

# PARTNERUP

## PARTNER UP Analysis Report European level

Del. 2.3



Funded by  
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them. [Project Number: 101087193]



## Project information

<b>Acronym</b>	PARTNER-UP
<b>Title</b>	Partnerships and stakeholder engagement for Upskilling Pathways
<b>Number</b>	101087193
<b>Sub programme or KA</b>	ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PI-FORWARD-LOT3
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://partnerup-project.eu/">https://partnerup-project.eu/</a>

## Executive Summary

The following European report represents the outcome of the initial desk analysis carried out by the project partners with the aim to deepen the actual state of art in the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways initiative (UP) at the EU level.

The desk analysis allowed the partners to investigate and share knowledge about several aspects related to the UP initiative: legislative context and measures, key measures in place, wide target groups addressed, main challenges in reaching out the target groups, main challenges in skills assessment, provision of tailored learning and validation and recognition of skills acquired, actors delivering Upskilling Pathways, cooperation mechanism in place.

It was based on stakeholders' contributions and on recent literature review and the consultation of National/EU documents on both Adult Learning and Education policies and Upskilling Pathways, published by European Commission or elaborated by European networks/associations.

The outcomes of the Analysis put the basis for the policy and practice work of the project.



**DEVELOPMENT TEAM:** Sylvia Liuti, Chiara Marchetta – FORMA.Azione srl; Carme Royo, Kirstin Sonne, Elisabetta Verginelli – EUCEN; Gina Ebner, Tina Mavrič, Davide Muraro – EAEA.

*September, 2023*



## *Table of Contents*

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Analysis report at the EU level .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.1 Partnerships and stakeholder engagement in EU education and skills policies .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.2 Partnerships in Upskilling Pathway .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.3 Key stakeholders in Upskilling Pathways.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.4 Final remarks: Common challenges and potential solutions .....</b>	<b>12</b>

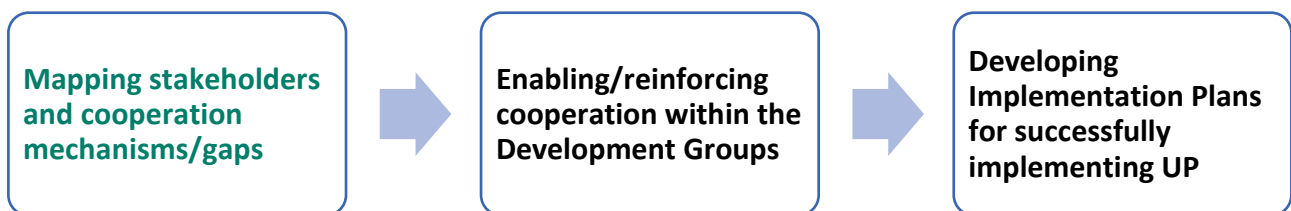
## 1. Introduction

The following European report represent the outcome of the initial Analysis carried out by the project partners with the aim to deepen the actual state of art in the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways initiative (UP) at EU level.

Specifically, the Analysis was meant at collecting quantitative and qualitative data and information about:

- existing and missing stakeholders,
- existing cooperation mechanisms and structures,
- gaps in cooperation,
- good practices with reference to the Upskilling Pathways implementation in the Partner UP Countries and at EU level,

in order to **provide the basis for the policy and practice work of the project.**



The Analysis process allowed the partners to investigate and share knowledge about several aspects related to the UP initiative, by:

- analysing the main challenges in the UP implementation, in view of defining strengths and weaknesses in cooperation, identifying existing coordination structures, missing stakeholders and how this has impacted on a regular process of implementation;
- mapping and analysing a list of possible/useful stakeholders to engage, so as to make clear their added value and expected contribution;
- defining how they can further enable the implementation of UP.

In order to collect highly qualitative data, the Analysis is carried out according to two different methodologies, both aimed at defining gaps in cooperation and identifying opportunities for reinforcing positive/meaningful relationships already in place and involving and engaging missing and/or new stakeholders: **Desk Analysis** and **Stakeholder Mapping**.



The **Desk analysis** was mainly intended at deepening the actual state of art in the implementation of the UP initiative at EU level, by investigating:

- legislative context and measures;
- key measures in place;
- wide target groups addressed;
- main challenges in reaching out the target groups;
- main challenges in skills assessment, provision of tailored learning and validation and recognition of skills acquired;
- actors delivering Upskilling Pathways;
- cooperation mechanism in place.

It was based on recent literature review and on the consultation of National/EU documents on both Adult Learning and Education policies and Upskilling Pathways, published by European Commission or elaborated by European networks/associations.

The mapping of Stakeholders was developed through different activities:

- **internal reflection** with partner organisations and/or in the project team, developed by collectively brainstorming about specific key questions, so as to share a common view of the main needs and objectives for the development of cooperation with/among stakeholders;
- **focus groups, interviews and surveys** with European stakeholders according common Guidelines, with the main aim to guide them in self-assessing their role in Upskilling Pathways, their relevance and their main contribution.

As results of the methodologies applied, the partners team produced an **Analysis Report** and a **Stakeholder Mapping Table**, as follows.

## 2. Analysis report at the EU level

This analysis starts with an overview on the function of stakeholders engagement in EU education and skills policies, followed by key remarks on partnerships in Upskilling Pathways policies. Subsequently, the report presents the main stakeholders activated by, and/or interested in, Upskilling Pathways at the European level, according to their degree and type of engagement. Finally, common challenges and related potential solutions conclude the report. These elements will also provide a basis for the development groups.

### 2.1 Partnerships and stakeholder engagement in EU education and skills policies

Partnerships and stakeholder engagement are instrumental to reach the objectives of education and skills policies in Europe. Before delving into the issue of partnerships in the framework of Upskilling Pathway, it is useful to provide an overview of the approaches adopted on this subject in key EU education policies.

The pivotal *New European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience* (2020)<sup>1</sup> recognizes the importance of working in a collective and coordinated manner, actively engaging a variety of stakeholders. This principle of partnerships and stakeholder engagement is translated into several actions enshrined in the Agenda. In the Pact for Skills, for example, large scale partnerships are envisaged, with a focus on public-private cooperation to implement concrete initiative – also at the local and regional level. The value of partnerships is also seen when it comes to strengthening skills intelligence, since diverse actors can contribute to gather and exploit data in a meaningful way. With regard to third countries, partnerships are presented as a policy tool to attract skilled workers.

Moreover, partnerships play a key role also in the *Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030*.<sup>2</sup> The Resolution affirms that partnerships should be reinforced both in inter-ministerial and in cross-sectoral fora as to reach a high level of policy coherence. Notably, the New European Agenda notes that partnerships are not only necessary, but also a “shared responsibility”. In this spirit, the EU calls for partnerships among adult learning providers to remove barriers and increase access to education for all. It is important to recall that the Council Resolution makes an explicit connection to Upskilling Pathways, especially in partnership between lifelong guidance and career development services.

In the broader framework of the European Education Area, both the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* and the *Communication from the Commission on*

---

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9723&furtherNews=yes#navItem-1>

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/53179/st14485-en21.pdf>

achieving the European Education Area by 2025 give ample consideration to stakeholders and partnerships.<sup>3</sup> In particular, cooperation between stakeholders – especially between governments and stakeholders – are promoted as transversal action in each pillar of the framework.

## 2.2 Partnerships in Upskilling Pathway

The *Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults* underlines the impact of coordination of partnerships, activating actors in all relevant sectors:<sup>4</sup>

11. “[The Council recommends that Member States] ensure effective coordination to implement this Recommendation, and support, where appropriate, the engagement of relevant public and private actors in education and training, employment, social, cultural and other relevant policy areas, as well as the promotion of partnerships among them, including cross-border and regional cooperation.”

This commitment is, according to the Recommendation, crucial to work with such diverse target groups while relevant public policies may be fragmented.

In the recent evaluation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, several critical issues have emerged regarding stakeholders’ partnerships.<sup>5</sup> Above all, it has been found that, while most Member States have put in place forms of stakeholders’ cooperation and partnerships channels, a lack of defined responsibilities for the respective actors involved in these networks may hamper their effectiveness and reach. Furthermore, successful examples of Upskilling Pathways’ implementation had in common the existence of a well-structured national coordination platform which provides a strategic framework for action at all levels of governance, including the regional and local one, and can provide a direction also to more informal networks. Overall, the Recommendation has facilitated the creation of partnerships for upskilling in most cases.

### 2.2.A Outreach

Given the multifaceted difficulties, situations of vulnerability and/or social exclusion that many people in the target group of this program experience, the outreach phase is simultaneously extremely important and challenging. In this context, partnerships and coordination platforms at all levels are crucial, and can become a bridge to bring these upskilling opportunities to those that need it the most. Several actors, including social partners and NGOs in the social inclusion sector, may have a stake in this process, yet – at least in some instances - their level of engagement at the

---

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32021G0226%2801%29>; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0625>

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001)

<sup>5</sup> Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12637-Improving-adults-basic-skills-Upskilling-pathways-recommendation-evaluation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12637-Improving-adults-basic-skills-Upskilling-pathways-recommendation-evaluation_en)



European level remains marginal or inexistent. Several factors may explain this trend including lack of appropriate resources and funding, as well as lack of awareness.

## 2.3 Key stakeholders in Upskilling Pathways

Given the wide range and variety of stakeholders that have been interviewed - both with regard to the type of organization, their membership (in the case of a network), their size, and their goals and remit - it is not surprising that **engagement with the Upskilling Pathways Framework (UPF) differs significantly from stakeholder to stakeholder**. On one end of the spectrum, the Directorate General for Employment (DG EMPL) at the European Commission, and Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) are **highly engaged** in and committed to the framework, had a stake in Upskilling Pathways prior to the establishment of the framework, and played a central role in its development. On the other end of the spectrum, some of the other institutions, organisations and networks that were interviewed could currently only be considered **potential stakeholders**, as they reported not even being aware of the UPF prior to being contacted about the Partner UP project. In between these two extremes, a number of networks/organisations knew about the UPF and were **advocating and raising awareness** about it across their membership, but noted **variations in uptake of the framework among the individual member organisations** and were themselves **only indirectly engaged in the framework**.

### 2.3.A Highly engaged stakeholders at the European level

As EU bodies whose institutional remit covers the Upskilling Pathways, **DG EMPL** and **Cedefop**, and to a lesser extent the **ETF** (European Training Foundation), are **highly engaged in the framework and have been especially active in researching, monitoring and evaluating its implementation**. The ETF has undertaken this work primarily at the national level outside the EU, both monitoring how Upskilling Pathways have been put into practice by national governments, as well as supporting them in incorporating UP in their skills agenda. Similarly engaging in M&E activities, DG EMPL commissioned an ongoing evaluation of the relevant Council Recommendation. This was undertaken by an external contractor, involved public and stakeholder consultations as well as a questionnaire, and was published as a Commission Staff Working Document in July 2023.

### 1.1 Monitoring and Evaluating the Framework

**Cedefop** has dedicated significant time and resources to better understanding how the UPF has been implemented so far. In particular, it is conducting **Thematic Country Reviews**, which aim to identify and address the specific needs of individual member states in relation to UP. This initiative was a direct outcome of three **Policy Learning Fora on UP** that were organised by Cedefop together with the European Economic and Social Committee, and of the resulting Analytic Framework, intended as a reflection tool for stakeholders at various levels to help them in

implementing UP according to their specific national needs. The Thematic Country Reviews expand and formalise this process further by appointing a national Steering Group, which decides on an area within UP that they wish to prioritise. Next, three rounds of survey interviews (at the beneficiary, institutional/organisational and national level) are conducted to establish a comprehensive picture of the implementation of UP in that country. So far, Italy and France have been subject to a Thematic Country Review, and reviews of Croatia and Spain are currently underway.

### **1.2 Enabling stakeholder engagement and exchange at the European level**

Complementary to their research and M&E activities are the efforts of Cedefop and DG EMPL to **create spaces and opportunities for exchange, peer learning and advocacy and support for stakeholders at various levels**. As part of the Thematic Country Reviews, Cedefop invited the national stakeholders involved in this activity to a Policy Learning Forum in Brussels. However, the representative of Cedefop reported that these activities were stymied by the language barriers between participants from different member states. DG-EMPL has also been active in bringing stakeholders together, including by creating a community of practitioners of UP through the EPALE platform. By raising the topic of UP in meetings of National Coordinators for Adult Learning, the DG has also made sure that UP remains a priority on the adult learning agenda. At the national level, it has coordinated several rounds of **mutual learning activities** to boost the uptake of UP within member states. Such activities are not only intended to facilitate knowledge exchange between stakeholders at various levels, but also to bring them **closer to the decision-making process**. DG EMPL has also played a significant role in contributing to the funding of UP, by initiating several relevant calls under the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme and through the Forward-Looking projects under Erasmus+. The area of UP has also been supported through the ESF+ fund.

### **2.3.B Bridging the micro and macro-levels: networks engaging in UP**

A number of stakeholders, specifically the **networks and umbrella organisations Solidar, EURASHE, All Digital, the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL) and Eurocities reported varying degrees of direct engagement with the framework**. While some (the LLLP and All Digital) are already committed to the framework, others stated that their engagement as a network has been limited, but that their national members contribute to the UPF.

#### **2.1 Networks active in different areas but facing similar challenges**

Which stage of the framework they contribute to specifically (whether skills assessment, learning provision, and recognition and validation), varies among stakeholders, and depends on the type of member organisations they are made up of. For example, All Digital, as a network of education and training providers, are primarily active in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage (learning provision) and within this, they mostly engage in digital skills delivery and as such primarily refer to the Digital Competencies framework. EURASHE's membership are also education institutions, but more specifically



Universities of Applied Sciences which focus on professional higher education. As such, they are especially active in Upskilling related to the labour market, with a particular emphasis on responding to regional needs. Both All Digital and EURASHE's membership also engage in the other two stages of Upskilling (skills assessment and in the recognition and validation of learning). In their efforts to deliver in these areas, both stakeholders stated that their members often lack the (human or financial resources) to do so comprehensively, that the broader frameworks are missing (for example for RPL), or that the existing frameworks (for example for skills assessment and qualifications) are not compatible/easily applicable to the learning provision their members are offering. **While certain “trailblazer” members within their networks are pushing against such misalignments by developing innovative, alternative solutions through a bottom-up approach, these efforts remain sporadic among their members.** Both EURASHE and All Digital are deeply invested in the social dimension of the Upskilling Framework and are committed to social inclusion through upskilling.

## 2.2 Pushing for the social dimension of Upskilling Pathways at the European and local levels

This is equally important to Solidar, which, as a network, is particularly committed to the development of transversal, rather than job-specific skills, and has been active in projects on the recognition and validation of such skills. Among its network (which includes CSOs and trade unions), Worker Education Associations and Popular Education Associations are contributing to Upskilling Pathways the most, while other members, including Trade Unions, focus less on education, and if they do, they tend to focus more on formal education. The **failure to fully realise the potential of informal and non-formal types of education to contribute to Upskilling** was also highlighted by the representative of Eurocities, who noted that the **cities in their network are more likely to focus on compulsory education** (although within Eurocities' Social Affairs Team, the working group on education encourages its members to dedicate more attention to adult education rather than just formal/compulsory education). In their provision, some cities look more towards European frameworks, especially those that have a more strained relationship with their national governments. These cities are more likely to respond to initiatives such as the UPF, especially if they are located in regions where English is more widely spoken. Such cities are also more likely to have their own **skills agenda, which tend to be adapted to the local labour market, but also take into account the needs of previously marginalized groups.** While municipal authorities are generally well placed to make such targeted, localized interventions, they often struggle to implement them due to their finite resources.

## 2.3 The importance of forming communities through networks

Given these challenges, it is evident why network organisations such as those interviewed are crucial for the implementation of the UPF. In **undertaking important advocacy work, bringing member organizations together, and developing communities of practice, network organisations provide guidance** and can orient their member organisations (who are so often absorbed in their day-to-day business) towards broader European-wide agendas and frameworks, and help them navigate and apply these to their own contexts. For example, EURASHE (the professional HE network) has developed a community of practice among its members (mostly Universities of

Applied Science) focusing on skills, which hosts discussions on how education and training providers can contribute to UP. **Their members are mostly local organisations who are embedded in the infrastructure of their city or region, and are thus connected to various other types of organisations, including community groups, education providers, and NGOs.** They therefore have the potential to extend the network organisation's reach far beyond its formal membership.

Network organisations often act as a link between the local and European level, either by representing their members on various platforms and fora (e.g. EU Commission working groups, European civil society alliances), contributing to new European frameworks by drawing on their members' expertise (for example, All Digital is supporting the development of a European license for digital skills) or by helping them access EU funding. The latter point was often raised in interviews in connection with the lack of funding that is directly linked to the UPF. The representative of Eurocities, for example, reported a degree of disillusionment about the effectiveness of related initiatives such as the European Year of Skills, as they have not been matched by the equivalent financial support. **Many of the network organisations stressed that their members tend to have many areas of activity, but limited financial and human resources, and that they are more likely to prioritise areas that bring in the most funding.** The launch of initiatives such as the UPF, and the European Year of Skills have not significantly increased the efforts they direct at UP in general.

### ***2.3.C Potential stakeholders: organisations that are not yet engaged in UP, but engage in related activities and address similar challenges***

It could be speculated that the lack of direct funding linked to the Upskilling Pathways framework is one of the reasons why a number of interviewed stakeholders reported not being aware of it prior to being contacted. These were the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, EADTU and ATEE. It is, however, more likely that this lack of awareness is primarily due to Upskilling Pathways not being their primary area of activity (in the case of ATEE and EADTU), or because they do not work within European frameworks (in the case of UIL). As networks of teacher training institutions and "Open" Universities, respectively, neither ATEE nor EADTU have low-skilled adults or learners with low levels of qualifications as their primary target groups, while UIL, as a global organization that focuses much of its work in developing countries, does not use EU policy or recommendations as its reference point.

### **3.1 Stepping in to fill national gaps: Developing RPL procedures**

Though UIL has engaged in multilateral partnerships with European organisations such as Cedefop and ETF, most of their activities either involve the governments of UNESCO member states, or organisations within member states. For example, in their work on the recognition of prior learning (corresponding to the third stage of the UPF), they often **support local organisations in developing RPL procedures in the absence of a national framework.** In other cases, they have advocated with member states to establish such a framework. Crucial to these efforts, as the interviewees from UIL reported, is the **collaboration of various stakeholders, including**

**employers, higher education institutions, national authorities, and relevant institutions** that are already active in this field. An online capacity building course has been established to support countries in this process, and encourages national governments to mobilise all their stakeholders. EADTU has also concentrated much of its efforts on RPL procedures that fill in the gaps left by missing national frameworks. Its members are often at the cutting edge of innovation regarding systems of recognition and validation, opening up higher education to a whole **new group of learners that would otherwise not have engaged in formal learning**. As higher education institutions with a focus on professional learning, their members have **close connections with employers, and are able to create learning offers and qualifications that are labour-market oriented**.

### 3.2 Addressing the gap between policy and reality created through demographic changes

Even if national frameworks for the recognition and validation of skills exist, the UIL representatives pointed out that these **frameworks do not always match the lived realities of people with low skills and/or low qualifications**, especially in countries with a significant informal labour market, or countries with a high proportion of migrants. The challenges that this latter target group, which is growing both in size and relevance to the economy across Europe, poses to the implementation of all three stages of the Upskilling Pathways are not only an effect of language barriers and cultural difference. These challenges are also often exacerbated by the conditions of the labour market, and specifically by employers who have a vested interest in migrants remaining unskilled, and thus more vulnerable to labour exploitation. **The growing diversification of societies driven by migration has had an effect on every stage of education**, not least the basic education sector, as the representative of ATEE confirmed. In his view, it is one of the factors that has resulted in **basic skills provision becoming an ever-increasing priority in most primary and even secondary schools**, with a growing number of children and teenagers across Europe not achieving adequate levels of literacy and numeracy.

## 2.4 Final remarks: Common challenges and potential solutions

### 4.1 More targeted funding needed – but where should it come from?

As already mentioned in this report, the **lack of direct funding associated with the Upskilling Pathways was highlighted by most stakeholders that were interviewed as a significant barrier** to the implementation of the framework, especially with regard to engaging local stakeholders and smaller organisations in the framework. However, there was significant variation among interviewees on the question of how UP could be better funded. The DG-EMPL representative acknowledged that more funding initiatives at the European level would not go amiss, but also stressed that **member states needed to allocate more funding to the Upskilling Pathways Framework in order for its implementation to be sustainable**. By contrast, according to Solidar's representative, **employers should play a greater part in the funding of learning offers for Upskilling Pathways**, reflecting the growing role they are given in shaping the skills agenda at the European level. There was a general consensus among the other networks too that Upskilling

Pathways would only become a priority area for themselves or for their member organisations if this was matched by an increase in funding.

#### 4.2 Engaging “non-traditional” stakeholders for more effective provision

This increase in funding was often also considered as a prerequisite for engaging new stakeholders in the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways framework. While there was widespread agreement among interviewees that **more stakeholders from across society needed to be engaged in a more sustainable way, they differed with regard to the specific stakeholders they would prioritise**. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of engaging certain sectors: All Digital, for example, stressed that **partnerships with tech corporations** need to be developed to make digital skills provision more effective. Given the degree of control they wield over the devices and digital platforms through which our online life (including online learning) is mediated, digital literacy and digital skills cannot be taught without their cooperation. The All Digital representative however noted how the mentality and ethos of such profit-driven corporations stood in contrast with the goals and working mode of the educational institutions and civil society organisations that comprise All Digital’s membership and partnership. For these organisations to stand their ground against “big tech”, more coordinated and united efforts were required.

#### 4.3 The importance of stakeholders for outreach, information sharing and governance

Among the other interviewed network organisations, there was a general consensus that **outreach played an important part in the Upskilling Pathways** (reflecting a similar prioritisation in the Thematic Country Reviews conducted by Cedefop, where outreach was also identified as a key area for development). The interviewees noted that their local members were already playing a significant role in recruiting learners from under-represented communities, and that they offered a safe “way in” for people who had limited previous experience of formal education. However, several interviewees pointed out how **minority community groups, who might not be engaged in education provision themselves, could be better mobilised to make the populations they represent aware of the upskilling opportunities that are already available, and could also be engaged as active stakeholders to ensure that the opportunities on offer are aligned with the requirements of the target groups**.

As became apparent from the interviews, not only does it matter *which* stakeholders are engaged, the way in which this is done also matters hugely. The DG-EMPL representative, for example, emphasised that **stakeholders should not only be involved in the delivery of the UPF, but should also be given opportunities to share information about their area of engagement and their expertise, and should be actively involved in governance issues relating to the Upskilling Pathways**. Given the importance of national frameworks for the implementation of much of the UPF, some interviewees stressed the importance of engaging member states more, in order to ensure that Upskilling Pathways would not be “left behind” in favour of other parts of the skills agenda which might be prioritised. The multiplicity of stakeholders, and their varying, if not competing interests, were widely acknowledged by interviewees, leading some to emphasise the importance of **creating platforms which allowed stakeholders from different levels to meet, discuss and work together towards the implementation of Upskilling Pathways**.



For further information, see **Stakeholder mapping table** [here](#).