

Cowork₄YOUTH | Collaborative and Sharing Workspaces Policies for Youth in EEA Peripheral Regions

Output 13

Policy Recommendations Addressing Skills Gap and Brain Drain

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1. Introduction

Output 13 (Policy recommendations addressing skills gap and brain drain) is the first component of Work Package 5 (WP5) of the Cowork4YOUTH project. It comprises a unity with Output 14 (Policy recommendations on employment potential through alternative economic sectors), both management-wise and conceptually.

The objectives of WP5 are

- a. to take into account information and knowledge from the previous packages, where they are applicable;
- b. to conduct/ offer whenever necessary, additional analysis specifically on policy making and implementation fields that the previous outputs cannot cover by virtue of their brief; and
- c. combine results to create a cohesive framework that will enable one to detect shortcomings and solutions in the policies adopted at regional, national, or even, when pertinent, at European level.

WP5 and its outputs endeavour to make a substantial contribution in two ways:

- a. by underscoring issues that decision-makers may already be familiar with but they do not appear clearly or are high enough in the decision making agenda; and
- b. by expanding this agenda to issues that do not draw attention in the current youth employment discussion. The proposed methodology is developed on these two conditions.

The document is structured in five chapters. Chapter 2 presents the research strategy and methodology. Chapter 3 begins with a brief presentation of the project's research outputs that are directly related to the issues of skills gap and brain drain; subsequently, the additional policy analysis that was conducted for the purposes of this report is presented. The report concludes with the policy recommendations on skills gap and brain drain in chapter 4.

2. Research Strategy and Methodology

2.1 The problem as a social construct

With the aim to produce meaningful policy recommendations, rather than a bricolage of “solutions” to a certain approach to the problem, the aim of this brief analysis is to lay the theoretical ground for the following Narrative Policy Analysis.

The field of policy analysis is a relatively new one, with Lasswell first coining the term in the 1960s (Lasswell 1968). One of its first ascertainments - partially owed to the critique of behaviouralism, being the dominant perspective of that period - was the fact that policies are research constructs (Muller & Sural 2002). In that framework, fundamental is the understanding of a ‘problem’ as a social construct. What we register as a problem is the result of an institutional process. A long series of theories, ranging from functional theory to conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism (see further in Hughes & Kroehler 2007) discussed the mechanisms of how a reality turns to become a public issue (namely an issue concerning public debate). Different models discuss how a public issue is being registered in the agenda as a ‘problem’ asking for a solution ranging from the agenda-setting model, to the agenda-building model, and the public policy agenda (Kountouri 2015).

In that respect, policy recommendations that mirror ‘institutional change’ (Tsakatika 2015) can be analysed via the ascertainment, on the one hand of the processes responsible for the problem’s formulation and on the other hand of the theoretical and subconscious underpinnings, or what will be approached in the next chapters as “narrative”.

2.2 Theoretical premises

Over the years, researchers and practitioners employed a wide range of methods and frameworks to approach policy analysis. Here we focus on the Narrative Theories which inform the theoretical toolkit of this report. We will start with a short discussion of two basic observations that will set the framework for policy analysis theories.

2.2.1 The scope of analysis and sources of policies

Analysis can focus either on the suggestion of new policies or amendments of existing ones, or, at other times, it can focus on an attempt to understand how the policies have come about. The interconnection between the two is not self-evident: in the former case (which could be perceived as a functionalist approach), the problem that a policy deals with is often considered as a given, its roots as known, and the objective of the analysis becomes to point out a solution or improvements, often complimented by quantitative findings (e.g. Patton, Sawicki and Clark; 2013). The latter

approach (which can be positioned within the interpretive paradigm) is oriented towards understanding why the policy maker has made a particular decision. In this quest, this kind of analysis focuses on the actors' (who may well be persons, organisations, institutions etc) perception of the problem, their belief system, structural factors that affect meaning, and the interaction between actors or groups of interest. Additionally, understanding how a problem is stated and why it is stated in a particular way, can enable the identification of alternatives (e.g. Bacchi; 2009). Thus, the former approach asserts that a given problem can objectively have an optimal solution, while the latter claims that in essence, problems (concerning at least their identification) are socially constructed and the policies adopted for their solution mirror the assumptions they are based on. The complexity of the phenomenon of unemployment and the history of the policies applied direct our report towards the latter approach.

2.2.2 Narrative Theories

Narrative theories shift the focus of attention to meanings, perceptions, and values. The main idea behind narrative approaches is that people make sense of the world in a narrative form, and this sensemaking informs their decisions and actions (Maitlis, 2005). In the field of policy analysis, Roe (1994) proposes a Narrative Policy Analysis (NPA) framework to approach the process of policy making. It is a general fact that in any text, hence also in policy texts, one can identify a dominant or minor narratives. The analysis examines the interplay between the dominant and the alternative narratives and from their synthesis a metanarrative is constructed. This metanarrative, potentially represents the precise image of the problem. The NPA identifies the effect of this metanarrative on the problem definition "to make it [the problem] more amenable to conventional analytical tools" (Roe 1994: 156-158).

To provide a more analytical framework, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones and McBeth, 2010), combine previous work in the field to suggest four elements of a policy narrative: the setting or context (which intends to address a common criticism on narrative approaches, regarding the overlooking of structures); the plot, which can comprise independent or causal stories); the characters which are often categorised as allies, enemies and victims; and the moral of the story – which very often takes the form of the policy solution.

Expanding previous work, the research employing NPF has developed an analytical framework for three levels on which narratives operate. In brief, a narrative's effect makes sense in the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Shanahan, Mcbeth and Hathaway, 2011). The micro-level refers to the way the perceptions of the individuals comprising the "public" are shaped under the power of dominant or alternative narratives. The meso-level employs ideas of the Systems Theory, and particularly the function of subsystems, to reveal how narratives are constructed and inform action for interest groups, policy networks, coalitions, etc (Shanahan et al, 2018). On the macro-level the narratives represent communal beliefs and cultural preferences which can be expressed in story form, that can "infuse situational specific activity sequences with social meaning" (Danforth, 2016).

The analysis of **problem representations** bears similarities with narrative analysis, in the sense that it attempts to identify a narration of the problem under examination by the policy-makers or other

actors, based on meanings and beliefs. Unlike narrative approaches however, such analysis is exclusively located in the interpretive realm (Yanow, 2000). Bacchi's (2009) WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be), in brief, consists of six main questions: a. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policies? b. What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'? c. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about? d. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently? e. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'? f. How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? A significant advantage of this approach is that while focusing on analysis of interpretations, the sequence of questions -especially up to the fourth question- provides a cohesive framework that can move beyond critical analysis and be oriented towards constructive solutions.

Bacchi's question about the silences highlights a crucial point: policy making is developed in a particular conceptual framework (representation) that naturally stresses some parts of reality and conceals others. This idea is not new in the policy analysis discourse. It is a widely accepted idea that policy is not only the observable reality, in the sense stipulated by behaviourism. The American debates from the 1960s and 70s (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, Dahl 1957, Lukes 2005, Isaac 1987) point to several levels of decision making (or faces of power), including the power of non-decision-making (preventing suggestions or problems to be discussed), the power of not even conceiving problems and suggestions (hegemony) and several other issues.

2.3 Methodology: Narrative Policy Framework, causalities, conceptual gaps and silences

The policy making process for Youth Employment in the Member States (MS) can be addressed as unfolding at three levels. The first (here we refer to it as EU level) concerns the policy guidelines - commonly provided by the European Commission or the European Council- on which MS base their policies. With the term "guidelines" here, we refer not only to the documents that share this title (i.e. from the field of employment: the Broad Economic Guidelines, and the Employment Guidelines -hereafter BEG and EG respectively), but to any kind of policy paper, such as Recommendations, Directives, Legislation, Communications etc., as well as to any report published by EU institutions (e.g. Working Papers, the Employment Committee reports, reports and reviews by the Eurofound, the Court of Auditors, the Public Employment Services (PES) Network -even when such reports contain critical elements- etc). Such documents, whether they have a binding character or not, define the acceptable framework in which policy makers at the national or regional level will design their interventions. In this way, the EU level expresses (or shapes) the basic assumptions for core issues such as economic growth, the function of the labour market, the potential of particular sectors, etc.

The second level, which for the purpose of this current output we will refer to as the national-regional level, comprises the policies designed and adopted by national and regional authorities. These policies are expected to realise the EU-level guidelines and perspective, in accordance with local needs and conditions. The tailoring of EU guidelines and recommended policy tools can be a complicated process affected not only by the analytical capacity of the actors in charge, but by the interrelations and relative power of interest groups or any involved party as well. For the Youth Employment field in particular the baseline study (Kelly et al. 2022) observed that the Youth Guarantee had a “unifying effect” on the MS and regional NEET policies compared to the 2008-2012 period.

This last point leads us to the third level which is the implementation or field level. As, for instance, Redmond and McFadden (2022) mentioned in Cowork4YOUTH’s Output 8, the state of the country’s PES is crucial for the success of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP). This observation could additionally concern a variety of public organisations offering for example inspection mechanisms (regarding for instance undeclared or precarious work or the abuse of subsidies by companies), or the ministries that need to publish implementation guidelines for the particular policies. Here the concept of Governance becomes extremely relevant. Even though we consider the field level as the “lower”- more practical level of the policy-making process, the detection of shortcomings in the implementation mechanism is very often a reflection of deeper, structural or cultural deficiencies¹.

The youth employment and NEET policies were designed at the second (national-regional) level, and the interconnection between the described levels is obvious: Decision makers contribute to the formation of the EU guidelines (directly through the European Council for example). Still, when adjusting the policy recommendations to their local context their decisions are formed (or at least should be) within the limitations or potential of the available implementation mechanisms. Any interconnection cannot negate the fact that the three levels undergo separate processes and -from at least an institutionalism viewpoint- do not necessarily pursue common goals.

The persistence (or even the escalation in some cases) of particular issues such as low outreach, disengagement, the vulnerability of youth employment in unprecedented circumstances (as in the case of the COVID-19), and precarity show that some of the assumptions that the existing policies are based on, may not be sufficient to cover all aspects of the problem. Groups that Cowork4YOUTH concentrates upon (such as mothers and the long-term unemployed) are particularly affected by the persisting issues such as the above. Sidney (2007) maintained that “to the extent that studies offer recommendations for generating alternatives as if problem framing has already occurred [...] they are flawed at their root”. Framing fluctuates, as conditions such as the pandemic, or new technological environments occur as a matter of fact, and change the problems themselves.

¹ This report does not focus on the third level of analysis. Given the fact that the preexisting reviews and literature on the first two levels have neither provided sufficient information for the current condition of the issues of Skills Gap, Brain Drain and youth employment on the regional level, nor sufficiently analysed content of pertinent policies, it was deemed necessary that the policy recommendations focus on an analysis of the first two levels. An analysis on the third level would be a huge endeavour that would require a considerable amount of resources (several field researches in various settings per region) and could only be carried out either as case studies focusing on a small number of regions, or by coordinated action of totally dedicated projects. Indeed, the need for building the conditions for such analysis on regional level across EU is one of the conclusions of this report.

Understanding the fluidity of the frame / environment, Wollman (2007) underscores the **significance of causality for the evaluation analysis**. After identifying the expected impact on the one hand, and the “real-world changes” observed on the other, the evaluation sees the connections between them, in order to determine whether there is a causal relation between the two. The project’s baseline study showcased the lack of knowledge on this issue (Kelly et al. 2022), as the existing research does not seem able to provide a positive answer on to what extent the improvement in employment and NEET indicators observed after the introduction of the YG can be attributed to the policy interventions or to the economic cycle.

The analysis that was conducted for the other outputs of the project pointed out the complexity as well as the persistence of problems of unemployment (with emphasis on youth unemployment) and skills mismatches (e.g. the project’s Baseline Study, by Kelly et al., 2022; the Transnational report on NEETs, skills gap and employment by Romero, Oses and Judge, 2023). Examining these problems from the beginning of the crisis in 2008, up to the early post-covid period, it is evident that there is a significant improvement from about 2013-2014 and on; nevertheless, whether one can attribute this improvement to the implemented policies or merely consider it a symptom of an economic cycle is not that clear. The fact that there are fields or at least aspects of the policies in which the implemented policies have not yet brought the desired outcomes is not only suggested in academic literature but is also officially acknowledged (the most recent example being the Report from the Commission to the Council Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for adults; published in July 2023). Furthermore, the problems described in a considerable number of academic articles and institutional reviews indicate that the implemented policies repeatedly fail to address specific issues, such as outreach, inclusion, ensuring the quality of job offers for support programmes beneficiaries etc.

The review of current trends in policy analysis in general, and the aforementioned factors of the policy making process and the nature of the issues of employment and labour skills in particular in the EU space, led us to the conclusion that for the formation of meaningful policy recommendations the analysis should also address whether there are conceptual “gaps” on their grounds. Hence, the intention of the present analysis was also to recognize the **way the problems under examination are perceived**. The policies necessarily embody this perception, and this can be understood as a representation (see for instance the WPR approach; Bacci, 2009). Identifying the representation of the problem facilitates the detection of areas that have not been taken into consideration and from which specific recommendations can be formed.

The majority of the policy texts analysed refer to the ongoing programming period and more specifically the period 2021-2027. Policy texts that are not connected to the EU defined programming period regard, more or less, the same future period.

The list of the policy documents that were selected for the analysis (hereafter also referred to as “sources”) thus are:

1. The Resilience and Recovery Plans (2021-2027)

2. Other official plans on the Digital and the Green Transition or Employment and Skills, on the national or regional level (see further in this document)
3. The regional plans in the framework of SFC 2021 “Investment for jobs and growth goal”
4. The 2022 National Reform Programmes and the Stability Programmes
5. A series of European Policy texts (Recommendations, Decisions, Communications, Reports, Staff working Documents) pertinent to employment and skills (see further in this document)

As already described, the policy analysis was based on current EU, national and regional policy documents. On the national level, the Recovery & Resilience Plans (RRPs) describe the Member States (MS) intended actions for the period 2021-2027, basically in regard to the digital and green transitions; some documents have a shorter (e.g. one year) scope, while others may describe the plans for longer periods, up to 2030. On the regional level, most of the sources refer to regions’ planning in the framework of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) 2021-2027 period. On the EU level, the selected documents may not refer to a specific timeline, but as normative texts or recommendations that express the current goals of the EU, they provide the framework for the policies that are eventually adopted at the national and regional levels.

Given the size of the material, it was deemed necessary to identify keywords in the texts of the policy documents. Parts of the documents that referred to the specific themes that are the focus of this policy recommendations study, and the Cowork4YOUTH project more generally were extracted and cited. As the three theme categories were (i) skills, (ii) brain drain, and (iii) unemployment these were seen to be described by a number of different keywords (see Appendix II). The keywords were selected based on a review of existing literature (academic articles, policy reviews, EU policy texts, and other Cowork4Youth outputs) on subjects such as employment, skills, and NEETs and were cross checked by reviewing regional and national documents which were wholly analysed beforehand. This exercise did not reveal any serious limitations in the method as the used language is quite specific; thus, the possibility of a paragraph referring to the concept of a keyword, e.g. “Lifelong Learning”, without naming it is rather small. Even when (to take the same example) “Lifelong Learning” is not named but just implied, keywords like “Training” and “Education” would still be around the first phrase, and would not be missed by the examination.

With the valuable help of the Cowork4YOUTH partners, the keywords were searched in the policy texts. Along with their context, they were extracted by annotators and attached in predetermined templates along with basic information on each policy text.

In a primary analysis we studied the frequency of appearance of the keywords per country and theme category (see further in Appendix II). Without offering a conclusive analysis and with certain caveats, the purpose of this exercise was to observe “(ir)regularities” in the language used, that would allow a rough preview of the narratives to be identified (e.g. the higher frequency of ‘school leaving / drop-out’ in Italy’s tourism-dependent regions).

3. Policy analysis

This chapter presents the policy analysis that will lead to the recommendations. As indicated in the methodology section for the purpose of this report, we have applied a narrative methodology based on an extensive list of policy documents from the EU, the national and the regional level. To ensure its reliability however, the narrative analysis, especially since it is mostly based on future plans, needed to be grounded on and connected with actual observations from the field. This ground and connection is provided by the other CoworkYOUTH research outputs. Hence, this chapter begins with a brief presentation of the pertinent to the skills gap and brain drain recommendations, research papers and reviews, highlighting findings that have been useful for the dedicated narrative analysis. Subsequently the narrative analysis is presented in detail.

3.1 The Cowork4YOUTH pertinent outputs

As described at the beginning of this report, the policy recommendations are basically informed by the policy analysis conducted specifically for this purpose with the methodology of narrative analysis on the one hand, and the knowledge produced by the other outputs of the Cowork4YOUTH project.

The project's baseline study (Kelly et al., 2022) has provided a comprehensive review of the evolution of youth employment rates and the pertinent policies in the EU in general and the four focus countries in particular. The information produced in this study has been a cornerstone for all the following outputs of the project.

In this paragraph the main points of the outputs that are directly linked to the development of this report are presented in brief². Special emphasis is placed on the findings that are related to skills and employment policies, as well as to the concept of decent jobs, which is an important goal for the EU as declared not only in the Youth Guarantee but also in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Output 9. Review paper on state-of-the-art of living wage & re-/ up-skilling policies for NEETs (Lizarraga et al, 2022)

The review paper has provided valuable information in two fields. First, it presented detailed descriptions of the minimum income schemes in the four focus countries, on regional level. The pertinent chapter includes a detailed presentation of the legal framework and the minimum income schemes that were in place at the time that the review was conducted; the review is not limited to the national level, but it goes through regional schemes in selected tourism dependent or in energy transition regions when such schemes are in place.

Second, the field of skills and employment support -which is apparently extremely relevant to the current policy recommendations report- Output 9 has provided informative reviews of employment

² The outputs are presented in chronological order, based on the time they were finalised and delivered.

support programmes in the four focus countries and selected tourism-dependent and in energy transition regions (which mostly comprise the sample of our narrative analysis as well).

A general observation of the review of upskilling and support policies for the youth refers to the fact that the mix of policies and measures does not present significant variations across countries and regions, most of them being implemented in the framework of Youth Guarantee. In Spain, the regional policies can be divided in two categories: In Asturias and Castile and Leon the programmes consist of a combination of guidance, training and apprenticeships. In Andalusia, the Basque Country and the Canary Islands on the other hand, the presented programmes focus predominantly on wage subsidies. In Italy the examined measures in the regions of Basilicata, Calabria, Lazio, Puglia and Sardegna comprise direct job creation in the public sector, upskilling programmes, self-employment schemes, wage subsidies, and apprenticeships. In the case of Greece, the differences between the tourism dependent regions and those in energy transition is more apparent. In tourism dependent regions the focus has been on wage subsidies, self-employment and traineeship programs, mostly concerning the tourism sector. This focus on the tourism sector has been challenged by the COVID-19. In regions in energy transition the support programmes aim to have a wider scope, including direct employment creation, aid for relocating to other regions, and the introduction of projects as part of the energy transition process. Finally, Ireland (treated here, similarly to other outputs of the Cowork4YOUTH project as one region) has utilised a series of policies such as apprenticeships, monetary incentives to enterprises, training programmes and personalised counselling.

Apart from the content of the support policies, the paper reviews evaluation of the examined programmes as well, highlighting the lack of such evaluations either from official or third-parties, especially in the cases of Italy and Greece, as well as the fact that not all of the conducted evaluations confirm the effectiveness of the implemented measures.

Output 6. Transnational Report on NEETs, skills gap and employment policies in target regions. (Romero, Osés and Judge, 2023)

The report explores the relation between the skills that young people who are identified as NEETs have acquired from previous work experience and the current trends in the labour market. To achieve this, the report utilises microdata primarily from the EU Labour Force Survey and the unique ESCO database on European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations, as well as from the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS). The methodology comprised two steps: firstly, identifying the skills that the NEETs have acquired, by matching their employment history with the ESCO skills categorization; and secondly, categorising a series of occupations as “emerging”, “neutral” or “decaying” based on their relevant growth from 1997 to 2019.

The analysis presents several findings of high importance. Indeed, the first observation is that the majority of NEETs do not have any prior working experience (with the exception of Spain, where 62% of NEETs appear to have worked in the past; the respective percentages for the other focus countries are: Greece 55%, Ireland 60%, Italy 65%) highlighting the difficulty of entering the labour market. Still, the proportion of those with employment history provides valuable insight, which in

combination with the labour market trends can be very useful for policy design. In Greece more than 65% of NEETs belong to the age group of 25-29; in Italy and Spain the situation is more balanced with the 25-29 group counting 52.8% and 54.8% respectively; Ireland is the only country where the age group of 15-24 outnumbers the older one with 57.5% of NEETs being under 25.

In general, the condition of being a NEET is more frequent for males and for people with low to medium education level (Greece presents the smaller share of low to medium educated NEETs with about 65%, in Ireland the share rises to 73%, in Spain 79%, in Italy 89%). Furthermore, it is more possible that NEETs prior employment was in sectors more exposed to precariousness. This is relevant (though not necessarily identical) with the fact that the rate of (current) NEETs who were previously employed in the elementary occupations and services and as sales workers, is higher than the respective share of people (currently) employed in such sectors as a share of the employed population. A significant number of NEETs were previously employed in the *accommodation and food service* sector (more than 30% in Greece and between 20%-25% in the other countries). *Wholesale and retail trade* is the second most frequent sector with about 20% of NEETs employed in relevant positions in the past in Greece, Ireland and Spain, and 16% in Italy. The third sector with a significant share in the employment history of NEETs is *manufacturing*, concerning 10%-11% of NEETs in all focus countries. On the other hand, there are some deviations among the four countries with NEETs being more frequently employed in certain sectors, as is the case for *Agriculture, forestry and fishing* in Spain and Italy (11.5%, 7% respectively); *Administrative and support service* activities in Ireland (7.7%); and *Construction* in both Ireland (6.8%) and Italy (6%). As suggested in the report, this sectoral analysis of employment history, is crucial for understanding to what extent becoming a NEET is related to sectoral precariousness (possibly structural for a sector such as accommodation and food services that is subjected to seasonality) or to the fact that before entering the state of NEET those young people were employed in declining occupations (e.g. the agriculture sector).

The comparison between skills required in emerging occupations and NEETs' prior working experience, shows that the greatest gap concerns the sector of *information and data management*. However, technical training on the ICT sector is not the only field for improvement, as the analysis indicates that NEETs working experience may have not allowed them to develop a series of soft skills which are highly valued in the labour market such as the ability to coordinate teams and tasks, communication skills, managerial skills, analytical skills, the ability to effectively cooperate with others.

Output 11. Review paper on minimum wage and living wage policies in peripheral European countries. (Romero and Osés 2023)

Minimum wages can be a tool for MS to ensure decent living conditions and decent jobs as suggested by policies such as the Youth Guarantee or even the European Pillar of Social Rights. The main debate about the implementation or possible amendments in the minimum wages concerns the effect it could have on employment, as the cost for enterprises could potentially make them reluctant to employ workers.

With Italy not having a minimum threshold for workers' compensation, the paper reviews the evolution of minimum wages in Greece, Ireland, and Spain during the past thirty years. Furthermore, it examines the relationship of the statutory minimum wages with living wages and the impact of minimum wage changes on economic and societal issues such as employment and inequality. In the case of Italy, the paper reviews the implemented system of collective bargaining agreements to establish wage floors.

The analysis shows that there is no conclusive answer on the effects of minimum wages on employment and that the pertinent future policies should continue to be analysed and evaluated. A significant finding comes from the case of Spain where it is more clearly observed that *the youth's difficulty in achieving a living wage is mostly channelled through the oftentimes continued interruptions of non-employment spells, rather than low hourly wages or part-time spells*. Thus, the need for ensuring -apart from decent and fair compensations- other qualitative features of jobs is underscored. Employment transitions, seasonality and other factors related to sectoral or structural issues of the economy and the labour market can be a crucial factor for ensuring living wages and decent living conditions.

Output 12. Youth employment amid successive crises and the low carbon transition: The case of Eurozone's coal regions (Krommyda, Gourzis and Gialis, 2023)

This paper enriches Cowork4Youth analysis scope by offering a critical review of employment policies in regions in energy transition. Using a mixed methods approach, the paper analyses data for coal regions across the EU and examines in detail the case of Western Macedonia.

On the EU level, the findings emphasise the fact that, even though the data are beyond doubt revealing that the problems of low youth employment rates and inactivity are common, still, the categorization of regions as in transition and even more specifically as coal regions, cannot adequately cover the special conditions each one faces. Thus, the need for tailored policies in accordance to each region's productive capacities becomes extremely relevant.

On the one hand, the study shows that most coal regions across the EU suffer *high labour market fragmentation and distinct internal inequalities*. This condition results not only in higher youth unemployment but what is more to the phenomenon of disengagement. The disruption provoked by COVID-19 further deteriorated the situation. In Western Macedonia, the study detects the source of these structural problems in the *paternalistic* relationship between the Public Power Corporation and the local economy. The actions related to the energy transitions in the region emerge along with a change in the labour control mechanism which in the examined case of Western Macedonia happens through outsourcing and the introduction of precarious working relationships, as well as the undermining of working union processes.

Furthermore, the support policies in the framework of Just Transition have disputable results. On the one hand subsidised employment seems to be just a temporary solution to the issue of youth outflows from the region. What is more, and despite *green transition narratives* that promote the

idea of increasing youth employability through upskilling and entrepreneurial support programmes, the actual allocation of funds from the Just Transition Mechanism remains strikingly low at only 2%.

Overall, the study concludes that the process of energy transition in its current form fails to address the issues of *distributional, procedural and recognition inequalities*, as described by official institutions³.

Output 7. Determinants of Regional Youth Employment in Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. Transnational Report on employment potential for young people through alternative sectors. Wheelan, A., Staffa, E. and Banahan, C. (2023)

Even though this report has been designed to provide information regarding the employment potential in sectors related to the green transition and the coworking spaces, the comprehensive quantitative analysis undertaken makes a significant contribution for understanding more generally youth employment dynamics in the whole spectrum of youth employment across EU regions.

The analysis tracks changes in youth employment on the regional level (NUTS2) in relation to changes in employment in specific sectors, examined both individually and grouped in conceptual categories and measures the degree of convergence between them. For this purpose, it utilises the quarterly anonymised country level files of the European Union Labour Force Study (EU-LFS) for the period Q1 2008 up to Q4 2021.

The grouping of sectors in Green (comprising Electricity, gas steam and air conditioning supply; Water Supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities; and Transportation and Storage), Brown (Mining and quarrying) and Coworking (Information and communication, Financial and insurance activities, Professional, scientific and technical activities, Administrative and support service activities) in combination with the classification of regions according to the relative presence of these sectors, allows a series of informative information on the behaviour of youth employment in relation to the regional economic conditions. An additional advantage of the analysis consists in the division of results in two periods (pre- and post- 2014), which reveals the differences of the examined effects in the turmoil of the 2008 crisis and the more “normalised” conditions that followed with the post 2014 recovery. In this way, the risk of reaching conclusions that are biased due to the economic cycle is alleviated.

The findings sketch a complicated image of the relationship between sectoral employment and youth employment rates, showing that generalisations and preconceptions should be treated with caution. For instance, overall there is a clear negative relationship between employment in Brown sectors and youth employment (-1.52); further analysis however reveals that this relationship is solely driven by the effect in decarbonization regions. Furthermore, employment in sectors

³ International Labour Organization (2015) Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All. Geneva: ILO.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2022) Labour market and wage developments in Europe: Annual review 2022. Publications Office of the European Union.

categorised as Green is also negatively related to youth employment in the pre-2014 period, while post-2014 no statistically significant effect is observed (either positive or negative). Employment in coworking sectors -and especially in regions categorised as coworking- is seemingly having a slight negative effect on youth employment. However, post-2014, this effect is not statistically significant with the exception of the financial sector specifically (-1.17). A possible explanation concerns the greater competition in the labour market supply side in such occupations, as older workers may continue their careers for longer periods and posing a significant barrier for younger people's entrance in the labour market⁴. The relationship between the financial sector and youth employment is significant across all regions, although more mild in the coworking regions (-1.1); the effect of the other sectors comprising the coworking sector however is significant only in decarbonization regions.

Apart from the relationship between youth employment and increases in employment in the aforementioned sectors, the analysis also provide insight on the relationship between youth employment and several significant parameters that are of high relevance to the employment research: GDP per capita, job polarisation (high-to-low skills occupation ratio), tertiary education, the share of female in the labour force, the share of migrants in the labour force, the share of part-time employment, and the participation rate (employment rate). With reference to the post-2014 period, the participation rate, GDP per capita and the share of people with tertiary education are overall positively related with youth employment. In particular, tertiary education is positively related across all regions, while the participation rate effect is not statistically significant in the decarbonization regions. On the other hand, GDP per capita is not found to have a statistically significant relationship with youth employment in coworking regions. Another interesting finding concerns the negative impact that both the share of migrants in the labour force and the ratio of high to low skilled occupations seem to have on youth employment: post-2014 these relationships are statistically significant only in coworking regions and at a 10% level of significance.

3.2 Narrative Analysis⁵

3.2.1 The European Union

Promoting common EU policies through non-binding (or at least not strict) recommendations and guidelines is meant to leave room for MS and Regions to develop tailored solutions for the specific conditions they find themselves in. It is clear however that the problem definition and the methods used to deal with the identified problems share common focus and terminology and follow similar

⁴ Indeed, this is a significant observation as the intra-generation competition is rarely mentioned as a barrier for youth employment; what is more, given that the category of the coworking sector comprises professions that are closely related to the information economy and possibly to metropolitan and more economically advanced regions, this finding can question the common idea that such regions offer better prospects for the youth in general. This note can also be connected with the negative relationship of both job polarisation and the share of migrants with youth employment in these regions, mentioned below.

⁵ In-text citations in this part of the report referring to policy texts are bibliographically noted in the appendix.

patterns. Under this scope, it is important to first examine how the issues of skills gap and brain drain (especially concerning NEETs) are perceived at the EU level. This provides crucial information for understanding how the national narratives are constructed. The ways that the EU narratives are translated at the national (and in cases at the regional level) is important for three reasons:

- I. it is possible that the EU narratives do not fully address the nature of the problems faced in each locality, in which case, if they are not critically reviewed before adoption, may have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the designed policies;
- II. it is possible that the localised narratives we identify may deviate from the original EU perception of the problem, perhaps due to error (e.g. inexperienced decision makers), structural deficiencies of the implementation mechanisms (e.g. PES structure and resources) or pressure from conflicting interests (as suggested by pluralistic approaches – see the methodology section); this may lead to fragmented interventions rather than a cohesive policy; and
- III. Since policymaking bears normative elements (see the methodology section), the root narratives of the problem perception are key for revealing misconceptions of the problems and for subsequently producing alternatives. Even when local narratives don't share striking similarities with the central EU ones, still, in order to comprehend the former, one should be aware of the latter and recognize both the effect and the common ground, be it inherent in the perceptions or technically incorporated in the policy language.

The application of the aforementioned methodology in identifying and analysing narratives, informed by EU policy texts resulted in the identification of 13 narratives.

3.2.1.1 Narratives identified at the EU level

The narratives identified at the EU level have been grouped into the following categories:

A. General orientation of economy and labour

1. *The narrative that the economy and labour market are driven by the digital transition.*
2. *The narrative that digital transition and green transition are linked, and moreover linked to job creation.*
3. *The narrative of how digital skills are not only a labour parameter but a citizen's social and political right.*
4. *The narrative that digital skills are an "investment" in human capital.*

Focusing on the Digital and Green transitions ("tween transition") is a central political choice for the EU. It has taken a formal character in all policy documents for the period 2021-2027 (see for example the MFF 2021- 2027, Next Generation EU, all the national Recovery & Resilience Plans, the Horizon

Europe work programme for 2023-24, etc.). Furthermore, texts such as the European Green Deal underline the necessity of digitalization, technological advancement, and even technological breakthroughs for achieving the goals of the green transition (European Green Deal, 2019; see also Daehlen, 2023).

The goal of the “twin transition” sets the digital as the ground and source for any developments not only in the economy, and consequently in the labour market, but also in society in general. The twin transitions are in a vague dialectical relationship. The citizens’ (basic) digital skills are a prerequisite for a “digitally transformed Europe”.

At least 80% of those aged 16-74 should have basic digital skills, a precondition for inclusion and participation in the labour market and society in a digitally transformed Europe. [European Pillar of Social Rights action plan 2020, a129].

The centrality of this perspective is underlined by the “upgrade” of digital skills from a labour parameter to a social and political right.

Today more than ever, being digitally competent is both a necessity and a right [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; p.39]

Specifically for the labour market, as implied by Narrative 4, and despite a more balanced phrasing in different occasions, the process of job creation is considered to be heavily dependent on the digital and green skills the workforce acquires. Given that enterprises comprise the labour market’s demand side to a large extent, the way that new job positions are created in them is rarely discussed; **the main idea behind the discussion on job creation is that the acquisition of skills will (definitely) lead to employment**, either by working for existing employers or through entrepreneurship of the workers themselves. In other words, the problem is stated as starting from the insufficiency of a skilled workforce, while the demand side is somehow considered to be ready to employ unused human resources, as soon as they are able to efficiently perform in the new digital landscape. However, the ability of the Green transition to create job positions is yet to be proved. Krommyda, Gourzis and Gialis’ (2023) study on decarbonization regions shows that the transition landscape can be complex and highly dependent on those regions’ productive capacity, while the use of transition funds are not always absorbed or used in the more efficient way. Furthermore, Wheelan, Staffa and Banahan (2023), find that increases in employment in the Green sectors are not related with increases in youth employment, while pre-2014 there was even a negative relationship between the two; these results imply that we are not -at least yet- in position to consider the effect of green transition -especially for the younger workers- as a priori positive for employment in general terms.

[the current] Individual digital skills across Europe are insufficient to meet the needs of the economy and the society, as suggested by aggregate statistics both from the supply side (measured as individual digital skills) and from the demand side (measured as the level of skills required for worker occupation). [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; p.43].

Future-proofing vocational education and training systems means synchronising them with the green and digital transitions, and making them adaptable to any future challenge. [...] It also means fostering the development of a strong set of skills to empower people to design, produce and manage products and services in an environmentally sustainable way and to provide employers with the skilled workforce they need. [Commission Communication COM(2020) 276. Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation a213]

Besides the basic digital skills that are recognized as a necessary feature for the workforce of any economic sector, the availability of advanced digital skills in fields such as Computing, Artificial Intelligence, Cyber Security etc, is a main concern when it comes to the growth potential of the Union. Romero, Oses and Judge (2023), has shown how this idea is reflected in the labour market trends, with skills related to *Information and Data management* being currently in high demand in the Cowork4YOUTH four focus countries, and moreover being the field in which the greatest skills gap for young people is detected. It should also be noted, that the soft skills that the Romero, Oses and Judge identified as the most valued skills in the labour market (coordination, communication, managerial skills, analytical skills) are also directly connected with the process of digital transition, an observation that apart from scholars, is also recognized at least in Ireland (see the paragraph on Ireland's narratives below).

To thrive in a technology-driven economy, Europe needs a digitally competent workforce and a large pool of digital talent with basic and advanced digital skills, including those related to emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; p.3]

Digitally-enabled automation and AI are set to become the primary drivers of the next technological revolution. They permeate all spheres of life (from machine translation, to image recognition and music generation) and bring significant benefits, including increased productivity and societal wellbeing, but also challenges connected to the need to manage a socially responsible transition by carefully addressing socio-economic, legal and ethical impacts, as well as cybersecurity, safety, and data protection risks. Its use also entails opaque decision making and risks of gender-based or other kinds of discrimination. [Digital Education action Plan 2021- 2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; p.54]

Despite the prevalence of these narratives in the EU policy documents (as well as the regional ones as it will be shown in the following paragraphs of the chapter), the same documents, even though sparsely, do acknowledge some limitations for these, as well as negative conditions that need to be taken into consideration and addressed, especially with regards to the younger generations.

Young people are among those groups exposed to losing their jobs due to automation, as entry- level jobs tend to have a greater proportion of automatable tasks. [Bridge to Jobs, a40]

[...] more research is needed to see whether the increased use of digital technologies will lead to more critical, confident, and creative usage or to greater inequalities and negative experiences with technology. [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; p.3]

However, more than one third of 13-14 year olds who participated in the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) in 2018 were working below the lowest proficiency level of digital skills and evidence shows that there is a digital divide increasingly related to socioeconomic status and years of experience of using devices [i.e. beyond simple access]. [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT; pg46]

These extracts reveal a relative distance between a social perspective and growth, or a “market-oriented” perspective. Thus, Narrative 4 concerning the human capital and the need to invest in it (continuously, as it will be discussed in the education narratives), becomes highly relevant.

This distance between the social and the economic dimensions, and the perception of digital skills both as a necessity (human capital) as well as a right (for people as citizens) sets a question over the priorities of the pertinent policies. Given the EU’s stated goals for a just and inclusive Europe, as expressed for instance in constitutional texts such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, finding a golden mean between the two is necessary.

B. Evidence-Based Policy

1. *The narrative that the designed and adopted policies are evidence-based.*
2. *The narrative that the required evidence consists primarily in quantitative evidence, and furthermore, (macro)economic indicators have a predominant role.*

The development of evidence-based policies is a core principle for the EU policy framework⁶. The European Semester has a prominent role in the assessment of and feedback on national and regional policies on employment and skills. The role of evidence however cannot be limited only to evaluation. It is crucial that MS develop monitoring and predicting mechanisms that are capable of accurately informing policy decisions. Therefore, comprehensive mapping of labour market skills needs emerges as a crucial factor for producing effective policies

Member States should make the best use of the European Semester as the relevant well-established framework to coordinate economic, employment and social reforms and investments, putting people and their well-being at the centre. [...]As mentioned above,

⁶ for a detailed discussion on the need of evidence-based policies and possible limitations see the JRC publication edited by Sucha and Sienkiewicz (2020).

the EU headline targets will help to steer national and regional policies and reforms in the employment, skills and social domains. In the coming years, the European Semester will also allow for a coordinated monitoring of the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plans [European Pillar of Social Rights action plan, a147]

[the policies should] be complemented with the implementation of the related country-specific recommendations adopted by the Council in the framework of the European Semester, be based on a mapping of skills needs and possible shortages across economic sectors and regions, including the industrial ecosystems defined by the ‘New Industrial Strategy for Europe’ in order to identify those with the highest potential for quality job creation and facilitate the transition to a climate neutral, resource-efficient and circular economy in line with the European Green Deal [Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/402 of 4 March 2021 on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE)]

The effectiveness of the implemented policies and measures, however, may often be undermined by insufficient monitoring methods (see for instance European Court of Auditors, 2017). Developing reliable diagnostic and assessment tools has presented significant problems through the years and it concerns even prominent and widely used ones such as the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).

However, both ICILS and DESI have certain constraints. While scientifically sound, ICILS has so far had limited geographical coverage: only 14 EU Member States combined (nine and seven respectively) participated in its two first cycles. DESI’s methodology relies on self-reported data largely based on respondents’ replies to a set of questions on their internet use rather than a direct measurement of actual digital competence. These are recurring issues in studies and surveys focusing on digital skills, as they provide indirect approximations and limit the ability to analyse and assess digital competence development and tendencies. [Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027 COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT p.50]

In combination with the previous group of narratives and the discussion about a potential gap between growth and societal perceptions, a first observation regards the objects of measurement, meaning that one could question which set of evidence is more important for specific policy fields. For example, are horizontal criteria more suitable for assessing digital skills, or should there be sectoral or regional? But even before raising such questions it should be underscored that the need for detailed and reliable evidence is yet to be answered. The review of evaluations of certain support programmes provided by Lizarraga et al. (2022) highlights the fact that further development of impact assessment is necessary in order for the designing of policies and the implementation mechanism to become more effective. Even strictly in the field of hard data, the development of methodology by Wheelan, Staffa, and Banahan (2023) had to deal with the fact that “no reliable time-series data on youth employment exist to allow a systematic cross-region comparison across time”.

The silenced part of the evidence-based narrative poses another substantial question. Considering that the EU level monitoring mechanisms need to work with economic figures, and, in fact, most of the national or regional measures as implemented through support programmes are addressed to large numbers of beneficiaries (many times to tens or even hundreds of thousands) and therefore when they do apply monitoring and feedback techniques these are necessarily strictly standardised and quantitative, it appears that there is no provision for how qualitative evidence will have an effect on the policymaking process.

The absence of formally produced qualitative evidence is partly alleviated by the encouragement of social partners participation in the policy design (see the subparagraph F 'agreement between social partners and stakeholders' below). Nevertheless, in most cases social partners also represent populous and often heterogeneous groups, which means that many of the opinions they support are not necessarily formed by direct discussions with the people that are the subjects of the policies.

A final argument for the need to incorporate qualitative data in the policymaking process stems from the very goals of the 2021-2027 policy framework. As underlined in many policy documents, the twin transition both implies and requires a change in the business and social processes. This idea is apparently correct; turning digital and green is in essence a social change. In order to assist organisations and people adopt new practices it is important to understand where the hurdles lie, information that quantitative data are usually not able to reveal.

C. The role of education and training

1. *The narrative that higher education should be more “vocational” in that it should cater for market developments, labour market shortages, and evolve in closer relation with enterprises.*
2. *The narrative that early school leaving leads to unemployment.*
3. *The narrative that the concept of LifeLong Learning (LLL), including VET, is a central one for developing skills, and more specifically digital skills, that follow the changes of a fluid labour market environment.*

EU pays special attention to VET and has repeatedly underscored its role for a well-functioning labour market; funding schemes either through state or regional programmes (often via PES), or directly through funding tools such as Interreg and the Erasmus plus, are available and attempt to ensure the orientation and characteristics of the training. There is a clear intention to directly link VET with skills that are considered necessary for the digital and green transitions. Concerning the design, apart from the requirements for EU funded VET projects, the Council has set a framework with relatively specific guidelines such as the Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.

Indeed, the role of VET is by definition to support the labour market entrance and transitions that normally take place in an economy. But at the same time, there seems to be a long discussion on the need to transfuse a vocational character in the field of higher education as well. The idea that higher education should be more ‘vocational’ may put under the spotlight the democratic relevance of higher education – as judgement and thinking are not qualities that are vocational, nor can they be learnt at a merely vocational setting (see Arendt 1994). This is extremely relevant to the findings of Cowork4YOUTH output 6 (Romero, Osés and Judge; 2023) which identifies managerial, analytical, coordination, and communication skills as crucial for the labour market itself. Following Arendt’s argument, one could certainly support that the independence of HEIs from occupational and technical concerns is necessary for cultivating this kind of skills.

Still, mirroring practical considerations regarding the real-world economy, the connections between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and enterprises are considered to be crucial for synergies to emerge in the quest for innovation, while curricula should be developed in accordance with the needs of the green and digital transitions.

European labour markets are transforming rapidly, due to technological development, digital and green transitions, and the restructuring of the economy, but also influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Flexible learning opportunities and formats are needed at all stages of life and across disciplines and sectors. This represents an opportunity for higher education institutions to develop innovative curricula, study programmes as well as flexible learning provisions and alternative learning pathways, in order to enhance quality, inclusion, and gender equality in higher education, and also to develop education and research agendas responsive to the digital and green transition and key socio-economic challenges, while remaining committed to excellence. [Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative]

‘European Universities’ have the potential to nurture entrepreneurship and transversal skills and fuel innovation through a flow of creative talents to support the establishment and scaling up of start-ups and SMEs in Europe, notably by setting up and reinforcing technology transfer, or sharing knowledge and technology transfer capacity, thus potentially supporting the development of emerging novel concepts likely to lead to breakthroughs or market creative innovations. [Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative]

Apart from providing advanced skills and boosting research that is in congruence with the social and economic challenges and innovation, HEIs are considered important also for Lifelong Learning (LLL). Prompted by the connotations that arise from narratives 3 and 4, about job creation and the investment in human capital, LLL emerges as a necessity. This is highlighted by the fact that the EU sets measurable targets for the participation of adults in training every year.

In the context of recovery and of the twin transitions, increasing adult participation in training to 60% is paramount to improve employability, boost innovation, ensure social fairness and close the digital skills gap. Yet, by 2016 only 37% of adults were participating in learning activities each year. For the low-qualified adults this rate only reached 18%.

A key factor of success to ensure that adults are able to engage in up- and reskilling later in life is a strong foundation of basic and transversal skills acquired in initial education and training, in particular among disadvantaged groups. In 2019, 10.2% of young people left education and training with maximum lower secondary education and were not anymore involved in education and training activities. These figures risk to worsen as a result of the current crisis. Efforts must therefore be strengthened to increase adult participation in training and to improve the levels of achievement in initial education and training. [European Pillar of Social Rights action plan; a128]

Considering both the attention paid to LLL and the growing intention of linking higher education to the market, one could make an argument that technological developments and goals tend to have a huge impact on education; not only to its methods, but directly to its content and nature. In this sense, there seems to be a gradual shift from a “classical” idea of a skills-driven market, i.e. the economy follows the productive capabilities of the society, to one of market-driven skills, meaning that the skills that people acquire need to be developed in accordance to market needs and adjust to its developments.

This last observation, even though it may sound quite general, can also explain the narrative that negatively connects early school leaving with employment potential. Of course the narrative is based on actual facts, and there are many reasons why early school leavers exhibit higher rates of unemployment and are more exposed to conditions that can lead to exclusion; here however it seems that the fact that in a given state of affairs, the difference between the employed and the unemployed or between those who have better or worse job positions is necessarily a relative one, and not necessarily meritocratic, (even when maintaining a meritocratic view of the society and the labour market in particular), seems to be silenced.

Effectively addressing early school leaving is key to ensuring better employment prospects for young people over their lifetime and promoting their active participation in society, in line with principles 1 (education, training and lifelong learning), 3 (equal opportunities) and 11 (childcare and support to children) of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The reduction of early school leaving is therefore a key policy priority and as such highlighted in the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) as well as in the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee. (Joint Employment Report 2022, a182)

D. The role of Apprenticeships

1. *The narrative that apprenticeships are a key vehicle for entering and re-entering the labour market, as well as for developing skills in line with market needs.*

Quality and effective apprenticeships that lead to a combination of job related skills, work based experience and learning, and key competences facilitate young people's entry into the labour market, as well as adults' career progression and transition into

employment. They are part of the formal vocational education and training (VET) systems and they exist in parallel to other work-based learning and/or vocational pathways. [European framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships]

It can be said that apprenticeships are positioned in the middle between training and employment. A noteworthy fact is that, especially after the first years of the 2008 recession, apprenticeships comprise the most common form of subsidised employment and certainly the only one that is directly and consistently promoted in the EU policy framework (see also the review of support programmes provided by Lizarraga et al, 2022).

Indeed, apart from supporting individuals and enterprises, and following the basic directions on which the VET is shaped, apprenticeships are also a tool for promoting the goals of the digital and green transitions. Under this scope, the part of the narrative that refers to market needs is directly affected by the narratives about digital economy and subsequently growth and innovation. In fact, as an Active Labour Market Policy, apprenticeships comprise a direct intervention and as such they carry a political message as well, of hands-on addressing labour problems; this is partly a reason for the Council's interest to sketch a design framework through the pertinent Recommendations.

[A reinforced Youth Guarantee] should strive to support young people in gaining work experience and developing the right skills for a changing world of work, in particular those relevant to the green and digital transitions. Apprenticeship plays an important role in this respect. There is a need to boost their supply and quality in order to strengthen their role in the recovery phase. Apprenticeships prepare young people for jobs that are in high demand and thereby offer them a path towards stable labour market integration also at a local level. [Commission Communication COM(2020) 276. Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation a97]

The renewed Alliance will call for new commitments for digital and green apprenticeships, focusing on the economic sectors that will be on the frontline of the transition to a climate neutral Europe. It will bring together governments, social partners, businesses, chambers, regions, youth organisations, vocational education and training providers and think tanks. [Commission Communication COM(2020) 276. Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation EU a229].

Well-designed apprenticeship schemes benefit both employers and learners as well as reinforce the link between the world of work and the world of education and training. High quality standards avoid that apprenticeships are geared towards low-skilled jobs and poor training that damage their reputation. In addition to providing a pathway to excellence, quality apprenticeships can also contribute to fostering active citizenship and social inclusion by integrating people of different social and personal backgrounds into the labour market. [European framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships]

The last extract is indicative of how the different narratives can be combined to construct a metanarrative that permeates the design and maybe even the implementation of pertinent policies. A strict interpretation of the mention of “low-skilled jobs” and “poor training”, can result in

essentially excluding a wide range of sectors and positions from apprenticeships; the question is which are the criteria to discern between low and high skilled or to assess the level of training. Apparently, such evaluations require a well-developed monitoring mechanism that follows generally accepted standards.

E. Individualised approach

1. *The narrative that the support provided either through PES or any other schemes and initiatives will be more effective when using individualised approaches and continuous support to address specific needs and special conditions of the beneficiaries*

Tailoring actions such as counselling or participation in upskilling programmes, to the needs of each individual is considered to be a key factor for providing effective support. This applies to apprenticeships as well.

Member States should provide individualised support to jobseekers, comprising counselling, guidance and mentoring, assessment and validation of skills, job-search assistance, entrepreneurship support and referrals to social services when needed. Specific attention should be devoted to young people, in particular those entering the labour market, and to countering gender bias and other forms of discrimination [Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/402 of 4 March 2021 on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE)]

Career guidance, mentoring and learner support should be provided before and during the apprenticeship to ensure successful outcomes, to prevent and reduce drop-outs as well as support those learners to re-engage into relevant education and training pathways. [European framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships]

The Reinforced Youth Guarantee (Commission Communication COM(2020) 276. Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation) pays special attention to this idea, and even expands it to follow-up methods. These suggestions are in line with the narrative referring to evidence-based policies.

Providing post-placement support and implementing feedback

(20) expand continued post-placement support for young people to help them cope in new situations and adjust individualised action plans where needed, using the opportunity of post-placement feedback to ensure a quality offer was provided and prevent young people falling back into NEET status [...]

Improving the data collection and monitoring of schemes:

23. *step up efforts to enrich follow-up data by strengthening systems that allow young people to be tracked after taking up an offer, in order to monitor long-term, sustainable labour market integration;*

24. *encourage, while respecting data protection rules, the wider sharing of tracking, profiling and follow-up data between Youth Guarantee partners to improve support, which is of particular importance for the success of interventions targeting vulnerable NEETs [Commission Communication COM(2020) 276. Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation]*

Member States and PES have, to a greater or lesser extent, incorporated techniques of individualised support in their services. Thus, the narrative -which is indeed reasonable- does not refer to a hypothesis but rather to the fact that individualised support is provided. This support however does not yet seem to have the desired effect, as the following acknowledgment from the 2023 report from the Commission indicates.

Career guidance by the public employment services is widely available, but suffers from low levels of awareness, may be perceived as intimidating, and is not always available to low- skilled who are not unemployed. [EVALUATION of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways]

F. Agreement between social partners and stakeholders

1. *The narrative that active Labour Market Policies and interventions are more effective when they are designed and produced in a framework of agreement between social partners and stakeholders.*

The EU policy documents consistently maintain the position that decisions reached and policies designed after social dialogue are more effective. This is a reasonable argument since when different actors agree on a decision it is more possible that their behaviour bears elements of ownership. On the other hand, it is hard to assess the involvement of various actors (e.g. participation in a consulting or even drafting committee is not necessarily translated into influence) and the effect of their involvement on results. The Joint Employment Report makes a reference to this difficulty. Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration the economic environment conditions and a country's political culture.

Member States should rely on social dialogue and involve social partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of the policies they devise to address the labour market challenges [brought by the COVID-19 crisis]. [Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/402 of 4 March 2021 on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE)]

Quality and effective apprenticeships are established through structured partnerships involving all relevant stakeholders, particularly social partners, businesses, intermediary bodies such as chambers of industry, commerce and crafts, professional and sectoral organisations, vocational education and training institutions, youth and parent organisations, as well as local, regional and national authorities. [European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships]

The current Social Scoreboard covers 18 out of 20 Pillar principles, four more than under the previous version. The two principles not yet covered are 7 and 8 'Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals' and 'Social dialogue and involvement of workers', respectively. There are strict quality requirements for headline indicators that also need to have a clear normative interpretation. So far, it was not possible to find such an indicator for these principles, but the Commission will conduct further work on this. [Joint Employment Report, 2023; p.30]

G. The use of common methods among the MS

- 13. The narrative that common methods, such as following common standards (i.e. through frameworks proposed by the Council (e.g. on Apprenticeships, VET or the YG), or by the standardised use of micro-credentials) are required to ensure compatibility and effectiveness of the practices and any interventions among Member States.*

As discussed in other sections of this report, in the fields of Employment and Economic Policy the EU sets the policy framework for MS basically through Recommendations. Even though Recommendations are not as strict as, for instance, a Decision, MS are still expected to take action in accordance with and towards the goals set in such documents.

Indeed, MS are encouraged (or even urged) to formulate tailored policies; however, the goals and very often the methods and tools of these policies are prescribed. From one point of view, this condition is in line with the MS willingness to deepen the effects of the common market and further promote political and economic unification. Hence, the labour market, as part of the common market (and of course given the fourfold constitutional principle of freedom of movement), needs to present compatible structure and characteristics across the Union.

Micro credentials are an illustrative example of this case, as it expresses the need to have a common reference system for skills from which employers from different MS can draw reliable information.

Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to integrate micro-credentials into their employment policies and active labour market policies (i.e. employment services, training support and employment incentives), including by: a) using micro-credentials, as relevant, to: i) address skills mismatches and bottlenecks in given

economic sectors and regions and ii) upskill and reskill workers for skills and jobs that are in demand on the labour market, in particular in the context of the digital and green transitions. b) including training leading to micro-credentials in recognised training opportunities that may be linked to individual learning accounts, where they exist, and other systems for training support. [Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability].

3.2.2 Greece

The common expression that “Greece is coming out from a crisis” is a relative misnomer since the financial crisis and the subsequent recession of 2008 turned to a sovereign debt crisis and lasted for more than a decade; just before the COVID-19 pandemic and the following war in Ukraine. The connection between those crises and youth unemployment or underemployment would be an easy corroboration, if it was not too superficial. In reality, structural issues of the Greek economy have “traditionally” affected employment long before 2008 (Pissaridis et al. 2020). The Cowork4YOUTH project focuses on the peripheral perspective in order to elucidate those structural issues. More specifically, apart from a country-wide approach, this report discusses the policy narrative from South Aegean (NUTS2: EL42) and Ionian Islands (NUTS2: EL62) as tourism-dependent peripheries, and Central Macedonia (NUTS2: EL52), Western Macedonia (NUTS2: EL53) and Peloponnese (NUTS2: EL65) as peripheries in the process of decarbonisation.

3.2.2.1 Identified narratives from policy texts in Greece

A first conclusion from the analysis of policy texts in Greece is that there are strong similarities between the national and the peripheral level documents. It also seems that many narratives mirror EU documentation narratives. Bearing that in mind, the narratives identified were the following:

1. *The narrative that education is positively linked to employment*

In the field of employment education VET and skills are strongly linked with employment opportunities:

*...education, vocational education and training, and skills aim to increase long term employment and productivity through the acquisition of skills required for the green and digital transition and **stronger links between education and the labour market** (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 42.).*

2. *The narrative that digital skills are a primary factor for employment rates to rise and to that end new vocational training / digital skills’ training needs to be implemented within curricula and research programmes.*

3. *The narrative that digitization of private and public sectors are important for the creation of highly skilled workers who will not migrate.*

The Greek policy documents examined seem to address digitization as linked with the rise of employment – and even the rise of the quality of employment. Lower skilled workers are seen as better included through digitization, and higher skilled employees will remain in the country instead of becoming part of the brain drain trend:

*Specific objectives of this component include the following: (a) Potential growth and job creation: Investment in **digitisation** will **boost the creation of quality jobs**, will counter down the brain drain phenomenon that Greece has experienced since the economic crisis, will increase the inclusion of lower skilled employees that will have to manage simplified services and will also attract foreign direct investments. It will also have **important spill-over effects on the Greek economy**, including rural and remote areas and will increase productivity and quality of services rendered. Almost 50% of digital firms report having increased the number of employees in the last three years, compared to less than 35% of non-digital firms (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021).*

Output 6 of the Cowork4YOUTH project, however, indicated that NEETs, when they have work experience, work in areas that are being left behind when moving towards a digitalised economy and society - areas such as accommodation, food service activities, repair of motor-vehicles, etc. In the era that Amazon.com is buying drones to deliver its goods, and supermarkets have automatic checkouts, it becomes evident that NEETs will soon need new and special skills to find new jobs - as these are no longer served and serving.

To support this intensely desired digital transformation, education is seen as in need to be transformed as well, to incorporate research, technology, vocational training:

...[the] goal of incorporating these new skills into curricula, investing in digital technologies and research capabilities, implementing evaluation to track and improve educational outcomes, and fostering collaboration between education, research, and business (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021 p. 43).

*Greece continues and intensifies the implementation of major investments for **the Digital transformation in education**. The relevant NRRP [National Recovery and Resilience Plan] investment aims to achieve an inclusive digital educational model (in terms of content, infrastructure and services) in Greece, which is a prerequisite for building a resilient, extroverted Greek economy in the long term. [...] Subprojects on the **digitisation of educational content, on school vocational guidance using Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, on digital tools for students with disabilities, on the development of Innovation Centres, on the digitisation of school services and on the digitisation of university services are expected to proceed to the tender phase by Q3 2022, while the subproject related to teacher training actions is expected to enter this stage by Q4 2022 (National Reform Programme Greece 2022).*

Thus, digital knowledge is addressed in the Greek policy documents examined as a prerequisite for economic growth.

*The benefits of digital transformation (productivity gains, cost reductions, **creation of new jobs**, access to new markets, faster adoption of innovation, etc.) are widely known and have been highlighted by a wealth of research as key to a country's economic growth (Greek National Recovery and Resilience Plan - Greece 2.0).*

[The Greek programme for digital transformation and digital innovation will sustain] “actions promoting the use of new cutting-edge technologies and the adoption of ICTs in the organisation and management of business operation of public and private sector institutions” as the main operator for digital transformation and economic transformation (Report on the Digital Transformation, National Plan, 2021, p. 12).

- 4. The narrative that addressing unemployment and providing the general population with pertinent skills are linked (and partly through the benefits for economic growth) with social cohesion, with special emphasis given to the category of “vulnerable groups” which contains large and miscellaneous groups such as the youth, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed.*

The Greek National Plan for Digital Transformation takes into consideration the European Pillar of Social Rights, and hence it has the capacity to highlight the need for a more social and inclusive society. Under this scope social cohesion is referenced along with convergence, growth, and digitalization:

*Resilience is particularly relevant in the EMU, where policy instruments to address the effects of significant economic events are more limited. The experience of Greece in the last decade has, indeed, been one of a long and persistent downturn that has affected, as noted above, long-term growth, **social cohesion** and real convergence (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021, p.41).*

*The pillars of “Green Transition”, “Digital Transformation” and “Private investments and transformation of the economy” comprise investments and reforms which contribute directly and indirectly to job creation, while the pillar of “Employment, skills and **social cohesion**” is by definition directly linked to enhancing youth employment, and interacts with the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. Reforms and investments included in the “Employment, skills and **social cohesion**” pillar, aim at **increasing long-term employment, employability and labour productivity** through labour market reforms, modernization of active and passive labour market policies (including measures targeted to the young unemployed individuals), upgrading the mechanisms for diagnosis of labour market needs, and reforming and digitalizing the Public Employment Service (OAED). (Report on Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 41).*

The development of appropriate digital skills of the human resources plays a key role in the well-being of society, as well as the continuous functioning of the state and the economy. (Report on the Digital Transformation, National Plan, 2021: 20).

*Economic & Social Cohesion: Effective and enhanced digital services, achieved through digitalisation and operations improvement, **ensure equal access and same quality of service for all citizens and businesses**, including older persons, marginalised communities, or persons with disabilities and replacing old fashioned, ineffective, possibly unfair, 'manually provided' services. This component clearly focuses on this specific aim of enhanced digital services provision, covering the Greek Public Administration in general and key sectors of economy, therefore fully supports **cohesion and mitigates disparities** (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 193).*

Here one could make an argument that perceiving the improvement of social cohesion and inclusion as results of the enhancement of the function of the labour market and the citizen's employability may indicate that the focus is not exclusively on inclusivity and cohesion itself. Taking for instance the case of women, as a country with a strong patriarchal past, Greece often addresses the difficult conditions for women's employment through its obligations towards the European Union (Stratigaki 2022), and the group is somehow viewed as unutilized human resources.

Women's employment rate is one of the lowest in the EU, especially for the younger (15-24) and older (50-64) age groups (European Semester Report and the Pissarides' Committee report, 2019).

Lower wage labour market participation in Greece is mainly affected by the low participation of women (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 296).

*Among women, the percentage of active population in 2019 is limited to 60.4% in Greece, compared to 68.5% on average in the Eurozone and 67.9% in the EU, with Greece being in the third lowest position in the ranking of countries (higher only compared to Italy and Romania). **The low labour market participation of women significantly reduces the country's productivity**, while the average educational level of women who do not participate in the labour market is high (Pissarides Report, 2020).*

The phenomenon of women's low participation in the labour market requires discerning the factors responsible for maintaining this dire percentage, so that efforts concentrating on integrating women into the labour market will benefit from the consideration of the underlying reasons contributing to the phenomenon.

Furthermore, a recurrent pattern is that consistent reference is made between women employment rates, the unemployed youth, and the elderly, categorising them collectively as a 'vulnerable group'. This type of collective analysis fails to address key distinctions between these groups - and therefore sidetracks the fact that there may be different solutions to each group's labour market struggles.

...(a) improving the skills of the labour force (employed and unemployed) and (b) increasing the participation rate of those groups of the population currently under-

represented in the labour market (women, young people and older people) (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 651).

To alleviate these inclusion issues, sustainable, affordable, and quality services are key here – as for instance in the case of women socially imposed obligations of care have been an obvious hindrance for them in patriarchal conditions (see among others Karamesini 2021) – and addressing these is obviously a prerequisite for labour market involvement.

The actions contribute to the promotion of the principles of equal access to quality, sustainable and affordable services (children, women, disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities, etc.), as well as the promotion of women's participation in employment. The main objective of the action to support children's integration into pre-school education is to strengthen childcare and reconcile the family and professional life of carers (mainly women), thus helping to facilitate personal and professional development. The main objective of the action to support structures to combat violence against women is to promote gender equality by addressing the problems of women victims of violence and promoting equal access to the labour market (Report on the Western Macedonia, Regional Plan, 2021: 39).

- 5. The narrative that the tourism industry is fundamental for the national economy and efforts should be made for expanding the tourism season, and that the upskilling of people from the tourism sector is linked to expanding the tourism season and the flourishing of the tourism industry in general.*

It is not surprising that tourism is recognized as an extremely important sector for the Greek economy, and it is specifically mentioned in national plans. On the one hand, it can be a positive fact that economic sectors find their way on the country's long-term planning. On the other hand, it can be said that specific issues are either silenced or not analysed in depth.

The goal of expanding the tourism season is in line with the idea that growth will lead to job creation, which in this case is reasonable, since tourism employment largely consists in fixed-term contracts that do not cover a whole year; still there is no specific provisions for the sector's labour market issues, such as precarity, that have been discussed in extend in the Baseline Study Chapter on Greece (Kelly et al., 2022). Furthermore, the narrative fails to address the sustainability issues that year-long tourism might impose on the Greek environment and the communities that suffer from over-tourism.

Investments aiming to extend the tourism season and promote alternative forms of tourism (mountain tourism, health and wellness tourism, agrotourism, diving & underwater tourism); to upgrade regional ports, as well as the accessibility to beaches for the elderly and people with disabilities; and a dedicated programme of upskilling and reskilling in the tourism sector (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 22).

Component 4.6. - Modernise and improve the resilience of key economic sectors. For tourism, the plan envisages a reskilling and upskilling programme for employees and investments that aim to promote alternative forms of tourism and extend the tourist season, thus, diversifying the sector (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 35).

...entrepreneurship and research and innovation, for enhancing the productivity, competitiveness and resilience of key sectors of the national economy - tourism, culture, manufacturing, agriculture and transportations and logistics – and for providing incentives to private enterprises to scale up and become more competitive and export-oriented (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 70).

6. *The narrative that supports the private sector and entrepreneurship will lead to job creation.*

Linking the boom of the tourist sector with the issue of supporting entrepreneurship, are two of the insights from the Outputs of Cowork4YOUTH project: Lizarraga et al. (2022) address self-employment as one of the five policies supported in Italy; this addresses the issue that we have touched upon earlier, the issue of job creation. They also talk about efforts to ‘include the youth in a thriving sector’. This implies that there are sectors that are already yielding economically and otherwise, for others (such as, perhaps, owners of hotels). This implies that there should be laws that affect a rising of wages - which can be a political decision both at EU and national level. Romero and Oses (2023) also indicate that additionally to low wages, it seems that there are also continued interruptions to employment - which are devastating to achieving a living wage.

This narrative is quite generic and indeed corresponds to basic EU assumptions. While questioning the narrative in a profound way is totally out of the scope of this paper, in the case of Greece, and in combination with the narrative No 5 above, concerning the tourism sector, a disputable aspect comes to the forefront: while the documents examined strongly suggest the upskilling (mostly focused specifically on digital and green skills) of the supply side of the labour market as a means to achieve job creation, in the case of the demand side the narrative remains quite vague. For example, enterprises need to be connected with and receive direct support from Higher Education, as well as direct financial support in the form of business loans. However, the nature and conditions of this support is not specified (as it is the case with the nature of skills that the supply side should develop, and often in practice even the conditions to receive the suggested upskilling), which implies that the demand side will certainly act in a specific way and the labour market will automatically be benefited with the creation of new, quality job positions.

*In addition, the Recovery and Resilience Plan aims at strengthening the **links of entrepreneurship and production with scientific knowledge**, technology and innovation (Components 4.5 and 2.3), in consistency and complementarity with the emphasis placed by the National Strategy for Higher Education in linking education, research and production (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021).*

*Utilising the RRF loans to improve competitiveness and to **support private investments**
The Plan is devoting the RRF loan support exclusively to important additional reforms*

and investments, to further reduce: (a) The significant negative output gap projected in 2020 to reach 12.3%, (b) The large investment gap characterising the Greek economy over the past ten years: in 2019 investment spending stood at 10.1% of GDP compared to a eurozone average of 22.2%, (c) The large interest rate differential on business loans observed between Greece and the EMU average. Around 70% of the total investment gap is due to (lack of) **business investment**. Therefore, utilising the loan support to **finance private investments** accompanied with adequate reforms, **can stimulate growth, job creation and economic and social cohesion** (Report on the Greece 2.0, National Plan, 2021: 41).

3.2.3 Italy

Along with Greece, Italy has been badly hit by the recession after the crisis of 2008, yet, being a more robust economy, managed to resiliently recover sooner than Greece. Italy, however, also suffers from structural problems, different from Greece. The vast division between the economic paradigm of the North and the South has particular results upon the employment outlook, especially when it comes to the youth. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major blow to the Italian economy. Given the Cowork4YOUTH peripheral focus, in addition to the country-wide approach, the analysis here will elucidate the policy narrative from Calabria (NUTS2: ITF6), Sardegna (NUTS2: ITG2), Puglia (NUTS2: ITF4) as tourism -dependent regions, and from Lazio (NUTS2: ITI4) and Basilicata (NUTS2: ITF5) as regions in the process of de-carbonization.

3.2.3.1 Identified narratives from policy texts in Italy

The analysis of the previous policy texts has revealed the following narratives in the case of Italy:

1. *The narrative that technology drives economic growth, and entrepreneurship should be supported in adopting pertinent solutions and practices, while the workforce needs to be re-/up-skilled in line with technological developments.*

Several indications pinpoint that conclusion. Starting from the large number of reports on the matter of digitization and continuing with the texts themselves, it is apparent that the economy is deemed to revolve around entrepreneurship and technology. Indicatively, it is suggested that direct subsidies should be given to companies themselves, for them to invest then without fearing financial risk:

*A problem arises of the feasibility of the investments that can be covered by **resorting preferentially to direct subsidies** to induce companies to make particularly ambitious investments, characterised by the presence of high initial fixed costs and subsequent reduced operating costs, limiting the underlying financial risk (National Plan Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027).*

Such a practice takes away the risk from companies - but it seems that the risk remains in the hands of the state / public body which gives the subsidies.

The excerpt calls for investments on what is called 'dual transition', that is investments such as the hiring of both "high profile managerial" staff and "qualified workforce", as feasible only when direct subsidies eliminate risk for the companies.

The other side of the coin concerns the "small and micro companies for which the first step may consist of simplified tools of a relatively "generalist" nature which aim to encourage the acquisition of basic digital technologies;" and

*[...] dimensionally larger and organizationally more structured companies for which more complex initiatives can be imagined, aimed at projects, including collaborative ones possibly facilitated by the involvement of the MiSE Digital **Competence** Centers or Digital Innovation Hubs, linked to the introduction of more advanced digital technologies (National Plan Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027).*

Or, in

*The effective functioning of the entire innovation policy chain requires **training** and retraining of **skills** for industrial transition, smart specialisation and entrepreneurship, which operate within, or for, firms". (Accordo di Partenariato Italia 2021-2027)*

2. The narrative that 'skills' are predominantly digital skills

Following and expanding the previous narrative, the need for 'digitization' is constantly recurring, as it is stated in the titles of the policy documents themselves (see for instance the policy document "National Plan research, and innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027"). This is even more apparent in texts that have a broader scope, such as *Accordi di Partenariato Italia*, where digital skills are presented as integrally linked with employment:

The ESF Plus supports courses to strengthen scientific and technological skills (STEM), with particular attention to the participation of girls, to overcome gender stereotypes and increase female employment (Accordo di Partenariato Italia 2021-2027).

At the centre of this narrative lies the fundamental perception that technological and technical competitiveness are what is required for a thriving economy.

The NP supports the competitiveness of less developed regions through the strengthening of research and innovation capacity, the development and enhancement of skills, the transition towards digital and sustainable production systems, the increase of companies operating on the competitive frontier with the final objective of guaranteeing a process of convergence between territorial areas with different levels of development (National Plan Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027).

This type of competitiveness may also be seen to imply that there can be competition within the country - which eventually leads to a type of convergence - perhaps an equality which may lead to equal opportunities (for the cited 'companies').

- 3. The narrative that innovation stems from the partnership of entrepreneurs and researchers and to that end, universities should support entrepreneurship.*

'Innovation' is integral to economic advancement (as, once more, is evidenced in the titles / themes of the documents examined). Yet in spite of the insistence on the word, what is meant by innovation is not explicitly clear (apart from the relevance to technological advances).

Priority is given to the following objectives: to support the structural adjustment of the fisheries sector through innovation, low-impact fishing, gear selectivity, upgrading of skills, diversification and promotion of sustainable small-scale coastal fisheries and the strengthening of producer organisations (Accordo di Partenariato Italia 2021-2027).

What seems to be clear to the authors of the policy documents examined is that innovation is produced by researchers - yet the partnership with companies is also praised and seen aiding innovation. thus, for instance:

[...] within companies, these being understood as partners in the definition and conduct of research projects and also as recruiters of trained profiles and stable producers of research and innovation (National Plan Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021- 2027)

The idea that HEIs and their research should be of help to companies, which is present in the narratives of other countries too (see for instance Spain), sees companies as allowed to have demands from the public sector (Universities / publicly funded research), most likely under the understanding that it is companies that create jobs. Thus, the policy may concentrate on 'training and retraining' **for** companies and **delivers** to companies:

The effective functioning of the entire innovation policy chain requires training and retraining of skills for industrial transition, smart specialisation and entrepreneurship, which operate within, or for, firms (Accordo di Partenariato Italia 2021-2027).

Each project must present the following elements to a significant extent: a) innovative training activities conducted in synergy by universities and companies and aimed at reducing the mismatch between skills required by companies and skills provided by universities, as well as industrial doctorates; b) research activities conducted and/or research infrastructures created jointly by universities and businesses, in particular SMEs, operating in the area; c) support for start-ups; d) involvement of the local community on innovation and sustainability issues (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza 2021)

The objective of the measure, implemented by the MiSE, is to support, also through a reorganisation and rationalisation process, a network of 60 centres (Centres of Competence, Digital Innovation

Hubs, Digital Innovation Points) in charge of project development, delivery to companies providing advanced technological services and innovative and qualifying technology transfer services (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza 2021).

4. *The narrative that even “green transition” needs to be linked with technology and technical solutions*

It is of interest that digitization and the use of technology is seen as commensurate to what is called “green” transition – implying, one might suggest, that even the care of the environment is dependent upon the promotion of some form of digitization. The relationship of green transition with skills, therefore is formed as so:

Development of skills for the production chains to face the new challenges posed by the green and digital transition and by technological development also by promoting business networks; in particular, it intends to support the development of digital skills in the company and those related to ecological transition processes, with incentive measures that allow for professional updating and continuous training of internal company resources, including through the use of vouchers for the introduction into the company of specialised figures in the various fields connected with innovation and the transition towards production models based on the application of digital technologies and sustainable production techniques (National Plan Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027).

Linking green transition with digital transition, thus ultimately linking technology with the protection of the environment ([...] the development of digital skills in the company and those related to ecological transition processes” the application of digital technologies and sustainable production techniques”), seemingly may ignore the impact of technology on the environment.

The urge for a combined green and technological transition allows for an economic environment where a broadened scope of skills become technology related skills.

5. *The narrative that education should be shaped in accordance with the economy’s need for skills*

The narrative that education provides skills that lead to employment reflects a wider discussion surrounding these themes, also in terms of early school leaving. Particularly interesting in the case of Italy is the specific reference to what is coined as “educational poverty”:

The prevention and contrast of early school leaving and insufficient levels of basic skills are a priority to be addressed, as well as with an early and targeted guidance activity, in a framework of fight against educational poverty, with greater attention to the crucial education in the pre- school phase, integrating system interventions and expansion and better accessibility of the offer - in particular of services for the 0-3 age group still very

lacking in the South - with social inclusion measures and measures to combat child poverty (Accordo di Partenariato Italia 2021-2027).

However, moving from lower to higher levels of education it becomes clear that the focus is on a technical one, aligned with labour market needs as it is implied by the acknowledgment that there are insufficient opportunities for employment in Italy for those who complete tertiary education.

The narrative that Universities don't necessarily provide skills for employment, complimented by the narrative that the companies don't offer jobs for highly educated graduates, is of course in line with the narratives identified elsewhere that HE should become more vocational. Although in general, education improves employability, as we saw in previous narratives, it seems that at the higher level, it presents lower employment prospects within the country:

Furthermore, ISTAT notes that almost 20 percent of people who complete a research doctorate every year move abroad, while those who remain in Italy suffer from a profound mismatch between the high level of advanced skills they possess and the low professional content they find at work (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza 2021).

With that perspective it seems fitting that the Italian narratives focus on training and more specifically on skills directly related to professional, rather than academic education.

6. The conflicting narrative about the desirability of attracting talent from other countries and the undesirability of losing talent to other countries.

Italy seems intending to support training mobility, as well as the workforce's mobility within the country.

Post-graduate advanced training courses It is envisaged to finance advanced training interventions aimed at workers and executives as well as entrepreneurs of regional SMEs, for new skills and new professions, connected with the processes of economic transformation of the regional productive sectors. The objectives may be, on the one hand, to encourage the processes of professional re-orientation and mobility but also to accompany and anticipate the processes of economic transformation taking place in the various sectors, as well as contributing to the formation of new professions also taking into account the needs expressed by the regional strategic production chains. Specific attention may be paid to new higher education interventions at post-university level and/or linked to the research sector, connected with the processes of economic transformation and of the productive sectors which are of particular interest to the S3 "Specialisation Areas" (Regional Plan Lazio ESF+ 2021-2027).

2.1.1.1. Specific objective: ESO4.7. Promote lifelong learning, in particular flexible upskilling and retraining opportunities for all, taking into account entrepreneurial and digital skills, better anticipating change and new skills requirements based on labour market needs, facilitating career reorientation and promoting professional mobility (ESF+) (Regional Plan Lazio ESF+ 2021-2027).

...support for training mobility (internships in companies or institutions in the EU, language courses, postgraduate masters) and internationalisation courses; ·paths for the acquisition of entrepreneurial and transversal skills in students and teachers, with the involvement of the productive world (CALABRIA Programma SFC2021 finanziato a titolo del FESR).

The Italian policy documents seem to demonstrate the intentions of the member state to attract talent both from “local contexts” within the country, and from international context:

The PR will therefore intervene with actions aimed at strengthening the competitiveness of the entrepreneurial fabric through research, innovation, the development of knowledge-intensive enterprises and digital skills/knowledge, and at stimulating internationalisation through the creation of favourable conditions for attraction of talents also from other local contexts (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna Programma Regionale FESR 2021-2027 Verso una transizione sostenibile della Sardegna).

The transition process of the production system is therefore also driven by an increase in the availability of skills which, in the case of attracting talent, passes through a process of internationalisation of companies. To encourage this, this objective - in synergy with the provisions of the 'Os iii) - promotes the exchange and acquisition of skills thanks to the greater international propensity of companies, through the coordination and integration of regional initiatives with national and European ones set up for this purpose and through the strengthening of the governance system of internationalisation processes and the strategic management of all relevant parties (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna Programma Regionale FESR 2021-2027 Verso una transizione sostenibile della Sardegna).

The documents are conscious of the country’s brain drain. At the same time, they seem to have a concern about attracting talent from other countries (therefore perhaps prepared to contribute to the brain drain of other countries):

Furthermore, the following may be envisaged, also in the form of "Bonuses/incentives": forms of support for the activity of researchers in carrying out research activities in the regional territory; interventions to counter the "brain drain" towards other Italian regions or other European countries and contribute to the permanence of high skills in the regional economic and social fabric; interventions to attract new talents also coming from other regions or from abroad to carry out research activities in the regional territory at the universities based in Lazio (Regional Plan Lazio ESF+ 2021-2027).

Italy in that respect embraces a global tendency pertaining to the attraction of the most talented (see for example Tsaousis 2007).

3.2.4 Spain

Spain completes the Mediterranean side of the focus countries of the Cowork4YOUTH project. Being in the European South, Spain was hammered by the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent recession. Much like Greece and Italy, however, structural problems in the economic paradigm were pre-existing. Thus, Spain had a persistently high unemployment rate, especially when it comes to the younger part of the population. During the COVID-19 pandemic Spain, along with Italy has become the “hot spot” of infections with significant impact on the unemployment rate. In a similar fashion to Greece and Italy, the Mediterranean location of Spain leads to tourism-dependent regions, while the long tradition of the industrial sector means that specific regions are transitioning from de-carbonisation. More specifically, the present analysis will focus on Canarias (NUTS2: ES70) and Andalusia (NUTS2: ES61) as tourism-dependent regions, and on Castilla y Leon (NUTS2: ES41) and the Basque country (NUTS2: ES21) as regions transitioning from de-carbonisation.

3.2.4.1 Identified narratives from policy texts in Spain

1. *The narrative that acquiring digital skills is a necessary development for the country's workforce and the main tools to achieve that is VET and LLL*

The challenge for 2026 is to strengthen the digital skills of the workforce and citizens as a whole, reducing digital divides; complete the digital transformation of education; guarantee training in digital skills throughout working life; and increase the percentage of digital specialists in the Spanish economy by achieving gender parity in this group (Digital Spain 2026).

The narrative of the primacy of digital skills appears in other countries' texts as well, and as such it may sidestep the employment reality of low skilled jobs that do not require digital skills. Indeed, the narrative echoes the European Union's intentions to establish a digital society and digital economy.

On the other hand, component 20 also envisages the possibility for the ESF+ to provide continuity from 2024 onwards to support vocational training and its adaptation to the new needs of the labour market (provision of intermediate and higher degree courses, teachers' remuneration). In this way, the measures to be financed by the ESF+ in terms of improving the quality of the education system, equal access, and lifelong learning and professional mobility will be added to those provided under the Recovery Plan to reinforce the joint effect on this sectoral area (National Reform Programme 2022).

The understanding of digital skills as vocational also echoes the perception of the subject in European Union policy texts. It also may attest to a perceived relative ease of training, as opposed to increasingly advanced skills of a non-vocational character – comments such as the above however, equate the support of vocational training with ‘improving the quality of the education system’, which is linked with the narratives about higher education as well.

2. *The narrative that optimal society and optimal economy is a digital society and a digital economy and therefore it is vital that the workforce and the general population acquire digital skills, in order to improve employability and prevent exclusion*

*The digital transition requires the development of basic digital skills among citizens, with the aim of ensuring that everyone can interact, shop, carry out transactions and communicate with public administrations with autonomy, sufficiency and security. Some groups have all the necessary digital skills to do so, but others still have problems in taking advantage of the benefits derived from a **digital society and economy**. Therefore, public action must place special emphasis on those groups that find it more difficult to acquire these skills, such as the elderly, and people with low income levels, from non-urban areas or with a low level of education, paying special attention to women in these groups (Digital Spain 2026)*

Lifelong digital skills training: This line will ensure that both employed and unemployed people can develop, throughout their working lives, the digital skills necessary to fully integrate into the digital economy. To this end, the following actions, among others, will be completed: creation of centres for the development of digital skills; modular training for professional qualification and requalification aimed at employed and unemployed people; professional requalification of employed workers in the tourism sector; training in digital skills for people in ERTE; and detection of new training needs (Digital Spain 2026).

As the development of a digital economy and a digital society are aims of the European Union [see for instance the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)], these aims are implemented in the national and regional texts. This narrative does not necessarily address the issue from an employment point of view; rather, it takes for granted that the employment issues need to be solved with a view to these EU aims – and perhaps even that these aims are optimal for the solving of employment issues as well.

This narrative is complemented by the notion that the digital is a whole world of its own. In this sense, being digitally literate becomes a prerequisite for participating in society.

The digital world has quadrupled in speed, partly due to the pandemic. Digitalization is already part of the daily life of citizens, companies and public administration. The aim of this challenge is to address: The training and acquisition of digital skills for citizens, entrepreneurs and employees (Castilla y Leon ERDF).

[...] Another essential aspect of digitalization is the training of human capital, with a twofold objective: to avoid bottlenecks due to the lack of qualified workers needed for the implementation of digital technologies and to promote the use of their advantages by all citizens, preventing them from operating as a source of social exclusion (National Reform Programme 2022).

3. *The narrative that digital education should be involved in all levels of education, which will be beneficial both for employability as well as avoiding social exclusion.*

The link that is referenced between digital skills and higher education adds a skills problem to the tasks of higher education– inducing training, rather than education (if we see education as something that would imply a deeper understanding / thinking / creativity). Learning advanced digital skills however, could be seen as a creative endeavour – one that would promote the existence of a “labour capital” of higher competencies.

However, the reference to the involvement of higher education in the training of digital skills does not make that distinction: it rather may be perceived to imply that the same competencies can be served by vocational training *and* by higher education – together with training initiatives formed by public authorities, or the labour sphere itself, implying that the value of vocational training should be in the scope of higher education.

The development of these competencies must be promoted from all areas: from the educational system, both in primary and secondary education and in vocational training, where the modification of the curriculum and technological modernization must improve the digital skills of students and promote digital vocations; from the higher education system, which must correct the low proportion of female digital specialists and increase the number of these specialists; from the labour sphere, where companies and public administrations must collaborate by providing mechanisms to improve the skills of male and female workers; and from the public authorities, which must facilitate the training of the unemployed and those who need to acquire new skills. (Digital Spain 2026)

In the field of education, within this specific objective, the Association Agreement provides for actions for the construction and reform of educational centres for infant, primary, secondary, baccalaureate, vocational training, special education, artistic education and even university education, as well as such as equipping these centres with new technologies aimed at educational innovation. Investments supported by the FEDER that promote equal access to general education will continue to be a priority, including for people with disabilities, guaranteeing equal treatment that ensures the full integration and inclusion of these people (Canarias ERDF, 2022).

As recurring in the EU and regional / countries’ policy documents, the issue of seeing innovation as optimal, is here addressed in relation with education. It is of specific interest that even artistic and even infant and primary education are seen as benefiting from innovation – in spite of, for instance, studies that warn against the use of some (seen as innovative) digital technologies from an early age (see for instance Mustafaoglou et al. 2018).

Modernization and digitization of the educational system, including early education from 0 to 3 years: This component pursues the modernization and digitization of the education system to move towards a personalised, inclusive and flexible model that adapts to the needs of each student. It also aims to reinforce teacher training by integrating new educational techniques at school based on the use of digital media. It also seeks to

guarantee the connectivity of the university network and the adaptation of programs and systems to new technologies and blended face-to-face and distance learning. (Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, 2021).

4. The narrative that mobility is beneficial for vocational training regarding the adaptation to the needs of the labour market

The issue of the mobility of advanced workers appears in the documents of different countries. Whereas in Italy it seems to appear in antagonistic terms (Italy suggests it would try to attract workers, and stop brain drain), in Spain it seems to be addressed in aiming to enable both the attracting and providing workers (mobility towards Spain and from Spain). At the same time, and as the Italy policy texts attest to, it seems that European Union Member states are competitive regarding their need and wishes to attract high skilled workers from other member state countries (see also Tsaousis 2007: 244).

Measures to promote the mobility of learners and teachers and the transnational collaboration of educators and trainers, including the recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications (Canarias ERDF, 2022 & Castilla y Leon ERDF, 2022).

On the other hand, component 20 also envisages the possibility for the ESF+ to provide continuity from 2024 onwards to support vocational training and its adaptation to the new needs of the labour market (provision of intermediate and higher degree courses, teachers' remuneration). In this way, the measures to be financed by the ESF+ in terms of improving the quality of the education system, equal access, and lifelong learning and professional mobility will be added to those provided under the Recovery Plan to reinforce the joint effect on this sectoral area (National Reform Programme 2022).

In this regard, Galicia has implemented the Galeuropa Program to promote mobility and training internships in European countries, and Cantabria has launched the "Escuelas de Talento Joven" and "Jóvenes con Talento" programs. In the same vein, the Basque Country has developed an alternating vocational training model, aimed at unemployed young people and vocational training students, and also supports companies that hire young returnees to the Community. Navarra develops integrated training and employment programs aimed at vulnerable groups. Castilla y León grants aid for the hiring of young people as technical support personnel for research in public universities, providing them with specific training to facilitate their labour insertion in qualified jobs (National Reform Programme 2022).

5. The narrative that skills lead to greater productivity which subsequently leads to better living conditions.

This narrative seems to not address issues such as workers' burnout, and indeed does not explain or justify the conclusion that living conditions and productivity are linked. It could for instance be

more obvious to say that higher wages would be linked with better living conditions – but the link between productivity and living conditions seems more arbitrary.

The development of human capital is fundamental for increasing worker productivity and, therefore, contributes to improving their working conditions. Therefore, as is the case with labour market reform, training measures favour both social cohesion and an increase in productivity and competitiveness of the economy, and take on an outstanding relevance as a policy of investment in young people and future generations. These policies respond to sub-paragraph 3 of CSR 2 of 2020, regarding the development of skills to strengthen the labour market, as well as sub- paragraphs 8 to 11 of CSR 2 of 2019, on improving the education system, reducing school dropout rates and better matching training to business needs” (National Reform Programme 2022).

Another major priority will be to promote training, a driver of productivity and key to the employability and mobility of workers, which, together with labour market reform, will facilitate access to better living conditions (National Reform Programme 2022).

6. *The narrative that potentially equates social groups with different characteristics, such as women, migrants, people with disabilities, as groups with a problematic relationship with employment.*

This narrative makes a valid point, as all these groups seem to be either excluded, or not equally represented in the labour market. However, as already discussed in the case for other countries, the narrative sets limitations in dealing with the employment problems of these groups as it tends to group them together, despite their different needs.

In addition, the Autonomous Communities develop vocational training and training for employment actions aimed at specific groups or sectors, including the new model of training services aimed at people with disabilities in Castilla-La Mancha or subsidies for the training of young immigrants or unemployed people with low qualifications due to dropping out of school in the Basque Country, where the training and hiring of women in male-dominated areas and retraining and outplacement in sectors in crisis are also promoted (National Reform Programme 2022).

7. *The narrative that links competitiveness and social cohesion through investment in human capital*

Citing competitiveness together with social cohesion can be perceived to imply a connection between the two. Although ‘decent work’ may remain the prerogative of those who are on the receiving end of the ‘investment in human capital’ (as cited below), it is conceivable that -following the narrative that competitiveness leads to growth and subsequently to more and of better-quality jobs- a country’s competitiveness may result in improving the overall social cohesion within the country. Nevertheless, a large number of highly skilled workers does not however necessarily result

in those workers being employed in their own country as it has been the case for example with the brain drain circumstances of many European countries.

Straddling the actions to improve competitiveness and social cohesion are investment in human capital (section 3.3.2: Human Capital) and the promotion of a well-functioning labour market (section 3.3.1: Labor Market), which enable progress to be made on SDG 4, quality education, as well as SDG 8, on decent work and economic growth (National Reform Programme 2022).

A more general issue with this narrative is revealed in the following extract which is seemingly attributing a significant aspect of the wage gap between the sexes exclusively on the nature and level of skills. Under this scope, one could argue that the objective of competitiveness affects the perception of social cohesion.

The Plan is expected to make it possible to reduce the differential in technological skills between men and women, which in turn will make it possible to reduce wage differences in the medium term, especially in the most highly qualified jobs, where the gender gap is highly explained by the differences in skills called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) (Recover Plan – Strategic Industrialization 2022)

Furthermore, one should consider this narrative and its aforementioned implication, in combination with the previous one concerning the grouping of “vulnerable groups”.

3.2.5 Ireland

The former ‘Celtic Tiger’ presents a trajectory from fast economic development during the 1990s and the 2000s, to the economic crisis of 2008, which was manifested in the form of private debt crisis. Unemployment in Ireland has been at relatively lower levels, compared to Greece, Italy and Spain. At the same time Ireland’s recovery has been significantly faster than the other focus countries. Nonetheless, it presents similar challenges with areas with active tourism industry and transitioning areas from decarbonization. Nonetheless, administrative reforms pertaining to geographical reasons minimise the significance of regional divisions. Therefore, although administratively Ireland is divided to Northern and Western region (NUTS2: IE04) on the one hand, and Southern (NUTS2: IE05), Eastern and Midland region (NUTS2: IE06) on the other, the analysis will tend to focus on Ireland as a whole.

3.2.5.1 Identified narratives from policy texts in Ireland

1. *The narrative that Ireland is a digital economy leader and as such Ireland experiences a significant need for high quality digital skills.*

Ireland defines itself as a digital economy leader, where technology companies and highly digitalized businesses from other sectors can find a suitable environment to operate. To do so, it needs to provide, apart from the infrastructure and the political environment, a highly specialised workforce. Developing its internal workforce and attracting employees in fields such as AI, cyber security and advanced computing is considered a main goal.

In 2022, the EGFSN published a report titled: AI Skills: A Preliminary Assessment of the Skills Needed for the Deployment, Management and Regulation of Artificial Intelligence. Difficulty of hiring new staff was perceived as the biggest barrier to AI adoption by Irish firms, with firms reporting significant skills gaps in the areas of cloud computing, programming and machine learning or modelling, compared with our European neighbours. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

The examined policy documents anticipate a further increase in the need for specialised digital skills. The efforts for the expansion of the ecosystem for high tech and highly digitalized companies (as undertaken by IDA for instance), are by themselves a driver for increased labour demand in these sectors. Improving the supply of labour, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is a requirement for achieving the strategic goals of attracting more foreign investments.

The shift in labour demand towards higher digital skills is likely to continue and become even more pronounced. Identifying the specific skills requirements that need to be met through focused and specific programmes will be a priority. This will be achieved by developing more and diverse pathways in HE and FET, as well as an understanding that digital skills must be developed alongside essential transversal skills. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022)

Ireland as a location for leading digital enterprises: Ireland's digital policy is likely to play an increasingly important role in shaping location decisions of Multi-National Corporations (MNCs). That includes a strong, stable and coherent regulatory framework for digital, with highly capable and well-resourced regulators, as an essential part of Ireland's strategic offering. It also includes a commitment to maintaining and investing in digital infrastructure and connectivity; certainty around data security and a well-resourced National Cyber Security Centre; and prioritising digital skills development and ensuring a strong pipeline of talent. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

IDA Ireland's new Strategy, Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021- 2024, includes a focus on realising opportunities from digital transformation, as well as supporting clients in their digital transformation, including through supporting the upskilling of clients' employees. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

The conditions created by the digital economy ecosystem provides extra support for the common among EU and the other focus countries' narrative that it is the supply side of the labour market that needs to adjust to the needs of the enterprises. It is assumed, or even taken as a given, that job positions will increase in the "expanding sectors".

Actions Crucial for Enhancing Labour Market Performance - To Enhance Quality of Labour Supply: In July 2021, the Government published its AI strategy, AI-Here for Good-National AI Strategy, which considers how AI can be incorporated into future policy for digital learning while employers are to be assisted in expanding workplace-focused AI upskilling and reskilling. In response, the EGFSN's AI Skills report discussed earlier lists 10 recommendations aimed at alleviating the skills-related issues and challenges relevant to the adoption of AI in Ireland. [...] The Council believe[s] it is important to implement these recommendations immediately to help support Ireland's labour supply with the skills needed to meet the labour demands for the twin digital/climate transition. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022)

The medium-term projections assume some mismatches in the labour market: the skills needed by firms in expanding sectors of the economy being different to the skills of those in firms in declining sectors. (Ireland Stability Programme 2022)

2. *The narrative that digitalization of enterprises is key to economic growth and that it requires a change in culture*

Digital transition is perceived as a crucial factor for ensuring the growth and competitiveness of the Irish economy; furthermore, it is understood as a process that is broader than a mere addition of technical skills, applications, or equipment. In this sense soft skills and the adaptation of the human capital to new business processes and models is a prerequisite for its success. It should be noted however, that this complex issue (that is a major challenge not only for governments and states but even for prominent multinational corporations) is not analysed in depth. Organisations such as Enterprise Ireland and IDA do provide services for supporting the management for the transition such as advisory on leadership⁷ or lean management⁸ respectively; still, in the level of nation or regions -wide policies it is not clear how the SMEs (especially domestic and not export ones) are becoming part of the transition, and overcome external or internal barriers.

Digitalization of Enterprise: It is a priority for Government to drive a step change in digital adoption in all enterprises. To be successful, digital transformation requires not just the use of technology, but changes in culture, leadership, skills, and processes. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

Barriers to adoption of digital technologies by SMEs include a lack of awareness of digital solutions available and their benefits; access to investment finance; skills; trust, including security and privacy issues; addressing small firms' specific vulnerabilities to cyber-attacks; and access to infrastructure, for example, high-speed broadband. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022)

⁷ <https://globalambition.ie/>

⁸ <https://www.idaireland.com/latest-news/infographics/lean-digitalisation-business-offer>

Many companies view investment in digital technology as a cost rather than a long-term opportunity. However, it represents an investment that can not only improve their resilience but help them in addressing the big challenges they face, such as staying competitive in a changing world and tackling climate change, when paired with an appropriate set of multidisciplinary skills such as digital, management and process improvement skills. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

The assessment that many small firms perceive the “investment in digital technology as a cost rather than a long-term opportunity” requires some further analysis, as it can provoke reasonable questions. A first one, acknowledged in the first of the two extracts above, concerns the level of awareness about its (the investment’s) utility. A second one concerns its utility itself and it has two legs. Firstly, are the small enterprises financially capable of undertaking relevant investments? And secondly, how can they be certain that such an investment will improve their financial position in the mid or the long-term? The argument of competitiveness and sustainability is apparently relevant here; however, at this point, the Irish narrative for digitalization concurs with the narratives present in the other countries as well that -from a certain point of view- envision a fully digitalized economy.

3. The narrative that Lifelong learning (LLL) is a key factor in achieving growth and responding to the digital and green transition trends.

In line with EU’s dominant narratives, LLL holds a very important position in the efforts for dealing with labour market problems. Several policy documents acknowledge that there is room for improvement especially in regards to targeting specific groups of the workforce. It is important that participation rates increase and LLL practices become more efficient by being more targeted and flexible.

Addressing the increased need for upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning is a priority for Ireland in line with the EU Skills Agenda the goals of the European Education Area 2030 and targets set in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. (Partnership Agreement Ireland, 2021-2027).

Without quality educational and upskilling and reskilling opportunities throughout the lifecycle, the economy is at risk to being constrained as it deals with the challenges of structural change that accompany digital innovations and climate change investments. Furthermore, individuals are at greater risk of precarious employment, limited access to the labour market, and of poverty and social exclusion if there is not sufficient investment in their skills (Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

The last extract highlights the perceived role of LLL as a factor that provides protection over social exclusion. The following extracts expand this idea from the individual to the macro-level: the green and especially the digital transitions are not seen as plainly temporary phenomena and LLL needs to become a “norm” for the country’s workforce in order to ensure the conditions for economic growth in an ever-changing environment.

If we are to have the economy and society we want in 2025 low carbon, higher productivity, technologically responsive, family continuing to be core, we need to create the environment where that is possible. As a country we need to see lifelong learning as the norm so we are adaptable to new technology and sectors; businesses need to consider new ways of attracting and retaining talent through remote and flexible working options; and that women as well as men can get the job done (Future Jobs Ireland 2019).

We need to enhance Ireland's lifelong learning provision to help workers re-skill throughout their working lives. We need to enable enterprises, and SMEs in particular, to invest in upskilling/ re- skilling their workforce, including their managerial capacity so as to enhance and maintain productivity, adapt to technological disruption, and identify and exploit emergent opportunities from the digital and green economies. (Future Jobs Ireland 2019).

- 4. The narrative that higher education should be aligned with the economic and labour market trends.*

The narrative about HE that -as discussed elsewhere- is gaining ground across the EU, is present in Ireland as well. In alignment with the country's strategic orientation to the role of a "digital economy leader", the practical application of scientific knowledge is seen as a necessary development. The following extract from Needs Analysis for ERDF/EFS+ Funding (2020) is indicative.

Development Challenges Facing Southern Region: In terms of lifelong learning, the RSES acknowledges that support will be needed to ensure greater collaboration between the Higher Education Institutes, the Regional Skills Fora and the Educational and Training Board of the Region. The Southern region has seven major higher education institutions, four of which are currently in the process of seeking re-designation as Technological Universities. The region's higher education institutes will be important in encouraging innovation and increasing R&D intensity in the SME sector. Assisting enterprises to invest in upskilling and re-skilling their workforce was also highlighted as a key challenge including the potential to develop apprenticeship schemes. Indecon [Economic Consultants] believes that this reskilling will be of increased importance in the post COVID-19 environment. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/EFS+ Funding, 2020).

- 5. The narrative that apprenticeships are a very effective tool for entering or re-entering the labour market and developing necessary skills, benefiting both the individual as well as the enterprises.*

Apprenticeships are regarded as an efficient way to shorten unemployment periods and address the skills gap, especially in concern to the twin transition.

Apprenticeships as a route to reskilling: An appropriately educated and skilled workforce is key to meeting the current and future skills needs of the economy, and the apprenticeship model and wider FET sector plays a key role in meeting these demands. As previously highlighted by the Council in Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021, apprenticeships can provide a reskilling route to rapid re-employment for those impacted by structural changes to the economy and labour market and can provide support for the digital and green transitions (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

[...] further changes to some apprenticeship courses, in particular craft apprenticeships, could potentially allow for more efficient delivery of trained workers and ensure that these skilled workers can enter the labour market at an earlier point with the relevant skill sets (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

The Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022, acknowledges that different sectors and subsectors may have different needs; hence designing apprenticeship design should be taking into consideration the special conditions in every case. The analysis required under this scope, apart from contributing to tackling the skills gap, can also reveal areas for improvement that could be linked to inclusion and cohesion issues, as for example the gender gap.

For example, a report commissioned by the Construction Industry Federation (CIF), published in 2020, investigates the causes and implications of low numbers entering wet trades [trades in construction mixing materials with water e.g. plastering] in Ireland. The report finds that while the existing apprenticeship model is clearly working well for some wet trades, it is not as effective for others, with some respondents noting the duration for certain trades are too long. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022)

[...] given the vital need for apprentices and the current overhaul of the apprenticeship system in Ireland, the Council believes that the ongoing monitoring of the drivers of take-up of apprenticeships of all occupations for both employers and employees is essential. All components of the apprenticeship model – including duration, remuneration and other terms and conditions

– should be kept under review with a focus on identifying and resolving any barriers to take-up. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

Currently 41 apprenticeship programmes are predominantly male whilst only one is predominantly female, the latter being hairdressing. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022)

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 aims to increase the number of apprenticeships to 10,000 per year by 2025 through measures including a new National Apprenticeship Office, a new grant for employers and nonfinancial support targeted to SME's. Additionally, the DFFHERIS [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science] recently launched the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA) and announced a new gender- based bursary to address gender

imbalances, particularly targeting female participation (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022)

The examined texts underline the target of increasing apprenticeships to 10,000 per year. The emphasis given on the apprenticeships' design is expressed with the establishment of the National Apprenticeship Alliance, which supports the implementation of the Action Plan for Apprenticeship - 2021 to 2025.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make apprenticeship more accessible to employers and learners, to achieve a target of 10,000 annual registrations across a wide range of programmes by 2025. Expansion to date has widened the impact of apprenticeship to areas of skills shortage such as engineering, technology skills, logistics and fintech. (Ireland National Reform Programme 2022- 2025)

There are currently 64 apprenticeship programmes on offer, with a further 14 additional programmes being developed. [...] The new National Apprenticeship Office will deliver practical support and information for employers and apprentices seeking to engage with apprenticeship. As part of the transition, the new National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA) has been established and will take on and build from the previous role of the Apprenticeship Council and will play an important role in the delivery of the Government's commitment to develop a single unified apprenticeship system, which is fully valued by both employers and prospective apprentices, with apprenticeships which are relevant and linked with skills demands. (Ireland National Reform Programme 2022- 2025)

Overall, Ireland has taken action to design a cohesive system for apprenticeships that will ensure their effectiveness. The focus appears to be twofold: promoting the skills required for the digital and green transitions on the one hand, while at the same time advancing social goals such as inclusion. As shown by Romero, Oses and Judge (2023) Ireland's unemployed youth seems to "experience higher educational or skills barriers to entering occupations [even those that have] not [been] in decline". The intention to develop a well coordinated system that takes input from a wide range of stakeholders⁹ is fully aligned with the identified narrative.

- 6. The narrative that (beside advanced digital skills), increasing the proportion of the workforce that has the basic digital skills is crucial for achieving mid- and long-term goals regarding growth, the digital and green transitions and inclusion.*

Ensuring that the majority of the workforce (and the general population as well) has the basic digital skills is important for dealing with the challenges imposed by the green digital transition. Furthermore, it is perceived as an additional factor for the country's goal of being recognised as a

⁹ Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025.

digital economy leader. Even though Ireland is considered to be in a better position in this field compared to other EU countries, some reports draw a less positive image.

An important link is evident between basic literacy and numeracy challenges and a lack of basic digital skills. The focus of the National Strategy: Literacy & Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011- 2020 and the Interim Review 2017 was to raise the standards of teaching and learning in literacy, including digital literacy and numeracy from early years to post primary. The development of a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy for all learners is underway to fulfil the Government's determination that all young people will leave school with the digital skills required for everyday life and further studies. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022)

The proportion of young people aged 16-19 having basic or above basic digital skills has increased since 2015 but remains slightly below the EU average (77% v EU 82%) (Council Recommendation on the 2022 National Reform Program).

The need to improve basic digital skills and improve access to digital infrastructure is also confirmed by the evidence that almost half the population (47%) were classed as having no, or low, internet and digital skills use. This is illustrated in Figure 8.3 below. The percentage of the population with the most advanced "above basic" skill classification at 34% in 2019 was just above the EU average of 31%. (European Semester, Country Report (Ireland) 2022)

Ireland has set a measurable target of raising the percentage of the working population that acquires basic digital skills to 80% by 2030, with the 10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy. The idea put forward in the EU policy texts as well, of digital skills as a right, is also present here, as digital skills are considered a prerequisite for citizens to "fully engage in society and realise their full potential", a condition that logically emerges along with the digital transition.

The new 10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy is aimed at bridging the digital divide across Irish society including through enhancing broad digital skills. It takes a whole-of-Government approach and is underpinned by a vision of an Ireland where every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society and realise their full potential. The Strategy sets a target of decreasing the share of adults in Ireland without basic digital skills from 47% to 20% by 2030. (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

[...] increased levels of more advanced digital skills will be required to address emerging skills needs in the economy. Improving digital skills is important in addressing social inclusion objectives. Various public service strategies highlight the need to move public services online and access to these services will require basic digital skills for citizens. Similarly, access to eHealth will require at least a basic level of digital skills. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/ERDF+ Funding, 2020)

An appropriate digital skills level for the general population, to enable all cohorts regardless of age or background to engage with and benefit from digitalisation, is crucial

in ensuring the digital transition is inclusive and positive for wider society. This is a focus of Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, with digital infrastructure and funding for schools, focusing on disadvantaged students, and mainstreaming essential digital skills across lifelong education provision (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

The idea of upskilling a significant percentage of adults in order to be able to live in a “digital society” is closely linked with the vision of Ireland as a digital leader. From this point of view, upskilling the general population bears a significant economic dimension.

Positioning Ireland as a digital leader, driving and enabling digital transformation across the economy and society - Targets: Increase the share of adults with at least basic digital skills to 80% by 2030. Increase graduates with higher-level digital skills to over 12,400 by end of 2022, with ambition to further increase digital skills provision in following year (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022)

The importance of skill enhancement and lifelong learning including digital skills is needed to achieve the Smart Region objective set by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. It is aligned with the priority for the region to improve its overall human capital levels and to enable remote working. Of note, the Southern region set a key strategic outcome to improve education for all their citizens and communities and saw the creation of an inclusive and learning region as a key enabler. This is consistent with the strong emphasis placed in the Eastern and Midland RSES on developing the region's skill base and addressing skill shortages and lifelong learning needs. Enhancement of digital skills is essential to achieve the Smart Region objectives set in each of the RSES. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/EFS+ Funding, 2020)

Indecon's research highlights the importance of enhancement of skills for the Irish economy and for Irish society. One area of particular focus should be the enhancement of digital skills. Evidence from Eurostat indicates that 53% of the Irish population have basic or above basic digital skills. This is significantly below some of the most developed European economies where over 70% have basic or above basic digital skills. Data from the European Commission indicates that Ireland is above the EU-28 average in terms of advanced digital skills and development. The evidence indicates that Ireland ranks fifth in this category but is significantly below the top three countries. The EU Country Report for Ireland also highlighted the need for investment in skills and digitalisation. The National Reform Programme noted the importance of digital skills. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/EFS+ Funding, 2020)

7. The narrative that Green Transition is a great opportunity for job creation.

The examined policy texts tend to sketch an optimistic (and a rather vague one) image of the green transition, concerning its impact on employment. This is indeed in congruence with the case presented in Narrative 1 that job positions will increase in the “expanding sectors”.

Responding to the green transition: A key focus has been to support the transition of the existing workforces and the creation of new enterprise and employment opportunities so that the region remains vibrant, innovative, and prepared to maximise the opportunities that decarbonisation will bring. (Climate Action Plan 2023).

The European Green Deal and The Just Transition Fund: The potential for combined measures involving the ERDF, ESF+ and the Just Transition Fund will include the creation of new employment opportunities and the upskilling of workers impacted and these will be very important in the next programming period. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/ESF+ Funding, 2020)

The Demand for Renewable Energy, Residential Retrofit and Electric Vehicle Deployment Skills to 2030 report makes 30 recommendations to support Ireland's transition to a zero-carbon economy. The Council believe it is important to implement these recommendations immediately to help support Ireland's labour supply with the skills needed to meet the labour demands for the twin digital/climate transition. (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022)

While the creation of new job positions in the process of green transition cannot be disputed, the following narrative which is substantially connected to this one, presents some significant limitations, as discussed below.

8. *The narrative that -especially in the context of green transition and green jobs- the lack of skills on the supply side of the labour market is a major barrier for job creation.*

In line with the dominant EU narratives, job creation is perceived as an issue that is addressed exclusively by enterprises. The policy documents examined connect the issue with developing sectors, and especially with opportunities that arise from the green transition. There are no state intervention initiatives or measures, apart from apprenticeships or the wage subsidies in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Ireland faces the "common problem for the advanced economies" of lacking a highly skilled workforce to support the creation of new jobs.

Evidence is mounting that the availability of labour supply, rather than demand for labour, has become the main constraint to employment creation, a feature that is increasingly common in other advanced economies. And while the labour market is a complex one, with a myriad of sub- sectors and firms, it would appear that shortages of labour – both skilled and unskilled – may be holding back production in some areas. (Ireland Stability Programme 2022).

9. *The narrative about working conditions and compensation as a means to increase productivity, attract skilled labour and improve competitiveness.*

The examined documents contain only a few references on the issues of compensation and working conditions. Still, when mentioned, these issues are basically not seen per se, but from the perspective of their utility for economic growth:

Compensation of Labour: Measures enhancing working conditions can help to attract and retain talent in Ireland. They are not only important for employee well-being directly but can also contribute to productivity by strengthening the commitment of workers to their firm, reducing excessive worker turnover, promoting the use of skills in the workplace and strengthening the incentives of firms and workers to invest in training and skill acquisition (Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022).

While Ireland had performed well in overall competitiveness rankings, a number of competitiveness challenges remain which must be addressed if economic recovery is to be facilitated. Key areas where priority needs exist include measures to address the productivity gap in SMEs and to reduce the costs facing employees. These include childcare, transportation and housing costs. Improving infrastructure and addressing skills and education are also of fundamental importance. (Needs Analysis for ERDF/EFS+ Funding, 2020).

4. Policy Recommendations

The narrative analysis offered a way of understanding how skills gap and brain drain problems are perceived in the EU in general and the four focus countries in particular. Possible insufficiencies and conceptual gaps were identified when compared with the literature on the matters at hand. The discussion and recommendations that follow are based on the identification of these gaps and the evaluation of the narratives and their use in contexts that could be seen as ‘meta-texts’ (texts upon the texts): the policy texts of the Member States, national and regional.

How are the central narratives adapted by each MS? Are there common narratives in the MS policy texts examined? How can those narratives be further acknowledged in new policy recommendations?

The problems of skills gap and brain drain, as well as employment in general (in line with the European objectives and long-term goals, such as those set in the *European Pillar of Social Rights* or in less generalised plans) need further attention - but we are making a first modest step here.

Beginning with a discussion on the current perception of the problems, as it emerges from the narratives presented in the previous pages, the recommendations restate the problems and acknowledge the broadness of their defining characteristics.

4.1 Skills Gap

4.1.1 The problems as they are perceived in the policy texts

1. Common perception of the basic aspects - agreement between EU and MS;
2. Connections between skills, employment, and growth;
3. The dominance of the green and the digital transition; and
4. The concepts and methods used to promote this.

A horizontal reading of the narratives presented in the previous chapter revealed two facts: first, in most cases there is a congruence between the EU and the countries’ narratives - given that the digital and green transitions are EU strategic goals, and the fact that the national and regional plans are developed in line with EU policy recommendations, and even at times partially within the framework of EU funding mechanisms. It is conceivable that MS and regions critically evaluate EU recommendations in accordance with their particular conditions and strategies before adopting the narratives, and it is also conceivable that in some cases they merely follow them without questioning. It would be pertinent to attempt an assessment of that, based on the texts - namely,

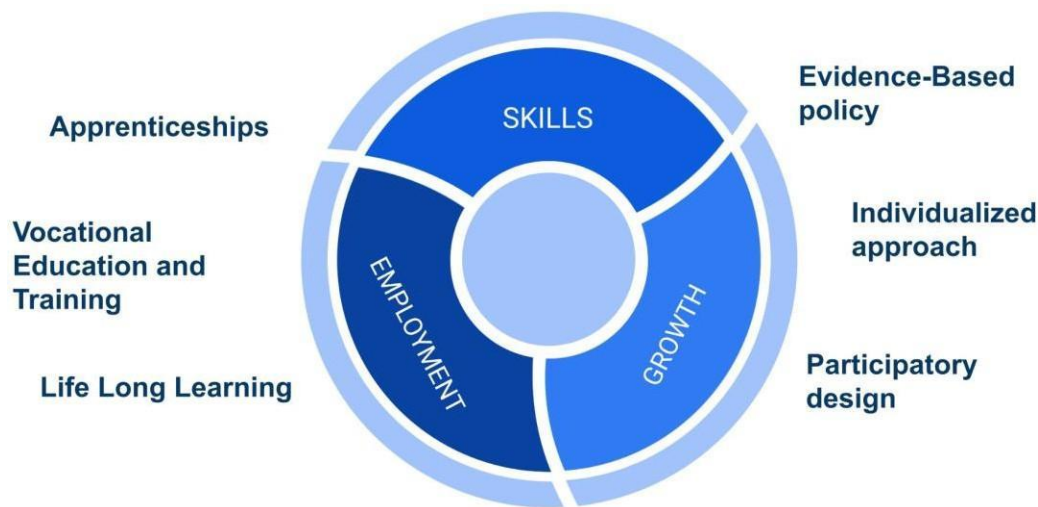
which narratives seem adopted without comment in the texts, and which are being re-thought in different ways.

At the same time, regarding the subject of the narratives, the national and regional plans did not contain adequate information to identify narratives on all the categories identified at the EU level. In particular, there were no identified narratives for evidence-based policy; the type of methodologies used; apprenticeships; and the agreement among social partners. This does not mean that these subjects have been ignored. In fact, the policy documents contain occasional mentions that are aligned with the EU narratives - hence, for the purposes of this analysis, those EU narratives are considered as having been accepted as part of the general framework of policy design.

A main finding of the narrative analysis concerns the connections between skills, employment, and growth. The proposed interventions focus almost exclusively on the supply side of the labour market (LM) and the development of skills, while there are limited provisions for measures that will directly result in job creation. Given that there are sectors where the supply of labour does not meet the demand, the acquisition of pertinent skills by the workforce is expected to lead to job creation. This conceptualisation, which is indeed reasonable, is expanded to imply that the workforce's upskilling will not only cover current vacancies, but in addition, even if the vacancies are at some point or in some places covered, it will increase employment through entrepreneurship or the anticipated LM needs. Thus, and given that upskilling predominantly refers to digital skills, and on a second level green skills, it appears that behind the narrative stands the projection of the effects of the twin transition, whose success is dependent on the quality of pertinent skills. Subsequently, given that the twin transition is considered the vehicle for sustainability, competitiveness, and growth (the stress being on the latter two), it follows that the acquisition of digital and green skills by the workforce is a prerequisite for growth. At the same time, the relationship between employment and growth is also acknowledged as a two-way one: on the one hand it is generally accepted that growth leads to higher employment; on the other, the employment targets for MS suggest that increasing employment precedes growth. The findings of Wheelan, Staffa and Banahan (2023) indirectly capture this two-way relationship by observing a statistically significant positive relationship of both GDP per capita and participation rate (labour market participation of the whole working age population) with youth employment. These sequences, i.e. skills - employment - growth, or skills - growth - employment seem to justify the focus on skills and the supply side of the LM. However, while the objective of growth is the subject of other policy documents (e.g. the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines, The European Industrial Strategy, etc.) the direct policy on employment and job creation (i.e. apart from job creation that occurs through growth) mainly consists of the up- and re- skilling policies.

As indicated from the narrative analysis in the previous chapter, the EU and MS employment and skills policies make use of specific tools (apprenticeships; VET; LLL) and concepts (evidence-based policies; individualised support; and participatory design, which mainly refers to agreement between social partners).

Figure 5.1 - Skills narrative representation



4.1.2 Conceptual gaps

The definition of skills

In discussing the skills gap narratives, the very first observation concerns the definition of skills. In all policy documents examined, the references to skills predominantly regard digital skills. This is indeed in line with the digital transition goal. Nevertheless, without disregarding its necessity, the digital transition cannot cover all the areas of the LM, at least not in the short- and mid- term. Hence, the required skills are basically digital skills, and this is not exclusively based on a mapping of the current labour market needs, but it is partly a projection. Digital skills seem to be promoted in order to promote the idea of “turning digital”: a digitally advanced workforce is a necessary and sufficient condition for digitalisation. The same is true of green skills - even though the fields of green transition and green jobs are even less cohesively defined. In this way there is a clear intention to develop “market-oriented skills” and disregard the idea of developing economic activity in accordance with skills that do not fit the pattern of this projection.

The correlation between skills and employment

Apart from skills and market imbalance, one can also observe that there is a narrow interpretation of labour market needs. Linking skills with technology is closely connected with the adoption of the hypothesis that the lack of skills is correlated with unemployment. Accepting this hypothesis necessarily leads to a sort of complacency concerning the need for active job creation policies, which is essentially absent from the policy documents. This approach that puts all the weight on the supply side of the labour market disregards both the needs and potential of local labour markets; this disregard should also be seen as closely related to brain drain.

The nature of evidence

A third observation concerns the nature of evidence that is used for policy design. The national and regional policy documents seem to accept the EU exhortations for evidence-based policies as self-evident. At the EU level, as well as the national and regional levels, however, the documents fail to address in detail what actually comprises evidence. Reports such as the Joint Employment report and those produced in the framework of the European Semester, or others - such as for instance studies from Eurofound etc. - are indeed extremely useful as general feedback, but they are not sufficient to provide a detailed image of the labour market conditions in every country and region. Producing evidence for designing policies on employment and skills, especially when considering the goal of decent and good quality jobs, is something that requires a detailed and deep examination of the LM conditions and dynamics. The use of macroeconomic or other indicators - though they can and probably should be used as benchmarks - presents serious limitations, with the most important being the fact that they can neither grasp the qualitative aspects of the skills mismatch (e.g. when skills acquired through formal or informal education and VET do not actually correspond to what is required in real life situations), nor those concerning the jobs quality that go beyond basic categorisations such as part- and full- time employment (e.g. work-life balance, work environment, self-actualisation etc). On top of that, it should not be ignored that even in the realm of quantitative data, there are serious methodological and structural deficiencies in the monitoring and feedback techniques and mechanisms that compromise the effectiveness of the process (see the evidence-based policy section (B) in subparagraph 3.2.1).

4.1.3 Recommendation on Skills Gap

- Reconsideration of what constitutes evidence in the framework of evidence-based policy, practical support and enhancement of the monitoring and feedback mechanisms, and advancement of methodologies for collecting and analysing data.

Existing mechanisms (such the Mechanism for Diagnosing LM Needs in Greece, or other similar initiatives within PES) can be supported and further developed. Furthermore (as is also the case for some of the recommendations that follow), additional structures can be established that will enable a type of “real time” monitoring of the policies and measures implemented as well as the labour market and skills matching conditions in general - possibly via feedback as well. This kind of support for gathering evidence can be seen as a material one, in terms of human and technical resources.

On the other hand, the methodologies used can be re-examined and new ones can be developed. EU and national and regional authorities need to promote the production of more qualitative data to obtain a clear image of the issues of skills and skills mismatches both for individuals as well as for enterprises. At the same time quantitative methods need to be designed in ways that alleviate limitations and provide information on qualitative variables. A meaningful implementation of such methods will not be feasible without the material support suggested above.

- Comprehensive mapping of skills and needs at the local level. Support for Initiatives and mechanisms already in place. Methods and criteria that ensure comparability.

By local, in this context, we mean the sub-regional level of analysis. Skills mapping at the local level is a prerequisite for developing effective national and regional plans and advancing regional development. In our analysis the restrictions caused by the absence of such mapping become obvious when considering how the national plans do not present any substantial deviations from the EU narratives; yet, we couldn't identify regional - let alone sub-regional - plans on the issue. Ideally, the considerations laid out in the previous recommendation would be taken into account for this mapping, incorporating qualitative data (e.g. from interviews or observations, to understand the actual needs of enterprises) and additional ways of gathering quantitative or categorical information (e.g. regarding the existing skills of the workforce or job quality). Quantitative data at the regional level must also ensure that it meets requirements relating to sufficient sample size and geographic comparability across time; such methodological challenges have indeed been encountered during the course of the Cowork4YOUTH project.

- Developing local (regional/ sub-regional) action plans on skills that will address mismatches and foster regional growth and competitiveness.

This recommendation is in line with the central idea that the development of skills that are pertinent to LM needs can have a positive impact on productivity, competitiveness and growth, and that unused human resources limit local ability to achieve strategic goals.

Such plans are best developed in close relation with the Regional Innovation and Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3). It should be noted that, although the RIS3 are not by definition connected with the twin transition, very often their main focus is on digitalisation and technological innovation. As suggested in our previous analysis, providing more space for initiatives beyond the digital can be beneficial. Along with the mapping suggested in the previous recommendation, this kind of planning can point out domains that the regional plans should focus on.

Finally, in developing such plans, it is important to develop wide structures for effective communication and coordination among regions and localities both at national and European level, while ensuring the participation of all relevant stakeholders.

- Effective localisation of technology in order to support local (regional/ sub-regional) strengths.

Along with the process of producing technology and knowledge that is pertinent to the needs of the local economy, or perhaps even before engaging in this process, regions would benefit from being aware of the available technology and being able to develop processes for adapting it to their needs.

National and regional governments may establish structures (for instance in the form of institutions, directorates, networks etc.), focusing on sub-regional structures (e.g. NUTS3 level), to facilitate this goal. This is extremely relevant for tourism-dependent regions and regions in energy transition, especially for those of them that face difficulties in developing other economic sectors and need to enhance their specialisation in the respective fields.

- Local Knowledge Ecosystems as a facilitator, but also as a result of technology localisation.

Such ecosystems will be involved in implementing the knowledge produced or adapting knowledge to local (regional/ sub-regional) needs. Advancing their form from committees and networks to create physical and digital spaces such as hubs can have a significant impact on their effectiveness. Through these initiatives, the strategic goal of enhancing the cooperation between Universities, Research Institutions, and Enterprises can be promoted and expanded by creating a focal point for the interaction of all stakeholders. Furthermore, they can be a tool for transnational clustering.

While their establishment can be quite easy, their efficient operation and impact cannot be taken as a given. Regional governments are considered the most appropriate partner for the coordination of these ecosystems, as their planning must necessarily be in alignment with regional strategies such as the Smart Specialization Strategies or the Local Action Plans on Skills described above. Existing initiatives, such as the *Knowledge and Innovation Communities* created by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, can provide valuable input and even possibly undertake the role of coordinator among local ecosystems.

National Governments would benefit from supporting the establishment and operation of educational and research institutions, such as HEI and research centres, that can focus their scientific activities on areas pertinent to the regions' plans.

- Localising VET and Lifelong Learning (LLL)

When adapting VET and LLL to economies and LM conditions at the local (regional/ sub-regional) level, namely through the aforementioned Local Knowledge Ecosystem, there are three factors to be considered:

- a. Improved mapping of skills would be required, to determine the LM needs at the local level, as recommended above.
- b. Training material and suitable methods would have to be developed to address those needs - a demanding task requiring considerable resources. Funding opportunities from programmes such as Erasmus+ could serve as a vehicle for both mapping and material creation. EU programmes, such as LEADER, already offer training and LLL based on sub-regional needs and comprehensive Local Development Strategies. In Ireland, for example, this is complemented by a number of locally based training networks that have the flexibility to offer tailored training schemes in close collaboration with local employers under the

Skillnet Ireland Agency, funded through the National Training Fund. Local initiatives such as these could serve as foundations for improvements in the Local Knowledge Ecosystems. Of course, one could argue that such programmes are already inclined towards these goals; here the existence of reliable structures (such as the Local Knowledge Ecosystems) becomes extremely relevant as a way to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of such programmes.

- c. Finally, it is crucial that VET and LLL become more accessible and more inclusive, while at the same time improving their attractiveness; thus, design and efforts should not be limited to outreach concerning the category of "vulnerable groups", nor targeting only the supply side of the LM. An important expected outcome of localising VET and LLL consists in the involvement of as many local stakeholders as possible and the development of a sense of ownership. Apart from the obvious benefits for the design of VET and LLL in terms of courses and training material, direct contact with local enterprises can result in engaging them with processes for the development of both their workforce as well as their internal processes (accelerating in this way the twin transition and improving efficiency and sustainability). Of course, this type of engagement can also be instrumental in reaching the targets for LLL participation.
 - Promoting the concept of personalised support and expanding it to the labour market demand side.

MS and regions should continue developing and enhancing their personalised support practices which - despite possible shortcomings - are indeed in the right direction.

Furthermore, (i) considering the observed problem of SME's lack of awareness regarding the challenges and possible solutions as well as the opportunities that emerge in the framework of the twin transition, and (ii) following the previous recommendation for localising VET and LLL, and especially the last factor regarding the improvement of their attractiveness, it is important to help enterprises and organisations to better understand their actual needs and the ways to cover them, and thus to better adapt to the changing environment. This could happen either in the form of process consulting or through suggesting tailored reskilling practices. Furthermore, tailored support to enterprises on the subject of skills, will improve the effectiveness of employment support measures such as apprenticeships and subsidised employment, as well as the development of channels for feedback and monitoring.

- Establishing channels and structures to improve the information flow among key actors and stakeholders (policy makers, VET providers, the PES, educational institutions, enterprises, beneficiaries of support programmes).

The significance of such channels and structures is twofold. On the one hand, many of the current initiatives produce information which is, however, not always used in a meaningful way and does not reach all the interested parties; the establishment of such channels can be of service by

concentrating this information and dealing with fragmentation. On the other hand, if stakeholders perceive these initiatives as a useful tool for achieving their goals, their existence can contribute to the production of new information.

As discussed throughout our analysis and commonly acknowledged, improving the effectiveness of monitoring and feedback mechanisms is necessary for producing evidence-based policies. The re-discussion of the nature of evidence recommended above should include ways to achieve an unhampered flow of information. On the other hand, the creation of Local Ecosystems of Knowledge will, by definition, result in better information flow. Nevertheless, the existence of appropriate channels will not only ensure the effectiveness of the proposed actions, but it can substantially support and accelerate their progress, or have a very positive impact even as a partial substitute, if these actions are not undertaken in full.

Such channels could take the form of digital spaces that provide access to and facilitate the exchange of information and feedback. They can include direct and indirect communication and feedback tools; semi-open databases concerning the LM and skills; services such as information on initiatives and support measures, consulting (as discussed above about the personalised support to enterprises) etc. In this way they can be a key tool for effective mapping and matching.

As clearly indicated in the present analysis, these channels would be best developed at the local level, but of course it is vital to ensure their interconnection with each other and, in the mid-term, to work on their integration. An alternative approach would be a sectoral structure, which would promote intra- and trans-national cooperation and exploit to the fullest the potential of mobility. In both cases, however, the approach should be as balanced as possible, as in real-life situations one cannot strictly define neither the regional operation nor the sectoral needs of enterprises.

4.2 Brain Drain

4.2.1 How the problem is perceived

Low Visibility in EU policy texts and national and regional plans

The primary observation regarding the issue of brain drain is its low visibility in the documents analysed. At the EU level the issue is practically absent. At the national and regional levels our analysis resulted in only one pertinent narrative (though quite vague), in the case of Italy:

[6. The conflicting narrative about the desirability of attracting talent from other countries and the undesirability of losing talent to other countries].

In the other study countries the sparse mentions of talent attraction and mobility were not considered sufficient to constitute a cohesive narrative. It should, however, be noted that in the case of Ireland, due to the vision, practical efforts, and results of maintaining an international position as a digital leader, the concept of talent attraction is frequently stressed as a practical

necessity and it is either directly or indirectly captured in many narratives, more clearly in the one concerning working conditions

[8. *The narrative about working conditions and compensation as a means to increase productivity, attract skilled labour and improve competitiveness.*]

This condition of low visibility is revealing of conceptual gaps that are discussed in section 5.2.2.

The “Harnessing talent in Europe’s regions” Commission Communication

In January 2023 the Commission published the communication *Harnessing talent in Europe’s regions* (Commission Communication COM(2023) 32)¹⁰ that intends to set the context for regional development and utilisation of talent to tackle the problem of shrinking workforces in several EU regions, and in this framework to improve the brain drain situation by providing for convergence in regional development.

There are several positive points in the Communication, which promotes the idea of place-based policies, and presents a series of initiatives and actions (e.g. the new “Smart adaptation of regions to demographic transition” initiative; the Technical Support Instrument that supports MS in designing and implementing reforms; the European Urban Initiative; the “Knowledge and Innovation Communities” from The European Institute of Innovation and Technology within the framework of Smart Specialization Strategies etc.). Furthermore, it conceptually acknowledges six sources of the issue: job opportunities, wages, working conditions, equal opportunities, location and services available in their surroundings and trust in institutions.

In discussing the perception of the problem, the narrative and the aspects that remain “silenced” one might note that the main approach identified for Skills is also present in the case of brain drain: in a similar way to how the development of skills is expected to lead to increased employment and growth, talent development is expected to benefit regional economy. Indeed, provisions for regional development will be beneficial; however if the formation of coherent regional strategies is not ensured (which of course is not a new objective for EU and MS) and the aforementioned issues of job opportunities, working conditions etc are not addressed, any talent development will result in people moving to countries and regions that are already ahead in the talent attraction “race”.

¹⁰ While the Communication provides useful information on the way the problem is perceived on the EU level, it was not included in the presented narrative analysis. Even though at the time of publication our analysis was already in progress, this was not the reason for not incorporating it in the list of sources. The problem we considered was a) the fact that the particular Communication is in essence an introductory statement which can be misleading before it is translated in actual guiding or binding policies of applied character; b) the lack of relevant policy documents and its short length and descriptive character which render it more suitable for direct review rather than applying the keywords methodology. Thus, it was considered more efficient to include it exclusively in the brain drain discussion rather than “squeezing” it to identify narratives that cannot be crosschecked with other sources.

A simple discourse analysis technique, provides some indicative examples that highlight how the proposed perception of the problem potentially conceals aspects that are not directly addressed due to reasons that are discussed in the next paragraph.

The Communication introduces the term “Talent development trap” to describe the problem of general workforce decline and the low proportion of high-skilled workers; these traps are statistically depicted as “facing an accelerating decline of their working-age population, and a low and stagnant number of people with a tertiary education”. Furthermore, the term negative mobility is used to refer to brain drain and intra union emigration flows; while, finally, the term brain drain is used only once (meaning that it is not considered a non-suitable term) in a paragraph concerning immigration (from third countries); the relevant term “human capital flight” is not used at all.

4.2.2 Information and Conceptual Gaps

The problem of brain drain in the EU presents an inherent contradiction, as any idea of preventing brain drain may oppose basic European principles concerning competition and mobility. The problem of the market-oriented skills discussed in the skills gap section is present here as well. Moreover, brain drain has revealed in practice the gap between central European countries and the periphery. These factors have resulted in strikingly low visibility of the problem of brain drain even in the countries that still suffer its consequences. An additional observation worth mentioning concerns the influence of the dominant narratives about the need for digitalisation and digital skills, with the emphasis being on “digital drain”, ignoring a series of sectors that brain drain has also hit.

Following the basic assumption of market economics, labour is perceived as a commodity and inevitably the skills required are dependent on the market needs. While this idea is not invalid it is possible that a more balanced approach would be beneficial.

In this framework, tackling (or even reversing) the problem of brain drain requires first of all its acknowledgement as a problem in the policy agenda and the production of knowledge about the subject. The very last support measure proposed in the *Harnessing talent in Europe's regions* Communication puts forward the need for information:

The Commission (Eurostat) will also invite Member States to provide more comprehensive statistical data on population movements within the EU, in particular regional migration flows, broken down by age and gender. Furthermore, data on the location of essential services within the EU, such as education and healthcare, within the EU will be collected to provide valuable research and information to stakeholders on how to address the key challenges for social cohesion and just transition.

The second substantial requirement concerns the need for coordinated action among MS. Since some MS capitalise on brain drain to improve the quality of their workforce, it is obvious that any actions taken from a hit MS or even a group of them, cannot be effective.

4.2.3 Recommendations on Brain Drain

As indicated in the previous paragraphs, the main problem for brain drain from a policy analysis perspective is actually the lack of pertinent policies. Despite the aforementioned deficiencies in the approach, the attempt to position brain drain in the area of regional talent development is a positive development. If specified and supported, the proposed actions of the *Harnessing talent in Europe's regions* Communication can create some necessary conditions to tackle the issue, however without consensus and coordination among MS these actions cannot be sufficient.

The following recommendations are proposed in addition to the Commission's Communication and to our recommendations regarding the skills gap.

- Skills mapping and needs projection at national and regional level, and strategy devising at the regional level.

(see the pertinent recommendations in paragraph 5.1.3)

- Designing research and measures for assessing the problem: regional or sectoral sources and its impact.

As mentioned above, the brain drain problem has multiple sources with most of them falling within the categories of working and living conditions. It is obvious that for designing evidence-based policies in the field, policy makers need to acquire specific information. Comprehensive mapping and interaction with stakeholders and the community can provide this information.

Furthermore, while it is true that in the short term it is not easy for the regions to alter the conditions in these areas, in the long term it is important to know the relative importance of different factors: taking for instance a remote region, it would be useful to know whether an improvement in access to services could counterbalance the lack of job opportunities or the relatively low level of wages.

- Supporting remote working and providing incentives for international practices as a method that facilitates decentralisation.

Utilising remote working to encourage people to stay in their regions can be a response to the aspects of brain drain that are related to job opportunities. This would require consensus and coordinated policy measures in all MS, as in various circumstances there might be labour law restrictions and, if adopted as a practice on a large scale, it could indeed have a complicated impact on national and regional macroeconomic indicators such as gross product and consumption. On the other hand, the available technology (e.g. for transportation) and the changes in the working environments from digitalisation, indicate that in many cases it is feasible. Thus, in spite of counterarguments, promoting transnational remote work can benefit lagging regions and their people, without compromising mobility and competitiveness. Leaving aside bureaucratic obstacles

and differing goals of groups of interest, from a policy design perspective it concerns the utilisation of a tool (the available technology) for alleviating an existing problem.

- Supporting the development of the platform economy and enhancing sectoral initiatives

Platform economy is another method to utilise the available technology in favour of decentralisation. Supporting the creation and development of digital sectoral initiatives, such as platforms and digital networks can be beneficial both in terms of efficiency and limiting negative mobility¹¹ (see also the pertinent analysis and recommendations on the other Policy Recommendations paper of the Cowork4YOUTH project, on the employment potential through alternative sectors). The promotion of platform economy with a sectoral orientation can be further expanded with the following recommendation.

- Supporting the development of sectoral ecosystems and transnational clustering.

Based on the development of sectoral platforms, creating sectoral ecosystems and transnational clusters can advance the flow of information and respond to existing LM needs without being subject to the need for physical mobility. Such ecosystems could be developed in the framework of the Local Knowledge Ecosystems proposed in the skills gap recommendations. Still, as the focus here is not on regional development, they could be seen separately and developed in a complementary way. Under this scope, and considering the size of such an initiative, transnational coordination is crucial for their success and the issue of consensus among MS becomes a prerequisite. On a smaller scale, the promotion of transnational and bilateral agreements on sectors of interest for two or more countries or regions that can mutually benefit from each other's specialisation can also be a fruitful practice.

¹¹ Here we propose the use of the term negative mobility in a more psychological sense, to indicate the situation that an individual leaves their place of origin not in accordance with their own will but rather due to the pressure of external “negative” factors such as working conditions, job opportunities, living conditions etc.

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Appendix I

Sources used in policy analysis

No	Country	Level	Type	Date of publication	Title	Period of planning
1		EU	Council Recommendation	22/04/2013	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee (2013/C 120/01)	
2		EU	Council Recommendation	22/04/2013	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on A Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee 2020/0132 (NLE) 11320/20	
3		EU	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament	01/07/2020	COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation. COM(2020) 276	
4		EU	Proposal from the Commission and the Council	22/11/2022	Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2023 From the Commission and the Council 22 November 2022	

5		EU	Communication	27/05/2020	COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation. {SWD(2020) 98 final}	
6		EU	Action Plan	30/09/2020	Digital Education action Plan 2021-2027. COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Brussels, 30.9.2020. SWD(2020) 209 final	
7		EU	Commission Recommendation	04/03/2021	COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2021/402 of 4 March 2021 on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE).	
8		EU	Report from the Commission to the Council	19/12/2016	REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL EVALUATION of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for adults. COM(2023) 439 final [Brussels 17.7.23]	
9		EU	Council Recommendation	16/06/2022	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2022/C 243/02)	

10		EU	Council Conclusions	10/06/2021	Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education (2021/C 221/03)	
11		EU	Council Recommendation	15/03/2018	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 15 March 2018 on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (2018/C 153/01)	
12		EU	Communication	11/12/2019	COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS The European Green Deal Brussels, 11.12.2019 COM(2019) 640 final	2019 - 2050
13		EU	Action Plan	01/11/2017	THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS ACTION PLAN. European Commission, 2021.	2021
14	Greece	National	Council Recommendation	17/05/2022	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Greece and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Greece	2022-2023

15	Greece	National	Country Report	23/05/2022	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT 2022 Country Report – Greece Accompanying the document Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Greece and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Greece	2022-2023
16	Greece	National	Normative	15/06/2022	Competitiveness	2021-2027
17	Greece	National	Normative	1/7/2022	Digital Transformation	2021-2029
18	Greece	National	Normative	26/08/2022	Environment and climate change	2021-2029
19	Greece	National	Normative	16/06/2022	Just Development Transition	2021-2027
20	Greece	National	Partnership Agreement	29/07/2021	Συμφωνία εταιρικής σχέσης - Ελληνική Δημοκρατία	2021-2027
21	Greece	National	Recovery Resilience Plan	22/01/2021	Εθνικό Σχέδιο Ανάκαμψης και Ανθεκτικότητας - Ελλάδα 2.0	2021-2027
22	Greece	National	Reform Programme	04/2022	National Reform Programme 2022	2022-2023
23	Greece	South Aegean	Regional Plan	29/08/2022	Notio Aigaiο	2021-2027
24	Greece	Ionian Islands	Regional Plan	5/9/2022	Ionια Nisia	2021-2027
25	Greece	Central Macedonia	Regional Plan	5/9/2022	Kentriki Makedonia	2021-2027
26	Greece	Western Macedonia	Regional Plan	5/9/2022	Dytiki Makedonia	2021-2027
27	Greece	Peloponnese	Regional Plan	5/9/2022	Peloponnisos	2021-2027
28	Greece	National	Stability Programme	04/2022	Stability Programme 2022	2022-2023
29	Greece	Adriatic - Ionian	Transnational Plan	30/11/2022	Interreg VI-A Greece-Italy Programme 2021-2027	2021-2027

30	Ireland	National	Council Recommendation	23/05/2022	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Ireland	2022-2023
31	Ireland	National	Country Report	09/06/2022	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT 2022 Country Report - Ireland Accompanying the document Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Ireland	2022-2023
32	Ireland	National	National Plan	9/16/2022	Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2022	2022-2023
33	Ireland	National	National Plan	2/1/2022	Harnessing Digital. The Digital Ireland Framework	2022-2025
34	Ireland	National	National Plan	12/21/2022	CLIMATE ACTION PLAN 2023 CAP23	2023
35	Ireland	National	National Plan	3/10/2019	Future Jobs Ireland 2019	2019-2025

36	Ireland	National	National Plan	2018	IRELAND'S NATIONAL SKILLS STRATEGY 2025	2018-2025
37	Ireland	National	Needs Analysis	7/1/2020	Needs Analysis for ERDF/ESF+ Funding	2020-2025
38	Ireland	National	Partnership Agreement	12/01/2023	Partnership Agreement 2021-27	2021-2027
39	Ireland	National	Recovery Resilience Plan	16/07/2021	Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan	2021-2027
40	Ireland	National	Reform Programme	04/2022	National Reform Programme for the European Semester	2022-2023
41	Ireland	Northern and Western	Regional Plan	18/11/2022	Northern and Western Regional Programme 2021 – 2027	2021-2027
42	Ireland	Southern, Eastern and Midland	Regional Plan	18/11/2022	Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional ERDF Programme 2021 – 2027	2021-2027

43	Ireland	National	Stability Programme	04/2022	Stability Programme Update Incorporating the Department of Finance's Spring Forecasts	2022-2023
44	Italy	National	Council Recommendation	18/05/2022	Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Italy and delivering a Council opinion on the Stability Programme of Italy	2022-2023
45	Italy	National	Country Report	07/06/2022	PROGRAMMA NAZIONALE RICERCA, INNOVAZIONE E COMPETITIVITÀ PER LA TRANSIZIONE VERDE E DIGITALE FESR 2021-27	2022-2023
46	Italy	National	National Plan	29/11/2022	NP Research, innovation and competitiveness for green and digital transition 2021-2027	2021-2027
47	Italy	National	National Plan	28/10/2022	NP Culture 2021-2027	2021-2027
48	Italy	National	Partnership Agreement	25/07/2022	ACCORDO DI PARTENARIATO ITALIA 2021-2027	2021-2027
49	Italy	National	Recovery Resilience Plan	25/07/2022	PIANO NAZIONALE DI RIPRESA E RESILIENZA	2021-2027

50	Italy	National	Reform Programme	04/2022	National Reform Programme 2022	2022-2023
51	Italy	Sardegna	Regional Plan	26/10/2022	Programma Regionale FESR 2021-2027	2021-2027
52	Italy	Basilicata	Regional Plan	16/12/2022	Piano Strategico Regionale 2021/2030	2021-2030
53	Italy	Puglia	Regional Plan	11/26/2020	PROGRAMMA DEL GOVERNO REGIONALE	2021-2027
54	Italy	Calabria	Regional Plan	3/11/2022	IT - PR Calabria FESR FSE+ 2021-2027	2021-2027
55	Italy	Lazio	Regional Plan	26/10/2022	Atti della Giunta Regionale e degli Assessori	2021-2027
56	Italy	Lazio	Regional Plan	19/07/2022	IT - PR Lazio FSE+ 2021-2027	2021-2027

57	Italy	National	Stability Programme	04/20202	Italy's Stability Programme 2022	2022-2023
58	Italy	Andratic - Ionian	Transnational Plan	30/11/2022	Interreg VI-A Greece-Italy Programme 2021-2027	2021-2027
59	Spain	National	Council Recommendation	23/05/2022	COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Spain and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Spain	2022-2023
60	Spain	National	Country Report	23/05/2022	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT 2022 Country Report - Spain Accompanying the document Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Spain and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Spain	2022-2023
61	Spain	National	National Plan		Espana digital 2026	2021-2026
62	Spain	National	National Plan		Plan nacional de adaptacion al cambio climatico 2021-2030	2021-2030

63	Spain	National	Partnership Agreement	18/11/2022	Acuerdo de Asociación de España 2021-2027	2021-2027
64	Spain	National	Pluri-regional Programme	13/12/2022	ES - Programa Plurirregional España FEDER 2021-2027	2021-2027
65	Spain	National	Recovery Resilience Plan	20/12/2022	PROYECTO DE ADENDA AL PLAN DE RECUPERACIÓN, TRANSFORMACIÓN Y RESILIENCIA DEL REINO DE ESPAÑA. IMPULSO A LA INDUSTRIALIZACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA	2021-2027
66	Spain	National	Recovery Resilience Plan	16/06/2021	PLAN DE RECUPERACION, TRANSFORMACION, Y RESILIENCIA	2021-2027
67	Spain	National	Reform Programme		PROGRAMA NACIONAL DE REFORMAS 2022	2022-2023
68	Spain	Canarias	Regional Plan	14/12/2022	Programa de Canarias FEDER 2021-2027	2021-2027
69	Spain	Castilla y Leon	Regional Plan	12/12/2022	Programa de Castilla y León FEDER 2021-2027	2021-2027

70	Spain	Basque country	Regional Plan	29/11/2022	Programa del País Vasco FEDER 2021-2027	2021-2027
71	Spain	Andalusia	Regional Plan		Programa de Andalucía FEDER 2021-2027	2021-2027
72	Spain	Andalusia	Regional Plan	2014-2020	ESTRATEGIA REGIONAL ANDALUZA PARA LA COHESIÓN E INCLUSIÓN SOCIAL INTERVENCIÓN EN ZONAS DESFAVORECIDAS	2021-2027
73	Spain	Andalusia	Regional Plan	21/06/2018	ESTRATEGIA ANDALUZA DE DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE 2030	2019-2030
74	Spain	Andalusia	Regional Plan	03/2021	Sustainable Finance Framework	2021-2027
75	Spain	Andalusia	Regional Plan	05/10/2021	S4Andalusia, Smart Specialization Strategy for Sustainability: prioritisation and new horizons for 2021 - 2027	2021-2027
76	Spain	National	Stability Programme		ACTUALIZACIÓN DEL PROGRAMA DE ESTABILIDAD 2022-2025	2022-2025

Appendix II

Keywords and frequency of appearance

<u>Skills</u>	<u>Brain Drain</u>	<u>Unemployment</u>
Skills	Brain Drain	Unemployment
Upskilling	Brain Gain	NEETs
Reskilling	Qualifications	Long-term unemployment
Lifelong Learning	Mobility	Employment
Drop-out	Talent attraction	Job creation
School leaving		Job positions
Training		Labour market
Education		Seasonality
Traineeships		Childcare
Apprenticeships		Mother NEETs
Internships		

EL. SKILLS	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total EL
Skills	31.91%	21.74%	17.00%	28.46%
Upskilling	17.64%	6.96%	11.00%	15.52%
Reskilling	14.38%	6.96%	8.00%	12.61%
LifELong Learning	2.81%	8.70%	8.50%	4.32%
Drop-out	0.34%	2.61%	1.50%	0.75%
School leaving	0.34%	2.61%	1.50%	0.75%
Training	14.61%	16.52%	17.50%	15.27%
Education	16.07%	33.91%	34.50%	20.83%
Traineeships	0.11%	0.00%	0.00%	0.08%
Apprenticeships	1.12%	0.00%	0.00%	0.83%
Internships	0.67%	0.00%	0.50%	0.58%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
EL. UNEMPLOYMENT	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total EL
Unemployment	19.47%	5.26%	13.51%	16.98%
NEETs	3.89%	6.58%	5.41%	4.44%
Long term unemployment	4.25%	7.89%	6.76%	5.07%
Employment	23.72%	22.37%	40.54%	26.74%
Job creation	3.89%	0.00%	0.00%	2.79%
Job positions	9.38%	6.58%	9.46%	9.13%
Labour market	30.44%	40.79%	20.27%	29.53%
Seasonality	1.59%	9.21%	2.03%	2.41%
Childcare	3.36%	1.32%	2.03%	2.92%
Mother NEETs	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

IT. SKILLS	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total IT
Skills	54.80%	47.15%	35.42%	48.25%
Upskilling	6.97%	2.44%	3.13%	5.33%
Reskilling	4.18%	2.44%	3.13%	3.68%
LifE Long Learning	0.93%	0.00%	0.31%	0.64%
Drop-out	1.39%	6.50%	2.82%	2.39%
School leaving	1.39%	5.69%	3.45%	2.48%
Training	17.80%	18.70%	27.27%	20.68%
Education	11.15%	13.82%	14.73%	12.50%
Traineeships	0.31%	0.81%	5.64%	1.93%
Apprenticeships	0.93%	2.44%	4.08%	2.02%
Internships	0.15%	0.00%	0.00%	0.09%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

IT. UNEMPLOYMENT	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total IT
Unemployment	16.50%	16.67%	22.86%	17.41%
NEETs	8.50%	25.00%	20.00%	10.93%
Long term unemployment	0.50%	8.33%	11.43%	2.43%
Employment	46.00%	50.00%	25.71%	43.32%
Job creation	4.50%	0.00%	0.00%	3.64%
Job positions	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Labour market	20.00%	0.00%	14.29%	18.22%
Seasonality	1.50%	0.00%	2.86%	1.62%
Childcare	2.50%	0.00%	2.86%	2.43%
Mother NEETs	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

ES. SKILLS	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total ES
Skills	21.52%	9.30%	27.59%	20.34%
Upskilling	8.07%	0.00%	0.00%	6.10%
Reskilling	13.45%	4.65%	0.00%	10.85%
LifELong Learning	4.48%	9.30%	17.24%	6.44%
Drop-out	1.79%	2.33%	3.45%	2.03%
School leaving	5.38%	0.00%	0.00%	4.07%
Training	26.01%	41.86%	27.59%	28.47%
Education	17.49%	32.56%	24.14%	20.34%
Traineeships	0.90%	0.00%	0.00%	0.68%
Apprenticeships	0.45%	0.00%	0.00%	0.34%
Internships	0.45%	0.00%	0.00%	0.34%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
ES. UNEMPLOYMENT	National	Tourism Dependent	In Transition	Total ES
Unemployment	13.30%	0.00%	4.00%	10.97%
NEETs	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Long term unemployment	0.53%	0.00%	4.00%	0.84%
Employment	44.15%	41.67%	40.00%	43.46%
Job creation	15.96%	33.33%	36.00%	19.83%
Job positions	0.53%	4.17%	4.00%	1.27%
Labour market	25.53%	20.83%	12.00%	23.63%
Seasonality	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Childcare	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Mother NEETs	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

IE. SKILLS	IE
Skills	41.48%
Upskilling	7.98%
Reskilling	3.19%
Lifelong Learning	6.08%
Drop-out	0.00%
School leaving	0.40%
Training	19.44%
Education	16.95%
Traineeships	0.90%
Apprenticeships	3.59%
Internships	0.00%
	100.00%
IE. UNEMPLOYMENT	
Unemployment	10.12%
NEETs	0.89%
Long term unemployment	0.30%
Employment	46.13%
Job creation	6.85%
Job positions	0.00%
Labour market	23.81%
Seasonality	0.00%
Childcare	11.90%
Mother NEETs	0.00%
	100.00%

List of Revisions

Date	Partner	Name	Description
24.01.2024	RP	V2	Revisions following suggestions and comments