

A gloomy landscape for skills development: Adult education systems in the Visegrad countries in the eyes of stakeholders

Zdenka Šimová^a, Markéta Tučková^b, Horacy Dębowski^c, Wojciech Stęchły^d, Erzsébet Szlamka^e and Lúbia Gállová^f

Abstract

This article examines stakeholder perspectives on the functioning of adult education systems in the four Visegrad countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Its starting point is a marked discrepancy that emerged in a scoping study conducted within the Erasmus+ project Digital Individual Learning Accounts in the Visegrad Countries. Adult participation in education and training in the region has been rising, and considerable policy effort, supported by European Union funds, has been invested in the field. The stakeholders we interviewed nevertheless assessed their national systems in largely critical terms. The article draws on 45 interviews conducted in 2023 with policy makers and policy experts, employers, adult training providers, and representatives of public employment services and human resources agencies. We examine the perceived strengths and challenges of the national adult education systems, the barriers to adult participation in learning, and the ways in which soft and transversal skills are under-

^a Zdenka Šimová, National Training Fund, e-mail: simova@nvf.cz

^b Markéta Tučková, National Training Fund, e-mail: tuckova@nvf.cz

^c Horacy Dębowski, SGH Warsaw School of Economics, e-mail: hdebow@sgh.waw.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-8457-9376

^d Wojciech Stęchły, SGH Warsaw School of Economics, e-mail: wstech@sgh.waw.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-1359-6272

^e Erzsébet Szlamka, Governmental Agency for IT Development, e-mail: szlamka.erszabet.anna@kifu.gov.hu

^f Lúbia Gállová, State Vocational Education Institute, e-mail: lubica.gallova@siov.sk

stood and prioritised. Respondents in all four countries point to weak governance, information asymmetries and funding mechanisms that distort rather than respond to demand, and locate the barriers to participation largely beyond the education system itself: in the time and resources available to learners and in the attitudes of employers and of adults themselves. Positive views were limited and concerned mainly the growing training offer and the availability of European Union funding. Soft skills are regarded as highly relevant but loosely conceptualised, with new demand emerging for skills related to mental health and well-being and to diversity and inclusion. Adult learning in Central and Eastern Europe remains under-researched, and systematic studies of the region have begun to appear only recently. The article addresses this gap and contributes to debates on adult education policy.

Keywords: adult learning; transversal skills; soft skills; stakeholders, Visegrad countries, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia

1. Introduction

The article presents the results of a scoping study conducted within the project *Digital Individual Learning Accounts in the Visegrad Countries* (D-ILA). The project aimed to analyse and develop new ways of using data and artificial intelligence to enhance the development of soft skills within adult education systems through individual learning accounts in the four Visegrad countries. Although the scoping study was primarily used to inform the project team and to tailor project deliverables, in our view its outcomes also have scientific value.

The article is motivated by a discrepancy that surfaced in the scoping study. Participation in adult education and training has grown in all four countries, and the field has attracted sustained policy effort, much of it financed from European Union (EU) funds. The stakeholders we interviewed, selected purposively for their expertise in the field, nevertheless judged their national systems harshly and named weaknesses far more often than strengths. Because the project centred on the development of soft skills, or transversal key competences, we also include this aspect in the analysis and present stakeholders' opinions on the development of soft skills alongside their opinions on systemic solutions.

In this article we follow Desjardins (2023, p. 353), who defines adult learning systems as “the mass of organized learning opportunities available to adults along

with their underlying structures and stakeholders that shape their organization and governance”. On this definition, stakeholders are part of the system itself, and their views are an important object of analysis. While research on adult learning systems has concentrated largely on systemic arrangements and typologies (Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020; Kalenda, 2024), patterns of participation and the barriers to it (Boudard & Rubenson, 2003; Kocór & Worek, 2017; Roosmaa & Saar, 2010; Saar et al., 2014), and labour market and societal outcomes (Desjardins, 2023; Wiederhold, 2015), this article presents the stakeholders’ perspective on these systems.

Our analytical lens is directed primarily at organised education. We therefore use the term *adult education system* for the organised provision that respondents assess, and *adult learning system* only where we refer to Desjardins’s broader concept. The analysis covers the four Visegrad countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

The Visegrad countries face many common challenges in adult education and training (Kalenda, 2024) and share the legacy of a communist period in which their education systems were marked by centrally imposed curricula, rigid bureaucratic control, little school autonomy and the dominance of the vocational track in upper secondary education (Herbst & Wojciuk, 2017). Variation among them persisted under socialism, although the overall trend was towards uniformity (Kalenda, 2024, pp. 75–76). This variation deepened after 1989, as the four countries responded in different ways to the critical junctures of economic and political transformation, accession to the EU and the financial crisis (Tütlys et al., 2022, p. 37) and, more recently, to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

Their divergent trajectories have been described by Herbst and Wojciuk (2017) for the school systems, by Kalenda (2024) for adult learning and in the country chapters of the volume edited by Tütlys, Markowitsch, Pavlin and Winterton, on Czechia (Dvořák & Gal, 2022), Hungary (Laczik & Farkas, 2022), Poland (Dębowski & Stęchły, 2022) and Slovakia (Vantuch & Jelínková, 2022). Markowitsch and Dębowski (2022) synthesise the changes in skill formation systems across the region. The socio-economic orders that emerged from the transformation have been conceptualised in terms of embedded neoliberalism (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012), dependent market economies (Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009) and “patchwork capitalism”, an institutional architecture marked by multidimensional incoherence and a lack of complementarity, whose weakness entails high transaction costs (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021).

This literature agrees on the conditions under which adult education entered the transition. The economic elites that emerged from privatisation, largely recruited from the former communist elite, had few entrepreneurial ideas and little appreciation of

the need to invest in human capital (Norkus, 2008, as cited in Tütlys et al., 2022, p. 31). During the transition, adult education attracted even less political attention than vocational education and training (VET). Regarded as a market-oriented service, it was left to private providers and non-governmental initiatives, and its institutionalisation and the professionalisation of its providers advanced slowly (Markowitsch & Dębowski, 2022). Kalenda's (2024, pp. 200–201) institutional histories of the four countries show the same pattern, with the 1990s marked by the withdrawal of the state from the coordination of adult education and the emergence of largely deregulated training markets. Given this combination of shared legacies and divergent trajectories, we drew on the scoping study to establish whether key stakeholders in the four countries hold similar or different views of their adult education systems and of soft skills.

The Visegrad countries have recently made noticeable efforts to implement adult learning policies and instruments with the support of EU funds, including new training schemes for the unemployed and for those wishing to requalify, sectoral skills councils, qualifications frameworks, credit systems, procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and qualifications registers, all of which are visible in national policy documents (Markowitsch & Dębowski, 2022; Stęchły et al., 2024; UNESCO et al., 2023). Qualifications frameworks, although adopted by all countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), have nevertheless had little impact on skill formation practice, and the validation of non-formal learning has been implemented only to a limited extent in most countries of the region (Markowitsch & Dębowski, 2022).

Adult participation in education and training has also improved. According to the Eurostat Adult Education Survey, Slovakia and Hungary record high participation rates (62.4% and 54.8% respectively in the twelve months preceding the survey), Czechia (45.7%) is slightly above the EU average (45%), and Poland records a low level of participation (24.3%). In addition, all four countries recorded substantial increases over the last two years in the Eurostat Labour Force Survey indicator of participation in the four weeks preceding the survey.¹ However, these figures call for some caution, since the legal basis of the EU-LFS changed in 2021 with the application of Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 (2019), so that the series before and after that year might not be fully comparable.

The value of qualitative studies such as the one presented here lies in their ability to look beneath the surface of such statistics. Case-based research can test the plausibility of relationships observed in survey data, draw insight from the cases that

¹ For a discussion of the differences between the LFS and AES indicators, see Eurostat (2006).

statistics treat as outliers and improve the measures themselves (Lieberman, 2005), and in adult education research the two traditions are best seen as complementary (Käpplinger & St. Clair, 2023). Kalenda (2024, pp. 221–223) describes the available quantitative maps of the region's adult learning systems as crude, identifies blind spots in the international survey data on which they rest, and points to the importance of case studies of the roles of stakeholders in national systems, while Markowitsch and Dębowski (2022, p. 401) note that micro-level data on the opinions of learners and employers are largely missing from research on qualifications systems. A qualitative study can identify emerging trends and uncover dynamics that are not visible in policy documents and official data, and is in this sense complementary to quantitative research (Herbst & Wojciuk, 2017).

The analysis presented here documents key stakeholders' perceptions of adult education systems and soft skills. By systematising these perceptions, we aim to capture current beliefs about adult learning and, where possible, to uncover new observations that complement existing research. A full analysis of the relationship between these perceptions and the factual functioning of adult education systems lies beyond the scope of this article.

Adult learning in Central and Eastern Europe has long received limited attention in comparative scholarship, which has concentrated on the developed Western economies (Roosmaa & Saar, 2010; Tütlys et al., 2022). Book-length comparative treatment of adult learning systems in the four countries studied here has appeared only very recently (Kalenda, 2024). The present study complements this small body of work. The material collected in the scoping study allowed us to formulate the following research questions (RQs):

- (1) What are the main perceived strengths and challenges of the national adult education systems?
- (2) What are the barriers to adult participation in learning, including the development of soft skills, in the Visegrad countries?
- (3) Are soft skills considered important for development in the current labour markets? Which soft skills are seen as the most relevant? How are soft skills understood and conceptualised by stakeholders?

Additionally, we formulated two hypotheses to guide the study. First, we expected stakeholders in the four countries to hold broadly similar opinions, so that any observed differences would be better explained by stakeholder group than by nationality. Second, we expected soft skills to be regarded as increasingly important owing to both internal and external factors. Internal factors comprise company development

leading to demand for higher-level and soft skills (e.g. growth in size, cultural and organisational change). External factors comprise shocks associated with the polycrisis of recent years, including social (demographic change, inequality and migration), political (partisan politics, radicalisation and de-democratisation), economic, military and public-health developments (COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, inflation). Given the exploratory character of the study, these hypotheses served as guiding expectations against which the qualitative material was read, rather than as propositions to be tested statistically.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the institutional perspective adopted, the imperfections of training markets, the barriers to participation in adult learning, and the concept of soft and transversal skills. Section 3 describes the scoping study design, the sample, the analytical procedure and the limitations of the study. Section 4 presents the findings in three parts corresponding to the research questions. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature and the two hypotheses and draws conclusions for policy and further research.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Institutions, training markets and barriers to participation

We approach adult education systems from the perspective of new institutional economics (NIE), complemented by the economics of training and the theory of collective action. Its premise is that institutions matter, that is, the rules of the game which people create to reduce uncertainty in their transactions (North, 1990; Ménard & Shirley, 2005). Unlike the neoclassical theoretical baseline, NIE assumes incomplete information, bounded rationality and positive transaction costs (Williamson, 2000), and it treats institutions as configurations whose elements can complement or undermine one another. The concept of patchwork capitalism introduced above rests on this logic, since an incoherent institutional architecture raises the transaction costs of everyone operating within it (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021).

Following Ménard (2018), the rules of a particular domain are designed and enforced at a meso level between the national institutional environment and individual organisations. An adult education system is such a domain. It lies at the intersection of education, labour market and welfare policy, its provision and certification are dispersed among ministries, public agencies, employers, social partners and private provi-

ders, and the seams between these layers make coordination at the meso level decisive for its coherence (Desjardins, 2023; Dębowski, 2024, pp. 32–34, 131). The stakeholders we interviewed are therefore participants in the system rather than observers, with incentives, beliefs and capacities shaped by its rules (Dębowski, 2024, pp. 29–35).

The main categories of failure on the markets for developing and utilising adult skills are well documented (Acemoglu & Pischke, 1998; Finkelstein & Grubb, 2000; Leuven, 2005). Imperfect competition on the labour market prevents workers from capturing the full return on their investment in human capital. Poaching externalities weaken employers' incentives to fund transferable skills, and in the region they are reinforced by labour emigration (Reegård & Dębowski, 2020).

Financial constraints follow from the fact that human capital cannot serve as collateral. Information asymmetries take at least four forms. Employers find workers' qualifications difficult to verify, potential participants cannot see the deferred benefits of learning, purchasers lack credible information about the quality of providers, and employers' skill needs do not reach potential learners. Without such information, suitable training is hard to identify, providers face weak incentives to supply quality, and higher-quality provision tends to be pushed out of the market by cheaper and lower-quality provision.

Market actors could in principle cooperate and self-impose standards in order to secure these collective benefits. Conflicting interests, however, give rise to a collective action problem that discourages joint action (Olson, 1971), and limited social trust raises the transaction costs of solving it without the state. Sustaining high and widely distributed investment in adult skills therefore depends on non-market coordination through institutional arrangements and public policy, which alleviate the coordination problems that would otherwise lead to underinvestment and unequal access (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013).

In the Visegrad countries the problem is aggravated by the limited capacity of workers' organisations, employers' organisations and business associations to provide or organise training, or to influence provision by state and private entities (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021; Wallis & Winterton, 2022). Tripartite bodies have largely remained advisory and are often seen as bureaucratic rather than as guardians of a public interest in skill formation (Tütlys et al., 2022, p. 36).

These conditions make it difficult to generate information about skills demand at the meso and macro levels and to introduce qualification requirements for jobs. They also encourage firm strategies based on low skills and on competing on price rather than quality, since firms adapt technologies and job profiles to the skills available, and

the resulting low – or medium-skill equilibrium is difficult to escape without coordinated intervention (Crouch et al., 1999; Oesch, 2013). Kalenda (2024, pp. 209–214) documents such strategies among firms in the region until the labour shortages of the 2010s and shows that adult learning has remained a secondary priority within welfare states built around redistribution rather than social investment.

Whether adults take up the learning on offer depends on more than the functioning of markets. The bounded agency model explains their decisions through the interaction of individual dispositions with the structural conditions set by welfare state regimes and adult learning policies (Rubenson, 2011; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009), and research on barriers asks the complementary question of what keeps adults from participating.

The classification developed by Cross (1981) sorts obstacles to participation under three headings and underlies most surveys and comparative studies (Kalenda, 2024, pp. 49–50; Rubenson, 2011), with the lack of information about learning opportunities and their benefits later added as a fourth (Rubenson, 2011). We use this four-category typology in coding respondents' statements about barriers. The categories relate to:

- the individual's life situation, such as lack of time due to work or family responsibilities, health problems or financial circumstances (situational barriers);
- institutional arrangements that shape the decisions of individuals and employers about investment in human capital, such as fees, unsuitable scheduling, entrance requirements, limited or poor-quality provision and the absence of incentives for employers (institutional barriers);
- the availability of information about education and training opportunities and their benefits (informational barriers);
- the attitudes and dispositions of adults towards learning (dispositional barriers).

Because the resources an adult can devote to learning depend on the welfare system and on employer support as much as on personal circumstances, cost straddles two categories (Kalenda, 2024, p. 50). We treat the individual's financial situation as situational and providers' fees as institutional.

Situational barriers are reported most often, by participants as well as non-participants and regardless of country (Kalenda, 2024, p. 51; Rubenson, 2011). The incidence of institutional barriers varies with the welfare regime and is lowest where the state fosters favourable structural conditions and targets barriers directly, as in the Nordic countries (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Adults in Eastern European and Balkan countries report such barriers more often (Kalenda, 2024, p. 51).

Dispositional barriers are concentrated among low-skilled workers, adults with basic education, the unemployed, migrants and retirees, and in the Visegrad countries they are the constraint of key importance (Kalenda, 2024, pp. 51, 218).

The participation literature concentrates on individuals, but employers are the second source of demand for training, and they form part of our sample. Polish evidence points to low awareness of training needs among firms, to information barriers created by an atomised market of providers whose quality is hard to assess, and to the fear of losing trained workers to emigration or poaching (Dębowski, 2024, pp. 159–162). Equity considerations reinforce the case for public support. Financial barriers weigh more heavily on low-qualified and low-income workers, and employers invest less in their training because returns to learning in adulthood depend on skills acquired earlier in life, leaving disadvantaged groups doubly exposed (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003).

2.2 Soft and transversal skills

The growing importance of soft and transversal skills in the labour market is well documented (Deming, 2017; Felstead & Ashton, 2000), and their significance for education policy and for society is recognised across sectors and countries (see, for example, Council of the European Union, 2018; Dębowski et al., 2021, 2024; Gruzdev et al., 2018; Halász & Michel, 2011; Pepper, 2011; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). At the same time, the concept of soft skills, although widely used in labour market discourse, remains fuzzy. There is no exact definition and no widely shared practice regarding its use and scope of meaning. Both the term and the underlying construct (variously labelled social, generic or transversal skills) are perceived as complex and fluid, without clear boundaries and difficult to conceptualise. Because the concept is not operationalised, it can be dismissed as a cliché with no recognised practical usefulness. The operationalisation gap is visible within education systems themselves. A comparative study of six European VET systems found that transversal key competences, although prominent in strategic documents, are unevenly present in operative curricula and effectively absent from the assessment leading to certification (Dębowski et al., 2024). Where such competences are written down as learning outcomes, moreover, three quarters of the statements describe knowledge about a competence rather than its exercise (Stęchły, 2024).

The broad recognition of the importance of such skills nevertheless persuaded us that the topic should not be avoided merely because soft or transversal skills resist precise definition. Rather than imposing a definition, we treated respondents' own understandings of the concept as an object of inquiry.

3. Data and methods

3.1 The scoping study design

Scoping studies are preparatory studies within research programmes and provide an overview of a particular research area or topic. They are typically conducted at the outset of a project to map the field, to identify key concepts, theories and gaps in the existing literature, and to refine research questions and objectives (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). They lay the foundation for more focused investigations (Levac et al., 2010). Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 4) distinguish scoping studies from systematic reviews. Scoping studies do not focus on well-defined research questions for which appropriate study designs can be identified in advance. A scoping study tends to address broader topics to which many different study designs might apply, and is less likely to seek to answer very specific research questions or, consequently, to assess the quality of the studies it includes. Interviews with key stakeholders are one of several methods that can be employed within scoping studies to gather data and insights that are not available in the published literature. When the scoping study began, we did not expect it to reveal such critical attitudes among the respondents.

3.2 Sample and data collection

Within the scoping study, four groups of respondents were approached to discuss the functioning of adult education systems, including the role of individual learning accounts: policy makers and policy experts; employers; adult training providers; and representatives of public employment services (PES) and human resources (HR) agencies. These interviews were the main research instrument.

Altogether, 45 interviews were conducted between January and June 2023 (Table 1). Interviewees were identified purposively on the basis of their knowledge and expertise in the field by each partner participating in the project. Most interviews were conducted online or by telephone, and some were face-to-face. All interviews were carried out by partners of the D-ILA project and authors of this article, following a common interview guide, and lasted 45–60 minutes. Participation was based on informed consent. All notes made during the interviews were subsequently anonymised.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents in the study

Group of respondents	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	Total
Policy makers and policy experts	3	3	2	3	11
Adult training providers	1	2	3	3	9
Employers	4	7	3	4	18
Public employment services and HR agencies	4	1	1	1	7
Total	12	13	9	11	45

Source: Authors.

3.3 Analytical procedure

We analysed the interview notes thematically, following the approach to thematic coding described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), which combines inductive and deductive elements. The procedure differed slightly across the three research questions.

For the analysis of perceived strengths and challenges (RQ1), we proceeded inductively. As a first step, we read the replies of all interviewees and identified the key themes, which were then grouped into five broad categories: (a) systemic solutions at the national level and governance; (b) financing; (c) employers' strategies towards competence development; (d) approaches and resources of individuals; and (e) the training providers' offer. In the second step we assessed whether each theme carried a positive (strength) or negative (challenge) connotation, and each theme was assigned a code. In the final step we reread the interview notes and assigned a code to each identified statement in order to synthesise the results. Overall, 129 statements were distinguished and coded, of which 33 were classified as positive and 96 as negative.

For the analysis of barriers (RQ2), we proceeded deductively, assigning each statement to one of the four categories of the typology presented in Section 2.1 (Table 4). Altogether, 90 statements were coded.

For the analysis of soft skills (RQ3), we recorded all skills named by respondents in reply to the relevant questions. Since respondents were not restricted to the skills enumerated in the interview guide, each respondent named several skills. Overlapping mentions were grouped under parent categories, and the number of statements referring to each category was counted (Table 5).

3.4 Limitations

We recognise that the number of interviews is not large enough to generate definitive or statistically representative conclusions applicable to the entire population of the Visegrad countries. The sample may not capture the full diversity of opinions and practices, and its composition is uneven across countries and groups (for instance, employers are more numerous in the Hungarian sample and PES representatives in the Czech sample), which limits the strength of cross-country comparisons. The counting of coded statements did not serve statistical generalisation. It was designed to organise the qualitative material systematically, and the counts should be read as indicative of the relative prominence of themes within this sample rather than as a basis for universal claims.

4. Findings

4.1 Strengths and challenges of the national adult education systems

The analysis of the strengths and challenges of the national adult education systems is based on respondents' answers to the following questions:

From your point of view, how would you comment on the adult education system in this country – what do you think are its main strengths and challenges?

In general, do you think the right people are receiving the right training? If not, what are the causes? (At the supply or demand side? Finances? Motivations? Opportunities? Barriers?)

Table 2 summarises the themes identified in the replies, grouped by category and connotation.

Table 2. Opinions of key stakeholders regarding national adult education systems

Category	Connotation	Themes	n
Systemic solutions at national level, governance	Negative	Lack of coherence and transparency between subsystems; lack of trans-ministerial cooperation. Lack of databases and public registers; people do not know where to find information. Information about quality assurance systems is unclear; the system is not monitored and its effectiveness is not evaluated. Lack of a training advisory system and of promotion of the importance of adult learning.	40
	Positive	Diversity of the educational and training offer. Career tracking system implemented. Political will and availability of EU funds. Benefits of a tradition of completing formal education.	13
Financing	Negative	National funds complemented by EU funds cause distortions. Employers and employees do not seek the training they need but the training that is funded. Lack of financial incentives to respond to customer needs; no customisation. National tenders promote price rather than quality. People become accustomed to free training, which lowers incentives.	16
	Positive	Individual learning accounts are considered a solution (e.g. an e-shop for subsidised adult education courses). Recovery and Resilience Facility funds targeted at adult learning might create a positive boost.	3
Employers' strategies towards competence development	Negative	Lack of resources and of skills assessment competences among small and medium-sized enterprises. Failure to utilise skills learned during training decreases employees' motivation to learn.	18
	Positive	Management of employees' skills at company level among large and multinational companies.	11
Approaches and resources of individuals	Negative	Lack of motivation among adults; low learning culture. Lack of resources. Adults cannot articulate their training needs.	12
	Positive	Solid formal education, high enrolment and low dropout rates.	4
Training providers' offer	Negative	Quality of the training offer is not always adequate. No incentives for adequate evaluation; completion of the course matters most, but training centres organise the examinations. Providers want to sell a product: supply-driven, no customisation, little responsiveness to learners' and employers' needs.	10
	Positive	Flexibility of providers in adapting to changing circumstances (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic).	2

Note: *n* denotes the number of coded statements.

Source: Authors.

The most commonly indicated challenge was the lack of systemic solutions regarding the coherence of adult education systems, their transparency, data, quality assurance mechanisms and financing. This theme was most visible among respondents from Czechia, Poland and Slovakia and, to a lesser extent, in Hungary. Hungarian respondents, however, placed greater emphasis on distortions in the allocation of public funds and in tendering procedures. The following replies are representative of these two themes:

There are barely any bright elements in the Polish adult education system. Requalification for adults is challenging in Poland, especially for adults, older than 45 years. There is no accessible information for people – what skills are needed and where to find the best training offer. Professional and educational counselling is poorly organised for adults. There is a problem with the supply and demand side. There are no verification mechanisms for the training offer – as a result, learners and companies cannot screen good quality offers. The existing training offer databases are only databases there are no quality assurance mechanisms, Integrated Qualifications Registry, to some extent, is exceptional, but there are too few qualifications registered. Those persons who are well qualified and know English know how to navigate within the system and international training market, but those who are not skilled or do not know about labour market trends have significant difficulties. (Vice President of one of the Chambers of Industry, Poland)

Particular problem is that tenders for state-facilitated retraining have price as the dominant criterion. This eliminates the role of quality and breaks supply chains in AE. (CEO of an adult education provider, Czechia)

EU funds often distort business rationality. Subsidised training is preferred by businesses, not the training they need. (CEO of the organisational development consultancy and adult education company, Hungary)

The lack of systemic solutions and inadequate funding mechanisms were, to some extent, counterbalanced by the growing training offer, which was among the most frequently indicated strengths of adult education, together with the availability of European Social Fund and Recovery and Resilience Facility resources. Ten of the 45 respondents referred to one of these two strengths.

In Poland there is diverse offer of training provided by various entities – some might say this is a vice but in my view, this a strength of the system in Poland. The challenge is quality – although there are some mechanisms for quality assurance even though these are not widespread. (Policy expert, Poland)

Somewhat more positive assessments were recorded among representatives of public employment services in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland.

I often hear that there is no system of education, career guidance: but the system is given – a wide range of formal education, a wide range of private schools. Many companies offer further edu-

cation – the supply is there. Maybe what is missing is coherence between education, modularity, continuity between levels. Legally, the system is set. (Labour office official, Czechia)

These accounts describe the conditions under which training markets are expected to malfunction. Weak quality assurance and widespread information asymmetry, such as the absence of reliable registers, leave learners and employers unable to identify adequate provision and leave providers with little incentive to supply it. Our findings point to a limited ability of private adult education provision to meet labour market needs. State funding of training, however, appears to be affected by the same problems. Almost all employers indicated that funding distortions contribute to the lack of responsiveness among training providers:

Corporate training is supply-driven, a training company develops some kind of training, which it then tries to sell to as many companies as possible, even if there is no direct corporate demand for it. The customizability of training courses is not typical. (Hungarian-owned company producing industrial raw materials)

EU tenders are generally training-oriented: they do not respond to individual needs, but create a training course and look for participants for it. (County Chamber of Commerce and Industry senior officer, Hungary)

Tenders are biased: there was an upper salary limit for the tender for the development of communication skills. Such training would be needed by middle and senior managers, but they earned more than the application allowed. Low-paid people received the training, whereas this training would not have been beneficial for them. (Hungarian-owned company producing industrial raw materials)

These training market distortions and inefficiencies are also visible to training providers themselves:

The main deficiency – we do not have a Register of Educational Institutions, nor do we have a set of criteria for an institution educating adults, for a lecturer. In language education there is not even the possibility to get accredited – all we can say to the client now is that we educate and we do it well, but we cannot differentiate ourselves from the quantum of different language schools, that we offer a different or extraordinary quality.

Our clients then have nothing to decide on the basis of which language school is of good quality and which is not. There should be someone who has verified the quality of the language school so that the client can make a good choice. (...)

If we have a low level of lecturers, this is reflected in the low level of the educational programmes they prepare and lecture. The situation is better in corporate training, where the company pays for it. But if we are talking about public education, if an ordinary adult wants to sign up for a course, they don't even know where to go. Even the supply is not sufficient. (...) This is a fundamental problem. Why would one spend time somewhere and pay for it out of one's own pocket when the quality is questionable? (Private training provider, Slovakia)

Representatives of adult training companies also see major challenges in the attitudes and resources of employers and learners. Smaller companies were said to have limited resources and competences to audit skills and to create adequate learning opportunities for their employees, and a broader problem of skills utilisation after training was identified:

The main problem is ineffectiveness in training: people cannot use in practice what they have learnt (e.g. for career promotion, higher value added in their work); than they are frustrated and they rather change a job; there is not enough intra-company mobility. The connection between training and its direct effect in the job performance is failing.

In most companies, there is no targeted development of employees. The companies (the management) stick to the “comfort” of well-established positions and defined job descriptions (“this is what we hired you for...”), they don’t want to deal with transfers, internal horizon mobility doesn’t work... no preparation for career progression/growth... (Training provider, Czechia)

The data show that challenges dominate strengths in all four countries, with the share of negative opinions ranging from 58% in Poland to 83% in Czechia (Table 3).

Table 3. Positive and negative statements regarding adult learning policies in a given country

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Positive	7	9	11	6
Negative	33	24	15	24
Percentage negative	83	73	58	80

Source: Authors.

It is worth noting that the sample included six representatives of multinational or large companies, at least one from each country. Most of them did not hold firm opinions on how the national adult education system works. This appears to result mainly from the fact that such companies rely on in-house training or engage trainers and training companies not through the open market but on the basis of previous cooperation or recommendations. They assess their own strategies of human capital formation and competence development as strong, and most of the positive replies recorded in the scoping study came from these respondents. In this respect, large companies appear to operate largely in isolation from the national adult education systems.

4.2 Barriers to participation in adult learning and vulnerable groups

Taking the four-category typology of barriers presented in Section 2.1 as the analytical frame, we analysed respondents' answers to the following question from the interview guide:

What are the most frequent barriers of people/employees to participation in a training? Money? Time? Location/distance? Language? Personal reasons? No interest in training? Other?

As in the previous section, replies were coded and each statement was assigned to a barrier, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Perceived barriers to participation in adult learning in the Visegrad countries

Category of barriers	Barrier	n
Individual's life situation	Lack of time due to work or family reasons	17
	Financial situation	12
	Other (proximity of training, language barrier, information technology competences required for online training, health problems, age)	8
	<i>Subtotal</i>	37
Institutional arrangements affecting individuals' decisions to invest in human capital	Training fees	3
	Lack of training options or their poor quality	6
	Attitudes of employers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (do not allow training during working time, do not value additional skills, no internal promotion, lack of skills to assess competences)	11
	<i>Subtotal</i>	20
Availability of information about education and training opportunities	Lack of career guidance for adults	5
	Lack of adequate information about the education offer, future training needs or labour market trends	4
	<i>Subtotal</i>	9
Attitudes and dispositions of adults towards learning	Lack of confidence, perceived lack of need to train, lack of awareness, bad experience of school education	24
	<i>Subtotal</i>	24
Total		90

Note: *n* denotes the number of coded statements.

Source: Authors.

The distribution of statements in Table 4 adds to the gloomy picture of adult education in the Visegrad countries. In addition to the perceived lack of systemic solutions, respondents point to significant problems arising from a lack of time and money and from the attitudes of learners and employers. The distribution of statements across barriers was very similar irrespective of country or group of respondents, and no particular pattern could be observed.

The replies illustrate the complexity of these barriers. Time constraints were said to weigh most on individuals with family responsibilities, especially those with young children, since caregiving duties consume much of their personal time. In the professional sphere, respondents pointed to employees of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), whose workload frequently precludes participation in education because such companies have only limited options for replacing staff.

Financial constraints were named as another significant barrier, affecting both individuals and organisations. Many adults were said to lack the personal funds necessary to finance educational programmes, a barrier that respondents considered particularly acute for those from lower-income backgrounds. Reported financial constraints may, however, also indicate that learning is not a priority in personal budgets. In addition, SMEs were described as facing financial limitations that prevent them from supporting employee education, deterred by the cost of training programmes and by the potential loss of productivity during training periods.

There are companies that really cannot educate so much – e.g. due to the lack of time (the training should be provided within the working time, but in reality the work has to be done anyway and in many cases the employee then does the work in the free time – thus low willingness to participate in training) – it correlates with the lack of human resources. (Policy expert, Czechia)

The biggest barrier is time & money (not the cost of training, but the time spent on it: e.g. the IT professional's project is on hold while he/she is in training). (Large company representative, Hungary)

Low motivation was frequently cited and was attributed by respondents to a variety of personal and contextual factors. Negative past experiences of formal education were said to deter individuals from pursuing further learning opportunities. According to the respondents, some adults do not perceive additional education as necessary or beneficial, often owing to a lack of awareness of its potential advantages. The sustained effort and commitment required by longer educational activities were described as daunting, leading to reluctance or avoidance. A degree of scepticism towards the quality and efficacy of available courses was also reported. Respondents

pointed, in addition, to low motivation or willingness among company managers to provide training for their employees, resulting either from scepticism about the quality of education and its benefits for individuals and the company, or from low awareness of employees' training needs.

Often it's because they (the individuals) have to step out of their comfort zone and don't see the point or don't know how to do it. (Large company, Slovakia)

Who is responsible for our education? In childhood, parents and school. But then later myself, but this is not named. Maybe if we clearly named who is responsible, it would help. With that mindset, maybe people would choose their jobs accordingly and go to a company that supports AE and not the one that doesn't. Because they would be aware of the importance of AE themselves and also their own responsibility for it. (Adult Education provider, Slovakia)

The first barrier is a bad school experience. When people encounter education, it's because someone told them to do it, they didn't come up with it alone, they don't see the meaning. (Adult Education provider, Slovakia)

There is no competency assessment that confronts managers and employees with shortages. (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise expert, Hungary)

The biggest obstacle is convincing decision-makers (management in the case of businesses) that soft skill development is worthwhile and has a monetary benefit. (Company, Hungary)

Managers are not sufficiently prepared, they cannot accurately identify when and what kind of training their subordinates need, they do not recognize the need for training. (Company, Hungary)

In addition to these widespread barriers, respondents identified several specific factors that particularly affect vulnerable groups. Although mentioned less frequently, these barriers have wider societal implications and warrant more detailed investigation. Age discrimination was one such factor.

Older people were said to be unintentionally left out of education, partly because they themselves do not see the point of learning at their age. Cultural factors were also seen as shaping attitudes towards education, with certain family and community environments described as discouraging participation. A further example concerned heavy manual workers, who were said to face physical exhaustion and poorer health, which reduce their capacity and motivation for further education. Individual psychological barriers, usually connected with social disadvantage, such as low self-confidence and fear of failure, were also highlighted.

There have been cases where family background stood in the way of learning, family norms did not allow to increase education. (Large company, Hungary)

There are negative effects of micro-communities (e.g. Roma women's learning is often not viewed favourably by the community). (Adult Education expert, Hungary)

We, for example, educate a lot of seniors, but the state does not help us in any way. We don't have the finances for it, and neither do the seniors, because they don't see the fundamental point in education – they are willing to invest in their grandchildren instead. Then the education of seniors is left on the shoulders of proactive providers or NGOs – this is where the state should step in and introduce some quality standards for schools. (Adult Education provider, Slovakia)

The scoping study thus corroborates, from the stakeholders' perspective, the well-documented finding that barriers to participation in adult education disproportionately affect socially disadvantaged groups, especially low-skilled and low-income individuals, people from excluded localities and communities, and those facing other disadvantages (see also Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2022; Zarifis, 2021). Respondents also identified life-course stages at which participation is particularly difficult: older adults, especially lonely seniors, are vulnerable owing to age-related biases, lower income, poorer health and other limitations; parents of young children, particularly single parents, struggle with time and financial constraints. Among specific groups, refugees, and especially war refugees from Ukraine, were mentioned several times as facing substantial barriers owing to their precarious situation and the additional challenges of adapting to a new environment.

Attention should also be paid to less frequently mentioned risk groups that may escape the attention of companies and the state alike, such as people working in fast-changing industries and employees in positions with a high risk of burnout.

Vulnerable groups that need to be targeted more for soft skills development include mainly workers in managerial and customer service positions who are at risk of burnout and older workers who want to maintain their performance and keep up with new technologies and changes in the way teams operate. (Public Employment Services expert, Czechia)

Low and medium skilled people in fast changing industries living in small towns without access to public transportation. (Industry chamber expert, Poland)

4.3 The importance of soft and transversal skills and the lack of clarity in their operationalisation

This section is based on the analysis of answers to three questions from the interview guide:

In recent years, more similar concepts have emerged, emphasising the need for a set of skills, abilities, attitudes, literacies of individuals that should enhance their ability to face current and future challenges in their personal and professional lives – such as key competences, skills for life, or 21st century skills. Are you aware of these concepts? Which of these competences/skills do you consider the most important in relation to the current and future labour market and society?

The following sets of skills are usually regarded as transversal skills: teamwork, problem solving, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, time management, interpersonal skills. How do you assess the need of these skills with regard to the labour market development now and in the future? Which of them you consider the most important.

Is there any other area of soft/transversal skills (or general skills) that you would especially emphasise that we have not mentioned?

The results of the scoping study point to the many dimensions of soft skills and to their perceived importance in personal and professional development. The majority of respondents understand soft skills as general, transversal and universal, and as standing in opposition to hard, technical skills. Soft skills are seen as supporting the performance of tasks that require specific skills and knowledge, and also as contributing to personal and organisational development. One respondent compared the role of soft skills to that of “IT support”, something needed both to keep the software functioning and to ensure its smooth implementation and use within the company.

Soft skill has become like IT support: in a developed, well-functioning economy, you need soft skills in market conditions. (Adult Education provider, Hungary)

Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of several commonly listed soft skills (teamwork, problem-solving, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, time management and interpersonal skills). Their feedback indicated that all of these skills are considered crucial, either because of their interdependence or because of their varying relevance across professions. The answers were not limited to the list offered. Each respondent named several skills, some of which overlapped and some of which could be aggregated under parent categories. Certain groups of soft skills were clearly emphasised more often than others, which allowed us to rank their perceived importance approximately within our sample. Table 5 summarises the most commonly indicated soft or transversal skills in descending order of frequency.

Table 5. Soft skills listed in descending order of the number of appearances in stakeholders' opinions

Soft skill (group name)	Selected soft skills in the group (related skills, synonyms)	n
Teamwork and communication	Knowledge and information sharing, cooperation, networking, feedback culture, prioritising team success over individual ambitions, assertiveness, the ability to explain and defend one's work	42
Adaptability and learning	Willingness to learn, ability to learn, capacity to adapt to rapidly changing conditions and technologies, flexibility	22
Problem-solving and critical thinking	Ability to sort out and evaluate various information, appropriate decision-making, distinguishing what is important	12
Working with information and data	Data analysis, complex analytical thinking, systems thinking	11
Skills bordering on personality traits	Emotional intelligence, resilience, stress tolerance, self-awareness, integrity, self-confidence, persistence, etc.	10
Business-related skills	Entrepreneurship, profit-seeking attitudes, goal-oriented approaches, sales skills, presentation skills, the ability to create a personal brand, etc.	8
Creativity	Including the ability to improvise and to perform efficiently with minimal effort	8
Work ethics and organisational skills	Time management, reliability, precision, motivation, punctuality, adherence to rules and regulations	8
Mental health and well-being	Psycho-hygiene, mindfulness, the ability to care for one's mental health, maintaining work-life balance	7
Skills for everyday life in society and basic working life	Basic literacy, numeracy, social skills for daily interactions, civic skills, media literacy, financial literacy	6
Management skills	Leadership, change management, project management, self-management, career management	6
Diversity and inclusion	Cultural diversity management, awareness, communication skills for navigating multicultural environments, coping with gender issues, coping with stereotypes	3

Notes: *n* denotes the number of statements referring to the group. One respondent could make several statements relating to different skills aggregated under one skill group. Other skills mentioned by respondents but not included in the above categories were, for example, conflict resolution, the ability to work independently, and proficiency in understanding and formulating text.

Source: Authors.

The distribution of statements points to differences among the views of the stakeholder groups in our sample. Although almost all respondents stressed teamwork and communication, this group of skills was prioritised most strongly among employers, who underlined the importance of cooperation, networking, knowledge sharing and assertiveness in the everyday practice of companies. Employers ranked next the abi-

lity to work with information and data, work ethics and organisational competences, and a set of skills bordering on personality traits, such as integrity and creativity.

Adult training providers also rated communication and teamwork most highly, followed by problem-solving and critical thinking, business-related skills, and adaptability and learning in fourth place. This ranking suggests that these skills are central to the curricula through which providers prepare learners for the demands of the labour market.

PES and HR representatives placed adaptability and learning first, in line with the broader need for workforce flexibility. They then emphasised working with information and data, creativity, and mental health, which may indicate their awareness of the difficult environment created by current labour market and societal challenges.

Policy makers and policy experts differed from the other groups in the stronger emphasis they placed on skills for everyday life in society and for basic working life, such as literacy, numeracy, and civic and media skills. This perspective reflects a broader societal view of preparing individuals not only for employment but also for active and informed citizenship.

The replies generally reproduce patterns reported in other studies, including Binkley et al. (2012), Care (2018), Cinque (2016), Dębowski et al. (2021, 2024), Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023) and Van Laar et al. (2020). Our study adds the identification of two categories of skills related to diversity and inclusion and to well-being and mental health.

Diversity and inclusion, understood as a complex set of skills defined by their common purpose, are perceived as increasingly important. Several respondents emphasised the need for cultural diversity management, awareness, and communication skills adapted to multicultural environments, and addressing gender issues and challenging stereotypes in the workplace were also highlighted as significant.

The well-being and mental health of employees are attracting more attention owing to recent societal stressors such as the pandemic, war and inflation. Companies are recognising the importance of stress management skills, and respondents suggested promoting mental health through well-being-related training, such as yoga, mindfulness practices or leisure activities.

The emergence of these two categories may be explained by the proximity of the Visegrad countries to the war in Ukraine and by the large numbers of migrants (not only war-related) they have been receiving. Although the concepts themselves are not new, their explicit connection to evolving demand for related soft skills, that is, their manifestation as “skill-needs-inducing” concepts, can be regarded as a relatively novel phenomenon, particularly in the Visegrad countries. While individual studies have addressed these specific skills (e.g. Bogoeva, 2020; Sponselee et al., 2023), the

qualitative evidence from our research indicates that this perspective is becoming more widespread among human resources and adult education specialists. The following quotations illustrate this finding:

Soft skills are very important but also stress management – there are plenty of employees who do not know how to deal with stress resulting from COVID-19, financial crisis and inflation, and the war. Managers want to help their staff but do not have sufficient knowledge and skills. Another is cultural diversity – Poland becomes more and more diverse, not only due to migration from Ukraine, but also from Moldova, Belairs, Kazakhstan and others. (Company, Poland)

Mental resilience, self-confidence, stress management... but also other current topics such as diversity. We should ensure that everybody is feeling well in our company. (Company, Czechia)

Psycho-hygiene, mindfulness, know how to perceive your feelings, ensure well-being, the ability to care for your mental health. If we are not comfortable, we cannot communicate, use other skills correctly. (Public Employment Services expert, Slovakia)

5. Discussion and conclusions

The picture that emerges from the interviews is consistent across countries and across stakeholder groups. Stakeholders in all four Visegrad countries hold a predominantly negative perception of their adult education systems and, in the words of one respondent, see “barely any bright elements”. They do not perceive a systemic approach to adult learning either in public policy or in the initiatives of private companies and social partners. The lack of governance of adult education is accompanied by difficulties in funding, by tendering based on price and by market distortions and imperfections. Despite considerable policy effort in the field of adult learning, including the use of EU funds, adult learning remains a comparatively new policy field, a characterisation consistent with comparative analysis showing that lifelong learning has only recently emerged as a policy field in the CEE countries (Markowitsch & Dębowski, 2022).

These perceptions correspond closely to the theoretical expectations concerning imperfect training markets. The problems most frequently named by respondents (absent or unreliable registers, weak quality assurance, price-driven tenders, supply-driven provision) are the mechanisms through which information asymmetries are expected to produce adverse selection in training markets. The state of registers and data collection in the four countries is examined in a companion article based on the same project (Stęchły et al., 2024). The absence of any reference by respondents to ef-

fective self-regulation by providers or to coordination by social partners is consistent with the collective action problem identified by Olson (1971) and with the documented weakness of intermediary organisations in the region (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021; Wallis & Winterton, 2022).

Notably, respondents attribute the same distortions to publicly funded training as to private provision, which suggests that public funding, in the form in which it has been deployed, has reproduced rather than corrected the failures of the market. More broadly, the lack of coherence that respondents perceive across the subsystems of adult education can be read as a sector-level manifestation of the “patchwork” character of the region’s institutional architectures, whose internal inconsistency and weak complementarities entail high transaction costs (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021).

The results also reveal a discrepancy between certain indicators that show an improving situation, such as rising participation rates in adult education and the use of additional financing schemes under the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, and the overall poor evaluation of system performance in our interviews. This discrepancy can be attributed in part to the difference between what quantitative indicators and qualitative accounts capture. While increased financial resources generally lead to more training opportunities and higher participation rates, this does not necessarily imply that high-quality training is being delivered or that the right skills are being acquired. The qualitative insights from the interviews suggest substantial limitations in the effectiveness, accessibility and quality of adult education systems in the Visegrad countries. Financial resources and policy tools therefore appear to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for the development of quality skills and their effective matching to labour market needs.

Adult education is seen as a sector that struggles to respond to demand, whether because of inadequate training themes and content (often driven by the supply side) or because of low-quality provision and a lack of transparency.

Learners are seen by respondents as finding it difficult to articulate their needs and as lacking the motivation, time and money to invest in skills acquisition. Employers are perceived as a polarised group. SMEs lack the resources and competences to support the training of their employees, whereas large corporations, especially multinationals, are cited as examples of good practice, offering development opportunities and possessing the tools to support their workers. Large-company respondents rarely commented on the national system and rely on in-house or network-based provision, which suggests that the best-resourced actors have effectively opted out of the national adult education system instead of contributing to its improvement.

The barriers identified by respondents, the subject of the second research question, correspond closely to the categories established in the literature (Cross, 1981; Desjardins, 2017; Rubenson, 2011), and their distribution was similar across countries and stakeholder groups. Many of the challenges and barriers to adult learning, such as the lack of time and money for investment in skills development, are external to the adult education system itself. As such, they cannot be resolved by measures confined to education or public employment services, or by individual learning accounts alone. Addressing them requires attention to the interdependencies with other institutional domains, for example labour market regulation, industrial policy or digitalisation in the public sector.

The lack of time to develop one's competences, whether for personal or professional reasons, calls for intervention in the area of labour relations as well. Career counselling, improved transparency, quality and availability of the training offer, and funding remain necessary elements of public policy, but without complementary instruments in other domains they may be insufficient.

The findings also point to a role for the state, particularly in the Visegrad countries, which are still catching up with the wealthier and more developed Western European economies, and to the need for state policies to be coordinated across sectors beyond adult education and training policy *per se*. At the same time, the prominence of attitudinal barriers in respondents' accounts, on the part of both learners and managers, suggests that future research and policy making, at both national and EU level, should pay more attention to "soft", less tangible barriers. These include individuals' experiences and attitudes, as well as community factors such as a culture that does not value education, prejudice and negative social pressure.

On the third research question, opinions about soft skills were largely consistent across the groups of respondents: employers, adult training providers, policy makers and policy experts, and PES and HR representatives. Soft skills were considered highly relevant, indispensable and more important in the current situation, and were seen in opposition to hard and specific skills. This consensus on importance, however, coexists with the conceptual fuzziness of the term. Respondents defined soft skills mainly by contrast with hard skills and by the support they provide to other skills, not by any shared positive definition.

Respondents perceive demand for soft skills as highly dynamic and rapidly changing. While some needs in this area remain stable and well known, communication and teamwork being essential skills for the working environment, other demands are emerging, shaped by the polycrisis of recent years. Examples include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on information and communication technology (ICT) skills, of

the energy crisis on green skills, and of the rising diversity of the workforce on the need for diversity- and culture-related social skills. In addition, the psychologically difficult situation, characterised by perceived lower safety and higher stress levels (owing to the war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis and economic adversity), has produced a more acute need to support the development of well-being- and health-related skills.

These results indicate that the understanding of work and labour relations is shifting. The employee, seen as a person and as a member of a team, is expected to present a bundle of various skills, both specific and generic, hard and soft. We acknowledge that this observation is not independent of the labour market context of the study period, marked by widely reported recruitment difficulties and wage growth in the Visegrad countries.

The material allows a cautious assessment of the two guiding hypotheses. The first hypothesis, that stakeholders across the four countries hold broadly similar views and that differences are better explained by stakeholder group than by nationality, is partly supported. Cross-country differences were modest. The share of negative assessments ranged from 58% to 83% (Table 3), and the distribution of barriers showed no country-specific pattern. Group-related differences were more visible, particularly in the ranking of soft skills, in the somewhat more positive tone of PES representatives, and in the distinctive position of large and multinational employers. Some country-specific emphases nevertheless emerged, notably the Hungarian respondents' focus on funding distortions and tendering, which may reflect Hungary's distinctive regulation of the sector (Laczik & Farkas, 2022). Given the small and unevenly composed sample, these observations should be treated as tentative.

The second hypothesis, that soft skills are perceived as increasingly important owing to internal and external factors, is supported with respect to external factors. Respondents explicitly linked emerging skill needs to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, migration, inflation and related stressors. Evidence for internal, company-development factors is more indirect. Respondents contrasted the human resource development capacities of large and multinational companies with those of SMEs, but did not themselves frame growing demand for soft skills as a consequence of company growth or organisational development. This aspect of the hypothesis would require further investigation with a research design focused on employers.

The limitations of the study mean that these findings should be read as claims to be tested in further research rather than as established facts. By documenting stakeholders' perceptions, the study provides a qualitative complement to official statistics and a starting point for the project's subsequent feasibility study on digital individual learning accounts. Future research should examine the relationship between these

perceptions and the measured performance of adult education systems, extend the comparison to a larger and more balanced sample of stakeholders, and investigate the internal, company-level drivers of demand for soft skills more directly.

Funding

The results presented here were collected in a scoping study preceding a feasibility study within the Erasmus+ project *Digital Individual Learning Accounts in the Visegrad Countries* (D-ILA). 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.

References

- Acemoglu, D., & Pischke, J.-S. (1998). *Beyond Becker: Training in imperfect labor markets* (NBER Working Paper No. 6740). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/nbr/nberwo/6740.html>
- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Binkley, M., Erstad, O., Herman, J., Raizen, S., Ripley, M., Miller-Ricci, M., & Rumble, M. (2012). Defining twenty-first century skills. In P. Griffin, B. McGaw, & E. Care (Eds.), *Assessment and teaching of 21st century skills* (pp. 17–66). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2324-5_2
- Bogoeva, B. (2020). Project manager competencies in multicultural environment. In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Research in Business, Management and Finance*. <https://doi.org/10.33422/2ND.ICRBMF.2020.03.109>
- Bohle, D., & Greskovits, B. (2012). *Capitalist diversity on Europe's periphery*. Cornell University Press.
- Boudard, E., & Rubenson, K. (2003). Revisiting major determinants of participation in adult education with a direct measure of literacy skills. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 39(3), 265–281. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2004.04.007>
- Care, E. (2018). Twenty-first century skills: From theory to action. In E. Care, P. Griffin, & M. Wilson (Eds.), *Assessment and teaching of 21st century skills: Research and applications* (pp. 3–21). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65368-6_1
- Carneiro, P., & Heckman, J. J. (2003). Human capital policy. In J. J. Heckman & A. B. Krueger, *Inequality in America: What role for human capital policies?* MIT Press.
- Cinque, M. (2016). “Lost in translation”: Soft skills development in European countries. *Tuning Journal for Higher Education*, 3(2), 389–427. [https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-3\(2\)-2016pp389-427](https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-3(2)-2016pp389-427)
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning (2018/C 189/01). *Official Journal of the European Union*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))
- Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Crouch, C., Finegold, D., & Sako, M. (1999). *Are skills the answer? The political economy of skill creation in advanced industrial countries*. Oxford University Press.
- Dębowski, H. (2024). *Rama kwalifikacji jako narzędzie polityki na rzecz uczenia się osób dorosłych w Polsce* [The qualifications framework as an instrument of policy for adult learning in Poland] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. SGH Warsaw School of Economics.
- Dębowski, H., & Stęchły, W. (2022). Poland: Striving for better governance and integration. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 141–166). Peter Lang.
- Dębowski, H., Stęchły, W., Tomengova, A., Valovic, J., & Reegård, K. (2021). *Development and assessment of transversal key competences in the VET sector: Model solutions and practices in six European countries*. SGH Warsaw School of Economics. https://track-vet.sgh.waw.pl/system/files/TRACK-VET_Synthesis_Report.pdf
- Dębowski, H., Stęchły, W., Tomengová, A., Valovič, J., & Reegård, K. (2024). Development and assessment of transversal key competences in vocational education and training: Practices and experiences of six European countries. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*, 15(29/30), 39–77.
- Deming, D. J. (2017). The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(4), 1593–1640. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx022>
- Desjardins, R. (2017). *Political economy of adult learning systems: Comparative study of strategies, policies and constraints*. Bloomsbury.

- Desjardins, R. (2023). Lifelong learning systems. In K. Evans, W. O. Lee, J. Markowitsch, & M. Zukas (Eds.), *Third international handbook of lifelong learning* (pp. 353–374). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19592-1_18
- Desjardins, R., & Ioannidou, A. (2020). The political economy of adult learning systems: Some institutional features that promote adult learning participation. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 43(2), 143–168. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-020-00159-y>
- Desjardins, R., & Rubenson, K. (2013). Participation patterns in adult education: The role of institutions and public policy frameworks in resolving coordination problems. *European Journal of Education*, 48(2), 262–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12029>
- Dvořák, D., & Gal, P. (2022). Czech Republic: National and local perspectives. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 167–193). Peter Lang.
- Eurostat. (2006). *Classification of learning activities: Manual* (Cat. No. KS-BF-06-002-EN). Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3859598/5896961/KS-BF-06-002-EN.PDF.pdf/387706bc-ee7a-454e-98b6-744c4b8a7c64?t=1414781358000>
- Felstead, A., & Ashton, D. (2000). Tracing the link: Organisational structures and skill demands. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 10(3), 5–21.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107>
- Finkelstein, N. D., & Grubb, W. N. (2000). Making sense of education and training markets: Lessons from England. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), 601–631. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312037003601>
- Gardawski, J., & Rapacki, R. (2021). Patchwork capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe: A new conceptualization. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*, 12(24), 7–106. <https://econjournals.sgh.waw.pl/wfes/article/view/3399>
- Gruzdev, M. V., Kuznetsova, I. V., Tarkhanova, I. Y., & Kazakova, E. I. (2018). University graduates' soft skills: The employers' opinion. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 7(4), 690–698. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1200952>
- Halász, G., & Michel, A. (2011). Key competences in Europe: Interpretation, policy formulation and implementation. *European Journal of Education*, 46(3), 289–306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01491.x>
- Herbst, M., & Wojciuk, A. (2017). Common legacy, different paths: The transformation of educational systems in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47(1), 118–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2016.1153410>
- Kalenda, J. (2024). *Formation of adult learning systems in Central Europe* (Lifelong Learning Book Series, Vol. 32). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-59827-2>
- Käpplinger, B., & St. Clair, R. (2023). Vacant or viable? Niche as metaphor for understanding the status of German and Canadian research approaches in adult education. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 14(2), 245–259. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4160>
- Kocór, M., & Worek, B. (2017). Adult learning: Providing equal opportunities or widening differences? The Polish case. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(2), 239–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1265642>
- Laczik, A., & Farkas, E. (2022). Hungary: Liberal and developmental choices. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 223–244). Peter Lang.
- Leuven, E. (2005). The economics of private sector training: A survey of the literature. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 19(1), 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0950-0804.2005.00240.x>

- Levac, D., Colquhoun, H., & O'Brien, K. K. (2010). Scoping studies: Advancing the methodology. *Implementation Science*, 5, Article 69. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-5-69>
- Lieberman, E. S. (2005). Nested analysis as a mixed-method strategy for comparative research. *American Political Science Review*, 99(3), 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051762>
- Markowitsch, J., & Dębowski, H. (2022). Education systems and qualifications frameworks. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 397–425). Peter Lang.
- Ménard, C. (2018). Research frontiers of new institutional economics. *RAUSP Management Journal*, 53(1), 3–10.
- Ménard, C., & Shirley, M. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Handbook of new institutional economics*. Springer.
- Nölke, A., & Vliegenthart, A. (2009). Enlarging the varieties of capitalism: The emergence of dependent market economies in East Central Europe. *World Politics*, 61(4), 670–702. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109990098>
- North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Oesch, D. (2013). *Occupational change in Europe: How technology and education transform the job structure*. Oxford University Press.
- Olson, M. (1971). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups* (2nd printing with a new preface and appendix). Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvj3ts>
- Pepper, D. (2011). Assessing key competences across the curriculum – and Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 46(3), 335–353.
- Reegård, K., & Dębowski, H. (2020). Exit, voice or loyalty? VET stakeholders' response to large scale skilled emigration from Poland. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 7(3), 325–343. <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.7.3.4>
- Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 October 2019 establishing a common framework for European statistics relating to persons and households, based on data at individual level collected from samples. (2019). *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 261I, 1–32. <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/1700/oj>
- Roosmaa, E.-L., & Saar, E. (2010). Participating in non-formal learning: Patterns of inequality in EU-15 and the new EU-8 member countries. *Journal of Education and Work*, 23(3), 179–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2010.486396>
- Rubenson, K. (2011). Barriers to participation in adult education. In K. Rubenson (Ed.), *Adult learning and education* (pp. 216–224). Elsevier Academic Press.
- Rubenson, K., & Desjardins, R. (2009). The impact of welfare state regimes on barriers to participation in adult education: A bounded agency model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(3), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609331548>
- Saar, E., Täht, K., & Roosalu, T. (2014). Institutional barriers for adults' participation in higher education in thirteen European countries. *Higher Education*, 68(5), 691–710. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9739-8>
- Sponselee, H. C. S., ter Beek, L., Renders, C. M., Kroeze, W., Fransen, M. P., van Asselt, K. M., & Steenhuis, I. H. M. (2023). Letting people flourish: Defining and suggesting skills for maintaining and improving positive health. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, Article 1224470. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1224470>
- Stęchły, W. (2024). From disposition to knowledge: The cognitive drift in European VET learning outcomes. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*, 15(29/30), 79–108.
- Stęchły, W., Dębowski, H., Gállová, L., Habodászová, L., Szlamka, E., Šímová, Z., & Tučková, M. (2024). Supporting adult education policy through data collection and registries: Experiences of the Visegrad countries in the context of individual learning accounts and quality assurance developments. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*, 15(29/30), 110–150.

- Thornhill-Miller, B., Camarda, A., Mercier, M., Burkhardt, J.-M., Morisseau, T., Bourgeois-Bougrine, S., Vinchon, F., El Hayek, S., Augereau-Landais, M., Mourey, F., Feybesse, C., Sundquist, D., & Lubart, T. (2023). Creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration: Assessment, certification, and promotion of 21st century skills for the future of work and education. *Journal of Intelligence*, 11(3), 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence11030054>
- Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. Jossey-Bass.
- Tütlys, V., Winterton, J., Markowitsch, J., & Pavlin, S. (2022). Skill formation in the post-communist CEE countries. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 27–63). Peter Lang.
- UNESCO, ETF, & Cedefop. (2023). *Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2022: Volume II. National and regional case studies*. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2236_en.pdf
- Van Laar, E., Van Deursen, A. J., Van Dijk, J. A., & De Haan, J. (2020). Determinants of 21st-century skills and 21st-century digital skills for workers: A systematic literature review. *SAGE Open*, 10(1), Article 2158244019900176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019900176>
- Van Nieuwenhove, L., & De Wever, B. (2022). Why are low-educated adults underrepresented in adult education? Studying the role of educational background in expressing learning needs and barriers. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 44(1), 189–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2020.1865299>
- Vantuch, J., & Jelínková, D. (2022). Slovakia: Skill formation at the crossroads. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 195–221). Peter Lang.
- Wallis, E., & Winterton, J. (2022). Social dialogue and skill formation systems in the CEE. In V. Tütlys, J. Markowitsch, S. Pavlin, & J. Winterton (Eds.), *Skill formation in Central and Eastern Europe: A search for patterns and directions of development* (pp. 371–395). Peter Lang.
- Wiederhold, S. (2015). *Macroeconomic growth and lifelong learning* (LLLight'in'Europe thematic report). LLLightinEurope Research Consortium.
- Williamson, O. E. (2000). The new institutional economics: Taking stock, looking ahead. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 38(3), 595–613. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.38.3.595>
- Zarifis, G. (2021). Active citizenship programmes for unemployed young adults with low skills in Southern Europe: Participation, outreach, and barriers. In N. Kersh, H. Toiviainen, P. Pitkanen, & G. K. Zarifis (Eds.), *Young adults and active citizenship* (Lifelong Learning Book Series, Vol. 26, pp. 19–35). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65002-5_2