

Lifelong learning must engage both the university-educated engineer and the low-skilled worker

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KEY MESSAGES

- Participation in adult education has increased rapidly in Estonia, and the country places among the leading European performers.
- Education spending also reflects the strength of adult education: sustained investment in the education system helps reduce inequalities in participation across Europe.
- With participation in adult learning already high, Estonia must now focus more clearly on improving access and reducing inequality in adult learning.
- Over the past six years, inequalities between social groups have narrowed somewhat. However, adults with higher education and women continue to benefit most from opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills. Adults with lower levels of education, people with reduced work capacity and older men participate in continuing education far less frequently.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the role of the adult learner is increasingly important. People need to learn at different stages of life, and reskilling and

upskilling throughout one's career are increasingly necessary. In 2023 alone, approximately 168,000 people in Estonia reported participating in some

form of learning activity during the four weeks preceding the survey, which illustrates the scale of adult participation in learning.¹

Learning remains essential throughout life, as digitalisation and automation are reshaping the world of work. New sectors and occupations are emerging, while others decline, and career paths have become less linear, with more frequent job changes and varied forms of employment. The education landscape and modes of learning are also evolving: alongside multi-year degree programmes, providers now offer more short courses, micro-credential programmes and modular skill units that allow learners to update their knowledge and competences in shorter, more targeted formats.

Several actors shape the development of adult education. The state sets the framework by establishing the conditions and opportunities for continuous learning. Employers create opportunities to apply skills at work and support employees' competence development in line with organisational needs. Education institutions and training providers design learning opportunities, determining both content (what to learn) and format (how to learn). Adults themselves must be willing and motivated to seek out and use these opportunities. Advancing adult education requires coordinated effort from all stakeholders.

For three decades, Estonian Human Development Reports have examined adult training as a key link between the labour market and education.² Key challenges include the limited availability of jobs that require advanced skills – which partly reduces incentives to participate in adult learning – and limited access to suitable learning opportunities.³ Expanding learning opportunities for adults and reducing inequalities in participation have therefore remained central priorities in Estonian education and labour market policy.

In the following, we assess Estonia's progress as a society that promotes lifelong learning and examine how effectively it has reduced inequalities – in comparison with other countries and within Estonia itself. The ability to involve diverse social groups in skills renewal is essential for enhancing competitiveness – for individuals, for businesses and for Estonian society as a whole.

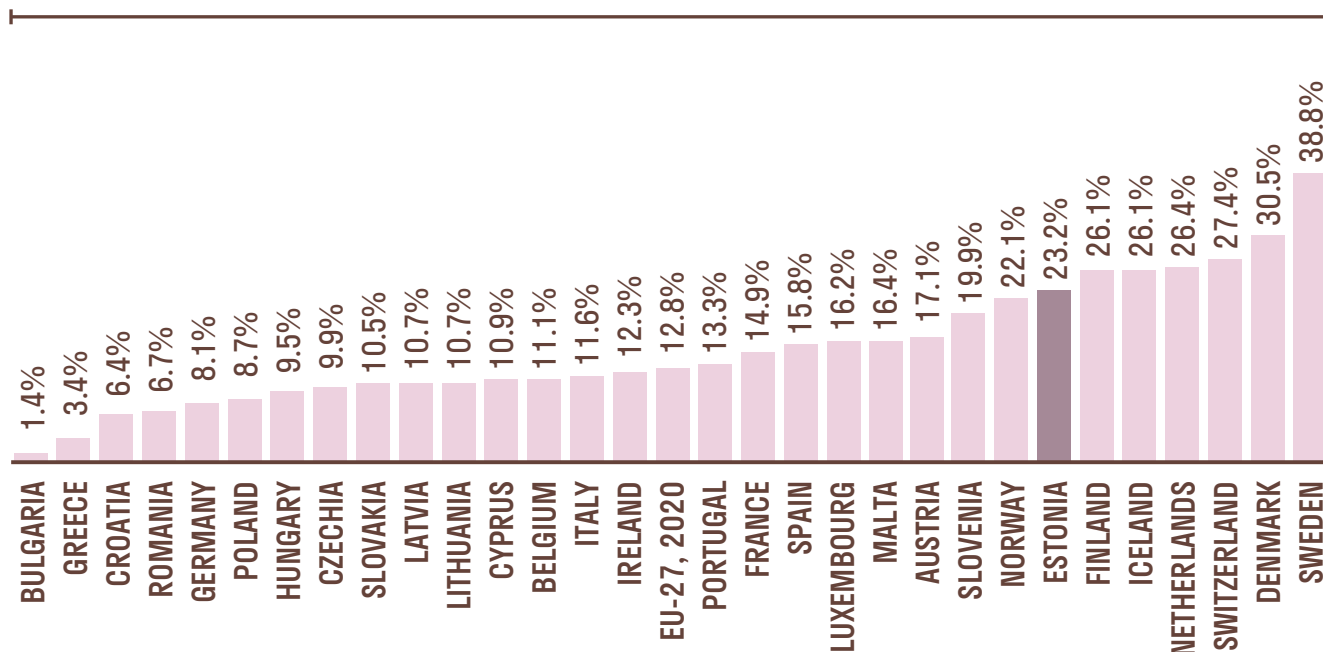
INEQUALITIES BETWEEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IN ADULT LEARNING HAVE WIDENED, BUT ESTONIA REMAINS AMONG THE LEADERS

Adult education holds a prominent place in European Union policy. Access to learning throughout the life course forms one of the core principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Commission that took office in 2025 reinforced this priority by launching the Union of Skills initiative, which stresses the need to guarantee regular opportunities for skills development and renewal.⁴ The Commission's latest objectives in this field are set out in the European Agenda for Adult Learning.⁵ The overarching goal is to raise participation rates in all member states. By 2030, nearly 170 million Europeans aged 25 to 64 – around 60% of the EU's adult population – are expected to take part in learning each year.⁶ To distribute participation more evenly across social groups and reach those who need it most, additional interim targets were set for 2025. These required that 30% of adults with low qualifications and 20% of jobseekers participate in adult education. The targets were ambitious. Meeting them required not only overall growth in participation but also greater convergence between member states – in other words, faster progress in countries with lower participation rates so that they could catch up with those already performing at a high level.

According to Eurostat data for 2023, Estonia ranks seventh among EU countries in adult participation in lifelong learning (Figure 1.5.1). With 23% of adults reporting that they had taken part in learning activities in the four weeks preceding the survey, Estonia's participation rate is well above the EU average (13%), though it remains about 16 percentage points lower than that of Sweden, the highest-performing country with 39%.

Although average participation in adult education has increased across the EU, national trajectories differ considerably. Despite overall growth, disparities between member states remain persistent. The EU as a whole is moving closer to its targets and the average participation rate

Figure 1.5.1 Participation of adults in lifelong learning in EU member states, 2023



SOURCE: Eurostat⁷

NOTE. The figure shows the share of adults aged 25–64 who reported participation in lifelong learning during the four weeks preceding the survey.

has risen, yet inequality between countries has not narrowed. Much of the increase in the EU average stems from a group of faster-advancing countries whose participation rates have grown more quickly than the EU mean. Estonia is among these contributors, with participation rising by nearly four percentage points over six years. The Netherlands and Denmark have been particularly dynamic, starting from a position similar to Estonia's in 2018 but recording even stronger growth. Slovenia has also progressed rapidly, narrowing the gap with Estonia after beginning from a lower baseline. By contrast, in several countries growth has lagged behind the EU average, and in some cases participation has declined. As a result of its faster progress, Estonia has widened its lead over Luxembourg and France. Growth has also slowed in some previously leading countries, such as Switzerland and Finland, allowing Estonia to draw level with them.

Two factors explain why inequality in adult learning participation across Europe has not declined. First, Sweden – already the frontrunner – has

also recorded growth well above the EU average over the past six years, further extending its lead. Second, countries with the lowest participation rates, such as Greece and Bulgaria, have not managed to increase their rates over the same period. As a result, disparities between member states persist. While Sweden continues to pull further ahead, lower-participation countries struggle to close the gap. Meeting the EU's objectives therefore requires targeted support for lagging countries and measures that reduce disparities across member states. In Estonia, where participation is already relatively high and progress towards EU targets has been consistent, there is no longer any need to benchmark against the lowest-performing countries. Sustaining competitiveness instead calls for more ambitious national goals.

One factor that clearly distinguishes leading from lagging countries is public expenditure on education. Across the EU, higher government spending on education as a share of GDP is associated with higher participation in lifelong

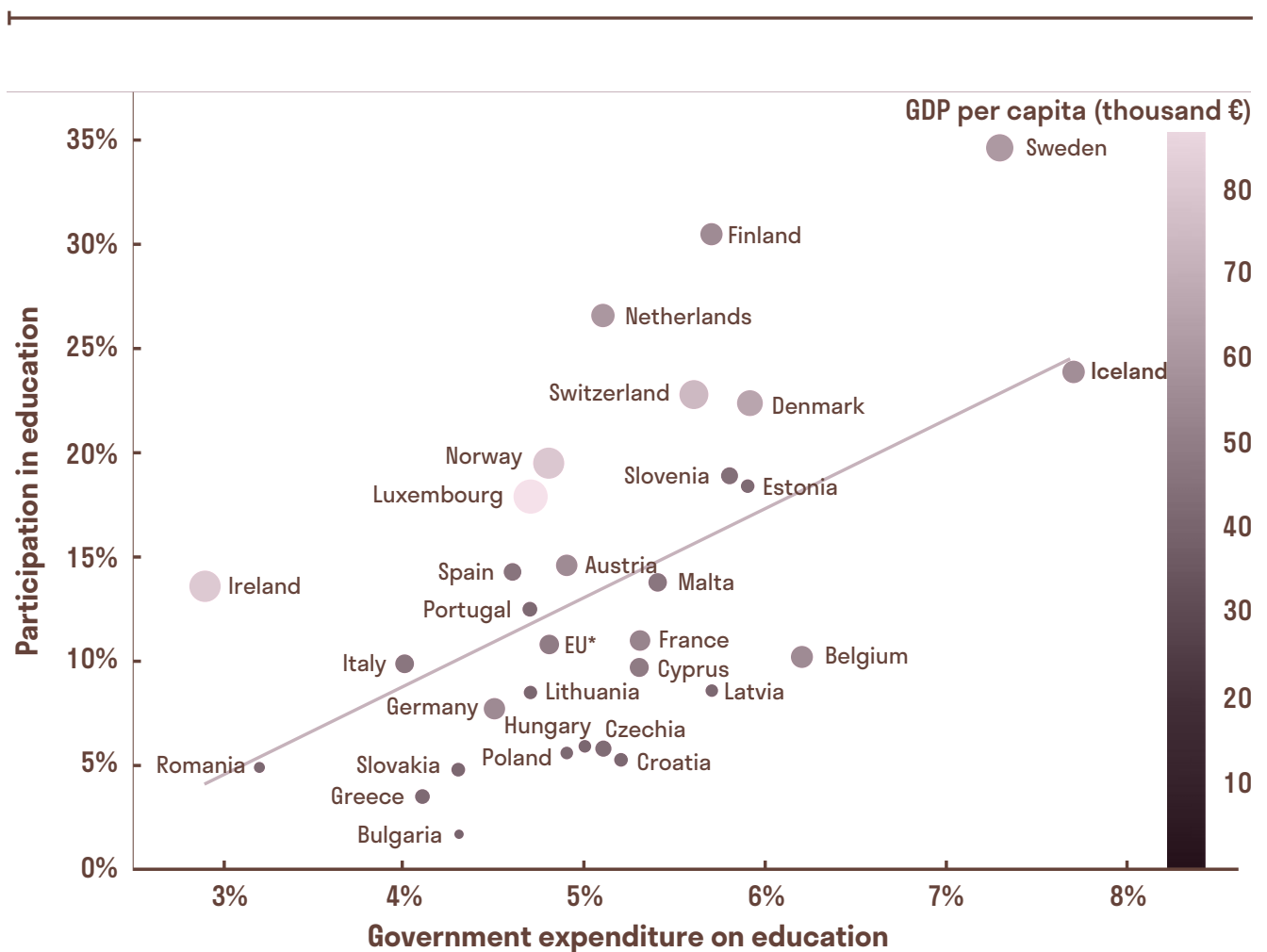
learning. Estonia belongs to the group of countries that combine relatively high education expenditure with high adult participation rates (Figure 1.5.2). Sweden, which has led recent growth in participation, also invests heavily in education, while lower-performing countries, such as Greece and Bulgaria, allocate the smallest shares of GDP to this sector. Although higher overall spending on education does not automatically mean that funding for adult education increases in the same proportion, a solid, well-funded education system also supports adult education.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES ARE NARROWING, BUT ADULT LEARNING REMAINS MORE COMMON AMONG WOMEN

Next, we will examine inequalities in participation in adult education within Estonia, including differences between social groups.

In 2023, 23% of Estonia's population participated in lifelong learning. Over the previous six years, the participation rate rose by seven percentage points, from 16% in 2018. Participation was lowest

Figure 1.5.2 Participation of adults in lifelong learning and public expenditure on education in EU member states, 2021



SOURCE: Eurostat⁸

NOTE. The figure shows the share of adults aged 25–64 who reported participation in lifelong learning during the four weeks preceding the survey. * European Union member states (27); data for 2020.

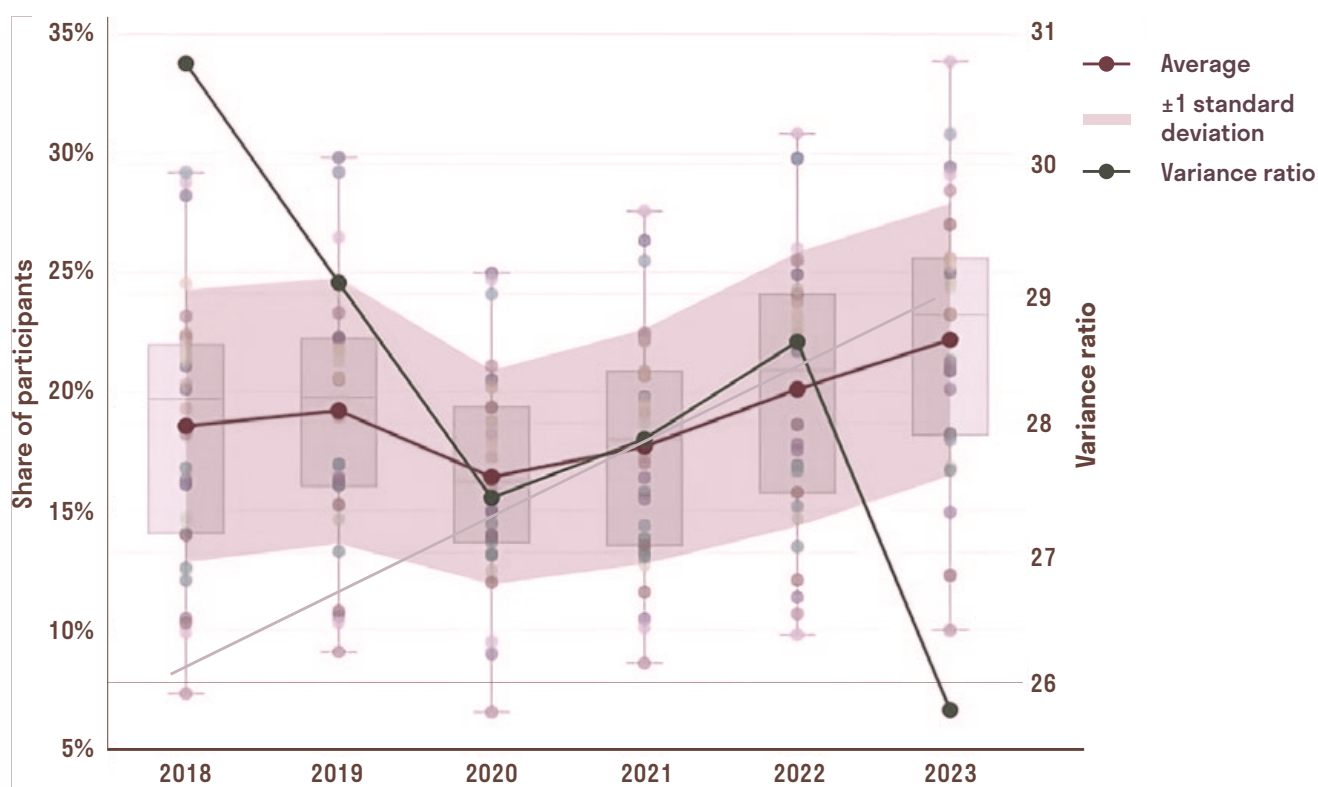
among adults with at most basic education (10%) and highest among those with higher education (34%). Gender differences are pronounced and become more marked at higher levels of education. Among adults with at most basic education, participation rates do not differ significantly by gender. Among those with higher education, however, 37% of women and 29% of men took part in learning. Women aged 50–64 participate more than men aged 25–49, and women of other ethnic backgrounds participate more than Estonian men. Overall, women aged 25–49 with higher education are the most active participants in adult learning. Participation is also high among unemployed women, 32% of whom engaged in learning. This share exceeds that of employed women and indicates good access to learning opportunities for unemployed women, while unemployed men make considerably less use of them (17%). Particularly low participation rates are observed among men and women with at

most basic education (10% and 11%, respectively), economically inactive men (10%) and men with reduced work capacity (7%). At the same time, participation has increased across all analysed groups in Estonia, albeit at different rates.

To assess changes in inequality over time, we analysed convergence indicators. We first examined how differences between social groups have evolved. Although overall participation in adult education has increased, the coefficient of variation – which captures disparities between groups – has declined, though only by six percentage points (Figure 1.5.3). This indicates that inequality in participation between groups has narrowed somewhat over time.

Examining the mechanisms behind this decline shows that groups with initially lower participation rates have recorded slightly faster growth than those with higher initial rates, which indicates a degree of catch-up. We tested this by analysing

Figure 1.5.3 Indicators of convergence in participation in lifelong learning



SOURCE: Statistics Estonia⁹

NOTE. The coefficient of variation is a relative measure that shows how widely values are spread in relation to the mean. When the coefficient decreases, it indicates that differences between population groups have become smaller.

whether subsequent growth in participation was inversely related to the initial level of participation. The results confirm such a relationship. If current trends were to continue, groups with lower participation rates would close half the gap with higher-participation groups within approximately seven to eight years (coefficient -0.09 , p -value 0.04). The narrowing of inequality has therefore proceeded at a relatively slow pace.

Time trends also become visible when we compare each group's participation rate with that of the highest-participation group, namely adults with higher education. Although lower-participation groups have, on average, narrowed their differences with one another, they have not significantly converged with the group with higher education. In fact, the gap relative to adults with higher education has widened somewhat over time. This suggests that individuals with higher education continue to benefit most from adult learning opportunities, while other groups participate to a lesser extent.

Over time, the lowest participation rates in Estonia have consistently been observed among adults with low educational attainment (at most basic education) and older adults (aged 55 to 64). Nevertheless, Estonia performs better than many other European countries in these groups. While the EU average participation rate among older adults is 5%, it is 10% in Estonia. Similarly, whereas the EU average for adults with low educational attainment is 8%, Estonia's rate stands at 15%. Participation in both groups has also increased compared to 2020 (by six and three percentage points, respectively). The Nordic countries again stand out for particularly strong participation among low-educated and older adults, suggesting the presence of effective inclusive adult learning programmes. However, differences between member states in these groups have not significantly narrowed. Disparities remain pronounced among low-participation groups, and despite policy measures and targets aimed at involving all segments of society in adult learning, these ambitions have not been fully realised. Differences between countries therefore remain substantial.

SUMMARY: ESTONIA NEEDS MORE AMBITIOUS GOALS IN ADULT EDUCATION

This Estonian Human Development Report examines educational inequalities in Estonian society. In adult education, a persistent pattern has been observed: those who already possess more knowledge and skills tend to acquire even more, while those who would benefit most from learning opportunities participate far less. Social scientists describe this as the Matthew effect, or cumulative advantage. It refers to a dynamic in which the benefits of education and skills development accrue mainly to those who already have stronger prior access to education or other resources that enable them to take fuller advantage of learning opportunities. We analyse educational disparities from the perspective of adult education. Given the efforts made in both the European Union and Estonia to promote adult learning, we assess whether these efforts have reduced inequality in participation over the past six years.

European data confirm that although the EU as a whole is gradually moving closer to its targets – average participation in adult education is increasing – inequalities between member states have not significantly decreased. As Sweden continues to advance with its already high participation rate, countries with lower rates struggle to keep pace. This underlines the need, at the EU level, to support lagging countries, including through increased investment in education and the sharing of best practices, in order to reduce disparities between member states. In Estonia, where participation in adult education is relatively high and progress towards EU targets has been rapid, there is no longer a need to benchmark against lagging countries. More ambitious goals are required to maintain competitiveness.

At the national level, participation in adult learning has increased across all social groups analysed. Growth has been somewhat faster in groups that had lower participation rates in 2018, indicating a degree of catch-up. Relative differences between groups have also narrowed, meaning that disparities between social groups have decreased. However, since there has been

no significant convergence with adults holding higher education – the group with the highest participation rate – it remains essential to direct investment in adult education more effectively towards the lagging groups: adults with low educational attainment, those aged 55 to 64, economically inactive individuals and people with reduced work capacity. Gender disparities in adult education remain substantial in Estonia, and women with higher education emerge as the most active participants. It is noteworthy that unemployed women also participate at high rates, which indicates good access to labour market services, particularly skills-related

services, during unemployment. At the same time, unemployed men use these opportunities far less frequently (a difference of 15 percentage points). Targeted investment, along with strategies and actions to identify and motivate underrepresented groups, provide positive learning experiences and raise awareness of existing opportunities, are therefore essential. General funding for adult education, if not targeted, may inadvertently increase inequality, as those who are already better positioned – particularly adults with higher education – are more likely to take advantage of available opportunities.

Data and methodology. In this article, we use convergence indicators to assess whether participation rates in adult education have become more similar over time and to identify the mechanisms underlying such changes (for a more detailed discussion of convergence measures, see Eurofound¹⁰). We examine convergence both between European Union member states and between social groups within Estonia. The indicator analysed is participation in adult education during the four weeks preceding the survey. Adult education covers participation in formal education at any level as well as in continuing education, such as job-related courses or self-development programmes, among individuals aged between 25 and 64. Although more recent approaches measure participation over the previous 12 months, this indicator does not yet permit sufficiently long-term analysis. For cross-country comparisons, we use Eurostat data. For the national analysis, we rely on relevant indicators from Statistics Estonia's Labour Force Survey. This dataset captures participation in adult education across 27 population groups, defined by gender, age, ethnicity, education, region, work capacity, labour market status, household income (divided into quartiles) and the presence of children in the household. We use data for 2023, the most recent year available at the time of writing.

REFLECTION

Anneki Teelahk

Developments in the labour market point to the need to prepare for change, as today's economy demands very different skills from those required decades ago. Individuals must be ready to upskill or to acquire entirely new competencies. Lifelong learning is indispensable for remaining competitive.

Participation in adult education has increased rapidly in Estonia, placing the country among the leading European nations. Significant investments have been made in education, learning pathways have become more flexible, educational inequalities are narrowing, and more people are engaging in reskilling and continuing education. The educational landscape and modes of learning have evolved and continue to evolve.

As in other European Union countries, participation in adult education in Estonia follows a familiar pattern: those with higher prior educational attainment or other supportive resources are more likely to engage in learning. More ambitious goals are therefore needed to support lagging groups and reduce inequality.

How can resilience and development be ensured?

The decision to extend Estonian as the language of instruction to all schools is historic, above all because it lays the foundation for a shared value space that also extends to adult education. Once such far-reaching decisions have been made, the focus must shift to supporting their implementation. This will be one of the key priorities in the coming years and is directly relevant to adult education as well.

The continued development of adult education requires the contribution of all stakeholders, including entrepreneurship policy, retraining opportunities, labour market services and social protection measures.

Supporting the motivation and self-confidence of vulnerable target groups and reducing segregation are essential.

Greater flexibility in education is also needed, including micro-degree programmes, micro-qualifications, broader application of the principles for recognising prior learning and work experience (VÕTA), work-based learning, and regionally tailored programmes.

Existing strengths must be maintained and further developed. Cooperation with universities and researchers should continue, as should initiatives such as the OSKA labour market monitoring and future skills forecasting.

Practitioners and collaboration networks should be supported and strengthened. Greater emphasis should be placed on communicating what works well; criticism is rarely in short supply.

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