in the trade. If so, they progress to the second stage of assessment, which consists of an interview. The interview has a set number of questions, which will be asked to each candidate to ensure consistency across the application process. Some of the questions will cover health and safety, which cover all national occupational standards. Additionally, the interview assesses the communication skills of the interviewee. The third stage is a written assessment. If the individual is illiterate, the questions are read out to them or the assessment is conducted through interview format. The fourth stage is a practical assessment, which consists of a simulation of the type of work situation for which the individual is being assessed for. Once these stages have been completed successfully, the contractor tasked with the assessment issues the individual with a slip that indicates that they have completed each assessment stage successfully and are eligible for a CISC; which is then issued by the competent institution.
- In Belgium-fr, companies take part in validation initiatives and allow for **validation at the work place**. For low-skilled workers, this has the advantage that the skills assessment related to work tasks can be carried out in their familiar environment, using the same tools they use every day at work. This may help to lower the threshold of participation for those groups of low-skilled that suffer from test anxiety. The approach is based on a close partnership between the company and a validation centre accredited to validate skills for specific occupations. The validation centre provides the practitioners who will assess the employees' skills through a skills audit. Validation centres themselves are established training providers, which are accredited by the Consortium. Evaluators are trainers, teachers or experienced professionals. Observers are professionals experienced in the relevant occupation.

The three initiatives that assess basic skills all use distinctly different methodologies.

- To assess basic skills of long-term unemployed, Italian PES have tested an **Online self-assessment tool based on the PIAAC survey**¹⁸. With the support of the European Commission (DG Employment), the OECD developed and promoted a self-assessment tool called Educational & Skills Online Assessment, (in Italian PIAAC - Formazione & Competenze Online) for assessing adults' key competences necessary for facing the challenges of the 21st Century. An experimentation of the PIAAC Online was launched in Italy at the beginning of

¹⁸ The PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) is a Programme conceived by the OECD within the framework of which a survey on adults' skills is conducted in a wide number of countries around the world, including EU Member States. The first round of the survey took place in Italy between September 2011 and March 2012, involving around 12.000 adults.

April 2017 and was concluded in the first semester 2018. A total of 180 PES and 4.600 beneficiaries were involved throughout the experimentation phase. However, this methodology could be used more extensively as part of Upskilling Pathways, to extend assessment to other groups

PIAAC Educational & Skills Online Assessment (IT):

The *PIAAC Online* self-assessment tool is based on three interconnected elements: 1) the Questionnaire, 2) the Cognitive Tests Module (*modulo delle prove cognitive*), 3) the Non-Cognitive Tests Module (*modulo delle prove non cognitive*) around which the *PIAAC – Formazione & Competenze Online* is articulated.

The **Questionnaire** is the starting point of the self-assessment path, and it has a twofold aim: the one of gathering general data on the beneficiary (e.g. sex, age, educational qualification, language skills, occupational status), and the one of addressing the beneficiaries to the cognitive or non-cognitive tests.

The **Cognitive Tests Module** is the second step of the self-assessment, and it contains some tests allowing to understand the level of competences possessed by the beneficiary. The competences taken into account are the following:

- *Literacy* (understood as the competence for accessing, understanding, interpreting, analysing and communicating complex information, and use it for facing and managing problems in professional and daily life situations)
- *Numeracy* (understood as the competence for accessing, understanding, interpreting, analysing, facing and managing mathematical problems in professional and daily life contexts)
- *Problem solving in technology-rich environments* (understood as the competence needed for using digital technology and communication tools and networks in order to solve problems and perform complex operations).

The questions included in the test concern the understanding of texts, short documents, graphs, according to an increasing difficulty level (typical of adaptive tests), and are aimed at assessing the possession of cognitive competences necessary for effectively acting in working and daily life contexts. Some explanation and examples relating to professional and personal life are provided in order to allow the beneficiary understanding how to undertake the test.

A further goal of this test is not only to assess the computer literacy of the beneficiary in itself, but also to get a view of his/her capacity of acting in a technology-rich environment for solving problems that each adult individual has to face when using digital technologies.

The **Non-Cognitive Tests Module** can be used only after the Cognitive Tests Module or after having answered the Questionnaire, depending on the typology of the PIAAC Online administered (within the framework of the experimentation, the complete set of tests is administered). Generally speaking, the beneficiary has the possibility of completing one or more of the three sections composing the module, which are:

- *Skills Use*: here the items of the PIAAC survey are used to assess the specific competences which are used by the beneficiary in his/her working and daily life, and are considered as relevant elements for the acquisition of additional competences influencing individual life. The questions of this section concern competences relating to reading, writing, numeracy and ICT.
- *Career Interest and Intentionality*: this section concerns the preferences of the individual in relation to working activities and environments, and the level of pro-activeness he/she demonstrates in searching new professional and career opportunities and vocational training)
- *Subjective well-being and health*: this section examines the main components of the personal well-being: the level of satisfaction in relation to the

beneficiary's own life, positive affect, negative affect, along with the individual perception of his/her health, and some well-being indicators).

The information included in the skills audit results is twofold. The results of the cognitive tests provide a numerical score structured per levels and based on the beneficiary's competences (literacy, numeracy and problem-solving capacity in technology-rich environments). Those scorings are based on a reference scale used for the PIAAC international index, and thus allowing comparisons among the scores obtained. The results report includes a descriptive section where the strengths and the weaknesses relating to the assessed competences are highlighted. As for the Non-Cognitive Competences Module, the results of the tests are gathered in a qualitative Score Report.

- The **French EFHA** project which assesses basic skills of low-skilled workers in the health care sector uses a 'CléA certificate' as the reference framework for the assessment, which is a well-known standard in France. The 'CléA certificate' is based on 108 evaluation criteria across 7 topic areas, and is subjected to strict quality control. The providers who carry out the skills audits must be accredited to deliver CléA-based skills audit certificates and to advise on further training. Check this, I have the feeling that CLEA certificates are not connected to the formal system.
- The **Move On Up project** from the UK undertakes two surveys with its beneficiaries. The first survey serves to examine attitudes, behaviour, previous experiences, and motivation. The second (follow-up) survey examines how this may have changed over time. In addition to these two surveys, the beneficiaries undergo one-to-one interviews with advisers and counsellors reviewing their educational attainment level (basic skills), previous work experience, socio-professional capital (connections with employers, networking abilities etc.) and any other relevant information on their background. These face-to-face interviews where test results and past experiences are discussed serve to identify the beneficiaries' individual strengths and areas for improvement (similarly to one-to-one interviews with PES counsellors). Although this project currently targets young black NEETS, it could be adapted as part of implementing Upskilling Pathways and extended to older cohorts.

4 Conclusions

This section presents emerging conclusions regarding the use of skills audits for the target group of the 2016 Council Recommendation 'Upskilling Pathways'. It also looks at how far the current practice of skills audits responds to the objectives of skills audits as stipulated in the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

4.1 Emerging conclusions

As part of the data collection related to the study 'Mapping Skills audits in and across EU Member States' a couple of examples were collected and analysed that address low-skilled adults. The study looked at a selection of skills audits which represent a diversity of target groups and approaches. Consequently, the sample is not representative and no quantitative analysis can be undertaken. Moreover, the study methodology does not allow for statements about whether or not the offer for low-skilled target group is sufficient in and across the 16 Member States included in the study.

14 examples of skills audits that state they target low-skilled adults (some of them not exclusively) have been analysed in more detail. Bearing in mind the small sample and the methodological constraints, the following conclusions emerge:

- The target group of low-skilled skills adults (as defined by the UP recommendation) is not in the specific focus of policies and programmes related to skills audits in any of the 16 Member States covered by the study.
- However, many countries have legal frameworks or policy frameworks in place that promote skills audits as a useful tool to support and accelerate the process of achieving a qualification (in the context of validation policies and initiatives), or securing a job (in the context of modernising the PES service offer). The UP target groups are not explicitly in the focus of these frameworks.
- The existence of a universal legal right for all is not sufficient to support low-skilled adults. Targeted methods and specific support are needed. Yet these policies provide a useful framework that should be better exploited in view of the needs of low-skilled adults.
- Specific skills audits are on offer for at-risk groups that may include low-skilled adults (NEET, long-term unemployed, migrants etc.). The UP target groups can benefit from these practices. However, efforts to reach out to low-skilled adults with gaps in basic skills seem not always sufficient, and the methods used during the skills assessment are not necessarily tailored to these groups.
- Sectoral organisations seem to play a large role in promoting the upskilling of low-skilled adults. Especially sectors with traditionally high numbers of unqualified workers like the construction sector and the health care sector have already put in place large-scale initiatives that help individuals that do not hold a qualification, but have skills from work experience, to acquire a diploma or a qualification through training and validation.
- More initiatives were found that help low-qualified persons (e.g. individuals who work in a field where they have no qualification) rather than low-skilled people with gaps in basic skills.
- In the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation it is stated that Skills Assessments (=skills audits) are the first step on an Upskilling Pathway. Yet, the reality is more complex and many of the examples analysed are found to go further. Some skills audits cover two steps (skills assessment and training), while others cover all three steps and hence constitute an Upskilling Pathway in their own right.
- Those skills audits that are restricted to step one often constitute online self-assessment tests. While low-skilled adults are a target group of these approaches, it can be doubted that persons with low literacy and IT tests are comfortable taking such tests alone. Moreover, the expected activating effect might be higher for persons with greater self-confidence and more and better resources to act upon the results of the assessment.

- There are skills audits that cover step one and two, meaning the skills audit is carried out in view of tailoring a training pathway. This can be done by recognising prior learning: when it has been established through the assessment, for example, that they already have some of the competences required, they can receive credit or exemptions, and the training period is shortened. Yet people with a difficult learning history can find it challenging that they have less time to finalise the training than other, 'regular' students. They may appreciate if they can choose freely between the shortened pathway and the regular trajectory.
- The majority of initiatives targeting low-skilled adults focus on professional (vocational) skills, and aim to support low-qualified person to achieve a qualification.
- Not many of the identified examples focus on basic skills, or provide adequate support to people with low numeracy, literacy and IT skills during the assessment. Some of those few examples that do assess basic skills use rather comprehensive and 'scientific' methods (e.g. PIAAC Online tool) which show the results in form of scoreboards etc. Hence the results of the test are mostly used by the guidance counsellor, and are shared only partially and strategically with the participant. Attention needs to be given to ensuring that the beneficiaries see the added value of taking such a comprehensive test.
- There seems to be a need for methods that present the outcomes of skills audits in a manner that is helpful for the UP target group. E.g. personal portfolios and written analyses need to be designed in a way that is adequate for a group of people with low literacy skills.
- Some initiatives have already developed interesting assessment methods (e.g. validation at the work place) that serve the need of persons with test anxiety and experience of failure in a learning environment. These approaches should be shared and discussed more broadly, e.g. in national or transnational mutual learning initiatives. Moreover, there might be interesting approaches developed in the context of migrants and refugees that focus on observation and work trials and may serve as inspiration when designing methods for low-skilled adults.
- A number of initiatives supporting low-qualified adults in acquiring a qualification through validation were identified. Yet the sample is small and not representative, hence it cannot be concluded that this means those initiatives are available on a broad scale. Nevertheless, they have the potential to be built on as part of the wider plans for introducing UP.
- The availability of validation (Step 3) depends on national legislation and is not yet ensured in all countries.

4.2 Compliance of skills audits for low-skilled adults with the objectives stated in the UP Recommendation

As mentioned in Section 2, 'Skills Assessments' are promoted as a specific step of Upskilling Pathways. The UP Recommendation lists several objectives of skills assessments. Based on the analysis of a small, not representative sample of skills audit initiatives for the DG EMPL mapping study, it can be stated that the current practice complies to a high level with these objectives.

It should also be noted that most of the skills audits contribute to more than one step of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. This means that in practice, skills audits are not restricted to Step 1, Skills Assessment, but can already include Step 2, tailored training and Step 3, validation as an integral part of the measure.

The table below gives an overview.

Table 1. Compliance of skills audits for low-skilled adults with objectives of UP Recommendation

Objective of skills audits	Current practice
Carry out an initial assessment of an individual's skills already acquired	The examples analysed fulfil this objective. Yet many examples focus on occupational/vocational skills, not on basic skills, and in this respect they promote access to upskilling pathways which provide them with the opportunity, according to their individual needs, to part (b) of the Recommendation: acquire a wider set of skills, knowledge and competences, relevant for the labour market and active participation in society,... by making progress towards a qualification at EQF level 3 or 4.
Make them visible through a document/portfolio that states the skills of the individual, ideally in relation to professional or educational standards	<p>The examples analysed lead to different types of results. Those that cover only step 1 do indeed provide the beneficiary with a document or portfolio that states the outcomes. Others include step 2, tailored training, and lead to a qualification. Others lead to directly to step 3, validation (some of them do not include step 2). The use of occupational or sectoral standards is common among those skills audits that cover more than one step.</p> <p>As regards basic skills, the methods used often result in comprehensive test results that are used by the counsellor rather than the beneficiary. There seems to be a need to develop portfolios documenting the outcomes from skills audits that low skilled adults can use at their own discretion.</p>
Identify any skills deficits in relation to these standards	<p>As stated above, where skills audits are directly followed by training, or are integrated in or validation arrangements, the use of professional/educational standards is common and is also applied to identify deficits and training needs.</p> <p>Where basic skills are tested, standards are also used (PIAAC, CLEA etc.).</p>
Tailor the required training to the needs of the individual, ensuring it ultimately leads to an EQF level 3 or 4 qualification	In some cases the skills audits grant access to the national Education & Training (VET) system, where individuals can acquire an EQF level 3 or 4 qualification. Further examples constitute validation arrangements which also lead to acquiring a qualification.
Recommend a process of validation of NFIL suited to the needs of the individual, to	A few examples for validation were identified, yet the availability of validation depends on national legislation and is not

Objective of skills audits	Current practice
ensure all prior learning outcomes are acknowledged.	yet ensured on a broad scale in all countries.

Hence, in practice, where skills audits are offered to the target group of low-skilled adults, the three steps are strongly interlinked, and often lead to outputs that constitute valuable currency on the labour market. However, in general, the UP target groups are not yet well covered. Existing policies and frameworks should be better exploited to serve low-skilled adults, especially in terms of outreach activities and methods. While offers for low-qualified persons with skills from work experience can be identified, individuals with gaps in basic skills, and the economically inactive would benefit from better access to such measures.

It is clear from what we have examined that more and better tailored tools for assessing basic skills (literacy, numeracy and digital skills) will be required, if Upskilling Pathways implementation is to be successful. Lessons can be learned from the few existing tools, but also from those being developed to assess the skills of migrants and refugees, or young people leaving education and training early.

The cases discussed in this paper, even when not originally targeted to low-skilled or low-qualified adults, serve as examples that can be emulated or adapted for use in addressing low-skilled adults. Some can also be adapted for other sectors or Member States, or for other targets groups. For example the test application of the PIAAC online tool that we have seen used by PES in Italy may have benefits beyond the group of long-term unemployed workers who currently take part in the pilot phase.

Annexes

Annex 1 Skills audits initiatives targeting low-skilled adults

The table below gives an overview on the main characteristics of the initiatives that are open to low-skilled/low-qualified adults. It should be noted that some of the initiatives have a broad target group that includes low-skilled/low-qualified adults, while others were specifically designed for that group.

Annex Table 1: Examples of skills audits for low-skilled adults researched for the DG EMPL study

No	Name of initiative	Implementation level	Country	Target group	Provider	Purpose of initiative and skills covered
1	Project "Du kannst was!" ('You have skills')	Project, rooted in the national validation policy framework	AT	Low qualified, low skilled (including, but not restricted to people with literacy/ numeracy gaps)	Career IAG (Chambers, Adult learning providers)	The initiative maps the skills/ competences of a person against the requirements of a job/ profession. A document/certificate is issued which describes what skills they have and how they can be used in the Labour Market. The initiative covers a broad range of skills including transversal skills and basic skills.
2	Validation at the workplace	Policy (legal right for all citizens)	BE-fr	Low qualified workers	Companies, with the support of the Consortium in charge of skills validation	Skills validation (validation des compétences) takes place at the work place and aims at recognising the professional knowledge and know-how acquired outside of formal education, so that low-qualified workers in companies gain a qualification. The initiative focuses on professional skills.
3	Ervaringsbewijs (Certificate of Experience)	Part of the offer related to the validation policy framework	BE-nl	The initiative is open to all, with a focus on low-skilled/low-qualified unemployed	PES and specific test centres	A service offered by PES and others for validation of non-formal and informal learning for workers, unemployed, students and others. Skills assessment is made to map the skills/competences of a person against specific job requirements in a company, and provide advice about jobs for which their profile is suitable. The initiative focuses on professional skills.

No	Name of initiative	Implementation level	Country	Target group	Provider	Purpose of initiative and skills covered
4	Min competence-mappe	Part of the offer related to the validation policy framework	DK	Jobseekers and adults wanting to re-enter formal education and training	Ministry-led	<p>Tool for self-assessment of skills and competences, as a basis to decide on the right training.</p> <p>Broad definition of skills, including work experiences, transversal skills and skills from volunteering</p>
5	Real-kompetence-vurdering (validation of prior learning in VET)	Part of the offer related to the validation policy framework	DK	All Danish learners over 25 (and many below that age) enrolling in IVET and who do not come straight from lower secondary school	Vocational schools	<p>Identifying relevant prior learning and recognising this in relation to IVET-courses and programmes</p> <p>The initiative focuses on professional skills in relation to a vocational course.</p>
6	Recognition and validation of prior learning in the Competence based VET system	Feature of the Finnish VET system	FI	VET learners	All VET providers	<p>In Finnish VET, all prior learning is recognised as part of a VET qualification. The system covers all forms of NFIL, as well as learning from abroad.</p> <p>The initiative focuses on professional skills in relation to vocational courses.</p>
7	EFHA	Sectoral project	FR	Employees in the health care sector (hospitals), low-skilled	Sectoral initiative implemented by ANFH	<p>ANFH developed a skills audit tool enabling each employer to collect data about their low-skilled staff, and enable facilitate the offer tailored training and validation.</p> <p>The initiative focuses on basic skills (literacy, numeracy, IT skills)</p>
8	Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS)	Sectoral initiative	IE	Workers in the construction and quarrying sector (several skills levels, incl. low-skilled workers)	Sectoral initiative implemented by SOLAS	<p>Supports the training, assessment, certification and registration of workers in the construction and quarrying sector. A specific training and certification scheme for low-skilled/low-qualified workers exists.</p> <p>The initiative focuses on professional skills</p>

No	Name of initiative	Implementation level	Country	Target group	Provider	Purpose of initiative and skills covered
9	PIAAC experimentation at PES	Project	IT	unemployed (possibly low-skilled)	PES/ANPAL	Implementation and use of PIAAC assessment in ca. 180 Italian PES for 4.500 individuals, to test the level of skills and competences of jobseekers, to decide on the next steps. The initiative focuses on testing basic skills (literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills)
10	Construction Industry Skills Card	Sectoral project, rooted in the national validation policy framework	MT	Workers in the construction sector (low-skilled)	Sectoral initiative	Validating and certifying the competences acquired by workers in the sector. The initiative focuses on professional skills
11	Competence Test (beroepenfinder)	Part of PES procedures	NL	All unemployed persons, incl. long-term unemployed, people with disabilities and unemployed people who are over 50 years	PES	The tests assesses competences and interests. Afterwards clients can use occupations in the occupation finder (www.beroepenvinder.nl). There is also a capacity test to see what level someone can reach in his work/education. Upon taking the test, an Action Plan for further guidance, counselling and/or job search is developed. The test focuses on aptitudes
12	Validering Yrkeskompetensbeämning Meritportfaljen	Part of PES procedures	SE	Long-term unemployed	PES	Development of a portfolio with skills and competences for long-term unemployed, to develop an Action Plan on their next steps Broad definition of skills, including work experiences, transversal skills and skills from volunteering
13	My Skills, My Future	Part of the guidance counselling system	UK	Young people who have left, or are about to leave school with few or no formal	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership	My Skills, My Future is a resource pack aimed at supporting individuals in identifying the skills they have gained from non-formal and informal learning. The test focuses on aptitudes.

No	Name of initiative	Implementation level	Country	Target group	Provider	Purpose of initiative and skills covered
				qualifications, young unemployed, adult returners and the long term unemployed.		
14	Move on Up	Project	UK-EN	Young black men NEET with different skills levels	Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG)	<p>Launched in 2015, its aim is to increase employment rates amongst young black men in London, by funding initiatives that improve the support offered to them and increases their ability to transition successfully into employment. Besides the skills assessment, the initiative also includes skills training with mentoring from employers for young people to improve a range of skills and build character, and one-to-one support focused on the young people's skills, confidence and outlook.</p> <p>The beneficiaries take a psychometric test, and a literacy/numeracy test.</p>

ICF research

Annex 2 References

- European Commission 2015. European Employment Policy Observatory (EEPO): Thematic Review Synthesis: Upskilling unemployed Adults (aged 25-64)
- European Commission 2016: Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, legal text, see: cf. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN)
- European Commission: Upskilling Pathways webpage, see <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224&langId=en>
- European Commission 2016: Communication – A New Skills Agenda for Europe. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15621&langId=en>
- European Commission 2018. Study Report 'Skills Audits in and across the EU Member States' (forthcoming).